FACEBOOK'S 'WHITE GENOCIDE' PROBLEM: A SOCIOTECHNICAL EXPLORATION OF PROBLEMATIC INFORMATION, SHAREABILITY, AND SOCIAL CORRECTION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

by

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 19 April 2021

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ABSTRACT

A relatively small, but highly visible group of South Africans believe that farm attacks/murders (and other crimes against whites) constitute a targeted 'white genocide'. Their beliefs have found support and corroboration in various online spaces, but especially within 'alternative news' Facebook pages. This case study is used as an opportunity to apply a sociotechnical model of media effects to a very real disinformation problem that continues to inflame race relations in South Africa. Three pivotal questions are addressed, relating to (1) how Facebook users on farm attack/murder-focused pages engage with problematic information (fake news) and why; (2) the qualitative and affordance/format-related themes of posts with the highest share counts on these pages; and (3) the common themes of discourse used in defensive responses to social corrections of false information. Findings suggest that South Africa's 'white genocide' problem is more deep-set than other more ephemeral 'fake news' stories, especially due to stark racial and political dichotomies, reflected by the post comment sections herein. Group identities and cognitive biases work to sustain the disproportional media 'spectacle' of gratuitous farm attacks/murders against white South Africans, and leverage Facebook's platform affordances to do so.

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List of Abbreviations

AgriSA –	Agri South Africa
API –	Application Programming Interface
CDA –	Critical Discourse Analysis
OII –	Oxford Internet Institute
QCA –	Qualitative Content Analysis
RQ –	Research Question
SA –	South Africa
SAPS –	South African Police Service
SATN –	South Africa Today News
SBG –	Stop Boer Genocide
ToS –	Terms of Service
UK –	United Kingdom
UNESCO –	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The current study aims to respond to the relatively small, but vocal group of white South Africans who are convinced of an ongoing 'white genocide' against farmers and whites in general, and who often claim that the issue receives neither local nor international media coverage. This controversial issue has occupied white reactionary South Africans' psyches for at least a few decades; the far-right, extremist group Suidlanders, for example, has been conducting operations based on 'Siener' van Rensburg's prophecy of a 'white genocide' ('Uhuru') in South Africa (Myburgh, 2013), despite the man having died in 1926. The issue of farm attacks/murders has, over the past few years, begun to attract international attention following rallies by prominent extremist groups (such as Suidlanders) and Afrikaner interest groups (like AfriForum). The latter's international tours endeavoured to raise awareness of the 'silent' genocide by appealing to the 'white homelands' who are most likely to sympathise with the narrative of white subjugation, most notably Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In fact, focus on the issue seems to be increasing despite the number of farm attacks having decreased steadily from an all-time high of 1,069 in 2001/02, to 561 in 2017/18 (Bornman, 2018), where the most recent crime statistics also show farm murders at an all-time low of 47 for the 2018/19 year (Masweneng, 2019).

It is very possible that the imagined issue of 'white genocide' has gained traction across the country, and indeed the world over (van Eyssen, 2019; Ward, 2018), due to its massive growth and spread in online spaces. In April 2018, for example, at a Breitbart town hall event, American far-right media pundit Ann Coulter claimed that, thanks to younger audiences turning to less traditional sources of online news media, a large percentage of the conservative questions she receives at events are about the genocide of white farmers in SA (Pogue, 2019). More recently, the specific environments that social media platforms provide have proven conducive to the unbridled creation and sharing of mis- and disinformation. One can no longer deny the latter reality in the aftermath of the 2016 US elections, where over half of Americans who saw fake news stories around the time of the 2016 election believed them (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), and partisan media were demonstrably more susceptible to fake news agendas (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). The *Bell Pottinger* saga, a more local fake news crisis that flared up not long after, exposed the UK public relations firm for their role in a multinational disinformation scheme attempting to conceal the Gupta family's corrupt earnings at the expense of South African citizens (ANCIR, 2017).

As such, the myth of 'white genocide' in SA is seemingly gaining both local and international traction at alarming rates. A very active group of believers operate on Facebook, where there are dozens of both public and private pages specifically protesting an alleged ongoing white genocide. These were seemingly created as a citizen-led response to what they perceive as either an insidious avoidance of the topic by mainstream media houses, or a passive failure to even acknowledge the so-called 'white genocide'. Some of these pages also appear to serve as the Facebook presence for online South African 'news' websites that consistently ride the line between extreme partisan news and fake news, and which are increasingly leveraged as legitimate news sources across most genocide-believer communities.

This study therefore aims to use white genocide, farm attacks, and farm murder-related fake news content shared across dedicated Facebook pages as a South African case study in understanding the proliferation and spread of fake news, as well as the outcomes of social correction (Vraga & Bode, 2017) practices in this regard. The study uses Marwick's (2018) sociotechnical model of media effects as a guiding framework, which complicates the idea of a direct effects perspective regarding fake news, and instead proposes a holistic approach that acknowledges both global and local media ecosystems at play, and the social tensions that give rise to the prevalence of fake news. In particular, Marwick's model touches on three components: actors, messages, and affordances. Thus, my research questions, which aim to stay mindful of the latter three factors and produce a holistic set of results, are as follows:

1. How do users on farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages typically engage with problematic information, and why?
2. What are the most prevalent qualitative and format-related themes (with specific attention paid to platform affordances) among farm attack/murder-related Facebook posts with high share counts, and why?
3. What are the common adversarial themes of discourse invoked in response to social corrections within farm-attack/murder-related Facebook posts and comment threads containing false information?

In addressing RQ 1, a qualitative survey was distributed among the followers of two farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages, the results of which were also used to complement the data derived from RQs 2 and 3. RQ 2 was addressed using a Qualitative Content Analysis of the top-shared posts for 2019 across five farm attack/murder-focused pages. RQ 3 employed a critical discourse analysis of farm attack/murder posts and comments where exchanges included evidence of users engaging in 'social correction' practices.

The following chapter addresses the relevant literature on topics including: (1) the various definitions of fake news; (2) the use of propaganda discourse in fake news; (3) the active audience theory of media effects, and the problems of early fake news research; (4) theories regarding sharing behaviours on social media; (5) the contemporary news landscape and its relationship to the post-truth era; (6) filter bubbles and echo chambers; (7) collective identity theory and cognitive biases as they relate to the news; (8) social correction practices on social media platforms; and (9) an in-depth discussion of the three strata of Marwick's (2018) model, and how they apply in the context of the white genocide.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses a wide variety of extant literature relevant to the current study. It should be noted, however, that there is an evident lack of literature examining the problem of fake news in the Global South when compared to the publication output of similar research fields in the Global North. Even less literature exists that specifically discusses this problem in the context of South Africa. As such, the literature examined below is gleaned for parallels and points that apply to fake news in the South African context, since few studies were applicable in their entirety.

