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"OK, Groomer" :(Post) Truth Rhetoric and Transphobia

Adit R. Selvaraj
Nova Southeastern University

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Thesis of Adit R. Selvaraj

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

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Approved:
Thesis Committee

Thesis Advisor: Kelly Concannon, Ph.D.

Thesis Reader: Janine Morris, Ph.D.

Program Reviewer: Juliette Kitchens, Ph.D.

“OK, GROOMER”: (POST)TRUTH RHETORIC AND TRANSPHOBIA

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Adit Selvaraj

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

Nova Southeastern University

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Abstract

Paying attention to anti-LGBTQ rhetoric circulating on social media in Fall 2022, this thesis situates political rhetoric on Twitter, by analyzing the use of the hashtag #okgroomer. This hashtag, a corruption of the popular phrase “ok, boomer,” has been used to show contempt on social media by equating left-wing ideologies to pedophilia. Informed by gender critical theory, this work espouses the idea that #okgroomer is constructed as a post-truth ideal aided by the mythos that queer people are dangerous to children. To study #okgroomer, this thesis employs a critical technical discourse analysis informed by ecological scholarship to a case study of the hashtag over two weeks on Twitter. Findings from the analysis reveal that okay groomer has a variety of rhetorical implications in the arena of Twitter. These findings reveal that #okgroomer is often utilized to deflect criticism aimed at conservative figureheads or ideologies, #okgroomer is used to response to criticize multimedia and pop culture and also serves to accentuate the dichotomy between the “everyday blue collar American” and “Hollywood Elite”, and finally, #okgroomer is reclaimed by liberal accounts to criticize conservatives. Additionally, this thesis attempts to trace how the hashtag relates to topics such as Stochastic Terrorism, and how the queer=groomer paradigm has implications for offline violence. This work may be a pertinent site of interest for scholars invested in political rhetoric, queer studies, and digital rhetoric, as well as those with vested interest in the political flashpoint the queer community has become in modern American Politics.

Keywords: rhetoric, social media, post-truth, transphobia, queerness, LGBTQIA, Queer Studies, critical discourse analysis, post-truth rhetoric, American politics, iconography, ideographs

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Exigence

What they don't tell you about being queer is the trauma associated with it, regardless of how "accepted" you are by your immediate circle. The way one interacts with the world is different, the fear of being hated is always on the mind. The circle of people you trust is exceedingly small, and even then, the people in your in your immediate circle will say something that makes you doubt the validity of your existence, such as how trans people shouldn't be able to play sports (even if you don't really care about sports), how they don't think being non-binary makes sense, or even seeing them say people like Ron "Don't Say Gay" DeSantis are "not that bad." The ability to think critically about gender and sexuality almost feels like a curse rather than a blessing, because your insight and acceptance is almost never congruent to the beliefs of those who you encounter. You try educating them in hopes of carving out a space where you feel wholly accepted, but end up sinking deeper into apathy, proclaiming that "you don't care" about issues that matter to you to keep the peace. This dichotomy of "us vs them" dictates life for many queer people, where they must constantly be on guard to protect themselves against those who wish to hurt them with barbed rhetoric and violence against their bodies. This us vs them dichotomy has caused the political situation in America to erode into something where a rainbow-colored shirt at a big-box retailer is seen as "satanic" and indicative of grooming children. This dichotomy has served to sever families, break bodies, and ultimately cause a total erosion of quality of life for the queer community at an unprecedented rate.

I hypothesize the thing that bothers me about the word "groomer" is that it positions anybody who seeks to explore the spectrum of gender and sexuality as a deviant. I suppose in the traditional sense, the semiotics of the word groomer don't apply to me, I don't plan to have children, nor do I plan to teach children about LGBTQIA issues. Nevertheless, I think that

information about sexuality and gender, and information in general, should be available regardless and should be able to be consumed at the discretion of a guardian, or when a child is old enough, their own self-determination and interest. I also think about my numerous trans friends, some of whom were my first exposure to LGBTQIA people, and I wonder if they began transitioning in the era of “ok, groomer” they could remain steadfast to their authentic selves.

You come into this world with absolutely nothing and leave it with absolutely nothing. If you plan to end your bloodline prematurely like me, the only thing that will remain is the ideas you shared with society. I think about people like Pastor Mark Burns (2022) who had to say this about LGBTQIA people, "The LGBT transgender grooming [of] our children's minds is a national security threat because it is ultimately designed to destabilize the republic we call the United States of America....We need to hold people for treason, start having some public hearings and start executing people who are found guilty for their treasonous acts against the Constitution of the United States of America. Just like they did back in 1776." When faced with the great equalizer that is death, I wonder what people like Mark Burns will think about the legacy of hate they leave behind.

Introduction

In March 2020, while the world was battling the COVID-19 epidemic, a new plague was born in the annals of the website 4chan, the phrase “ok groomer.” The 4chan post that sparked this phrase was posted on March 8, 2020 and reads as follows: “Use your Twitter accounts to comment “ok groomer” every post regarding LGBT sexualization. If “ok boomer” made people flip their shit, I suspect this will make them come out as pedos and actively defend child molesting.” The phrase remained niche until January of the following year, where notable alt-right commentator Jack Pobsiec retweeted a tweet that included the phrase “ok groomer” to attack the Lincoln Project’s criticism of John Weaver, a GOP operative who had 20 men accuse him of making sexual advances toward them. The phrase only increased in both ubiquity and usage in 2022, as accounts such as LibsOfTikTok used it extensively to attack LGBTQIA teachers and educators, getting them fired from their positions.

Contextualizing the phrase ok groomer requires an understanding that it is a corruption of the popular phrase “okay boomer,” which is a retort to older generations dissatisfaction with the ideologies of Millennials and Generation Z. Aja Romano (2019) conceptualizes the phrase as part of the omnipresent intergenerational schism, writing that the phrase is “teens reacting to adults who are judging things like their gender expression, their financial choices, their approach to job-hunting, or their leisure activities.” The corruption of the phrase, hashtag #okgroomer, compresses the idea that LGBTQ people are deviants and menaces to children in one snappy catchphrase that is easily propagated and inherently viral. Similar to how the phrase “okay boomer” use as a retort is akin to the older generation’s grievances with millennials / generation Z, #okgroomer is used similarly as a retort to LGBTQ people’s concerns about censoring the dissemination of information on LGBTQ topics to interested parties. This portmanteau of a

phrase is used by conservatives to consistently malign and misrepresent the LGBTQ community, all the while diverting attention from their own lascivious behaviors with children.

As the phrase becomes a social media phenomenon with major implications for offline violence and discrimination, it becomes a site of interest for the fields of rhetoric and communication. Alejandra Caraballo (2022), a clinical instructor at the Harvard Law Cyberlaw Clinic, notes that the groomer sentiment essentially a repackaging of old sentiments equating LGBTQIA people to pedophiles and child groomers, calling it an “old attack line brought back with an alarming speed.” Indeed, one can see vestiges of past smear campaigns targeting the LGBTQIA community in the groomer trend, particularly in instances such as country singer Anita Bryant’s 1977 campaign titled “Save The Children,” which sought to diminish the rights of LGBTQIA people by portraying them as deviants menacing to children. Forty-six years later, we still see the same discourses unfold regarding the LGBTQIA community being deviants to children.

With rhetoric being integral to the construction and propagation of targeted political attacks against marginalized groups, it becomes a site of interest to the fields of writing, rhetoric, and communication. The burgeoning field of social media and its various affordances is also pertinent to the field of writing, communication, and rhetoric, due to social media being the primary conduit for contemporary messaging about politics and popular culture. In contemporary society, we live our lives on social media, we buy and sell goods, we advertise and advocate, and above all, we can form connections with people all over the world. As such the field must contend with the shift toward the digital realm.

This thesis then serves to ask questions such as: “how political rhetoric and targeted ad hominem attacks against marginalized groups spread with social media,” “is hateful rhetoric

spread online, such as #okgroomer, accelerated by social media and has a marked effect on offline violence,” and finally “is the anti-trans sentiment emblematic of a post-truth world?” By asking these questions this thesis work ultimately asks how the advent of hateful digital rhetoric serves to reinforce heterosexual cisgender supremacy and denigrate everything existing outside that binary.

As the usage of #okgroomer is a relatively novel phenomena, it is my sincere hope that this thesis work can serve as an entry point for both understanding the rhetoric peddled by right-wing demagogues as well as understanding how the affordances of social media aid these negative sentiments. Ultimately, this thesis work seeks to analyze how hashtags such as #okgroomer serve to accelerate and amplify anti-queer rhetoric. This analysis will be accomplished by creating a framework to understand queerness and how queer bodies are discriminated against using the work of various distinguished scholars within the canon of queer theory and literature, such as Lee Edelman and Gayle Rubin. Further conceptualizing anti-queer rhetoric propagated by politicians and netizens as “post-truth” rhetoric allows for a better understanding of this rhetoric as misinformation and lies that are not based in factual evidence but instead designed to denigrate and harm the queer community. Finally, this work will be examining the #okgroomer hashtag itself, to see how netizens and politicians use this hashtag to silence pro-queer rhetoric as well as spread misinformation and hate toward this group. It is my sincerest hope that this work can serve as an entry-point for understanding a major occurrence of the culture war.

Review of Literature

Post Truth Rhetoric

The field of composition, rhetoric, and communication is intrinsically connected with the realm of politics. This link between the two is illustrated by the unilateral condemnation of then incumbent Donald J Trump's rhetorical strategies used to win the Presidential Election by institutions such as the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) and Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) (McComiskey, 2017). This connection of dogmatic rhetoric to these institutions, signaled a marked anxiety for the field, a field that must be cognizant of the fact that rhetoric is more powerful than we can begin to understand. Indeed, Bruce McComisky's *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* calls the rhetorical strategies employed by Donald J Trump a "rhetorical watershed moment" for the field of rhetoric and writing, by virtue of "people (political elite) using unethical rhetoric to accomplish their goals" and a shift in the way the "public audiences consume unethical rhetoric" (McComisky, 2017).

Unpacking the intentions of rhetors and their words is of paramount importance for this analysis, which seeks to understand the rise of transphobia and overall anti-queer sentiment in America. One of the major tenets of politics is the use of deliberate language to influence the court of public opinion. Bruce McComisky invites us to look at this political practice as an "post-truth" occurrence. Post-truth rhetoric is defined by McComisky as "a state where language lacks any references to facts, truths, and realities" (McComisky, 2017). In utilizing McComisky's work, we can conceptualize deliberate sentiments such as queer people being "groomers" as strategies of perpetuating lies and fallacies and indoctrinating voters to a particular political dogma.

McComisky himself has asserted that contemporary rhetoric has taken a turn toward “post-truth” citing the rhetoric of Donald J Trump, namely his violent rhetoric and xenophobic campaign strategies. Trump’s rhetoric is alluded to by McComiskey, with his assertion that “in a truthless world, a public declaration of sexual assault becomes “locker room talk” because a powerful person calls it that” (McComisky, 2017), referencing Trump’s handwaving of his misogynistic comments by deeming them “locker room talk.”

One of the most important aspects of post-truth rhetoric is that it is extremely difficult to address rhetorically. This is due to post-truth’s construction lacking any references to the truth and reality, and thus their opposites (lies, fallacies) become obfuscated, and it then becomes impossible to decipher meaning from it, something that post-truth rhetors are acutely aware of. This is evidenced by the work of Benjamin Tallis (2016) who argues that the goal of the post-truth rhetor is “the destabilization or even the destruction of the notion of the truth” (Tallis, 2016). Tallis also notes that “post-truth rhetors play to a widespread and increasingly cynical, anti-expert, and supposedly anti-establishment and anti-authority mood,” but one that clearly craves leadership and ambition” (Tallis, 2016). In our modern-day political discourses, this phenomenon is exemplified by the general conservative animus toward establishment figures such as Anthony Fauci during the COVID-19 pandemic, and regulation in the form of taxation. Curiously, the conservative base enjoys and encourages the regulation of gender, its performance and sexuality on the part of the government, as evidenced by politicians expending massive rhetorical and legislative capital on snuffing out the LGBTQIA community.

