

Navigating Truth In Crisis: Deconstructing Fake News Conspiracy Narratives Through Qualitative Content Analysis Of COVID-19 Pandemic Facebook Posts In The UK

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Abstract

This research study focuses into the presentation of fake news conspiracy narratives within the UK, focusing on the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's primary objective is to analyze the content of these narratives, particularly those that propagate conspiratorial notions lacking factual foundation, ultimately contributing to societal confusion and disruption. By employing Qualitative Content Analysis, the investigation aligns with the conceptualizations of conspiratorial narratives by Michael Barkun and Jesse Walker, situated within the realm of fake news. The analysis is further bolstered by the utilization of nvivo 12 Plus as a computer-assisted tool, enhancing the data analysis process. The study discerns that the examined fake news narratives exhibit distinct characteristics of conspiracy theories. The narratives further encompass claims such as vaccines being utilized for population extermination and 5G networks facilitating microchip activation for human control. This research study underscores its relevance in comprehending the dynamics

of conspiratorial fake news narratives and their implications for societal discourse.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Facebook, Qualitative Content Analysis, Fake News, Conspiracies.

Introduction

After the first news published in traditional media outlets, the communication technology has enormously evolved, bringing up social media as the new way of mediatization of the news. This enabled almost everyone to share and receive news instead the news being shared from only a very few media sources. This way of mediatization empowered the will of everyone to share news, without exemption, it empowered both the genuine news makers and fake news makers. Thus, social media present the most astonishing gateway in the history of the news. Furthermore, Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, and Legnante (2012) point out a distinction within news called as hard news and soft news. In addition, Shoemaker (2006) claim that "hard news" are urgent ones and need to be reported immediately because they may get obsoleted quickly whereas "soft news" are based on nonscheduled events, therefore there is no pressure on publishing or sharing them. Moreover, the commonality between news and "fake news" is that both share an event, however, the latter is being taken out of the context, it might be totally fabricated, misleading, exaggerating (Franklin & McNair, 2017; Gelfert, 2018; Holan, 2017; Schudson & Zelizer, 2017; Simons, 2018). With news we are being informed for a certain event, whereas with fake news we are being either manipulated or misinformed.

Furthermore, Swart, Peters, and Broersma (2018) point out that long before the press was present, as a necessity of social relationship, people needed to communicate with each other and share their thoughts, opinions, information and events surrounding them. However, this form of communication did not meet any professional criteria. With the incorporation of the professional press, this form of communication, namely the exchange of "news", took a different course which fulfilled the professional criteria established by journalism professionals. Thus, to this day this character is maintained and respected. In addition, it has been argued that the news, except that they have the

character to inform, as we mentioned earlier, they can also be a stimulus for social bond between people. And this type of news character is not something new, but it was practiced even before the press was present (Swart et al., 2018).

Literature Review

Consequently, how can we define "news" and what "news" really is? According to Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) news definition has several dimensions. First, "news" can be defined as the story of an event that happened recently, an event that is interesting and significant in nature. Second, "news" can be defined as the narrative of an event that, by its presentation, may affect people in different ways, and third, "news" simply represents an event that can be true or distorted. Contrary to the last definition, they argue that news should merely include true and reliable information. Furthermore, the idea of news is something that supposedly and normatively is believed to tell the truth. Having said this, we must always bear in mind that the "news" is a mosaic of journalism professionals who, in addition to providing fact-based, independent, truthful information, must build credibility and be comprehensive in presentation of the "news" (Tandoc et al., 2018). In the same line, Rider and Peters (2018) provide a very important explanation by saying that news not only has to follow the professional framework and criteria, but what is very important, is that in this process, it must necessarily be incorporated the journalist's genuine ethics. All of this, as an integral part of the "news" process, strives to bring news or information that is true, relevant and accurate. They also point out that the efficacy or truthfulness of the news is not achieved only when the person delivering the news, lists all parties or factors involved, but to go into the deepness of the story, which is often overlooked by the media. This effort according to Rider and Peters (2018) should be based on objective judgment that simultaneously presents moral and ethical requirements. In other words, all of these components represent the genuine quality of the news. In addition, Martens, Aguiar, Gomez-Herrera, and Mueller-Langer (2018) define the quality of news based on four specific attributes, namely: accuracy and reliability, assisting in understanding the complex issues, sharing and discussing views and opinions, and providing fun and entertaining content. Similarly, Caple and Bednarek (2016) point out that the elements of the professional and good quality of the news story are the well-maintained