In a similar vein, little literature exists on the topic of fake news produced by citizen-led, conservative Facebook pages and privately-run, propaganda-esque 'news' sites, or on the social dynamics produced by and between these entities. Widely various studies, often focusing more so on cases where mis- and disinformation are shared by mainstream news outlets, are therefore sampled for relevant information that pertains to the current study.

2.1. DEFINITIONS OF FAKE NEWS

Use of the term 'fake news' has become contested due to the various meanings it has come to signify, and the actors who have co-opted the term. As Jankowski argues:

> Trump and other politicians have usurped the term and use it to brand traditional media sources (e.g. The New York Times, CNN), with which they disagree. In this manner, the term has acquired status as a pejorative label for liberal media outlets, and has lost commonly accepted meaning. (2018, p. 248)

The above embodies the main argument in academic circles, where use of the term 'fake news' has become undesirable. Some, like Tripodi (2018a), have tried to pinpoint the reason behind invocations of the term 'fake news' when referring to mainstream media – she argues that conservatives will often do so due to assessment techniques involving 'close reading', similar to biblical interpretation. When they compare their interpretations of an event – in the case of Tripodi's (2018a) study, texts produced by Trump – to mainstream media coverage, they inevitably uncover inaccuracies, in turn reinforcing their belief that the mainstream media are 'fake'. In the context of SA and farm murders, the perceived lack of stories published by mainstream news media regarding the issue and their refusal to engage in the white genocide narrative could indicate to reactive whites that the mainstream media are 'fake news'. Similarly, in Tripodi's (2018b) ethnographic research involving American conservatives, she argues that they turn to alternative media sources because they distrust mainstream media, where the participants used the term 'fake news' to solely refer to mainstream news sources such as *MSNBC, CNN*, and the *New York Times*.

The mention of fake news might also bring to mind websites that have been created to impersonate real news sites, but which are instead populated with clickbait content in the hopes of generating advertising revenue (Marwick, 2018). The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) classifies these sites as 'counterfeit news sites' whose content constitutes 'junk news' (Narayanan, Barash, Kelly, Kollanyi, Neudert, & Howard, 2018). In a similar vein, Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018) define 'fabricated news' as articles with no factual grounding, published to replicate

the style of news articles to create the illusion of legitimacy. As Flanagin and Metzger (2007) found, website visitors who are unfamiliar with a particular news site's brand may use the apparent sophistication of the website, including its visual appearance, as a mental heuristic by which to judge its credibility. Once a reader's standard for credulity is satisfied and they accept a source's legitimacy, they are less likely to seek further verification as to the veracity of news published on that site (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Other definitions of fake news include 'propaganda entertainment' (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016) – content that "blurs lines between nonfiction and fiction" (Berkowitz & Schwatz, 2016, p. 4) – where some researchers even classify satire as fake news (Marchi, 2012, p. 253). Bakir and McStay (2018) define fake news as "either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context" (p. 154). Vamanu's (2019) labelling of specific clusters of fake news types (conspiracy theories, partisan news, propaganda) as 'propagandistic' is also worth considering, especially since these utilise power relations and affective dimensions in ways that other disinformation types do not (see section 2.2 below).

What is clear, then, is that there is no universal term or definition for 'fake news', despite many researchers' attempts to establish one. As such, it is pertinent that a definition best suited to the current study context be outlined. Marwick (2018) proposes that a more encompassing term would be Jack's (2017) 'problematic information', since "other frequently used terms rely on understanding the intent of the information creator" (p. 478). Intent is not only notoriously hard to discern within the text itself, but also because of fake news producers' secrecy around their potentially illegal actions, and therefore, their relative inaccessibility. Phillips and Milner (2017) also highlight that the networked nature of the internet and the inherent ability it lends to the replication and remixing of images, videos, and text makes it almost impossible to determine the origins of a particular idea, meme, or image, let alone discern authors' intent. Thus, "using intent to distinguish between types of information is not only extremely difficult (if not impossible), but potentially misleading" (Marwick, 2018, p. 478).

Two such terms often used that are informed by intent are 'misinformation' – which is *unintentionally* incorrect and shared inadvertently (UK Government, 2018) – and 'disinformation', which is *intentionally* incorrect (Jack, 2017), and is defined as

> the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain (UK Government, 2018).

Derakshan and Wardle (2017) propose a third term in this regard, also defined by intent: 'mal-information', which describes "information, that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country" (Marwick, 2018, p. 478). It should be noted that these collective terms – misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information – are the official terms adopted by UNESCO (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

What the term 'problematic information' in part aims to address is that, as noted by Marwick and Lewis (2017), previous definitions never seemed to encompass other important fake news mediums that have contributed toward white supremacist sentiment, among other things. This is a problem for researchers studying fake news,

since ideologically or politically problematic information often spreads through information mediums that are not precluded in the classic rubric of definitions, including images, memes, YouTube videos, and lengthy text files (Marwick, 2018). Furthermore, such definitions work to expand the previously narrow conceptualisations of the phenomenon to include partisan and hyper-partisan news sites that provide ideologically slanted, but not always objectively incorrect coverage (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, & Zuckerman, 2017). This is an important inclusion, since "even information which is *factually correct* […] can be used to spread deceitful ideas, agendas, news frames, and conspiracy theories" (Marwick, 2018, p. 480, emphasis in original).

Considering all of the above, this research, following Marwick's (2018) lead, will employ Jack's (2017) term 'problematic information' as an encompassing term for a wide variety of false, misleading, or propagandistic content and its mediums, and the terms 'fake news', 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' will be used as heuristic terms, given public awareness of these words. Speaking to the latter decision, Nielsen and Graves (2017) argue that the term 'fake news' will not be retired any time soon: it has become part of the vernacular employed when expressing frustration with the general media environment.

2.2. PROPAGANDA DISCOURSE IN FAKE NEWS

While it may be fallacious to refer to all types of fake news as propaganda, there are certainly some veins that share striking similarities with propagandistic content, where analysis using the lens of propaganda discourse may reveal pertinent information regarding inherent power relations present in most fake news. Ellul and Kellen's (1973) work distinguishing between 'vertical' ('subversive') propaganda and 'horizontal' ('integration') propaganda provides some useful insights. The latter dimension – horizontal propaganda – is of particular import: it involves individuals acting as peers within small groups, aiming to achieve voluntary "conscious adherence" to group ideals by engaging with them in "genuine and lively dialogue" (Ellul & Kellen, 1973). During this process of mutual exchange, an individual is able to "gradually discover his own convictions (which will also be those of the group)" (p. 81); by repeatedly distributing deliberately falsified information, horizontal propaganda functionally ensures that all group members discover "the correct line, the anticipated solution, the 'proper' convictions" (p. 81). This concept also resonates strongly with group identity theory in the context of fake news, which is discussed in section 2.7 below.