Bruce McComisky further notes that post-truth is difficult to counter because it is not rooted in individual claims that can be individually challenged, but instead is grounded in larger ideological systems of belief that hold firm even when challenged. For example, the belief that

trans women attacking biological women in bathrooms is constructed of apocryphal and inaccurate beliefs and lacks sufficient evidence to substantiate these claims. Conversely, the phenomena of youth pastors sexually abusing children has multiple salient claims: with 10 Texas Pastors accused of sexually abusing children in 2022 alone (Carbonaro, 2022) and the U.S Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) reporting 4,228 child sexual abuse cases as of 2021 (USCCB, 2021). In the modern political schema, only one of these issues has been made a site for regulation and political demagoguery, the issue regarding trans women in bathrooms. Meanwhile, the youth pastor epidemic does not receive ample attention from conservatives because it is rooted in Christianity, a seminal religion for many of the conservative base. This inaction echoes McComisky's assertion that post-truth is grounded in larger ideological systems of belief that hold firm even when challenged. Christianity is a belief system that is augmented by many centuries of scripture and development and has a myriad of rhetorical and financial capital backing it making it difficult to counter ideologically. Meanwhile the LGBTQIA community must play years of ideological and rhetorical catchup, with bastions of queer information being eviscerated by events such as Nazi Germany's destruction of the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for the Science of Sexuality) and the AIDS epidemic decimating much of the gay population in the 80s. Due to these circumstances, it becomes easier to rhetorically dispute and malign the LGBTQIA community over Christianity. In a post-truth world, objective truth is obfuscated, as is the goal of many far-right rhetoricians.

Scholar Harry G. Frankfurt further expounds on post-truth rhetoric in his 2005 text *On Bullshit*, synonymizing post-truth rhetoric with the term "bullshit." Frankfurt writes that bullshit is absolutely "unconnected with a concern for the truth" and proceeds without any concern for the status quo. Frankfurt notes that the essence of bullshit is an indifference to how things

actually are, writing that the “bullshitter does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out or makes them up to suit his purpose.” McComisky (2017) likens the figure of the “bullshitter” to a political candidate who picks a party line, says anything congruent to the ideological position expressed by said party line while never worrying if they are speaking the truth.

To McComisky (2017), the work of James Fredal (2011) serves to delineate the intrinsic connection “bullshit” has with rhetoric and communication, stating that akin to rhetoric, bullshit presumes a “speaker, listener, and text that enacts a symbolic exchange characteristic of language in use.” Further cementing this relationship, both bullshit and rhetoric both attend to the power of speech, carrying the innate ability to shape and influence both the speaker and listener, and their ultimate relationship to the world around them. In the post truth-world, things like “facts, realities, and truths” (McComisky) become obsolete and irrelevant to the overall political and rhetorical schema, meaning virulent lies can be spread at an alarming rate. For example, the often-false story of a trans woman having an advantage against biological women in sports spreads over the often-true occurrence of those high in religious groups molesting children. Post-truth rhetoric attends to those who are in power, meaning that the power imbalance between the cisgendered and queer becomes even more apparent, and serves to obfuscate the misdeeds of the group in power, while spreading fallacies about the out-group. Due to this erosion of objective truth and reality in a post-truth world, political rhetoric becomes a major site of anxiety for rhetoricians due to being reduced to mere strategic speech without any reference to the truth. According to McComisky, bullshit was relatively “simple” in the pre-post truth era, but now has evolved into various complex rhetorical strategies, including fake news and stochastic terrorism.

Understanding these rhetorical strategies are significant for proper analysis of the immediate effects of post-truth rhetoric and their subsequent contributions to the political climate in America. To properly unpack the recent discourses concerning the queer community that this thesis work concerns, it is vital to understand that *fake news* consists of the apocryphal myths regarding transgender people and other queer people, and *stochastic terrorism* is the direct result of fake news and leads to both rhetorical and physical harm to the queer community. Both fake news and stochastic terrorism will be explained in depth in the following sections.

Stochastic Terrorism and Fake News

On November 19th 2022, a gunman killed five people and injured 25 others at a queer nightclub in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The event punctuates a year of increasing anti-queer rhetoric on the part of right-wing politicians and right-wing rhetoricians alike. Ari Drennen, the LGBTQIA programming director at Media Matters surmises that a “false and dangerous idea that children are being taken in and forcibly transed by surgeons, by teachers, by drag queens, by some element of society,” (Factora, 2022) currently prevails through the minds of a largesse of the general populace. On the 20th of November, dictionary.com’s official Twitter account tweeted the definition of the word *stochastic terrorism*, a strategy that is said to be responsible for the Club Q Shooting.

Stochastic Terrorism is a term that has only recently become in vogue. The term is defined by scholars as “the use of mass media to provoke random acts of ideologically motivated violence that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable” (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017). As of 2022, there are multiple events this thesis concerns that could be influenced by stochastic terrorism. The events range from extremely salient examples of stochastic terrorism

(the November 2022 Club Q shooting) to milder but still frightening examples (anti-LGBTQ militia showing up to drag show events).

The very nature of stochastic terrorism could perhaps best be illustrated by King Henry II's cry of "will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?", an utterance that ominously preceded the murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Beckett. Scholars Molly Amman and J. Reid Meloy posit that the "king neither participated in, nor ordered, the notorious assassination, yet he (the king) is widely accepted as being largely responsible for it" (Amman & Meloy, 2021). In modern discourses regarding the schism between conservatives and the queer community, the repeated assertion that queer people (particularly transgender people) are pedophiles and groomers have led instances of offline violence.

Amman and Meloy conceptualize stochastic terrorism as "an interactive process between the originator of a message, its amplifiers, and one or more ultimate receivers." (Aman & Meloy, 2021). The scholars further break down this scenario: "a charismatic public figure, or perhaps an organization, lobs hostile rhetoric against a targeted out-group or individual into the public discourse to further some political or social objective. Next, an unrelated consumer of the rhetoric absorbs and reacts with anger, contempt, or disgust, often mirroring the speaker's emotional state, and adding his own fear and anxiety to that cocktail of negative emotionality" (Amman & Meloy, 2021). This is followed by the rhetorician (a charismatic public speaker or organization) purveying rhetoric that ranges from "bombastic declarations that the target is a threat by some measure to "jokes" about violent solutions, or to the shared problem posed by the target—always stopping short of requesting or directing an attack for reasons of plausible deniability" (Amman & Meloy, 2021). This hateful rhetoric is spread via the news cycle or social media, the repeated dehumanization and denigration of the target by the rhetor reaches its apex,

then an act of violence is performed by the consumer of the hateful rhetoric. At the culmination of the violence, the original rhetor will often condemn the violence, denying that anyone could have seen the violent event coming. This condemnation of the violence has the desired effect of inoculating the original rhetor against legal repercussions due to the untraceable and ephemeral nature of rhetoric. Despite these condemnations, Amman and Meloy (2021) note that it is the goal of the speaker to elicit violence, writing that “the speaker puts out a call, knowing that someone may answer that call even if there is no way to predict who or when someone will pick up the veiled message. The intent of the speaker to cause such violence may range from unwitting naivete—in the sense of an accidental sin—to full knowledge and hope that such violence will happen, the risk magnified by his or her public speech” (Amman & Meloy, 2021).

One of the most frequent employers of Stochastic Terrorism against the queer community is Tucker Carlson. Carlson, a prominent right-wing commentator on the right-wing news outlet FOX, has frequently equated drag shows to grooming. In one instance, Carlson has made the direct comparison with child sexualization and drag shows by offering the following syllogism. “Let’s say you were interested in sexualizing children. And unfortunately some people are. What would you do? You might have a drag queen story hour at a library or at school. That’s where you would indoctrinate and sexualize children. It is happening across the country” (Carlson, 2022). Not surprisingly, Carlson’s invocation of the words “indoctrinating” and “sexualizing” are purposeful. These are words meant to agitate and provoke viewers into attacking these drag shows, lest they aren’t doing their part on the war against “grooming” and being foot soldiers on the front lines of the culture war.

As posited within the section on *post-truth rhetoric*, the myths about transgender people and drag queens being dangerous to children are typically merely apocryphal, and typically have

significantly less verity than many claims of other groups' (such as pastors) sexual relations to children. Due to the apocryphal nature and less than veritable quality of accusations toward the LGBTQIA community, these utterances can be classified as *fake news*. Like stochastic terrorism, the term fake news is relatively novel, and is interpreted differently by various scholars. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers" (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Other scholars define fake news instead as "a news article or message published and propagated through media, carrying false information regardless of the means and motives behind it" (Sharma et al., 2019; Mustafa and Metaxas, 2017; Gelfert, 2018). Allcott and Gentzkow's definition of fake news uses the word *intentional*, acknowledging that it is the ultimate goal of those who employ this tactic to destabilize the truth. Rob Boston (2016) situates fake news in post-truth rhetoric, stating that "in post-truth America, even implausible tales gain currency because some irresponsible politicians, eager for votes and cash, spread them" (Boston, 2016). Boston further asserts that despite the lack of verity contained within these implausible tales, "they are accepted by some who are then spurred to action-in some cases, violent action" (Boston, 2016). At the core of both stochastic terrorism and fake news is an intention, a hope that an entity will mete out violence toward the desired targeted group. They both serve to agitate, irritate, and ultimately, bring about violence toward the targets of their denigration.

Twitter and the Hashtag

One of the largest avenues for fake news to propagate and stochastic terrorism to be performed, is the social media platform Twitter. Twitter is a pertinent site for political rhetoric, as evidenced by the fact the platform is a low-cost, direct, and immediate form of communication which can be propagated by other users through actions such as "retweeting"

(sharing a post to your followers), “quote retweeting” (sharing a post to your followers, with the user’s own commentary), and liking (amplifying or showing appreciation to a tweet by pressing the like button). Indeed, the affordances of Twitter on political rhetoric are lauded by notable figures in the realm of politics: Katie Hogan, one of former President Barack Obama’s political aides notes that political messages on Twitter “not only [reaches] our supporters, but our supporters can drive the message, too,” by retweeting posts” (Tumulty, 2012).

Aiding to the success of Twitter as a site for propagating political rhetoric is the hashtag. A hashtag is a metadata tag that is prefaced by the hash (#) symbol. The hashtag, which is endemic on sites such as Twitter and Instagram, is a form of user-generated tagging which allows cross-referencing of content by topic or theme. Bud Davis, author of *Hashtag Politics: The Polyphonic Revolution of #Twitter* (Davis, 2013) notes that Twitter’s unique intertextuality aids it as a tool of political rhetoric, and that the functions of the hashtag recall the tenets of intertextuality. Intertextuality is a post structural literary theory that posits every text has its meaning in relationship to other text. Julia Kristeva, who popularized the concept of intertextuality posits that “all utterances and artifacts exist within a complex web of interconnected meanings and messages” (Kristeva, 2002). Davis postulates that the hashtag is a modern-day adaptation of Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality, noting that hashtags are indicative of a “participatory culture in which tags are created by members of Twitter (rather created by the preset options from the website itself.” (Davis, 2013). On the site of Twitter, all tweets using a specific hashtag become a part of an akashic record, so to speak, utterances that exist within the same frame of discourse as other tweets utilizing the same hashtag. When one tweet is posted using a particular hashtag, it becomes included and searchable in all historical instances of tweets using that hashtag. For example, if a tweet is posted using the hashtag

#okgroomer, it can be found when a user searches within the #okgroomer tag. This essentially means that users can respond to other tweets using the same hashtag, oftentimes clashing over the topic the hashtag is discussing. This is extremely important in the context of the site of research, #okgroomer, as multiple of the responses collected were emblematic of a hostile clashing environment in which netizens fought over ideologies and politics.