grammar, spelling and punctuation, which are considered as an important and integral part of a reliable news provider. Over time, social media has enabled in shaping the news content as well as the scope of news sources. Thus, the construction of news is not just a mosaic of words, respectively the content of the news might be a combination of words, pictures, voice and moving scenes (Caple & Bednarek, 2016), which altogether create the news story. Furthermore, it is not merely consumed only at home as it was before (Swart et al., 2018), but now with the help of internet access, we are exposed to news from different social media sources while we are at home, work or simply walking (Heston & Sinha, 2017).

On the other hand, when it comes to fake news, is not something new (Newman & Fletcher, 2017), it has been part of the news itself since the beginning of its creation. The emergence of the fake news phenomenon and the subsequent investigation into these allegations have sparked extensive discussions among experts on a global scale. The term "fake news" gained prominence during the 2016 US electoral campaign when it was notably employed by Trump. Nevertheless, the core element of manipulation underlying fake news had manifested in various historical instances prior to Trump's campaign, albeit under different terminologies that shared similar attributes. Through our analysis, we encountered remarkably diverse interpretations of this phenomenon. Researchers' definitions of fake news can be broadly categorized into two distinct phases: the period preceding Trump's influence and the period following it, which we refer to as the pre-Trump and post-Trump chapters. This classification aids in comprehending the evolving landscape of fake news within a broader context. It's fascinating how two chapters define fake news from different perspectives. The definitions in the pre-Trump chapter are closely related to the phenomena itself, meaning that the definitions describe "fake news." However, the post-Trump "fake news" chapter concentrates on the motivations and reasons rather than the notion itself.

Furthermore, according to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) there are two main factors that motivate the creation of "fake news". The first one is considered as a material or monetary factor, in which the creators of fake articles make money from clicks-through advertising banners. Whereas, the second factor is considered to be ideological, that is to say, the dissemination of

false information happens for the purpose of ideological influence, either simply to favor a party or a particular person who in most cases degrades the opposing party.

Moreover, Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) point out that the dynamic competition in the media ecosystem, which is now considered to be the product of economic, technological, and political landscape, and also the pressure from the competitors to distribute articles as soon as possible in order to catch up with this dynamism, is the major problem of "fake news" phenomenon. From a slightly different perspective, Bakir and McStay (2018) argue that the core problem of the "fake news" as much as it is economic it is emotional as well. This process occurs because false information, namely sentimental titles of this information, emotionally affect their reader that as a result of being influenced, they pay attention to them through a click. In this way, clicks with the assistance of the algorithms are automatically converted to profits called as advertising revenues, initiated from the ads banners placed on the same website with false information. In addition, Bakir and McStay (2018) claim that the majority of the false information disseminated at the US presidential election in 2016 were merely driven by money rather than deviating purposes. As an explanatory note, they emphasize that through the websites promoting the false content it can be seen some of the most famous brands in the world such as Victoria, Disney, and Honda and so on, advertising their different products. In this context, interweaved advertising banners with the sentimental headlines of fake articles, use the humble emotional side of the audience only to attain material benefits (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

