

How real is the Illuminati? Investigating Open Source Conspiracism in the age of Black Lives Matter and Vigilant Citizen(s)

Identifying tropes and narratives in Beyoncé-related conspiracy theories

Research Question

What are the recurring tropes, themes, and narratives that contribute to Beyoncé-related conspiracy theories on Reddit, 4chan, and Twitter? How are these ideas expressed differently between the platforms?

Summary and Findings

Our research identifies the harmful tropes and themes associated with Beyoncé-related conspiracies on Reddit, 4chan, and Twitter. The differences in the content of the platforms and their level of moderation result in differences between how these tropes and narratives are framed on each platform. One of the broader narratives uncovered by the analysis showcases the extremely conservative and anti-progressive tendencies that are present in the world of conspiracy theories. This narrative was pervasive on all platforms, but its most “extreme” version was observed on 4chan, where hate speech was not censored. Other narratives which were uncovered point to a shared sense of marginalization in conspiracy theory communities due to their discontent with how power is distributed within our current society. Lastly, as previously established, there are discernible differences between how each of the tropes and themes is framed on the different platforms and how the difference in the form of communication on each of them plays a role in the formation of the themes.

Recurring tropes:

- Christianity
- Symbols
- Satanism/Occult
- U.S. politics
- Celebrities, pop culture, and the entertainment industry
- Hierarchy within the Illuminati
- Gender and sexuality
- Racism/anti-blackness
- Antisemitism

Data Collection and Curation

The data was collected using 4CAT from three platforms: Reddit, 4chan, and Twitter. For all three platforms, we focused on posts containing both “beyonce” and “illuminati” to gain a better understanding of the broader phenomenon surrounding the Beyoncé-Illuminati conspiracy theories. Our goal was to understand the interaction between those words and to classify and analyse the most relevant tropes and narratives that resulted from said collection. We decided to focus on these three platforms for our analysis because their discussion-based models make them particularly suitable for conspiracy-related content; additionally, they have varying levels of content moderation between them, with Twitter quite heavily moderated, 4chan very minimally, and Reddit as a middle ground.

Visualisation and Analysis

To visualize our findings we use bar graphs and word networks, created with Gephi and RAWGraphs. The word networks represent the words that most commonly appear next to “Beyoncé” on posts also mentioning “illuminati.” This way, we can observe clusters of words that are connected to the illuminati conspiracy, which gives us preliminary insight into common ideas surrounding Beyoncé. The bar graph represents all three social media platforms that we have analyzed - 4chan, Reddit and Twitter. The graph showcases the amount of tropes that we have uncovered when analyzing each of the posts that we have gathered from the platforms.

Overall, there is congruence between the most frequent tropes and categories present on the three platforms analysed, with theories regarding the entertainment industry being run by illuminati at the top, followed by the discussion on symbols connected to this secret society. Posts about the connection of US politics to the Illuminati are also popular, as well as tropes within the satanism and religion fields.

For more politicised categories such as gender and sexuality, antisemitism, and racism, there is an evident discrepancy between Twitter and the other two social media platforms. The amount of tweets related to these topics is significantly lower compared to the posts on Reddit and 4chan, perhaps due to the more severe content moderation as well as the fact that the period of time covered only dates back to 10 days ago, while the other two datasets include posts from years ago.

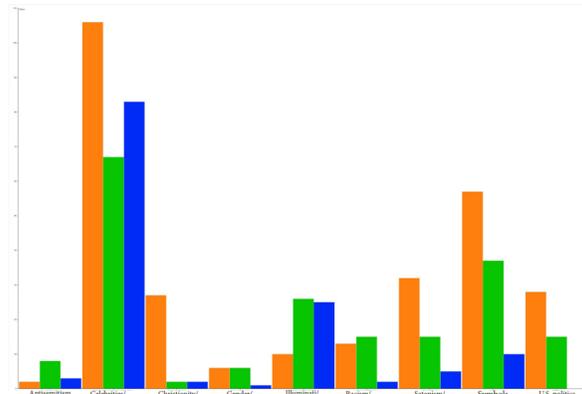


Fig.1 - Frequency (y) of recurring probes on Reddit, 4chan and Twitter (x)