Scholars have posited that the affordances of social media platforms such as Twitter have made it highly appealing to far-right demagogues. Phillip Darius and Fabian Stephany have suggested that extremists are able to circumvent the limitations of traditional channels of media by using social media platforms like Twitter, noting that “these alternative communication channels (social platforms and messengers) are particularly attractive for right-wing populist and radical-right politicians who often have a hostile attitude towards established media and less access to traditional media channels” (Darius and Stephany, 2020). Darius and Stephany surmise that right-wing actors have benefited disproportionately from the advent of social media since it provides a direct channel of communication toward the target audience rather than being filtered through a “custodian” (shareholders, censors). This direct form of communication with digital netizens, also recalls Davis’s idea that Twitter’s affordances add to a “participatory” culture. Some “custodians” have noted the popularity of right-wing content and have embraced these actors with open arms. Elon Musk, who bought the Twitter Platform in 2022, unbanned multiple right-wing figures upon his purchase, including: Donald Trump (former Republican president suspended for his role in the January 6th insurrection at the Capital), Andrew Tate (social media influencer known for propagating misogynistic content), Jordan B Peterson (social media influencer, known for “men’s rights activism” and suspended for misgendering trans actor Elliot Page), Marjorie Taylor Greene (Republican congresswoman suspended for spreading COVID-19

misinformation), and James Lindsay (a right wing figure known for calling various figures in the LGBTQ community “groomers”). Musk, a self-described “centrist”, has further increasingly appealed to right-wing rhetoric, tweeting “My pronouns are Prosecute/Fauci” (Lee, 2022). Musk’s tweet serves to mock and denigrate the practice of sharing one’s pronouns (a common practice within the LGBTQIA community) and concurrently appeals to a conservative ethos which desires to prosecute Dr. Anthony Fauci, Chief Medical Advisor to President Joseph Biden, for being instrumental in public-health outreach during the pandemic (mandatory masking, vaccinations). Charlie Warzel, author of an *Atlantic* article titled “Elon Musk is a Far-Right Activist (2022), notes that Musk appears “deeply committed to the right’s culture war against progressivism in most forms.”

Warzel additionally surmises that while Musk’s purchase of Twitter was a political act, meant to preserve free speech, Musk’s notion of free speech is only a “broad course correction that involves amplifying and advancing the interests of right-wing reactionaries while trolling the left” (Warzel, 2022). In a post-truth world, free speech is tantamount to hate speech. In conceptualizing the world as a post-truth one, we must reconcile with the fact that the free speech spoken within the post-truth turn is the free speech of bigots and reactionaries. These utterances are what were left unsaid in the pre-post-truth era, but now are allowed into public discourse due to custodians such as Musk facilitating and creating spaces for these discourses. These discourses ultimately include the overt transphobia this project is focusing on, and other tangentially related discourses such as racism, sexism, and toxic masculinity, that serve to sustain and contribute to a hostile environment for queer people.

Other scholars worry about the affects the affordances of social media have on concepts such as political polarization. Indeed, in looking at the current political situation in America,

more Americans are “more willing to condone violence, less open to political relationships that cut across party lines, and more prone to partisan motivated-reasoning” (Brown et al, 2022). As a result of the hyper-insular and extremely partisan nature of modern politics, more scholars are paying attention to the site of social media to see how this technology aids this polarization. Scholars such as Brown et al. (2022) suggest that this polarization is caused by social media and the digital sphere’s rapidly evolving information environment. This rapidly evolving information environment has increased the number of ideological news outlets and made it easier for individuals to exist in “echo chambers” where they’re rarely confronted with alternative perspectives” (Brown et al., 2022). In such a space, users become more entrenched in their chosen faction’s ideologies, and begin to identify further with said party. This identification manifests itself in many ways such as making memes, or accounts dedicated to figures to political figures or entities associated with these figures. In one such case of identification, a Twitter account called @TheOvalPawffice, anthropomorphized, and spoke as President Joseph Biden’s dog, Commander, and cat Willow, commenting on political happenings, or just purveying an overall glorification and appreciation toward Biden’s career. Other accounts are more subtle with their identification with a political cause, with user bios on Twitter often denoting political affiliation and adoration, containing hashtags such as #KHive (fans of Vice President Kamala Harris) or #Trump2020.

While Twitter often houses insular political spaces, research by Baskhy et al. (2015) found the reverse. Baskhy’s research found that platforms such as Facebook typically suggest ideologically diverse content, but users negate these suggestions by consistently clicking on content congruent to their own ideological beliefs when perusing the web. This sentiment is also espoused in Bruce McComisky’s *Post Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, in which McComisky

expresses that within a post-truth world, audiences do not seek information on which to base their beliefs; they seek opinions that support and augment their own beliefs (McComisky, 2017). As mentioned before, within the digital space, users are highly entrenched within their chosen political faction, the heavy identification with said faction manifests itself in ways that lead users to find content that is congruent with and reflects their beliefs. Within the digital space, users will often engage with and create posts reflecting their own beliefs, thus adding to a larger digital ecosystem in which the same ideas and discourse are regurgitated among users in that digital sphere.

Hashtags as a Rhetorical Ecology

Hashtags have been an influential and effective way to spread ideas or create cultural change on the social media platform Twitter. This idea is supplemented by social campaigns such as #MeToo, a trend which women publicized their experiences of sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The campaign was successful in dismantling the careers of serial abusers such as Harvey Weinstein, whom 80 women in the entertainment industry accused of sexually assaulting them. The #MeToo campaign also created a space where women felt safe enough to speak about topics such as rape culture as well as patriarchal expectations of women in regard to sexual desire. Scholars such as Erin Torbett (2019) have noted in the site of discourse within the #MeToo movement, “women were able to use Twitter individually and, when paired with millions of voices, collectively as a group. They were able to establish rhetorical agency and spark social change.” In the case of the #okgroomer hashtag, a similar rhetorical agency is established as well as a desire to spark social change. The social change #okgroomer seeks to perpetuate is not transformative or novel like #MeToo but rather a regressive change which harkens to society where all forms of queerness are tantamount to sin and the heteronormative

binary reigns supreme. Torbett further writes that “through the circulation and accumulation of writing inside, and outside, of this social media network, discourse enables other discourse and can help define the identity of the collective group participating in the discourse.” Torbett’s description of the #MeToo hashtag’s function reveals that a major tenet of the hashtag is the fact “discourse enables other discourse.” This assertion is reminiscent of Jenny Edbauer’s concept of rhetorical ecologies, which posits that rhetoric is: 1) in flux (rhetoric situations are not self-contained), 2) contains an exigence (a shorthand means to describe a series of events), 3) possess concatenation (elements of rhetoric connect, multiply, and exceed any situation), and 4) possess counter-rhetorics (rhetorics merge and mutate with other rhetorics) (Rivers, 2015). Applying Edbauer’s work to an interwoven collection of tweets utilizing the same hashtag allows for a conceptualization how these tweets behave in reinforcing the anti-queer sentiment and counter queer positivity. For example, organizations such as GaysAgainstGroomers and LGBAlliance peddle a counter-rhetoric which aims to distance same-sex attraction from the transgender population despite existing within and benefiting from the from the same inclusive queer discourses applied to trans people. Applying rhetorical ecologies to this work perhaps allows a conceptualization on how multiple tweets exist in the ecology of transphobic discourse, serving to reinforce these anti-trans ideologies constantly. In this way, the anti-trans sentiment and discourse itself is an ecosystem that sustains and gives birth to anti-trans violence and legislation.

The Hostile Net

The current state of the Internet is precarious for the queer. There has never been a more dangerous time to be queer online, and this is indeed evidenced by the Internet possessing the same mounting political tensions as in real life. Scholars such as Mike Godwin note that intra-party dialogue and discourse has become overtly hostile due to such concepts as Godwin’s Law,

which posits that “as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches to one” (Cinelli et al, 2021). For the purposes of this thesis project, it perhaps may be apropos to rewrite Godwin’s Law to say that “as an online discussion unfolds (particularly if it’s between a conservative or alt-right aligned person and a liberal or progressive person), the probability of a comparison involving pedophilia or grooming approaches to one.”

Vitriol between political parties has only increased in recent years, and it is safe to assume that both the transcendental status of political figureheads (particularly figures such as Donald Trump) and the culture war (particularly regarding “wokeness” and discourses regarding sexuality and gender) have a marked effect on internet discourse. If not born from a general animosity toward the other side, political hate speech can be derived from a desire for engagement and infamy. The algorithmic equations that comprise social media itself have been shown to incentivize the denigration of political opponents as shown by the concerns of former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey who expressed concern about the popularity of “dunking” (i.e., mocking or denigrating one’s enemies) on the platform (Rathje et al., 2021). Indeed, this statistic is supplemented by the work of scholars such as Rathje, Van Bavel, and van der Linden whose research posits that in the context of polarized political contexts, “out-group animosity may be a more successful strategy for expressing one’s partisan identity and generating engaging content than in-group favoritism” (Rathje et al., 2021). This work becomes extremely salient in the context of social media where rhetoric can be highly mobilized for financial or political gain. Indeed, empires have been built on the political “grift” and owing to the current discourse regarding queerness, provides a site of anxiety that easily exploitable for engagement. This is evidenced by the advent of right-wing pundits such as Tim Pool, Matt Walsh, Ben Shapiro, and

LibsOfTikTok (Chaya Raichik), have garnered copious amounts of engagement on platforms such as Twitter promoting virulent brands of transphobia.

LibsOfTikTok, is an account worthy of analysis due to its rapid growth and proliferation using the LGBT=groomer rhetoric. LibsOfTikTok, has been deemed a conservative darling, with high engagement numbers due to the copious usage of the word “groomer.” Media watchdog group Media Matters has quantified these numbers, revealing that the account LibsOfTikTok “specifically used ‘groomer’-related language in 46 tweets since November 2021. The tweets earned over 220,000 total interactions (replies, retweets, like, and quote tweets), or an average of nearly 5,000 interactions per tweet — almost double the average interaction of the account’s other tweets” (Gogarty, 2022). In addition, LibsOfTikTok has attracted a sort of cult of personality, interacting with high-profile accounts such as Christine Pushaw (press secretary of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis) and Elon Musk in a positive manner. After the owner of LibsOfTikTok was stripped of her veil of anonymity, and revealed to be former real-estate agent Chaya Raichik, she appeared on arguably the most influential conservative news-program in America, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. On this program, Raichik (2022) boasted that in addition to getting multiple teachers from their positions, she’s “gotten a handful of drag shows canceled.” Raichik then expressed “DeSantis's team told me that the content that I found helped with the [‘Don't Say Gay’] bill — helped inspire that. And I heard from other legislators stuff along those lines as well.” In looking at the case of Chaya Raichik, it is apparent that the affordance of the internet allows for a widespread dissemination of information, specifically misinformation. Rather Raichik was able to amass a cult of personality by propagating myths about the queer community and playing to algorithms to spread hateful rhetoric.

As exemplified by Raichik's meteoric rise in popularity, research suggests that social media sites such as Twitter perhaps are most pertinent as sites of propagating violent rhetoric due to its adeptness at communicating with large volumes of people, circumventing various socioeconomic and geographic barriers that plague other modalities of communication, such as price of information (e.g., books, speaking events). As a result of such affordances allowing the rampant spread of misinformation, and attitudinal biases toward groups of people or concepts being ubiquitous and highly prevalent on social media sites, scholars Deng, Sinha, and Zhao (2017) posit that social media texts are the largest source of public opinion and are highly influential in the arena of public discourse because of their ubiquity and virality. This is evidenced by phenomena such as the rise in Anti-Asian hate in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019-early 2020. Former president Donald. J. Trump's use of the hashtag #ChinaVirus has been linked to various anti-Asian sentiments and acts of physical violence against these groups. The violence escalated with the killing of 8 people at various Asian-owned spas in the Atlanta area in January 2021, with six of the eight people killed being women of Asian descent. While it is unknown if the killer was motivated by Trump's tweets, or simply the rampant fetishization and objectification of Asian women, it is obvious that there was a racial component to the massacre. Jieun Son (2021) posits that such incidents require both recognizance and examination of the correlation of online discourse and face-to-face action. As Son states, "offline actions of bias and hate, even if unable to be identified as being prompted by specific tweets, are still part of the same discourse that targets and condemns minority groups during times of crisis."