Based on the scholarly explications regarding the motives and factors that influence the distribution of "fake news", we can conclude that two are the main stimuli. One is for economic gain and the other is to impose the ideological agenda. Moreover, the impact of emotion as an instrument for attaining advertising revenues was also mentioned, as well as the dynamic way of the media ecosystem which, as a result of the pressure, is pushing for eventual reporting errors. In addition to the motives that lead to the dissemination of false information, there is another factor that plays a very important role which is the audience's perception towards the news. Additionally, according to Humprecht (2019) those who spend very little time on media use, those who do not have a high level of educational background, and the young

people, are very likely that these groups can trust unreliable information. However, people in general, tend to consider their reality as real, as they see it, which in scientific terminology is known as naive realism. Furthermore, an audience with a high level of education, and well informed about certain issues, it is very likely to trust and fall prey to any false article. That is to say, the more educated audience, the lower the chances of disseminating false information. From this point of view, we can argue that in a well-informed social environment on general and certain issues, and with high-level educational baggage, false information cannot succeed. Moreover, diversity in thinking is the result of human educational growth. In addition, knowledge is recognized as a process of improving beliefs about certain issues, as well as the eventual avoidance of bias, which can be considered as incentive for the dissemination of inaccurate information (Rider & Peters, 2018). However, based on the explanations above, it was not argued that the purpose of the dissemination of false information could be simply motivated by cultural factors, which for certain reasons based on cultural baggage people may disseminate incorrect information.

Research Methodology

This research study employs Qualitative Content Analysis, a research approach and tool developed within the Content Analysis Paradigm by a consortium of accomplished scholars. In line with the study's research inquiries, the investigation integrates Stromback's conceptualization of the four mediatization stages to elucidate the role of mediatization in propagating fake news narratives. Simultaneously, the taxonomies introduced by Michael Barkun and Jesse Walker are harnessed to methodically identify, structure, and categorize the predetermined codes. This deductive approach serves as a foundation for establishing connections and elucidating the intricate web of conspiracy elements within fake news narratives during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in The UK.

The methodology of qualitative research has a broader understanding of social phenomena rather than an isolated description of the research topic. Moreover, qualitative research

presents an approach with a naturalistic and interpretative nature, not proposing numbers, graphics and absolute conclusions regarding the phenomenon being researched (Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008), but exploring and investigating the entirety of the phenomenon in depth. Thus, the main purpose of qualitative research is to explore new and rich descriptions of social phenomena, and of human experiences that are multi-dimensional in nature and require to be analyzed by many prisms. Similarly, according to Norman K. Denzin and Lincoln (2005a) qualitative research is a method which has a multisided character that interprets research phenomena with naturalistic approaches. Thus, the multi-sided character of qualitative research enables a comprehensive and integrative approach to the research topic. In the same line, it has been pointed out that qualitative research represents the approach with flexible nature when it comes to the collection of data and their analysis, because the phenomenon itself requires a multidimensional research methodology, whereby qualitative research is seen as an effective method in this kind of research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Thus, the qualitative approach involves the use of qualitative data to better understanding and explaining the specific structure of a content that is being researched based on theoretical goals (Fields, 1988). On the other hand, it has been pointed out that qualitative research focuses on the interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings to make sense in terms of the meanings people bring to these settings (Norman K Denzin & Lincoln, 2011b). Moreover, the qualitative research involves data collection of personal experiences, introspection, stories about life, interviews, observations, interactions and visual texts which are significant to exploring the meanings from the written and spoken words, as well as exploring the meanings shared from the pictures. Furthermore, the qualitative research study does not aim to come up with any final and absolute truth regarding the research topic, however, it aims through the qualitative method to explore and analyze a particular element of the phenomenon seeking answers to the presented research questions.

In other words, the conclusions drawn from genuine analysis do not represent the absolute truth of the phenomenon, but rather explore a particular description analyzed by the researcher, for instance, the description might present observations upon what people believe, how do they feel etc.

(Brinkmann, 2007). As an explanatory note, the nature of qualitative research is to define and interpret the meaning of the phenomenon driven by description, understanding and clarification of a human experience rather than determining the ultimate truth. Additionally, it may be pointed out that qualitative research refers to a research that does not aim to achieve numerical findings or any other form of quantification of results. Thus, the findings acquired from the analytical process represent subjective personal interpretations and not numerical results or in any quantitative forms.