Structurally speaking, propaganda typically involves a proponent – the participant that initiates communication by sharing propagandistic information – and a respondent – the participant who receives such information (Walton, 2007). In the current context, the proponent would be the Facebook page administrator/s, and the respondents would be the users exposed to their posts, who are sometimes page followers. In the case of social media, users also become proponents when they share a post published by said administrators within their own circles – they are not only passive receivers of proponents' messages. In fact, active respondents are essential within a horizontal propaganda structure since conversation is the key mode through with an individual develops the attitudes, acquires the beliefs, or engages in the actions encouraged by the proponents (Vamanu, 2019).

Characteristically, propaganda message content usually takes the form of an elaborate argument expressed pictorially, verbally, or both (Walton, 2007). Unsurprisingly, arguments presented by fake news stories are often quite schematic (posts being shared over and over) or more elaborate, where posts – for example – often feature images to support their claims (Vamanu, 2019). This is certainly true in the current context: every post outlining the gratuitous details of another farm attack/murder, usually accompanied by gory images, attempts to add another piece of evidence to the claim of white genocide. Fake posts in this case also often take the form of image macros (discussed later in the context of message formats), combining blocks of text with images and diagrams supporting the existence of a targeted genocide. Furthermore, these messages are always unilateral – they only emphasise certain aspects of an issue, without encouraging respondents to deliberate any counterarguments or alternative perspectives (Walton, 2007). In doing so, proponents avoid the requirement of a rebuttal, where fake news posts essentially constitute one-sided arguments (especially when administrators delete dissenting comments).

Proponents also often use rhetorical means to present themselves as legitimate speakers communicating on behalf of the wider group (Vamanu, 2019), usually in order to encourage their audience to embrace the ideals of the collective (Walton, 2007). Thereafter, the ultimate goal of propaganda – inducing audiences "to comply with action, or to accept and not oppose a certain line of action" (Walton, 2007, p. 111) – is more easily achieved. Propaganda further justifies itself in a consequentialist manner, pointing to the desired outcomes that may be achieved if the recommended courses of action are adopted (Walton, 2007). In the context of farm attack/murder-related posts, there is often a call to action included, especially for vigilante justice, or calls to emigrate.

Propaganda's effective messaging is ultimately rooted in its ability to "overload various affective capacities, such as nostalgia, sentiment, or fear" and locate them "behind a goal that furthers an explicitly provided ideal" (Stanley, 2015, p. 53). As such, propaganda makes use of rhetorical figures, persuasive definitions, and emotive language in furthering its cause (Vamanu, 2019). Evidence of this can be seen with just a mere glance at the Facebook pages under analysis – white nostalgia for life under the old dispensation is widespread, as is the deep-rooted fear of black Africans' 'inherently violent' nature. In this vein, propaganda discourse builds itself up around powerful dichotomies that are used to label particular groups (Vamanu, 2019) – white vs. black, civilized vs. uncivilized, us vs. them. Groups of people are associated with the pejorative terms of the dichotomies, working to justify their marginalisation and oppression (Walton, 2007), creating polarisations that result in "affective arousal bias" and that contribute to the increase of "partisan bias and evaluative judgments" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 112). In the spirit of Trump, allegations of 'fake news' leveraged against uncomfortable views work to marginalise and delegitimise those who oppose the core work of the propaganda message (Gelfert, 2018; Dentith, 2017), where accusing opponents of engaging in propaganda is one of the more surreptitiously effective methods of conducting successful propaganda operations (Vamanu, 2019).

2.3. THE CONTEMPORARY NEWS LANDSCAPE AND ITS ROLE IN THE FAKE NEWS ERA

Many researchers have been able to locate the symptoms of the dysfunctional contemporary news landscape that preceded the current fake news paradigm we are experiencing. Kellner (2003) argues that "online news media are more part of the problem of online misinformation than they are the solution"; that, rather than being a source of reliable and accurate information, online media often promote and share misinformation when attempting to create and drive traffic and social engagement. This could be considered a rather broad, sweeping statement, however, since it reduces the complex financial problems and structures that have come to characterise not only online news, but news organisations in general, and unceremoniously lumps public relations (PR) media and tabloid news together with more traditional journalism. Regardless, Kellner's point stands, serving as a pertinent segue into analysing the conditions of the news media landscape that have led to increasingly distrustful news audiences, and sustained fake news phenomena like the white genocide.

Bakir and McStay (2018) argue that the contemporary fake news landscape is the outcome of a few distinctive components of digital media ecology. One of these refers to the '1440-minute news cycle' (Gillmor, 2009), where demands for immediacy in news media mean that already scarce journalistic resources are spread even thinner, and time-consuming, fact-checking journalism practices are largely no longer possible. This is in addition to an already lacking pool of funding for fact-checking resources and investigative journalism (Marwick & Lewis, 2018), increasing journalists' susceptibility to co-opting unchecked PR material and 'editorial subsidies' (Jackson & Moloney, 2016). A rise in problematic information is an obvious consequence.

An additional contributing factor is an increasingly emotionalised media landscape (Richards, 2007), and a proclivity for sensationalism (Marwick & Lewis, 2018), especially online, perhaps due to what Suler (2016) terms the 'online disinhibition effect', which refers to the effects of anonymity online. Bakir and McStay (2018) argue that the latter produces an ecosystem online that encourages the creation of media content which elicits affective reactions in users. Fake news content itself is also often deliberately affective and, as El-Sharawy (2017) argues, Facebook's operations tend to favour emotional content that strikes people whether it is true or not.

It follows that one should also then discuss what many have termed the 'attention economy': a possible result of the two factors discussed above, where the most valuable content is that which attracts the most attention (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The information overload on the internet has caused attention to become a very valuable resource (Goldhaber, 1997), whereby viral content – from sensational headlines to amusing videos – tends to garner the most engagements and thus the most advertising revenue (Wu, 2016). Both old and new media alike employ an array of software that collects and provides detailed data showing precisely which articles garner the most clicks, likes, shares, and comments (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), allowing blogs and newspapers to tailor future content in such a way that their metrics are driven up. This ultimately incentivises high-performing but low-quality posts in place of high-quality journalism (Chu, 2016; Petre, 2015).

Another characteristic of contemporary digital media that Bakir and McStay (2018) argue has contributed to the rise in fake news is the fiscal decline in journalism generally, due to audiences becoming less willing to pay for legacy news media content when faced with prolific free news online. Local newspapers have taken the biggest hit, especially since they do not have access to the resources required to invest in digital publishing (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Those who do manage to publish content online must face the dissolution of traditional business

models: users who are used to obtaining their news content through search engines or social media are very rarely willing to pay publications' subscription fees, forcing digital publishers to rely almost exclusively on advertising (Currah, 2009). There are further concerns around the consequent 'clickbait' formats: "[w]eb content designed to generate attention and online advertising revenue at the expense of quality or accuracy, relying on sensationalist headlines or eye-catching pictures to attract click-throughs and shares" (Bakir & McStay, 2018, p. 159). With less traditional journalistic content being published online compared to a staggering increase in advertisements that increasingly blur the line between news and advertising, a rise in problematic information is an unsurprising consequence.