The Child as an Ideograph

To provide a framework for the lion's share of the work being presented in the following paragraphs, it is perhaps best to condense the discourses regarding child protection and political rhetoric by understanding that the child, for our intent and purposes, is an ideograph. An ideograph is a concept posited by scholar Michael Calvin McGee (1980) which is defined as a term used to describe terms that "illustrate or reveal cultural ideology, collective thought, and a system of ideals and ideas" (Stassen-Ferrara, 2017). McGee's scholarship suggests that the pertinent methodology to unpack ideographs is looking at the discourse used to produce it. McGee classifies the discourse used to produce ideographs as political language, and further posits that the political language used to produce ideographs is rife with "slogans." McGee's scholarship is reflected in the current political landscape, in which phrases such as #okgroomer are viral and ubiquitous, coloring discourse regarding the regulation and control of bodies.

McGee (1980) defines "ideograph" as a figure that doesn't exist but is propagated through political language. As McGee writes, "No one has ever seen an equality strutting up the driveway, so if equality exists it has meaning through its specific applications." While the child is not such an arcane concept due to having a corporeal form, the "child" that is peddled by politicians is just an abstraction that is non-existent. The ideograph at its heart is an abstraction, an idea that disambiguates the arcane into tangible ideas that are well-received by the general populace. In this vein, the ideograph of the child, representative of "innocence" and "purity" is used to propagate ideas and ordinances that supposedly grant a beneficence to this phantasmic entity. This sentiment is pontificated later in this work by scholars such as Gayle Rubin (2006) who argues that "legitimate concerns for the sexual welfare of the young have been vehicles for political mobilizations and policies with consequences well beyond their explicit aims." The

concept of the child as an ideograph has also inspired a sort of “in loco parentis” (*trans.* in place of the parent) behavior toward this figure of the child. With this construction of the child as an innocent, there lies the stance that this innocent must be disciplined and controlled in a paternalistic manner. In our current political landscape, states such as Utah are acting “in loco parentis” by banning gender-affirming care for children under the age of 18 (Goodwin, 2023), often conflicting with the consent of biological parents who have given their blessing for their child to receive transitional care. The implications of this are troubling, as many states are using this ideograph of the child to further propel political campaigns and conservative ideologies. This entity of the child that is corrupted by the “deviant” queer community is a potent talking point for conservatives, with political rhetors such as Ronald DeSantis and Donald Trump utilizing this political strategy effectively to garner votes. Ronald DeSantis utilized this strategy to secure victory in Florida where he was re-elected to his gubernatorial position (Kraushaar, 2023). The utility of the ideograph for this thesis work is an understanding that the ideograph of the innocent child is integral to conservative rhetoric, and that it informs other scholarship regarding the child as a political instrument.

Reproductive Futurism and the “Innocent” Child.

As referenced in the previous section, the construction of the groomer sentiment is acutely informed by the ideograph of the “innocent” child. Scholar Eve Sedgwick’s seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) posits that Western culture is structured chronically and endemically by the heterosexual/homosexual paradigm. Utilizing the method of deconstruction, Sedgwick has conceptualized that this paradigm is not a symmetrical binary, but rather an asymmetrical one in which one binary is privileged over the other. Rather, the supremacy of heterosexuality in the heterosexual/homosexual paradigm, and the act of identifying

homosexuality as the other or aberrant has led it to navigate a world where heterosexuality is favored. Sedgwick applies the heterosexual/homosexual paradigm to sets of oppositions seemingly unrelated to queerness: active/passive, utopia/apocalypse, and, of most interest to this thesis, innocence/initiation. Sedgwick states, “Innocence is defined as the state of being one with the world, feeling no division or separation from others, believing one is, literally, the center of the universe. In this state, suffering is minimal and short-lived, and death is a foreign concept.” Conversely, initiation can be defined as the fall from innocence, of which its causation includes death, an awareness of evil, and sexual awakening. If innocence is classified as the heterosexual in Sedgwick’s heterosexual/homosexual paradigm, then the homosexual is its initiation or absolute destruction.

By applying Sedgwick’s (1990) paradigm to common conservative linguistics regarding children being corrupted by queerness, we can begin to see how the circulation of apocryphal tales of the homosexual menace are constructed and subsequently brought to the forefront of our cultural imaginaries. Parents wish to reconcile their childhood traumas by providing a blissful, carefree childhood for their children. In our cultural lexicon, the word child and its variations are often metonymic with innocence. The preservation of innocence as noted by Joanne Faulkner (2013), “attracts a great deal of cultural attention and energy, both positive and negative” as a “privileged site not only of concern, celebration, and protection, but also of anxiety.” As scholar Julie Garlen (2019) notes, “anxiety drives many parents to great lengths to guard their children from sadness, stress, and even mild discomfort, which in the home and in the classroom manifests as a desire to prolong children’s unawareness of social realities” by censoring certain topics. Scholar Deborah Britzman (1998) classifies these topics such as sexuality, death, violence, and poverty, as “difficult knowledge.” Specifically, the topic of difficult knowledge encompasses

“representations of social and historical traumas in pedagogy” (Dadvand et al., 2021) and how a learner interacts with them. The omnipresence of the figure of the child on politics is expressed in Lee Edelman’s 2004 work, *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Edelman’s work espouses the belief that the construction of the child as an innocent in need of protection has been theoretically and fundamentally used to malign queerness in humanity’s cultural imaginaries by rendering the queer as future disabling and therefore an annulment of the tenets of reproductive futurism (O’Rourke, 2021).

Scholars such as Veronica Hollinger (2018) define reproductive futurism as the summation of the investment of hope in our children’s future. Hollinger notes the gravitas of reproductive futurism’s rhetorical appeal in their work, positing that “it may seem counterintuitive, or downright perverse, to question the long-standing association of children with futurity with the extension of the human in time, with “life-itself.” Hollinger’s statement relates to the figure of the child (in the present time) and the child’s ability to produce offspring in the future. Hollinger further likens the child to an “archive”, writing that the child is “the archive of past and present that we send into the future as a guarantor of our continuity, of our immortality, of our extension into a time we cannot foresee.”

This reading of the child as an archive becomes problematized when put in conversation with Biblical understandings of reproduction, in which only a straight cisgender man and straight cisgender woman are capable of procreation. The queer cannot reproduce naturally, and thus is seen as an “embodiment of a relentlessly narcissistic, antisocial, and future-negating drive” (Edelman, 2005). Reproduction and anti-queer rhetoric have been intrinsically linked, with multiple examples throughout history. First, Fundamentalist Christian religions, such as Quiverfull, have claimed “if just eight million American Christians began supplying more

“arrows for the war” by having six children or more” (Joyce, 2006) the Christian Right could rise in prominence and win the “culture war.” Similarly, the Nazi Party focused heavily on reproduction to create a pure Aryan race, and then subsequently indoctrinating children into Nazism via the Hitler Youth program. Because of this anecdotal evidence, it is possible to read the mounting anti-queer campaign in America as a play to maintain conservative supremacy, and ultimately, conservative hegemony.

Scholars such as Lee Edelman (2004) acknowledge that reproductive futurism is not an innocuous concept, but note it is hard to challenge due to being akin to an ideological Mobius strip, “stating that “such “self-evident” one-sidedness—the affirmation of a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense.” In essence, Edelman explains that it is a Herculean effort to disavow the figure of the child both hypothetically and legislatively, lest one be seen as rejecting the well-being of a child.

The major implication utilizing Edelman’s work for this thesis is an understanding that the invocation of the child inoculates right-wing politicians from being seen as utterly genocidal by the general populace. For example, laws banning crossdressing or varied performance of gender are seen as “protecting” children from deviants instead of a complete desire to erase transgender people from participating in society. Similarly, any advocacy for the queering of society is seen as wanting to normalize “pedophilia.” It is through this language and rhetoric, that the “groomer” sentiment is born.

“Child Protectionist Frames: Erotic Hysteria and Moral Panics”

Gayle Rubin, the author of one of the most influential and prolific canons of literature regarding sex and gender, noted that after publishing her essay, “Thinking sex: Notes for a

radical politics of sexuality” (1984), there was a marked change to rhetorical situation regarding children and the concept of sexuality. As Rubin (2006) writes in "Blood under the bridge: Reflections on ‘Thinking Sex’,” “when I finished writing ‘Thinking Sex’ in 1983, the outlines of the panics over children were clear, but their scale and duration were not. The panics that seemed episodic in 1983 now are a permanent feature of our social and political landscape.” Rubin’s observation is unfortunately still a constant fixture in contemporary society, even 14 years after her initial publication of *Blood Under the Bridge*. Rubin’s claim is acutely congruent to the current ethos regarding sexuality and children, only elevated by her assertion that “when the history of the last quarter of a century is finally written, one of the distinguishing features of this period will be the extent to which legitimate concerns for the sexual welfare of the young have been vehicles for political mobilizations and policies with consequences well beyond their explicit aims.” This sentiment is echoed by Lee Edelman (2004), who writes that the “child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the phantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.”

In the current American political landscape, there is more than a mere verisimilitude to Rubin’s words and our current reality. Within her work, Rubin recalls the passing of California’s 1994 initiative, *Three Strikes and You’re Out* and its function as a political vehicle. Originally conceived as a reaction to the horribly tragic kidnapping, rape, and murder of Polly Klaas (whose father now runs the prolific *KlaasKids* safety initiative) and murder of Kimber Reynolds, the *Three Strike Laws* is a ruling that imposed a life sentence for almost any crime, provided the defendant had two prior offenses defined as serious and/or violent by the California penal code. In theory, the law was supposed to protect children like Polly Klaas and Kimber Reynolds from becoming victimized by criminals such as serial rapists and murders, but as Gayle Rubin

explains, the ordinance was an example of a bait-and switch. As Rubin writes, “rather than protect young people from serial rapists, the primary effect of the law has been to incarcerate tens of thousands of Californians, many on relatively minor charges, including drug use and possession” (Rubin, 2006). As a result of such bills and ordinances, resources unilaterally related to the beneficence of children such as education invariably have funding siphoned from them into the prison-industrial complex instead.

Conceptualizing the use of child protection and reproductive futurism creates a rhetorical framework of understanding how conservative politicians use moral panics and fear of potential harm to the idealized figure of the child to exert dominance on American society. This sentiment is echoed by scholars such as Nirmal Puwar (2004), who posits that child protectionist frames position “racial, sexual, and gendered others” against children. This positioning of “racial, sexual, and gendered others” against children is evident by use of the language used in current rightwing rhetoric, particularly the assertion that queers are “grooming” and “sexualizing” children.

Strange Encounters

To be queer is to be inherently othered. This otherness manifests itself in many ways such as not fitting in within heterosexual spaces, insular religious communities associating queerness with sin, or exclusion from gendered spaces. To understand the figure of the queer other and relate the concept to the concept of the #okgroomer, I turn to Sara Ahmed’s seminal work, *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality* (2004). Ahmed’s work is of paramount importance for those exploring the experience of difference in racialized, sexualized, and heteronormative societies” (Marrota, 2021). Utilizing Ahmed’s work allows for an understanding

that post-truth is being utilized to frame the queer community as strangers, aberrant and dangerous to the nation consisting of the cisgendered and heterosexual.