In Qualitative Content Analysis, any communication content can refer to different components. One of the constituent components of the content can be that of narratives, specifically conspiracy of fake news narratives. In addition, the stories that people interpret as a result of their experiences also form the identity of the narrative (Adler, Waters, Poh, & Seitz, 2018). Hence, narratives are presented as components of the content of communication which is formed by the words based on which we describe the reality and create sense of our daily life (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Consequently, the foremost consideration of the Qualitative Content Analysis is to form a link between the variety components of the communication content under the umbrella of an appropriate analytical process. In this research study, the researcher has tried to investigate the portrait of fake news narratives during the Covid 19 pandemic outbreak, the content of which was characterized by conspiracy narratives in the first place and also the analysis of the constituent components in addition to conspiracies, namely disinformation and misinformation.

Barkun (2003a; 2013b) outlines a tripartite framework for classifying conspiratorial narratives, encompassing distinct categories such as: Conspiracies concerning specific events that encompasses isolated, precisely defined occurrences. An illustrative instance within this classification is evident in the context of the 2020 pandemic; systematic conspiracies which implicates potent entities orchestrating methodical, malevolent agendas to assume dominion over populations, states, or prevailing institutions. This category became pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as certain groups were falsely ascribed the role of virus architects, ostensibly for global domination; the third category pertains to super-conspiracies, intricate interrelated content clusters functioning as discrete entities. Central to this

classification is a potent malevolent force, integral to the collective yet operating autonomously worldwide. Analogous to this category's essence were fabricated narratives depicting a nefarious elite exploiting COVID-19 as a pretext to pursue self-serving objectives through widespread extermination.

Walker's categorization of conspiratorial narratives revolves around the specific positioning of adversaries within the narrative structure Walker (2013). According to him, five distinct categories of conspiracies emerge. The concept of the "Enemy outside" pertains to external entities possessing substantial influence, crafting malevolent schemes targeting a nation's populace from beyond its borders. The "Enemy inside" construct characterizes internal factions intricately woven into the community's fabric, bearing ill intentions towards the populace despite being an integral part of it. The notion of an "Enemy above" encompasses potent groups that orchestrate specific events to reap individual advantages. The "Enemy below" archetype involves the lower strata of society, aiming to disrupt established social norms and hierarchies. Lastly, "Benevolent conspiracies" ascribe actions to supernatural forces operating covertly. These classifications afford a comprehensive lens for comprehending the placement and roles of adversaries within diverse conspiratorial narratives.

Data Collection

In this study, the investigator opted to utilize an authentic database of fact checkers from The UK which is "Correctiv" as the primary source for data collection. Moreover, the study's timeframe spans from the month considered the zenith of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak by the WHO, extending until the conclusion of December 2020. Furthermore, according to the WHO dashboard, the pinnacle of the pandemic in Europe occurred in October 2020, with subsequent peaks in November and December of that year. The initial step encompassed the retrieval of false narratives flagged by reputable and skilled fact checkers, categorized as materials featuring inaccurate information and divergent content

Self-reflexivity and Researcher's Role in the Study

Generally speaking, all qualitative researches are contextual which describe a phenomenon at a certain time and in a certain place. On