Marwick and Lewis (2017) further highlight a factor that has led to media becoming more vulnerable to manipulation: the tendency toward corporate consolidation, where local publications are replaced by hegemonic media brands. These consolidated companies – in order to save costs – tend to discourage any form of extensive local reporting in favour of content which is more broadly applicable (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), meaning they are increasingly disconnected from individual communities (Abernathy, 2016). Consolidated media ownership also hurts local news since the 'new media barons' heavily prioritise short-term profits and immediate returns over quality civic journalism (Abernathy, 2016). The lack of news media operating this critical civic function results in a public less informed about the issues that actually affect them, and creates an agenda-setting vacuum (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), hence the increased danger regarding media manipulation, and the rise of problematic information.

Marwick and Lewis' (2017) comments regarding the polarisation of political perspectives in mainstream media are also important: right-wing, conservative critics tend to argue that the mainstream media is dominated by liberal elites, while left-wing theorists insist that the media ignores dissenting voices, panders to advertisers, is too reliant on government and corporate sources, and generally supports the status quo (Herman & Chomsky, 1994; Gitlin, 1980; McChesney, 2008). In addition to the factors discussed above, such widespread distrust of mainstream media across the political spectrum has resulted in the perfect conditions for the emergence of both subcultural media manipulation, and a hyper-partisan far-right press (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The current study would extend this to the citizen-led, reactionary Facebook groups under analysis, who generally indicate distrust in any mainstream media due to a perceived unwillingness to acknowledge the specific persecution of whites in SA.

As a result of all of the above – and which also perpetuates some of the aforementioned issues – media manipulators are able to influence the public agenda and news framing. Very briefly, 'agenda setting' refers to the amount of coverage devoted to certain issues by the media, which tends to influence the public's presumed importance of those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The media agenda thus affects and determines, to an extent, the public agenda (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). By creating problematic information on a large scale about certain issues, consequently coercing the media into covering specific stories – even if only to debunk them – media manipulators have the ability to influence and inform the public agenda (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Studies have also shown that people, when presented with information that contradicts their extant beliefs, often tend to double down on their original opinions instead of amending them (Wadley, 2012), as discussed further in

section 2.7 below. This makes it almost impossible for mainstream media to correct a misinformed story once a topic has already gained popularity (Marwick & Lewis, 2017); besides, the accurate version of a story is often more boring and complicated than a compelling – albeit false – narrative (Harford, 2017), and therefore cannot compete within the 'attention economy'.

Ultimately, radically decreasing levels of trust in mainstream media have become both a determining factor for the rise in problematic information, and a consequence thereof, constituting a self-perpetuating phenomenon across the globe (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), which can be seen in African countries as well. According to Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019), respondents across three African countries who reported higher levels of exposure to disinformation largely tended to report lower levels of media trust. In SA, 45% of those interviewed by Edelman (2018) in 2014 indicated that they more or less trust the media, compared to only 35% in 2018. Africa is a special case in terms of problematic information, though, since "disinformation in African contexts is also a function of structural factors such as control over, suppression of and ownership of the news media" (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). This is also true for SA, where the largest media conglomerate in the country (and indeed, on the African continent) has its roots in apartheid and continues to operate under largely white ownership.

Another important factor can be identified by using the current climate in the US as a case study, where, according to a poll released in 2016, trust in the mainstream media is at an all-time low, but particularly so among Republican and right-wing participants (Swift, 2016). This is notable when considering the recent emergence of hyper-partisan right-wing media producers, forming a 'distinct and insulated media system' (Benkler et al., 2017). Most of the coverage produced is devoted to attacking the mainstream media, resulting in those attending such sources to grow even more distrustful of, and insulated from, external coverage (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In the current case, that the latter pattern is arguably being replicated in the 'alternative news' Facebook pages under analysis, where mainstream media is repeatedly chastised by admins and users.

Ultimately, in addition to perpetuating a cycle of problematic information, low levels of media trust inhibits the watchdog function of the media, weakens citizens' political knowledge, and may very well impede the full exercise of democracy (Jones, 2004; Dautrich & Hartley, 1999).

2.4. ACTIVE AUDIENCE MEDIA EFFECTS THEORY AND THE PITFALLS OF EARLY FAKE NEWS RESEARCH

In line with Marwick's (2018) research, this study aims to depart from thinking about 'fake news' through the frame of the 'direct effects' model. Instead, an active audience approach is adopted, demanding an understanding of how and why people make meaning from media, and which understands media use within particular sociocultural contexts (Jenkins, 1992; Morley, 1993; Radway, 1984). In this case, the sociocultural

context in question considers SA's unique history and the resulting social tensions, the state of the local digital divide, and the overarching global context of problematic information flows.

Active audience theory is one of the later theories to emerge from a long history of media effects research, and was borne from several media effects paradigms, including the 'uses and gratifications' theory (Liebes & Katz, 1986; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972), British cultural studies (Fiske, 1987; Hall, 1973; Morley, 1980), and audience researchers who have increasingly departed from the notion of media audiences as an undifferentiated mass (Ang, 2006; Nightingale, 1986). The paradigm champions more sophisticated analyses of the relationships between social context, individual positionality, and hegemonic ideologies spread through mass media (Morley, 1993). As in line with Rubin's (1993) seminal essay on the subject, this research regards an active audience not to be one that is wholly impervious to influence (Blumler, 1979), but as one that lies between the extremes of 'passive' (influenced by communicated messages) and 'active' (making only rational decisions regarding the acceptance and rejection of media content). Audiences – including social media users – should be thought of as "variably active or involved communication participants" (Rubin, 1993, p. 99).

Many fake news studies conducted – especially prior to 2016 – make dubious presumptions about the behaviour of online users, leading to intervention strategies that may prove ineffective. Some researchers (Marwick, 2018; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2015; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995) have pointed to the surprising tendency among media theorists to assume a 'direct effects' model when studying fake news: media literacy campaigns and fact-checking sites operate on the premise that people will not share news if they are aware that it is inaccurate, painting social media users as being at the mercy of media elites (Marwick, 2018). While the important work of fact-checking organisations such as AfricaCheck should not go unacknowledged, Marwick (2018) notes that fact-checking largely resembles an effort toward reform from within journalism, or in the case of Facebook's 'false information flags', from platform developers up on high. When coupled with a high level of distrust in media and journalism (Nicolaou & Giles, 2017), it is no wonder that fact-checking, then, may not serve as an effective measure to combat fake news. Marwick (2018, p. 475) details three of the most prolific assumptions regarding fact-checking efforts: (1) "that when confronted with 'correct' information, people will change their political opinions"; (2) "that what is 'correct' and what is 'incorrect' are objective truths"; and (3), "that people share political viewpoints online in an attempt to inform others, or at least convince others with different opinions". Arceneaux and Johnson (2015) rightly express frustration at research that approaches partisan/biased/fake news media with a 'magic bullet' mindset, assuming causal effects, uniform exposure, and passive news consumers.