Ahmed's *Strange encounters* utilizes the seminal thesis of Benedict Anderson's 1983 work *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism*, to define and construct her definition nation. In the text, Anderson defines the term "nation" as an entity consisting of social constructs sustained by the belief of its constituents. In this regard, anything sustained by belief, such as ideology, can be considered a nation. Anderson further argues that nation's constituents may not know each other or even meet in their lifetime, but live and exist within the nation in a shared sense of community and commonality." Anderson's point is incredibly salient in the present day, where the digital age has ushered a closer sense of proximity between individuals by ameliorating limiting factors such as distance and geographical location. For Ahmed, the nation is not born from a place of community and commonality, but rather is best conceptualized as a bastion or familiar space against what is unfamiliar or aberrant (Obamgi, 2016). Scholar Eddie Obamgi (2016) demarcates Ahmed's beliefs from Anderson's by succinctly stating that while Anderson's notion of community is marked by the belief that people "who are often different from each other can imagine that they share something in common through their belonging to the nation; in Ahmed's notion of nation, this imagined community relies on the production of a boundary between those who do and those who do not belong." Obamgi posits that the queer body is a figure of the stranger, an alien for both the nation and within it as well, which has been evidenced by the current American political landscape.

Ultimately, Ahmed's conceptualization of the nation is the heterosexual family. If one recalls the tenets of child protectionist frames and reproductive futurism, the queer is to be considered an abject threat to this nation. In applying Ahmed's definition to this thesis work, we

can see that the queer community is tantamount to the stranger in the mind of the cisgendered, heterosexual populace that comprises much of our contemporary society. The classification of the nation as a family, illustrates that the ideograph of the child and their association with the nuclear familial unit is integral to conservative rhetoric regarding what constitutes the proper nation. Further application of these concepts allows for an explanation for why the queer community is a site of such denigration from both netizens and legislators. Furthermore, the proposed legislation and discourse against queer people reflects Ahmed's notion of nation, by production of a boundary that seeks to differentiate and segregate the cisgendered heterosexual from the queer.

This production of a boundary is discussed within another one of Sara Ahmed's work as well. Her 2004 book, *The cultural politics of emotion*, espouses the belief that the emotions of "fear, danger, disgust and hate as expressed in the figure of the other is intentional." Through this projection of negative emotion onto the figure of the stranger, the stranger becomes a malefic entity that is to be hated, cursed, and loathed. Ahmed's work carries the belief that hate is an "affective economy, stemming from her work espousing the belief that hate does not simply stick upon the body of the hated, but rather materializes within and around said body socially and materially." Ahmed also writes that words of hate repeat narratives of difference rather than unity and create impressions of others as those who have invaded the space of the nation, threatening its existence. Ahmed concludes that the affective economy of hate is an endless cycle because it always waits for a potential body to hate, "The impossibility of reducing hate to a particular body allows hate to circulate in an economic sense, working to differentiate others from other others, a differentiation that is never 'over', as it awaits others who have not yet arrived. Such a discourse of 'waiting for the bogus' is what justifies the repetition of violence

against the bodies of others in the name of protecting the nation.” The repetition and circulation of hate is akin to the digital propagation of hate via fake news and stochastic terrorism, which is repeated and circulated within the digital arena. In applying Ahmed’s concepts of circulation and economic sense of hate to this thesis, we can see that within the digital arena the production of boundaries and protection of the “nation” is carried out via use of phrases such as #okgroomer, which serve to other and marginalize the queer, as well as those who have the queer’s best interest in mind.

The Rhetorical Situation

The happenings in America that this thesis concerns are considered the rhetorical situation this work is attending to. These happenings include anti-trans legislation, pushback against drag shows, and ultimately, a general animus toward queer people. Scholar Lloyd Bitzer (1968) classifies rhetoric as “pragmatic, something that comes into existence for something beyond the sake of itself; it performs some task.” Bitzer additionally argues that rhetoric is a mode of communication with the power to affect reality itself, propagated by a rhetor that “alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change.” In essence, Bitzer is explaining that rhetoric has a transcendental quality that has the power to alter reality, which indeed is echoed in events such as the Holocaust, which was stoked by the rhetoric of rhetor Adolf Hitler, and both altered and ended the livelihoods of many people across Europe. Bitzer writes that a rhetorical situation arises because “rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem.”

In the rhetorical situation this thesis is describing, anti-LGBTQIA language is propagated at a higher rate due to the visibility queerness is afforded in the schema of the modern day. Rather, queerness is not limited to just the nightlife, and instead has a higher visibility in the media, art, and literature made available for consumption. To be more precise, conservatives take umbrage with this visibility, and yearn to return to the days where heterosexuality and the heterosexual binary are hegemonically reinforced instead of narratives and livelihoods where queerness is celebrated.

Akin to the uprise of anti-Asian hate in the past, the hashtag #okgroomer seems to have a correlation to anti-trans violence and/or intimidation in the offline arena. Three separate occasions in December have involved an armed militia showing up at drag show events. Scholars such as Steven P. Schacht (2000) note the drag queen is a female impersonator who differs from transvestites and transgender individuals because this group typically consists of gay men donning traditionally feminine attire and accentuating feminine signifiers such as large eyelashes and lips. Their costuming and mannerisms typically are not born of gender dysphoria but rather a desire to perform in front of an audience in a creative manner. There also exists the drag king, who is essentially the gender inverse of the drag queen, a lesbian female dressing up as a male and accentuating traditionally male signifiers such as facial hair. In analysis of what drag comprises, it is clear that it is a subversion of traditional gender performance, and thus seen as aberrant and dangerous to the figure of the child. As mentioned later within this section, the juxtaposition between drag performers and children at events such as Drag Story Hour have only acerbated the #okgroomer rhetoric.

It is important to note that drag shows have been an integral part of the LGBTQIA community and interwoven into the tapestry of queerness and its associated history. Marsha P.

Johnson, a gay liberation activist who was influential in the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City was a self-identified drag-queen. Drag has been thrust into the mainstream with the advent of shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* being enjoyed by both queer and heterosexual individuals. Drag has been the site of targeting for right-wing commentators and individuals due to the introduction of an event called Drag Story Time created by author Michelle Tea in 2015. These events typically feature drag kings and queens reading stories to children accompanied by their parents in public spaces such as libraries or bookstores. A sampling of stories presented at these events have included *This Day In June* by Gayle Pittman, which is about spending a day at a Pride parade in June (Pride month); *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert, about a transgender girl with an unsupportive family who wishes to wear an extravagant dress who is helped by an older woman inspired by her courage; and finally, *Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hall, which is about blue crayon mistakenly labeled as red suffering an identity crisis due to being mislabeled.

Nina West, a Season 11 *RuPaul's Drag Race* contestant and winner of the award “Miss Congeniality” (an award given to the most helpful and amiable contestant) on that same season, considers drag to be “an opportunity for children to get creative and think outside the boxes us silly adults have crafted for them” (Wong, 2019). Additionally, West responds to critics who question if kids are too young to experience drag by stating that

drag is an opportunity for anyone—including and especially children—to reconsider the masks we are all forced to wear daily.... Children are inundated with implicit imagery from media about what is 'boy' and what is 'girl.' And I believe that almost all kids are less concerned about playing with a toy that's supposedly aligned to their gender, and more concerned with playing with toys that speak to them. (Wong, 2019)

While educators and progressive parents have lauded drag for challenging notions of gender norms and heteronormativity, Drag Time Story Hour has been violently opposed by right wing groups for perhaps, espousing the challenging of traditional gender norms. According to a CBC article by Yvette Brand, the opposition of these shows reached a critical mass after the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol in Washington, DC. As Brand writes, "It really wasn't until the January insurrection, when things really kicked off and things took a turn," said Jonathan Hamilt, executive director of the national non-profit, now called Drag Story Hour. "Some peaceful protesting [became] more of a storming of story hours and hate crimes and homophobic attacks" (Brand, 2022). Drag shows are often invoked when utilizing the #okgroomer hashtag, with videos of these events being embedded onto tweets using the #okgroomer. As mentioned before, at the time of writing of this thesis, drag is (and continues to be) a target for right-wing critics, believing it to be emblematic of "child grooming," and thus a repeated target within the #okgroomer hashtag.

Methodology

The methodology to analyze the hashtag #okgroomer is grounded in critical discourse analysis. According to scholars Gwen Bouvier and David Machin (2018), critical discourse analysis' primary function is to reveal how language is used to "maintain power and societal relations." Paul Simpson and Andrea Mayr supplement the work of Bouvier and Machin by providing a framework for understanding that critical discourse analysis's usage as an examination of power was primarily and historically concerned with how entities such as the penal, legislative, and the martial institution use language as coercion. As Simpson and Mayr (2018) write, "the language and communication found in, and produced by, these institutions and organizations reflect the interests of those in power and create a kind of "consent" that they are common sense and best for all." In essence, the language that critical discourse analysis (CDA) endeavors to decode, is language that both dictates and enforces societal norms, discourses that reinforce hegemony and obedience to a higher order. Bouvier and Machin note that CDA faces challenges in the digital age due to prior analysis typically concerning itself with the speech of the elite, such as political speech and news. Such an example of CDA in action is the work of Caldas-Coulthard who posits that CDA can be used to explain textual phenomenon such as that "reported speech in news can carry nonexplicit meaning" (Caldas-Coulthard, 1994). Bouvier and Machin give the example: "the management stated that working conditions were of the highest standard /the workers claimed there were problems with working conditions." Bouvier and Machin posit that applying CDA to these linguistics reveals that the difference between 'stated' and 'claimed' here implicitly affirms the stance of the managements more credible than the workers (Bouvier, 2018).

While Bouvier and Machin's (2018) scholarship has augmented the claim that these "elite" texts are attuned to traditional critical discourse analysis (CDA) due to appearing to have clear routes for revealing the dominant ideologies contained therein, CDA in the digital has complicated due to the various exigences and methods these platforms afford to disseminators of information. Furthermore, the monolith of traditional sites of information such as news, has eroded and no longer provides a top-down dissemination of information. Bouvier and Machin (2018) explain that the flow of knowledge has changed, and news has now been highly integrated into the social media landscape, a landscape in which authorship and authority must be rethought.

Bouvier and Machin (2018) note that CDA may have a difficult time contending with social media content as this content is typically highly multimodal in nature, created with not the prototypical larger bodies of running text that comprise "elite texts," but instead formed of shorter chunks of texts and integrated with images, lists, and graphics." Of paramount importance are these platforms' affordances to the individual over the institution. These affordances range from citizen journalists creating discourse via investigation and documentation, to creatives circumventing conglomerates to create lasting impacts on culture. Examples of these affordances include documentation of police brutality by citizens in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hand of police in March 2020 to musicians gaining popularity via the music sharing site SoundCloud. As such any ardent scholar of the digital age would be best be equipped to understand the power of social media and the internet.

Unfortunately, many contemporary texts look at the internet with rose-colored glasses, resorting to generalities about the platform. Some of these generalities include that the internet is democratic or is a "cool" nouveau medium (Brock, 2016). A text that addresses the burgeoning

field of CDA in the internet age while being cognizant to avoid generalities is Andre Brock's work *Critical technocultural discourse analysis* (2016). Brock's novel CDA method application, critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) "combines analyses of information technology material and virtual design with an inquiry into the production of meaning through information technology practice and the articulations of information technology." Brock notes CTDA is keenly concerned with the technological artifact, which is theorized as a "set of rules and resources built into the technology by designers during its development which are then appropriated by users as they interact with the technology" (Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001). In the arena of Twitter, these rules are appropriated and learned by users as they perform actions such as using emojis or abbreviated text to fit the 280-word limit or using hashtags to increase exposure on posts. This examination of the technological affordances of Twitter was repeated in Brock's usage of CTDA in analysis of the Black Twitter community considered Twitter's interface and protocol as a native part of its discourse, rather than paring it down to just its lexical and social features. Rather, usage of CTDA allowed Brock to find that Twitter's interface is just as diverse as its userbase, with options such as muting, blocking and site presentation affecting the discourses unfolding onto the platform in which these users are enmeshed. Indeed, as Brock posits, "isolating Twitter to one interface, however, is nearly impossible given its multiple incarnations on various platforms and hundreds of applications. In unpacking the multiplicity of Twitter, the study discovered instead that Twitter-the-interface is nearly as singular as the user" (Brock). While Critical Discourse Analysis provides a space for the inquiry and interrogation of the lexical aspects of analyzing speech, CTDA has provided a greater consideration for the platforms in which discourses unfold, especially in the digital age.