this premise, if the researcher returns back to the description of his interrelated relationship with the research phenomenon or the participants within the research, this will initiate the credibility of the findings, as well as will deepen the understanding of the research study (Dodgson, 2019; Holland, 1999; Walsh, 2003). However, the first idea about reflexivity in research was developed by Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön, who described the researcher's reflection built from his own personal assumptions that in some way affect a situation (Argyris, 1974). Basically, self-reflexivity refers to the characteristics of the researcher, his experience, his background, his behavior, which inevitably affect the research process in general (Gouldner, 1972; Kelly, de Vries-Erich, Helmich, Dornan, & King, 2017). In the same line, it has been pointed out that applying reflexivity in qualitative research will determine the quality in the researcher's work, whereas it is also a way to ensure the trustworthiness of the research (Teh & Lek, 2018). As an explanatory note, it has been emphasized that there are two types of reflexivity in qualitative research where the first one refers to the intellectual status of the researcher, that not only affects the epistemological and ontological approach of the research, but always being rational and explicit in the analytical process and interpretive – this is known as analytic reflexivity, whereas on the other hand descriptive reflexivity refers to the knowledge that develops the descriptive features of the researcher, such as critical awareness of the research issue, as well as other related social elements which construct the outcomes of the research (Stanley, 1996).

Findings and Analysis

The examination of fabricated news narratives within the context of the United Kingdom was undertaken through the utilization of NVivo 12 Plus. To facilitate this analysis, Figure 1 illustrates the word cloud generated by NVivo 12 Plus, a tool designed to highlight the most recurrent terms found in false news narratives disseminated among the UK audience on Facebook throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.



Figure 1: Most frequently used words in the data set of fake news narratives for The UK

Furthermore, the presented Figure 1 depicts the predominant terms in the context of the coronavirus, with a strong correlation to subjects such as COVID vaccine, fatalities, testing, Pfizer, coronavirus, vaccination, and the like. Notably, the recurrent terminologies in the counterfeit news narratives circulated within the United Kingdom conspicuously suggest the exploitation of COVID-19 as a pretext by certain groups to fulfill individual objectives. Moreover, Figure 2 showcases the application of the word tree feature within NVivo 12 Plus, revealing the specific words recurrently emphasized in fake news narratives that have been identified by fact checkers as disseminating false information