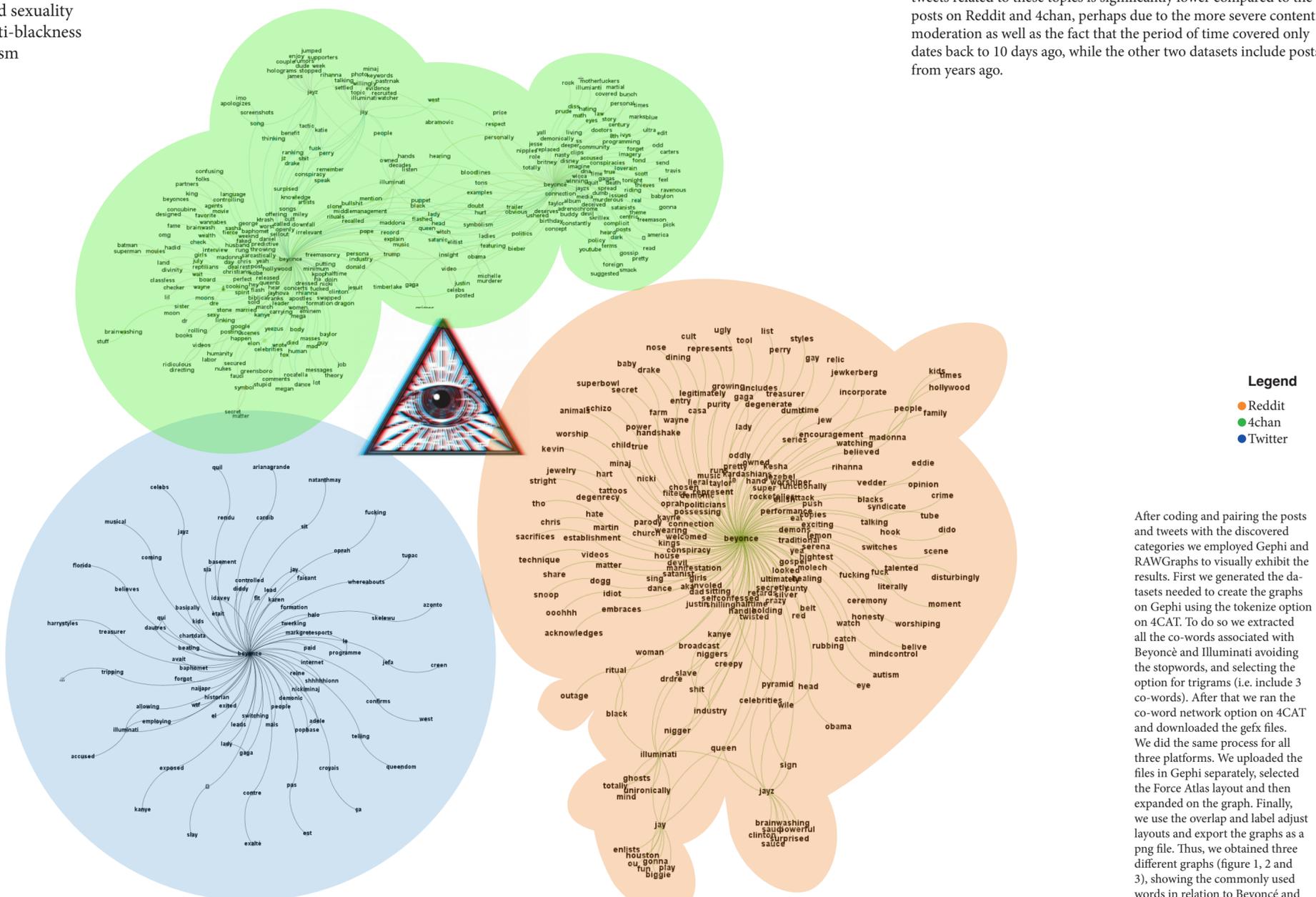


Fig.2 Trigram networks for ‘Beyoncé’ for all three platforms

After coding and pairing the posts and tweets with the discovered categories we employed Gephi and RAWGraphs to visually exhibit the results. First we generated the datasets needed to create the graphs on Gephi using the tokenize option on 4CAT. To do so we extracted all the co-words associated with Beyoncé and Illuminati avoiding the stopwords, and selecting the option for trigrams (i.e. include 3 co-words). After that we ran the co-word network option on 4CAT and downloaded the gefx files. We did the same process for all three platforms. We uploaded the files in Gephi separately, selected the Force Atlas layout and then expanded on the graph. Finally, we use the overlap and label adjust layouts and export the graphs as a png file. Thus, we obtained three different graphs (figure 1, 2 and 3), showing the commonly used words in relation to Beyoncé and Illuminati.