Social media sites such as Twitter perhaps are most pertinent as sites of communications studies because of their adeptness at communicating with large volumes of people, circumventing various socioeconomic and geographic barriers that plague other modalities of communication, such as price of information (e.g books, speaking events). As a result of such affordances, misinformation, and attitudinal biases toward groups of people or concepts are ubiquitous and highly prevalent on social media sites. These attitudinal biases toward groups of people and concepts were explored in my overall research for this thesis project.

Site of Analysis and Research Design

Given that the hashtag is endemic to the social media site Twitter and this social media site is typically ground zero for contemporary discourse, I decided to narrow my scope to this platform in collecting data about the usage of the term #okgroomer. At first, to filter my searches, I decided to look at tweets using the hashtag from verified accounts only. Being verified on Twitter primarily means that a user is notable in news, politics, sports, or entertainment, but with the recent corporate takeover of Twitter by Elon Musk, any user can be verified if they pay \$8 monthly to the site. Users who elect to be denoted as “verified by Twitter Blue” when clicking on the checkmark next to their name. Buying a verified status will have their purchase. Conversely, when clicking on a traditionally verified account, the phrase “this account is verified because it’s notable in government, news, entertainment, or another designated category” will appear. This ability to “buy in” to verification made my initial data collection conflict with Bouvier and Machin’s perspective to the employed methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis which states that it is primarily used to analyze the speech of the “elite” (Bouvier & Machin, 1990), but now anybody willing to pay the \$8 tithing to Twitter can be considered “elite” in the arena of Twitter. Contending with only verified accounts made data

collection tenuous due to the amount of data retrieved from using the “verified” operator being relatively scant in comparison to searching tweets site-wide. To diversify the pool of data collected, I decided to increase the scope of my search to include non-verified accounts as well. This increase of scope was solely intended to facilitate the retrieval of more data rather than for any other scholarly benefit. With this decision, I had two set parameters in place for a data retrieval framework.

My third parameter was influenced by the decision to incorporate Twitter’s native search parameters to facilitate appropriate and efficient data retrieval. To start, I selected the range of data to cover the span of the week, picking the dates of 24 November 2022 to 1 December 2022 and aggregating all the tweets from that range. I intentionally picked the start date of 24 November 2022 as it was only four days after the shooting at the Colorado Springs Club Q shooting. Ostensibly, I was aiming to see how the LGBTQIA-groomer rhetoric may have been discussed after the tragic shooting and all discourses related to this event, and if use of #okgroomer was a salient example of Stochastic Terrorism.

After determining that variables of the phrase #okgroomer would yield an amount of data that would be un-catalogable due to time constraints, I decided to use the operator #okgroomer exclusively, not utilizing variations of the phrase, such as #OkayGroomer or simply #groomer. Once I decided my operator terms and method of analysis, I began to collect all instances of tweets using the selected search operator phrase and began to catalogue them within a Google Spreadsheet to make connections between verbiage, intent, and overall messaging of each tweet. This cataloging process is known as coding and is utilized by researchers to categorize their qualitative data by labeling and organizing the data to identify different themes and therefore eking out the various connections contained therein. I employed Judith Houlton’s (2010)

methodology for research, theoretical saturation, as part of my research design. Houlton defines the process for theoretical saturation by explaining that it is

achieved through constant comparison of incidents (indicators) in the data to elicit the properties and dimensions of each category (code). This constant comparing of incidents continues until the process yields the interchangeability of indicators, meaning that no new properties or dimensions are emerging from continued coding and comparison.

In essence, this process requires the user to perform repetitive comparing of datasets to uncover patterns contained within the data. This constant comparison allowed me to find patterns in the tweets analyzed, and thus served to assist me in creating conclusions about the data as illustrated in the summary section.

As some of the data included within the data was visual imagery, I paid attention to the rise of visual rhetoric in the political sphere. This was accomplished by drawing on scholars such as Aparna Vincent (2020) and Darren Lilleker, Anastasia Venti, and Daniel Jackson (2019). Vincent's work expresses the belief that the post-2000 period has seen a marked increase in actors utilizing visual rhetoric in the political arena. Some examples Vincent relates include "North Korea releasing its missile test images as a diplomatic offensive, US President Donald Trump's meme war on his opponents, the Arab Springs protests where protesters circulated images of government repression online, the subversive graffiti of artist Banksy, the widely circulated photograph of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian child refugee who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea during his family's attempt to escape ethnic violence in Syria." Vincent also notes that the use of visual rhetoric is aided by the affordances of social media and is used by both "those who have power, and those who are/feel left out." Lilleker, Venti, and Jackson espouse the belief that human culture is visual culture, and humanity has historically used imagery to tell the story of

the human condition. These scholars posit that “images are particularly potent when they not only depict but instruct us about social norms—when they shape attitudes and behavior on everything from the role of women to ideas about nationhood” (Lilleker et al., 2019). Further relating to thesis work’s overarching notion of living in a post-truth world, Lilleker et al. reminds us that the phrase “a picture never lies” is both powerful, yet wildly inaccurate adage. The reasons for this inaccuracy are colored by the assertions that images “do not always tell the whole story, and the fact that images may be strategically constructed, manipulated or chosen carefully to convey an impression” (Lilleker et al., 2019). This assertion remains extremely salient to this thesis work, as I hypothesize at least one of the images presented below is “staged” to further the schism between queer people and conservatives.

The actual process of cataloguing of tweets was accomplished by embedding the tweets on a separate site called publish.twitter.com as well as using the social media dashboard management application Tweet Deck. Through applying the desired search operators as well as filtering the tweets through Twitter’s Advanced Search feature, I was able to find around 200 separate tweets using the #okgroomer hashtag. These tweets included both verified and unverified accounts, and there was a significant overlap in topics discussed, as well as repetition of the accounts participating in using the hashtag.

Analysis

Data collection and qualitative analysis utilizing critical discourse analysis allowed me to create a rhetorical framework for understanding how #okgroomer is used to malign LGBTQIA people in the digital arena. Through deploying a qualitative approach via extensive coding of data and making inferences by putting the analyzed tweets in conversation with other tweet categories (original post being replied to and reading other tweets that are in the periphery of analyzed tweet not using the operator #okgroomer). The goal of analyzing these tweets were to see if use of #okgroomer has implications for Stochastic Terrorism, more specifically seeing if these tweets will herald more instances of offline violence in the future. Analysis of tweets allowed for 4 distinct conclusions about how the hashtag #okgroomer is used: 1) #okgroomer is aided by the construction of the “innocent” child to widely spread; 2) #okgroomer is often utilized to deflect criticism aimed at conservative figureheads or ideologies; 3) #okgroomer is used to response to criticize multimedia and pop culture, and in this case, primarily serves to accentuate the dichotomy between the “everyday blue collar American” and “Hollywood Elite”; 4) #okgroomer is reclaimed by liberal accounts to criticize conservatives. As stated before, I hoped to find a marked correlation between offline violence and use of the #okgroomer hashtag by looking at the tweets expressed within the hashtag. I also was hoping to see how these tweets were emblematic of living in a post-truth world, and how these tweets contributed to, or were influenced by post-truth ideals about queerness. These post truth ideals have been outlined throughout this thesis work, and primarily entail the conservative discourse on the figure of the innocent child and the belief that queerness is a corrupting influence on it.

1) #okgroomer and the construction of the “innocent” child

One of the first things I noticed when analyzing the #okgroomer hashtag, is that it relies on the construction of the “innocent” child to widely propagate. This construction of innocence presumes that children lack agency to understand their own bodies, or the subsequent violence enacted on said bodies. This presumption of the “innocent child” was specifically invoked on 26 November 2022 by an account named @JoriRaytheon76. @JoriRaytheon76 tweeted the following, “These are in our kids’ libraries ...and you all defend it. #okgroomer.” Attached to the tweet were 2 images / illustrations from a book regarding sex and gender ostensibly for teens, and then a third image stating the definition of “groomer.”



Figure 1: A page from Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan’s *Let’s Talk About It: The Teen’s Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human* (2021). The book has been controversial for its frank discussion of sexual content and has been banned or a candidate for being banned in many libraries.

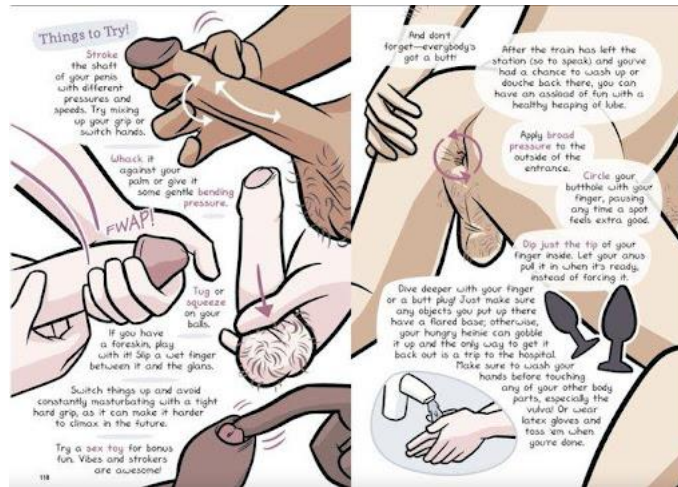


Figure 2: A page from Erika Moen and Matthew Nolan’s *Let’s Talk About It: The Teen’s Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human* (2021). The book has been controversial for its frank discussion of sexual content and has been banned or a candidate for being banned in many libraries.

groomer

a groomer is someone who builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them.

Figure 3: Definition of “groomer.”

Another tweet posted by @SJWsReally posted a picture with the caption “Yup no grooming here.” The picture was of a child posed holding hands with a stripper (as evidenced by markers such as money in her garters) and probably not with a drag queen (drag queens are typically cisgender men dressing up as females, and the person in the image appears to have natural breasts). Discourse surrounding this image suggests that the image is “staged” to arouse the ire of conservatives. The assertion that this photo is staged is aided by the hyper-proactive captioning (the assertion that children *belong* at drag shows) and use of the image only appearing

in contexts where LGBTQIA community members are denigrated. Further imperative to this image's efficacy is the child's juxtaposition with the stripper in this image. The child is wearing clothes reminiscent of church-wear, and is wearing a tiara, which is both a staple in the construction of the gendered female child, and reminiscent of the days of make-believe and innocence so intrinsically linked to the child. This reading of the imagery presented is informed and reified through the work of scholars such as Nirmal Puwar (2004), whose construct of child protectionist frames explains that historically the racial and gendered is seen as dangerous to children.

 **SJWsReally?**
@SJWsReally

Replying to @TTDarkLight

Yup no grooming here. #okgroomer



Figure 4: *Image of a child with a drag queen or stripper. The image typically appears when asserting that queer people are groomers.*

Another tweet by @FrankRi91301047 specifically juxtaposes the word “groomer” with the words “children and “preschoolers”: “The race baiting is tired, coming from a bunch of groomers that want to castrate children and sexualize preschoolers. #okgroomer.” In this tweet, the ideograph of the innocent child, is juxtaposed with verbs such as “sexualize” and “castrate.” These verbs are clearly used to imply that the “groomer” (liberals / LGBTQIA community) is a both a corrupting and malefic entity toward the child and must be snuffed out to safeguard the child’s wellbeing. Verbiage that positions the child against the imagined queer menace is intentional on the part of @FrankRi91301047 and many other employers of anti-queer rhetoric. The efficacy of the words “castrate” and “sexualize” to conjure visceral imagery of child abuse in the minds of the consumers of rhetoric is not to be underestimated, and undoubtedly a reason why “groomer” is the go-to way of fighting against the queer population.