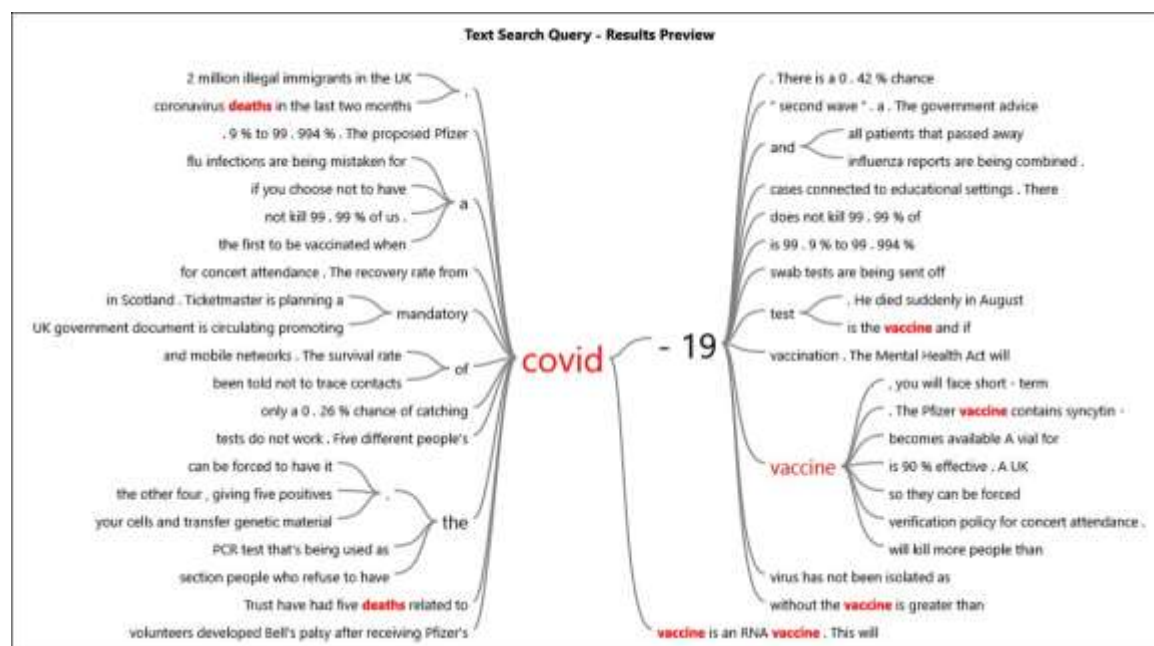


Figure 2: Word tree of specific terminology of fake news narratives for The UK

Figure 2 showcases a generated word tree that visually represents the prevalent terms during the distribution of fabricated news narratives in the United Kingdom. Accordingly, Figure 2 illustrates how the instances of frequently reiterated words within these counterfeit narratives exhibit a twofold classification. On one hand, there exists an expression of the triviality and fragility of the coronavirus. Conversely, there are conspiracy-themed narratives asserting that the Pfizer vaccine harbors lethal substances and that Covid tests include harmful agents intended for contagious purposes. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of governmental institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic is questioned. Moreover, Figure 3 introduces a tree map, providing another visual representation of the most utilized terminologies over the course of the three peak months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

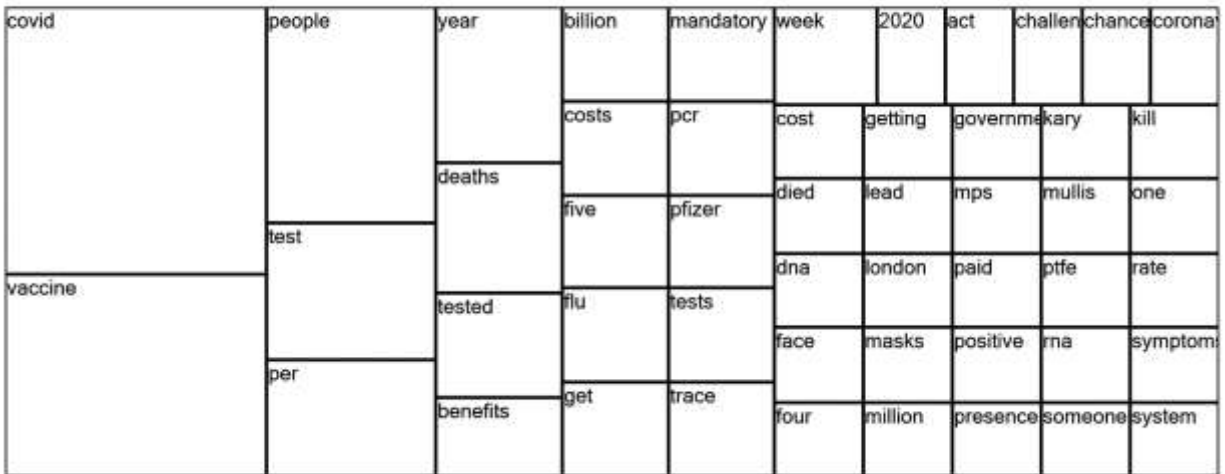


Figure 3: Tree map of the most frequently used terminologies

Figure 3 presents a tree map that has been generated utilizing the capabilities of Nvivo 12 Plus, illustrating the prevailing terms within disseminated counterfeit news narratives. These frequently reiterated words predominantly revolve around conspiracy-oriented subject matter, encompassing themes related to Pfizer vaccines, vaccination, contaminated testing swabs, DNA extraction, mortality, and similar concepts. Notably, the narratives also encompass content asserting that the coronavirus has been misconstrued and bears no distinction from the common flu. Moreover, Figure 4, depicted subsequently, offers visual representations in chart form, showcasing the frequency of theme codes, as follows:

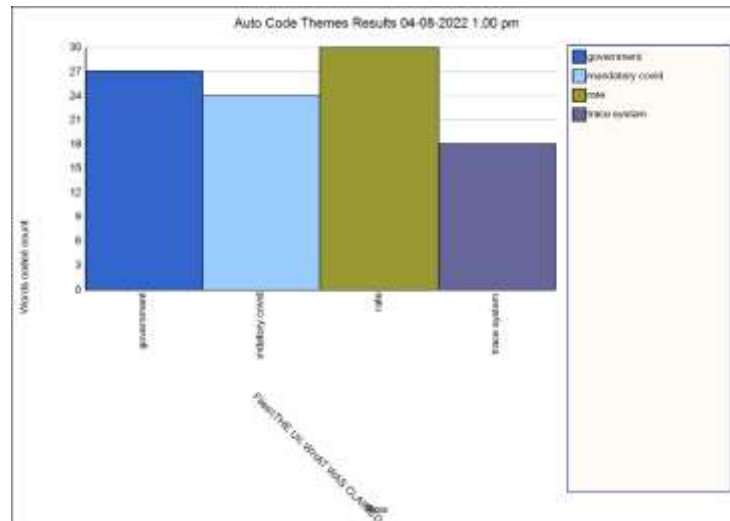


Figure 4: Chart of the most frequently used terminologies

The theme codes showcased in Figure 4 spotlight the most commonly employed terminologies found within counterfeit news narratives circulated among Facebook users in the United Kingdom. These narratives revolve around subjects including government actions, obligatory COVID vaccines, and the implementation of tracking and tracing systems. Additionally, counterfeit news stories, bearing a conspiratorial nature and previously marked as erroneous by fact-checkers, sow seeds of skepticism concerning the government itself. Moreover, these assertions primarily erode the credibility of governmental institutions, contributing to disarray within the informational landscape. Moreover, Figure 5 offers a visual representation of the codes derived from counterfeit news narratives dispersed among Facebook users in the UK over the course of the three-month span of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