2.5. SHARING ON SOCIAL MEDIA: THE PARTICIPATION PARADIGM, THE SPREADABLE SPECTACLE, AND SOCIAL PROXIMITY

In the 1990s, along with the advent of the internet, researchers began looking beyond the general audience model, and examined fans as having affective and participatory investments in certain types of media (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Grossberg, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). In contrast with earlier media effects models, fans did far more

than simply consume content; they engaged in the production of their own content – fan art, fan fiction and fan films. Henry Jenkins – one of the most prominent scholars in this area – used the notion of 'participation' in stark contrast with mere 'spectatorship'. His research serves as an important lens through which to view social media users, who can be conceptualised both as spectators and as participants in media production.

As can now be seen mirrored on social media, Jenkins described fans – who were networked long before the advent of computer-mediated communication – "not only as consumers of mass-produced content, but also as a creative community that took its raw materials from entertainment texts and remixed them as the basis for their own creative culture" (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016). He described 'participatory culture' as being the product of new media technology influences on media consumption, "which enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation and recirculation of media content" (Jenkins, 2003, p. 286). In this way, participatory culture represented a stark departure from top-down cultural production to grassroots user-generated content.

While early studies regarding online participation generally characterised this shift in utopian terms (Jenkins, Ito & boyd, 2016), they have not aged well considering the context of the current climate online, where user-generated content has sometimes proved to be quite harmful (Marwick, 2018). As argued by Harkinson (2017), social and participatory media have become the controlling agents of mainstream media manipulation, enabling those with fringe views to find one another, collaborate on media production, and share viewpoints that would usually be considered unacceptable to publicly announce in one's day-to-day life. The low barriers to entry and many forms of peripheral participation – whereby curious onlookers are able to slowly learn group norms and eventually become accepted contributors (Lave & Wenger, 1991) – operate just as well for fringe communities as they do for fan communities.

A concept that has become a special consequence of the participation paradigm, as argued by Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) in the context of fake news, is the 'spreadable media spectacle'. Kellner (2009, p. 1) defines media spectacles as "media constructs that are out of the ordinary and habitual daily routine". A key factor of the latter concerns the extent to which like-minded individuals in online communities (such as South African white reactionary groups online) are able to "create, extend, and sustain spectacle with little support from mainstream media" (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017, p. 442). 'Spreadable media' references "the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes" (Jenkins, Green, & Ford, 2013, p. 3). Jenkins et al. (2013) also note the importance of spaces of shared meaning as a necessary requirement for spectacle to emerge, where texts and narratives reinforce the values at the heart of networked communities. Members of farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages occupy such spaces of shared meaning, where users can reasonably expect others to share their same beliefs, resulting in an environment where the white genocide spectacle is proliferated.

Some argue that, in the context of fake news, whether a piece of information is veritable or not has less to do with the publisher of that information, and more to do with who shared it within an individual's network (Madden, Lenhart, & Fontaine, 2017; Media Insight Project, 2017). Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) argue that the creation and perpetuation of problematic information in citizen-led networks is an obvious consequence of a

digital media landscape where, as highlighted by Jenkins et al. (2013), citizens depend on one another to share compelling pieces of entertainment, information, and news multiple times over the course of any given day. This claim is strongly supported by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), who found that in order for mass media to have any persuasive effect, content had to be coupled with positive, in-person contact with someone holding the same belief or opinion. This is reminiscent of Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1966) 'two-step flow' theory – or the theory of personal influence – which posits that any given media message is strongly mediated by peers and opinion leaders, such as Facebook page administrators, in this case.

This is especially relevant when considering how social media blur and complicate the origins of information sources regarding news (Tandoc et al., 2018). For example, a news house could publish an article online that could reach readers through their own dedicated news site, via their Facebook page, or via someone who has 'shared' the article with their social network (Tandoc et al., 2018). Social media users, therefore, must navigate "a set of layers with various levels of proximity to the reader" (Kang, Bae, Zhang, & Sundar, 2011, p. 721). In fact, Sundar (2016) directly links the proliferation of fake news and the problem of trust to the high number of layers that readers must pass through to unearth the original source. Receiving information or news from sources which are more socially proximate to an individual can help them navigate the aforementioned complexities and legitimate the veracity of information (Tandoc et al., 2018). The consequent reliance on peers as credible sources of news and information fosters a dangerous false sense of security, however, where individuals become less likely to critically scrutinise the information presented (Sundar, 2016).

Social proximity is dependent, however, on the strength of ties between users in any given network. Facebook in particular tends to frame itself (or at least did so in earlier years) as being built on social relationships with known others, producing a form of intimacy that is a precursor to trust, which is key to accepting information. More realistically, however, research suggests that many users' Facebook friends are not familiar, intimate others (De Meo, Ferrara, Fiumara, & Provetti, 2014), where most connections instead constitute 'weak ties': connections lacking intimacy, emotional intensity, time, and reciprocal services (Granovetter, 1973). While weak ties are effective at spreading information and creating the potential for fresh and diverse information sources, they are easy to discredit since they lack the trust that comes with intimacy (Bode & Vraga, 2018).

2.6. FILTER BUBBLES AND ECHO CHAMBERS

Many researchers, including Mihailis and Viotty (2017), argue that the increasingly media-wary and polarised public are influenced by the growing amount of time they spend in homophilous networks that are largely devoid of contrarian views. They are referring to the theory of 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles'. Pariser (2011) explains the latter as personalisation algorithms on social media that lead to reduced exposure to ideologically and politically diverse content – users are only shown content that matches their interests and previous online activity. Sunstein (2001) argues that echo chambers – closely related to filter bubbles, but which do not consider algorithmic factors – form when ideas, information, or beliefs are reinforced or even amplified through repetition inside a defined system where opposing or competing views are underrepresented, if present at all.

The supposed outcomes of these kinds of homogeneous social networks, whether aided by algorithms or not, include: a reduction in tolerance for alternative views; the amplification of attitudinal polarisation; increased likelihood that ideologically compatible news is accepted; and decreased exposure to new information (Lazer, Baum, Benkler, Berinsky, Greenhill, Menczer, Metzger, Nyhan, Pennycook, Rothschild, Schudson, Sloman, Sunstein, Thorson, Watts, & Zittrain, 2018).

Filter bubbles in particular might occur without social media users even being aware of algorithmic processes, which are often designed to be invisible (see Powers, 2017). In fact, nothing illustrates the theory of filter bubbles more than Facebook's newsfeed algorithm, Edgerank, introduced in 2010. This was later evolved into a machine learning algorithm that evaluates, prioritises, and presents users with content based on thousands of factors, including what users engage with (clicks, pauses, shares, views, likes/reactions, comments), what groups they are members of, and whatever type of content Facebook chooses to prioritise at any given time (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2017) also determined that the group most likely to succumb to polarisation and homophilous networks were those over the age of 65, which happens to be one of the demographic groups least likely to use the internet. The latter might imply decreased literacy levels regarding the dynamics of online spaces, which is of import if online white genocide communities are comprised – even in part – of older users.