2) #okgroomer and deflecting conservative criticism

On 24 November 2022, account @TendieRealm tweeted #okgroomer to the account of journalist @MattBinder, whose tweet read “a lot going on here but just need to point out that the supposedly ‘neutral’ Elon Musk is affirmatively replying to a white nationalist who is smearing antifascists as pedophiles.” Similarly account @dbeux tweeted #okgroomer to Binder on 25 November 2022. As referenced earlier in this work, the landscape of Twitter has become precarious due to new Twitter CEO Elon Musk. Musk, a self-described centrist, has been a site of anxiety for a large population of the website’s userbase. Musk has been seen on the site cavorting with accounts that promote virulent brands of transphobia such as LibsOfTikTok and has on one occasion, said that “Pronouns Suck” (Musk, 2020), raising the ire of his former partner, musician Grimes. Occurring parallel to the discourse about Musk and his hostile

takeover, these instances show that his ardent supporters are even more enthused to deem anyone who criticizes Musk a groomer.

The next salient example comes from an instance occurring on 24 November 2022, in which account @soulassin870 tweeted the following to a critic of the GOP, “whoa, whoa, maybe don’t throw those cult accusations around when you live in a big ole glass house where there’s guys in drag dancing in front of kids. #okgroomer.” This tweet by @soulassin870 is response to a tweet by @RickMcIntosh16 that reads “all of you Trump cult clowns look at everything differently. It is called being in a cult. But hey keep telling us all about your ‘Alternative Facts’.” How American Presidents control GLOBAL gas prices, and inflation worldwide. Then disclose where you got you degree in economics.” Presumably @soulassin870 took umbrage with @RickMcIntosh16 smearing the GOP as a cult and referred to the user as a “groomer,” illustrating that the phrase is not only used to defend the honor of conservative figures, but additionally used as a weapon in the schism between liberal and conservative.

Finally, account @SinJunTheGreat tweeted the following when conservative commentator Matt Walsh was being criticized: “Peak fertility is a biological fact. What are you mad about? I guess your identity precludes reproduction altogether lol. So you are threatened by anyone else doing it. #MentalIllness #okgroomer.” The tweet was response to a suspended account called @tphobecringe, who stated that to remind us all what started the #MattWalshIsAGroomer hashtag, “here’s Matt ‘16 is most fertile’ Walsh himself defending Weinstein and McCarrick.” The tweet by @tphobecringe evidences that Walsh is talking about the age of “peak fertility” (best age to have a child) being 16, and defending sexual predators such as Harvey Weinstein and Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who is the only U.S. Catholic

Cardinal, current or former, to be criminally charged with child sex crimes. This defense of McCarrick reveals that conservatives ultimately do not necessarily care about sex crimes against children but have no problem invoking the figure of the child to further discrimination against queerness.

3) #okgroomer as multimedia and pop culture criticism

During the time of data collection, multiple events in pop culture informed the rhetorical situation that this thesis work is analyzing. In data collection there was multiple tweets referencing a *Washington Post* (2022) article that praised a play titled “Downstate.” The article’s which was published on 27 November 2022 has a title which reads “Review| ‘Downstate’ is a play about pedophiles. It’s also brilliant.” Reaction to this article was decisively negative, with the original *Washington Post* article receiving 2,726 quote retweets in comparison to 376 retweets and 669 likes. Quote retweets are primarily utilized to mock or denigrate the original poster in a process known colloquially on the internet as “dunking.” Indeed, this *Washington Post* article aroused the ire of many netizens, with one account @Guru85Neurotic quote-retweeting the article with this sentiment, “they've spent 30 years taking miles inch by inch. Maybe, just maybe, this inch will be worth fighting against. THIS is why the #okgroomer trend pissed them off so much. Fight back goddamit.” Other tweets that quote retweeted the *Washington Post* article were more direct, simply writing #okgroomer in response.

While most users of the #okgroomer hashtag often criticize media and culture inanelly and unwarrantedly, some of their criticisms end up being legitimate and speak against unnecessary sexualization of children. An instance of this legitimate concern was the critique of Balenciaga advertisements with pedophilic undertones. There were multiple ads criticized, one ad which featured children holding purses shaped like teddy bears dressed in bondage gear, as

well as another ad that featured a \$3,000 purse sitting on a desk with printed copies of the Supreme Court’s 2008 decision in the case of U.S. v. Williams. The case examined whether laws banning the “pandering”—promoting—of child pornography curtailed First Amendment freedom of speech rights. Response to this incident was similar to the *Washington Post* debacle, with many netizens tweeting #okgroomer in response to articles about Balenciaga, or at celebrities involved with the company, such as Kim Kardashian.

The last example, and perhaps the most superficial when juxtaposed with the previous two events was the response to Disney’s new movie *Strange World*. *Strange World* has been a site for incendiary comments from right-wing pundits due to featuring a homosexual main character. When the movie failed to perform at the box-office, tweets reveled in its poor performance, with one tweet present in data collection reading: “Disney is a company with which no decent parent would dare leave their child alone. LEFTIST WOKE TRASH. [All these instances show that #okgroomer does not apply to just maligning the LGBTQIA community, but rather can have usage when dealing with conglomerates or media empires. While the average consumer is often powerless against the average conglomerate, positioning them as promoting or being adjacent to pedophilia or grooming is an effective tactic for criticizing the interests of multimedia conglomerates.](https://thedirect.com/article/disney-strange-world-audience-score-worst-animation-studio...#Disney #Groomers #okgroomer.””</p></div><div data-bbox=)

4) #okgroomer and liberal criticism of conservatives

Much like how slurs have been “reclaimed” by marginalized communities, #okgroomer has been used against accounts that have propagated transphobia using the same phrase. In one of the most amusing cases of being hoisted by his own petard, James Lindsay

(@ConceptualJames) a right-wing commentator who is perhaps the originator of the transgender=groomer comparison. A tweet by @AnOpenSecret, an account that produces a documentary about pedophilia in Hollywood, revealed that James Lindsay has been cavorting with members of the NXIVM sex cult. As @AnOpenSecret tweeted: “James Lindsay just loves hanging out with the former right-hand lieutenant to NXIVM sex cult leader Keith Raniere, who is currently in prison for child sex trafficking.” Multiple tweets found in data collection were enthused to point out Lindsay’s connection to the sex cult to push back against his ideologies. On 28 November 2022 user@madbirdtweetin tweeted: “I’m super on board with getting the Streisand effect going with James Lindsay and his NXIVM cult member buddy. #okgroomer.” This sentiment was echoed user @ronesix who plaintively tweeted #okgroomer in a quote retweet response to James Lindsay. Finally, a tweet by @g4dualie utilized similar verbiage to many conservative tweets to “dunk” on Lindsay: “Why isn’t @ConceptualJames trending? This fucking snowflake is butt hurt because the ‘libs’ are promoting his #okgroomer meme and he can’t block them fast enough. He’s reporting the Libs as spammers hoping Elon steps in and saves him from further triggering 🤖.” The linguistic choices of @g4dualie almost parallel most conservative discourses by choosing to use words such “libs” as shorthand for liberal, “snowflakes” and “triggered.” Furthermore, a reference to Elon Musk, who conservative accounts view in an almost messianic manner, is invoked as @g4dualie notes that Lindsay is perhaps looking to Musk to save him from the same targeted harassment his groomer comparison has inflicted on the queer community.

Discussion

Utilizing the work of scholars such as Andre Brock has allowed for an elevated conceptualization of textual data extracted from the confines of Twitter, and pinpointed difficulties in the data collection process. Using Brock's (2018) critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) has facilitated the realization that the platform of Twitter has implication for texts retrieved from it. Brock's CTDA analysis of Black Twitter concluded that the Twitter platform "mediated discourse through brevity, ritual, performativity, and ephemerality." In my own data collection process, I began to find similarities with Brock's struggles. I began to contend with the difficulties of having such brief individual results (often consisting of tweets which solely said #okgroomer) and the ephemerality of the data, which required copious screenshotting to make sure the data was preserved properly.

Arguably my greatest frustration with analyzing the tweets using #okgroomer, was that I was primarily looking at tweets from individuals with ideologies not congruent to my own. Being confronted with the virulent brand of transphobia espoused in the tweets compounded with the sheer brevity of some of the responses felt tantamount to looking at the words of the "dregs" and utter refuses of society. As such, I felt there was little to no scholarly value from just mere observation and analysis, a fact that my thesis advisors had to convince me otherwise.

My own feelings regarding this issue recall the scholarship of Sara Ahmed, particularly her work regarding the "stranger" and how hate is an "affective economy" (Ahmed, 2000). Ahmed's work espouses the belief that words of hate repeat narratives of difference rather than unity and create negative impressions of invaders. For someone who has wholly insulated themselves with like-minded people (queer/progressives), my feelings of disgust toward propagators of the queer=groomer rhetoric are already incredibly intensified, to the point where I

regard these rhetors with utter contempt. Similarly, the same feelings are held by conservatives who view the queer community as “invaders” and aliens that in their mind, seek to dismantle heteronormative and patriarchal structures and understandings of society. This schism recalls Ahmed’s terminology of an “affective economy of hate,” in which instead of an exchange of goods and services prototypical in a traditional economy, there is an exchange of malice and hate.

Analysis of tweets using #okgroomer exemplifies current society’s devolution into a tribalistic dichotomy. Accusations of pedophilia and grooming are hurled at the other party for slights unrelated to discourses related to gender and sexuality (e.g., insulting a conservative figurehead like Donald Trump or Elon Musk) as well as differences in lifestyle (queerness vs. heterosexuality/cisgender). In this ideological battlefield, the right feels like their only recourse to combat “wokeness” and queerness is to call their political opponents’ “groomers.” Indeed, this sentiment is espoused in a tweet by @russiabeercans, who writes “yes and concerned parents and/or their representatives in office are accused of homophobia, ridiculed & publicly shamed for being a luddite hick rube...we say #okgroomer because it's the only response we have left.”

As stated before previously in the literature review, the invocation of the child is an extremely salient form of attack. Scholars such as Gayle Rubin (2011) note that this invocation has roused institutions such as the prison-industrial complex to enact legislation that was born of a supposed beneficence to the child. This legislation notably includes California’s Three Strikes law stemming from the murders of Polly Klaas and Kimber Reynolds, despite this ordinance primarily incarcerating non-violent offenders such as drug users instead of sex offenders. If the invocation of the child can mobilize the allocation of fiscal /legislative capital to such an extent, this invocation can logically also mobilize rhetorical capital as well. I use the term rhetorical

capital here to delineate that the “capital” in this scenario are the “rhetors” who spend their time on social media platforms propagating the grooming rhetoric.

It is also perhaps important to note that liberal accounts who co-opt the word “groomer” are doing so under the same ethos as user @russiabeercans and their ilk, because equating a political opponent to a danger to children is effective, regardless of party affiliation. Interestingly, liberal accounts were able to effectively use the “groomer” rhetoric against conservative accounts such as @ConceptualJames (James Lindsay), who is best known for being the one who popularized the ethos of queerness=groomer. Lindsay’s ties to a member sex cult known as NXIVM were exposed, and much to the chagrin of Lindsay, he was dubbed a groomer for this relation.

Analysis of the tweets collected also further shows a marked divide between “conservatives” and what they perceive to be “elites.” Criticism of companies such as Disney for the crime of acquiescing to the “woke” mob, which entails including queer, non-white characters in their properties. Accounts additionally relished the fact that Disney’s newest film, *Lost World*, a film which featured a gay and black main character, did not perform well at the box office. Following this failure, multiple conservative accounts began to tweet, “GO WOKE GO BROKE” began to appear, implying that including films featuring non-white characters and queer characters are not profitable due to not appealing to the conservative ethos. Other more sensible criticisms were levied toward the fashion house Balenciaga (a brand which is often synonymous with wealth and celebrity status) for featuring children posing with teddy bears wearing bondage gear, and brand ambassador Kim Kardashian for representing the brand.