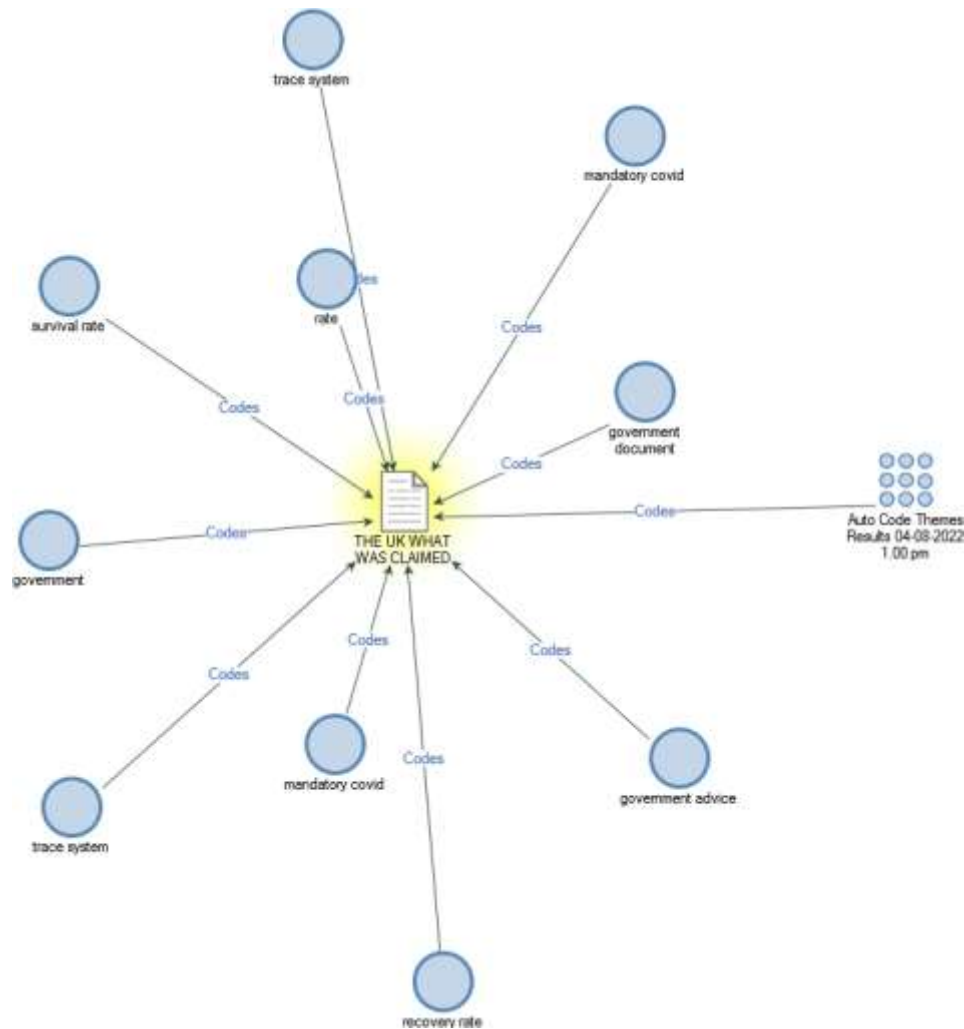


Figure 5: Generated codes extracted from fake news narratives in The UK

Illustrated in Figure 5 above is the compilation of predominant codes distilled from fabricated news narratives that gained traction over the span of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak's three-month period encompassing October, November, and December 2020. Noteworthy, visual insights afforded by features within Nvivo 12 Plus reveal discernible codes, including themes related to obligatory COVID vaccination, official government documents, and survival rates, among others. Importantly, it is crucial to highlight that all counterfeit news narratives propagated among UK-based Facebook users have been identified and marked as false information, a distinction evident through their corresponding personal Facebook posts, with access links thoughtfully furnished within this research study.

Additionally, the research study undertakes a comprehensive qualitative content analysis of misinformation within UK-based fake news narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will present a selection of passages derived from the data analysis of Facebook posts in the United Kingdom, disseminated throughout the peak months of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Excerpt One critically examines a post distorting COVID-19 and flu fatality reports, misrepresenting the data by comparing England-only flu figures and omitting updated England and Wales data. This highlights the flawed comparison of COVID-19, flu, and pneumonia victims, inaccurately suggesting significant disparities. Excerpt Two addresses the dissemination of erroneous claims about masks, particularly concerning synthetic fluoropolymer components, countered by factual corrections revealing the diverse materials used in ordinary surgical masks and clarifying the association between PTFE and health effects. Excerpt Three delves into a post rejecting COVID-19's existence, incorrectly attributing pandemic cases to common colds and flu, thereby undermining established medical consensus. Excerpt Four confronts disinformation about vaccine properties, elucidating that vaccines requiring extremely cold storage, including RNA vaccines, remain vaccines despite their conditions. This analysis exposes the post's intent to incite confusion and fear through misrepresentations. Collectively, these excerpts underscore the prevalence of misinterpretations, distortions, and conspiracy theories within UK fake news narratives circulated through various digital platforms amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

During data analysis, it became evident that purveyors of counterfeit news narratives endeavored to identify both external and internal culprits responsible for the pandemic catastrophe. It is noteworthy that globally, the network of manipulated narratives formed an interconnected web, consistently emphasizing the concept of a "foreign enemy." Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic was portrayed as a script enacted by a potent external faction, orchestrating global social disorder for personal gains. The manipulative and conspiratorial essence of these counterfeit narratives significantly contributed to the pandemic's disarray, painting the potent external group as an agent of psychological and emotional destabilization worldwide. Furthermore, the pandemic period witnessed claims about tools of mass control and

extermination, including microchip implantation, harmful components within vaccines, and the nefarious integration of 5G technology. Although counterfeit news narratives exhibited diverse manipulative subtleties, a common thread of conspiracy united them. As previously noted, some narratives located the "enemy" externally, while others posited the "enemy" within the nation. Concurrently, criticisms were directed at the WHO and pertinent authorities for purportedly mishandling the situation, with allegations of their subjugation to the influence of the "powerful group."

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