While the filter bubble and echo-chamber theories do offer an explanation as to the reasons behind many fake news phenomena, there are studies which contest these theories' roots in the direct-effects model, and its technologically determinist assumptions (Pariser, 2011). Dutton, Reisdorf, Dubois, and Blank (2017), for example, found that internet users with an interest in politics "search for and double check problematic political information, and expose themselves to a variety of viewpoints" (p. 1). In a similar vein, Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015), using a large Facebook dataset, concluded that,

> [a]lthough partisans tend to maintain relationships with like-minded contacts, on average more than 20% of an individual's Facebook friends who report an ideological affiliation are from the opposing party, leaving substantial room for exposure to opposing viewpoints. (p. 1131)

It is prudent, therefore, in line with this study's focus on active audiences, to consider filter bubble and echo-chamber theories with a pinch of salt.

2.7. SOCIAL AND GROUP IDENTITY THEORY, COGNITIVE BIASES, AND THE NEWS

A core component of the research at hand refers to group- and social identity theories as a point of departure, especially because of their relevance within social media networks. As noted by Polletta and Callahan (2017), much of the content on the fake news spectrum reflects and reinforces narratives about gender, class, and race that help build and maintain collective identities, especially those on the political right. As such, the sharing of problematic information, in this case of Facebook, can be understood within the context of self-presentation, in-group signalling, and the reinforcement of group identity. This is examined further through the lens of

cognitive psychology, which many scholars use in their approach to fake news and the post-truth era (see Levitin, 2016; Gorman & Gorman, 2017; Mercier & Sperber, 2017), specifically emphasising cognitive biases and their effects (for example, Fairfield, 2018; Bermúdez, 2018; McIntyre, 2018).

According to social identity theory, in addition to defining themselves on the individual level, people also frequently view themselves through the lens of their memberships within various social groups, for example, defining oneself as a student, a business owner, a woman, South African, and left-wing (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). The relevance of a given social identity varies greatly according to social context; when a specific membership is made salient (for example, at a political rally), people are far more likely to experience emotions and behave in such a way that is congruent with the social identity being activated at that time (Grace, David & Ryan, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). Furthermore, numerous foundational social needs or goals are fulfilled by social groups, including epistemic closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991), belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), access to power and resources (Campbell, 1965), and frameworks that endorse moral values (Turner, 1991; Tetlock, 2003).

Given how important political identity is to one's social identity, it also becomes necessary to briefly discuss what is meant by 'partisanship' – usually taken to mean 'identification with a political party'. In line with social identity theory: partisanship is not primarily driven by a particular platform or party position, but by similarity to and affinity with one's fellow party members (Peck, 2019). Others agree that partisanship is identity-based since people tend to identify with the political party that they perceive most members of their primary social group – family, neighbours, friends – belong to (Bartle & Bellucci, 2015). It should also be noted that political systems dominated by two main competing groups tend to heighten partisan motives on an individual level due to the dichotomous narrative of 'us' versus 'them', signalling the position of 'inside' or 'outside' a group identity.

Social identity theory becomes relevant to the problem of fake news when considering the capacity of partisan or politicised identities (Simon & Klandermans, 2001) to fulfil the goals mentioned above (epistemic closure, belonging, etcetera). This often generates a powerful incentive to distort one's beliefs in a manner that disregards truth, especially when the net value of said goals outweighs the value of truth goals (Van Bavel & Pareira, 2018). When differing beliefs come into conflict with one another, an individual might experience the mental state known broadly as 'cognitive dissonance', which people tend to avoid due to the uncomfortable feeling it generates (Festinger, 1962). In a famous case study by Festinger et al. (1964) – to which cognitive dissonance theory is largely attributed – members of a doomsday cult were recorded as experiencing an intense state of dissonance when their apocalyptic prophecy failed to actualise. Instead of abandoning the cult, the more committed members – those who had sold their homes and cars – instead increased their commitment to the cult's beliefs by rationalising the prophecy's failure (that it was their commitment that saved the earth), and subsequently began proselytising others. Van Bavel and Pareira (2018) argue that political beliefs operate in a similar manner, in a way that can be extended to politicised and polarised networks online.

Many parallels can be drawn between the behaviour described above and the dynamics of the fake news paradigm. When one reduces the value of truth – or by shifting one's perception of what constitutes accurate information – the feeling of cognitive dissonance can be diminished or reduced, helping a person to reconcile

their identity goals (Van Bavel & Pareira, 2018). It is also pertinent to note that individuals who have an increased desire for closure are more likely to feel the need to reduce the feeling of cognitive dissonance (Stalder, 2010), where the former is especially indicated in political conservatives (Jost, Nam, Amodio, & Van Bavel, 2014). It is not surprising, then, that media literacy and fact-checking campaigns have thus far often been ineffectual in their goal of combatting fake news (Amazeen, 2017, Kuklinski, Quirk, Schwider, & Rich, 1998; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Such interventions sometimes result in people doubling down on their ill-informed beliefs, producing a backlash effect – in other words, reducing the importance of accuracy (or rejecting accuracy entirely, sometimes in a violent manner) in order to reconcile one's identity goals.

The relationship between partisan news consumption and social identity, then, is quite complex. For example, Peck (2019) analyses how the *Fox News* channel presents itself as a champion for the 'underdog' or 'little guy' in the American context – working-class, white, political conservatives – by fusing tabloid culture with conservative talking points. Following Peck's (2019) example, constrasting news outlets like the *National Public Radio* or the *New York Times,* although painting themselves as objective, are widely viewed as having a left-wing bias by conservatives. As such, every news organisation signifies a 'social identity', not only through their marketing appeals, but also through the stories they publish. By believing or even publicly reading stories by the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times,* cultural conservatives risk adopting the image of a left-wing identity (Marwick, 2018). It also follows, then, that sharing articles by news sources that align with one's 'social identity' on social media would reinforce that identity and signal to others where one stands on various issues.

Holding the latter in mind, it becomes pertinent to mention that, according to Lazer et al. (2018), individuals tend not to investigate the credibility of information they encounter if it does not violate their extant beliefs, especially when their beliefs are aligned with those of their community – for example, their Facebook page communities. People are thus more willing to accept information that confirms their pre-existing attitudes, and view information that corroborates their extant beliefs as more persuasive than dissonant information, as per the theory of confirmation bias (Lazer et al., 2018). The US electorate, for example, is not so much 'ill-informed' as they are predilected to find information that factors into their worldview (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

A few additional cognitive biases seem to apply to the fake news paradigm. As indicated by various researchers (Gelfert, 2018; McIntyre, 2018; Oswald & Grosjean, 2004), cognitive biases can sometimes account for the process whereby people acquire beliefs after being repeatedly exposed to belief materials (the repetition effect). Another bias is that of 'motivated reasoning': once a belief has been adopted, people are encouraged on one hand to accept confirmatory information, and to reject any information that does not fit (Jerit & Barabas, 2012).