While the previous passages are important to understanding the functions of the #okgroomer hashtag within the Twitter platform, they do not exactly reveal a marked correlation

between usage of the hashtag and Stochastic Terrorism. Indeed, the affordances of the Twitter platform aid in the propagation of messaging, as noted by scholars such as Darius and Stephany (2020) who note that “alternative communication channels (social platforms and messengers)” are particularly attractive for right-wing demagogues by virtue of providing a direct channel of communication toward the target audience rather than being filtered through custodians such as shareholders and censors. Of course, on the site of Twitter, of which this work is concerned, the primary “custodian” is Elon Musk, who actively cavorts with these right-wing demagogues. The work of authors such as Warzel (2022) note that Musk bought the Twitter site as a “political act” meant to cultivate free speech, acknowledging that Musk’s notion of free speech involves amplifying and advancing the interests of right-wing reactionaries while trolling the left.

The “affordances” that Musk’s Twitter has granted the conservative / alt-right userbases a marked amplification of their “cults of personality.” If we remember Amman and Meloy’s (2021) assertion that Stochastic Terrorism is propagated by charismatic figures, and the work of scholars such as Rathje et al. (2021) which posits that out-group animosity is often a successful strategy for expressing one’s partisan identity and generating engagement as opposed to in-group favoritism, then it is understood that the nature of social media virality on Twitter is driven by negativity. Algorithmically speaking, users peddling hateful content that paint queer people and their allies as groomers such as @LibsOfTikTok (Chaya Raichik) and @Timcast (Tim Pool) are only aided by the negative emotions their content spurs. Both the negativity toward queer people, and negativity toward the “rhetor” serve to only spread the message of hate. Using the work of Amman and Meloy, I break down how this phenomenon occurs: first, a charismatic public figure purveys hostile rhetoric against a targeted out-group or individual into the public discourse to further some political or social objective (primary rhetor). Next, an unrelated consumer of the

rhetoric absorbs and reacts with anger, contempt, or disgust (peripheral rhetor). This is followed by the rhetorician (primary rhetor) purveying rhetoric that serves to dehumanize and denigrate the target, in hopes that the peripheral rhetor will spread the sentiment. The primary rhetor additionally hopes that an unrelated consumer of the rhetoric will maliciously toward the targeted group by being exposed to the spread of the original rhetoric.

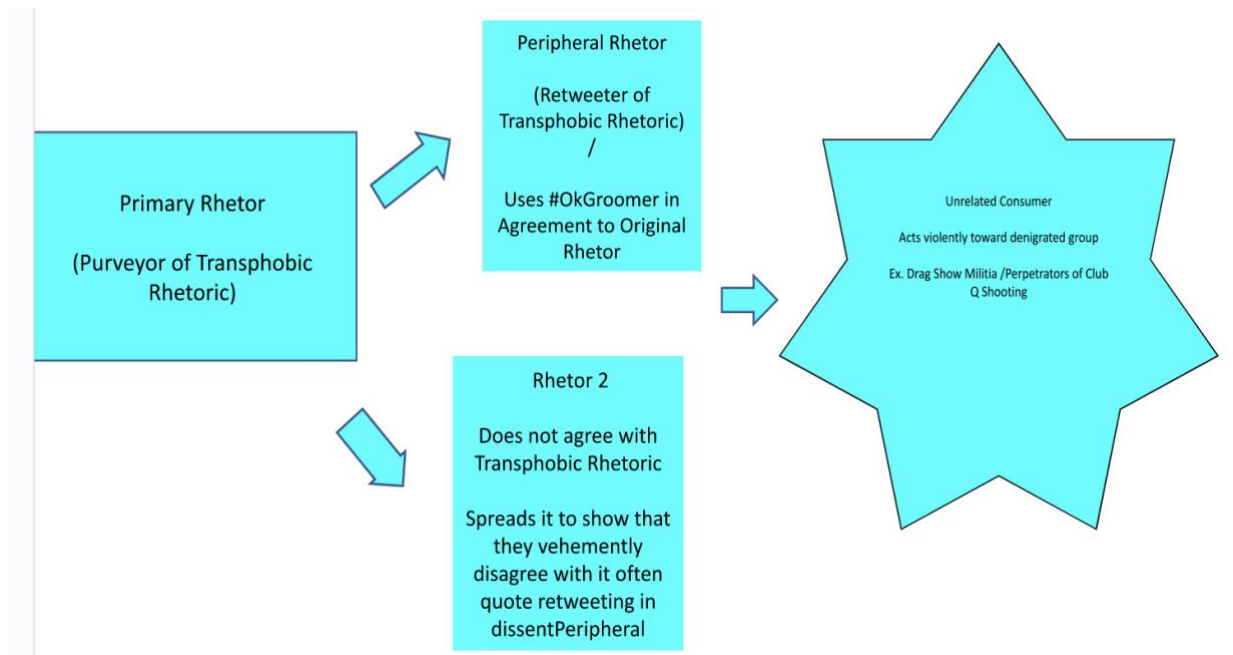


Figure 5: *Diagram that shows how transphobic rhetoric on social media like Twitter can contribute to Stochastic Terrorism.*

Unfortunately, due to the untraceable nature of rhetoric and language and verbiage on the part of the original rhetor which suggests plausible deniability, it is impossible to substantially claim there is a direct correlation between hateful rhetoric and offline violence, despite the claims of the original rhetor’s plausible deniability being wholly unconvincing. Similarly, we cannot accurately gauge if one instance of transphobic harassment can be linked to an individual’s suicide or death, despite evidence that such targeted harassment does have a detrimental effect on a person’s psyche.

Ultimately, the discourse uncovered by analysis of hashtags using #okgroomer seems to be emblematic of living in a “post-truth” America. The assertion that the left is a bunch of “groomers that want to castrate children and sexualize preschoolers” is fueled by the mythos that queer people are dangerous and aberrant to children. If we recall McComisky’s (2017) scholarship regarding “post-truth” we understand that a post-truth world is a world where language lacks any references to facts, truths, and realities.” The hashtag #okgroomer is also a digital language with no basis in facts and reality and is sustained by the same mythos that has fueled anti-queer campaigns of the past. These myths are peddled by rhetors who seek to control public discourse, hungry for votes and financial gain. Anita Bryant, a rhetor primarily associated with the anti-queer organization “Save The Children” became a crusader for anti-queer ordinances after being informed by her pastor that “gay people might teach her children in high school and in so doing “recruit” them into their ranks” (Eugenios, 2022). The same discourse is espoused within the #okgroomer ecology, with netizens like @SinJunTheGreat writing that, “the community itself was groomed, as evidenced by the massive spike in alphabet soup identity in Gen Z. The behavior that is the basis of their identity is learned not ingrained at birth. The community only survives by teaching.”

Conclusion

It is my belief that this work, while not entirely filling the lacuna of knowledge that the advent of phrases such as #okgroomer and its effects on offline violence that the fields of rhetoric, technocultural communication, and queer studies must contend with, allows for a facilitation for more specialized works regarding this line of inquiry.

At the time of writing, I am more interested to see how the field of queer studies contends with how the word groomer has impacted the lived realities of queer adults. Further research pursuing this line of inquiry would perhaps benefit from applying an intersectional lens that highlights the high rates of violence against Latine and Black transgender people. Is there a correlation between the word groomer and violence impacting these groups? How does the mostly white-originated phrase #okgroomer intersect with concepts such as machismo and the high involvement of institutions of the church in certain racialized communities. The works of scholars such as Martínez-Guzmán and Johnson (2020), who canvas narratives of transphobic violence in the Mexican province of Colima, and Garland-Tirado (2021), whose work traces roots of transphobia in the Black Church, could provide salient entry-points to researchers pursuing a more offline approach. Additionally, as the trend of using groomer to malign queer people is a relatively novel phenomena, more research can be done to see the effects it has on the psyche of queer people. A more adept researcher may find it prudent to conduct structured interviews with queer people, particularly transgender people, to gain an insight of how the rhetoric of transgender identity=grooming could potentially highly diminish the quality of life for this group. Further pursuit into this line of inquiry may probe if the usage of the word groomer has led to higher rates of suicide and self-harm. If I were to conduct this research again, I would like to instead center the voices of queer people instead of those who espouse anti-queer rhetoric, as I

did within this research design. I'd love to commiserate with other members of the queer community and talk to them about how they contend with the mounting hate toward their demographic.

Further situating this work in the realm of "post-truth," I'd like to see how this topic is informed by discussions on technology such as AI-based image generation or AI-voice technology. Are these technologies used to create propagandized images of queer people negatively interacting with children or speaking harmful beliefs? How would we contend with this misinformation? Drawing from my own sphere of interest in art, there is a negative phenomenon where artist's original work is fed to machine-learning AI generators. These generators then learn to copy an artist's style and technique and are subsequently used by non-artists to generate art using the same style of the original artist. The field of political rhetoric must also contend with this problem, with the voices of famous political rhetors such as Donald Trump and Joseph Biden being replicated via AI technology. Often on social media there exists viral videos with AI-generated Donald Trump and Joe Biden arguing about inane topics. While these videos can be entertaining, the implications this technology has on political rhetoric is alarming and should be a pertinent site of interest for scholars.

If I was to further pursue this thesis research, I'd like to attend to a broader approach that looks for more instances of the word groomer rather than reducing the phenomena to a snappy hashtag such as #okgroomer. Expanding my scope further than instances of tweets just saying #okgroomer could have allowed for a higher-quality of data to peruse, such as higher-order political speech from established rhetors such as politicians rather than neophyte rhetors such as Twitter users.

The largest takeaway from this work, is how the groomer sentiment is fueled by image of the child. As a result, I suggest that the field of queer studies and, invest less energy in the child itself. While it is a wonderful thing for children to feel validated in their gender expression, the line of research presented in this thesis suggests that events that position children in proximity to non-heterosexual presentations of gender such as drag shows are incendiary and could be used as fuel to stoke anti-trans rhetoric. While coming to this conclusion feels a bit of a betrayal to the work of queer theorists fighting for absolute queer liberation, I highly believe that the research presented within this work, namely the work of Lee Edelman and Gayle Rubin, suggests that if the child is enmeshed in the fight to dismantle the heterosexual, patriarchal, and cisgendered hegemony that dictates our world, conservatives will only increase the counterattack against queer people with more vigor.

Additionally, this work, does not solve the growing political schism between those with progressive views on economics, gender, and sexuality and those with more conservative views regarding those topics. At the time of writing this conclusion, a speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Michael Knowles called for the eradication of trans rights. “If transgenderism is false—as it is—if men really can’t become women—as they cannot—then it’s false for everyone. If it is false then for the good of society and especially for the good of the poor people who have fallen prey to this confusion, transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely” (Wade & Reis, 2023). Fellow right-wing demagogue Marjorie Taylor-Greene proposed a draconian bill at the same conference “I introduced a bill called the Protect Children’s Innocence Act that will make it a felony to perform anything to do with gender-affirming care!” (Migdon, 2023). How does the field of queer scholarship contend with these demagogues going forward? How do we contend with the fact that there are influential people

entrenched within the halls of power who have the wherewithal to enact violent ordinances that make queerness a sin. How did we get here?

The title of Lee Edelman's work, *No Future*, is extremely poignant for this thesis work. How can we as a queer community, have a future when our elders are being targets of violence (both physical, and psychologically) and suffer from high rates of suicide? How can we survive as a community when there are people in power that seek to snuff us out? I recall the AIDS epidemic that has eviscerated bastions of queer knowledge, I recall Nazi Germany's burning of books from the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft which inevitably stagnated and stalled acceptance of the queer identity. That animosity and apathy led the queer to have *No Future*, and now when we are close to reaching a utopic queer futurity, it's about to be taken away again.

We will continue to have *No Future* if conservative discourses that paint queerness as tantamount to pedophilia prevail. It is the goal of conservatives to make the queer have *No Future*, and we as a queer community continue to invest energy into a future that may not ever come to pass. We must safeguard our present to even have a fighting chance.

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