It is also worth discussing the social concept of 'conformity' in the context of cognitive biases, which refers to the act of matching one's behaviour to the behaviour and responses of others in order to "enhance, protect or repair their self-esteems" (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, p. 611). This resonates with behaviours observed in online groups filled with networks of like-minded users, like the Facebook pages described herein:

> individuals often engage in […] conscious and deliberate attempts to gain the social approval of others, to build rewarding relationships with them, and in the process, to enhance their self-esteem. Conformity offers such an opportunity." (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, p. 610)

This even occurs among anonymous internet users (Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000), where the same would likely be true for online networks full of 'weak ties'. Colliander's (2019) work seems to indicate that social media users often look toward comments made by others for guidance in how they should respond to disinformation online – more so than any kind of disclaimer or other fake news interventions.

As a final note, and which is also predicated on theories of collective identity, Alexander's (2004) concept of 'collective cultural trauma' may offer more specific insights into the white genocide groups herein. Mediated mass communication, as embodied in social media platforms, "allows traumas to be expressively dramatized and permits some of the competing interpretations to gain enormous persuasive power over others" (Alexander, 2004, p. 18). In the current context, the traumas expressed by white reactionaries online are arguably rooted in the upheaval of white power after the end of apartheid (and earlier, of colonial rule), and subsequent redistribution attempts and black empowerment policies. For white Afrikaners especially, the traumas may be even further compounded by historical events such as the Boer Wars and their consequences. Alexander (2004) also notes that the representational processes involved in expressing collective cultural trauma in mass media are usually subject to the normative restrictions of news reporting, which demand concision, perspectival balance, and ethical neutrality. This does not, however, apply to the Facebook pages herein, who are able to create and sustain news spectacles with no support from any mainstream media (Mihailis & Viotty, 2017), and which thus operate outside of any form of quality control.

2.8. SOCIAL CORRECTION OF FAKE NEWS

'Social correction' – a term popularised by Vraga and Bode (2017) – refers to corrections provided by social sources in the context of social media, where one's peers are usually a primary source of information. It can occur in different ways: a user may offer a statement refuting a piece of misinformation without providing evidentiary support; other times they might include a link to expert sources to bolster their refutation (Vraga & Bode, 2017). Vraga and Bode (2017) argue that the latter has greater potential for successful correction of misinformation for three reasons: (1) expertise is often linked to credibility – especially effective should the expert be considered an unbiased actor (Bode & Vraga, 2015; Petty & Brinol, 2008); (2) providing supporting evidence may facilitate persuasion, particularly in situations where individuals tend not to process information very carefully (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Petty & Brinol, 2008; Pornpitakpan, 2004); (3) offering a source when substantiating a claim can be considered 'repeated correction', since the correction is proposed by the user as well as credible third-party sources (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012).

According to a study conducted by Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) in the UK, the self-correcting aspect of social media appears to operate to some extent, but the vast majority of inaccurate news goes unchallenged. Tandoc,

Ling, and Lim's study (2020) indicates that as much as 73% of social media users in Singapore ignore fake news posts when they come across them, despite the functions available on most platforms to respond to disinformation. There is a potential reason for this, located in the balancing act that users must face between holding correct cognitions in order to enhance their self-esteem on one hand, and the ingrained motivation to maintain social relationships on the other hand (Tandoc et al., 2020).

Those arguing for social correction as a potential weapon against fake news pinpoint corrections from friends as having a greater impact than that of strangers, since we tend to trust those closest to us (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995). Radzikowski, Stefanidis, Jacobson, Croitoru, Crooks and Delamater (2016) also argue that social corrections may be more effective within those hard-to-reach, diverse populations that otherwise ignore messages from more official channels (such as fact-checking sources). In the context of health misinformation, other users' comments measure up to be as trustworthy and credible as fact-checking flags and articles promoted by Facebook's algorithm (Bode & Vraga, 2018). Tandoc et al. (2020) found that most users tend to ignore fake news posts that they come across, but would be more likely to offer corrections if the issue were strongly relevant to them, or in response to people with whom they have strong interpersonal connections. In fact, interpersonal networks are key in many aspects of fact correction online: when users come across a post whose veracity is unconfirmed, many turn to interpersonal channels seeking verification (Tandoc, Ling, Westlund, Duffy, Goh, & Zheng Wei, 2018). Tandoc et al. (2020) even note the feeling among users of 'saving' those close to them from embarrassment when correcting their engagements with fake news, and that correcting family/friends is easier than correcting an acquaintance, largely due to the perception of the action as aggressive behaviour.

On the other hand, even social corrections made by friends are easily dismissible should motivated reasoning be used to discredit dissenters' expertise (Bode & Vraga, 2018). More realistically, however, and which is largely the case regarding the Facebook pages herein, weak ties tend to dominate on social media, meaning social corrections usually come from unknown others, removing the important factor of trust present in social relationships (De Meo et al., 2014). Social correction could also easily result in backlash that strengthens misinformed beliefs due to the desire to avoid admitting mistakes publicly (Tavris & Aronson, 2007) and the feeling of cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, Bode & Vraga (2015) found that, in the context of misinformation related to health, corrections seem to be more effective when problematic beliefs are not deeply ingrained in the population's consciousness. This does not bode well for the current case – the potent myth of the white genocide is one that has been imbued in the consciousness of some white South Africans for decades (Myburgh, 2013). The specific kind of messages this study is concerned with may be more difficult to correct than more ephemeral fake news topics: misinformation that is plausibly true, emotionally arousing, or for which there are high levels of uncertainty, is more difficult to correct (DiFonzo, Robinson, Suls, & Rini, 2012; Tan, Lee, & Chae, 2015). Facebooks posts about farm attacks/murders certainly encompass the former two characteristics.

Closely related to this is the issue of conspiracy beliefs among genocide believers, and reactionary white South Africans in general. According to both Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, and Imhoff (2013) and Miller, Saunders, and Farhart (2016), providing information that counters fake news may not be sufficient in population

groups that lean toward conspiracies, especially since they are less trusting of society overall. Those who tend to hold conspiracy beliefs also tend to have lower levels of interpersonal trust (Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013), which could make them less receptive to social correction (Lewandowsky, Gignac, & Oberauer, 2013; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a, 2014b; Bode & Vraga, 2018). These populations also tend to form more insular, echo-chamber communities on social media, which logistically limits potential exposure to social correctors, and increases scepticism toward corrective information when they are exposed (Bessi, Coletto, Davidescu, Scala, Caldarelli, & Quattrociocchi, 2015).

The expectation for social media users to correct strangers online, or even their own family members/friends, is a heavy burden to bear. Participants in Tandoc et al.'s (2020) study indicated being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of fake news on social media, arguing that it would be difficult to share any meaningful corrections that would hold the attention of their friends or family. Furthermore, many believed that corrections would not change the minds of users sharing fake news – they argued that such acts demonstrate one's personal opinions, and that altering the sharer's original beliefs would be impossible (Tandoc et al., 2020). This corresponds with literature discussed earlier regarding cognitive biases.

2.9. MARWICK'S SOCIOTECHNICAL MODEL OF MEDIA EFFECTS

Now that some groundwork has been laid, one can begin to unpack Marwick's (2018) work, which proposes a sociotechnical model (comprising both social systems and technical systems) of media effects in understanding *why* – among other things – people share fake news. This model is composed of three premises: (1) that "people make meaning from information based on their social positioning, identity, discursive resources, and skill set"; (2) that "media messaging is often structured in particular ways to further a variety of agendas"; and (3) that "the material settings of media consumption […] have particular technical affordances that affect both meaning-making and messaging" (Marwick, 2018, p. 487-488). The latter premise is particularly important in networked environments, where the material setting is complicated by both the presence of connected others, and advertising models and algorithms, hence the technical component of the model (Marwick, 2018).

The following sections will expand on the three factors of Marwick's sociotechnical model – actors, messages, and technological affordances – as they relate to the subject of analysis at hand, and discussed through the lens of available literature.

2.9.1. ACTORS: REACTIVE WHITE IDENTITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA AND HOW THEY MAKE MEANING FROM MEDIA

As suggested by Marwick (2018), a specific group of actors – namely users or audiences – should be identified in the broader scheme of a sociotechnical analysis; thereafter, the study should aim to understand their social contexts, observe their activities on- and offline, and listen to how they describe their use of media. This is essential in understanding how audiences decode media messages since "[it] is not that texts routinely feature

unstable denotation but that instability of connotation requires viewers to judge text from their own value systems" (Condit, 1989, p. 107). If one prioritises active audience theory, it follows that actors do not just receive and accept media messages (direct effects), but that they interpret or decode them based on the discursive resources available to them, and their specific social positioning (Hall, 1973).

Tandoc et al. (2018) further highlight the importance of actors and their context, noting "that the success of fabricated items relies on pre-existing social tension" (p. 143): if there are serious cultural, racial, sectarian, or political differences present in the social backdrop, then people become more vulnerable to believing problematic information. Social divisions and tumult facilitate news consumers' willingness to read and believe news that confirms their enmity toward another group (Tandoc et al., 2018), in this case, confirming white South Africans' racist anxieties regarding a perceived victimisation by the black majority and the state. As such, one should first aim to understand the historical background of the actors in the population being studied, especially considering the nebulous history underpinning white South African identities that informs their current relationship with media and fake news.

In a brief study that Marwick (2018) conducted to illustrate her sociotechnical model, she focused on conservative and far-right Americans who share fake news – a group which draws substantial parallels with conservative white identities in SA. Benkler et al. (2017) determined that, in the months leading up to the 2016 US elections, right-leaning citizens were very likely to consume news from a dense network of hyper-partisan sources that definitively spread problematic information. A similar study by the OII found that Trump supporters and hard conservatives were far more likely to share junk news on Twitter or Facebook than centrist or left-wing equivalents (Narayanan et al., 2018). While white conservatives/reactionaries in SA may have a different flavour and circumstance to those in the US, especially considering that the country is technically a political white minority while the US is a white majority, the parallels are still clear.

A pertinent factor to touch on here is white-genocide believers' tendency toward conspiracy theories, specifically that the SA government orchestrates – or is at least complicit in – farm attacks/murders. Ernst Roets – Deputy CEO of Afrikaner interest group AfriForum – in fact wrote and published an entire book on this subject in 2018. As mentioned earlier, conspiracy beliefs are more likely to occur when beliefs in government corruption and general uncertainty are high (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Bruder et al., 2013). As Marwick and Lewis (2017) state, conspiracy theories generally express anxieties over losing status or control in a particular milieu, driven by a strong belief in the machinations of a powerful faction of people who actively conceal their role in a situation or event (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Many theories have an ideological bent, while others simply express a distrust of government or stories from the official media (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). White genocide communities also often embody the symptoms of polarisation: as more sceptical individuals opt to leave these groups, they become echo chambers populated primarily by like-minded believers devoid of exposure to differing views (Isenberg, 1986; Sunstein, 2000).

To give the loss of control by white South Africans some context: after the colonial and apartheid dispensations ended – which had insulated SA's white population from most violent crime – white citizens were shaken to the core by the introduction of hijackings, home invasions, and robberies into their everyday lives (Kynoch, 2013).

For some, the end of the old dispensations signalled the beginning of the 'black onslaught' that "ideologues of apartheid had long warned would be one of the consequences of African rule" (Shaw & Gastrow, 2001, p. 235). As a result, white citizens in SA are more afraid of crime than their black counterparts, even though they face a far lower rate of victimisation (Statistics SA, 2012). This crime 'epidemic' serves as a visceral reminder to white South Africans of their diminishing political status, where protestations against crime – like the #SwartMaandag protests of 2017 – serve as an outlet for voicing white anxieties about the new SA without appearing openly racist (Kynoch, 2013).

Working in tandem with these anxieties, mainstream, traditional South African media – and media globally – tend to amplify and prioritise white crime victims' stories over those of black victims. This extant publishing bias is made worse by an administration that some white South African citizens feel refuses to even acknowledge white concerns (like the white genocide) and feel it is openly hostile to the country's white population:

> The wanton violence and racist utterances attributed to some black perpetrators reinforces the belief that violent crime is inseparable from racial antagonism. These sentiments underscore an all too common perception of a white population under siege by a mass of vengeful black criminals, while the (black) government stands idly by. (Kynoch, 2013, p. 430)

Despite this publishing bias, many white South Africans still feel ignored in their plight, criticising mainstream media and classifying them as fake news due to their refusal to acknowledge the white genocide.

The interplay between individual attitudes and partisan media that does acknowledge such 'persecutions' can often be more complicated, however. In a parallel with South African conservatives and the partisan media they imbibe, Hochschild's (2016) book about *Fox News* tells a deep story underlying the anger in her southern Louisiana informants. They felt that they deserved the benefits promised to them under the American dream – as whites were under apartheid and colonial rule – including financial security and stable jobs, both now in short supply. They were 'in line' for these things, but the line is not operating fairly:

> Black women, immigrants, refugees . . . all have cut ahead of you in line. But it's people like you who have made this country great. You feel uneasy. It has to be said: the line cutters irritate you. They are violating rules of fairness. You resent them, and you feel it's right that you do. So do your friends. Fox commentators reflect your feelings, for your deep story is also the Fox News story. (Hochschild, 2016).

The above also constitutes white entitlement: the narratives are coded and moral, and work to reinforce ingroup/outgroup feelings (Marwick, 2018).

Cramer (2016) touches on another aspect that hits close to home in SA's white population, particularly white farmers*:* in her study of rural residents in Wisconsin, they expressed what she called *rural consciousness* – a 'politics of resentment'. Much like rural white communities in SA, these residents believed that urban institutions and governments, purposefully or not, ignore rural concerns and deprive their areas of much-needed resources (Cramer, 2016). In the case of SA, these resources largely concern effective policing. In both instances, the feeling of resentment and the concept of being the 'underdog' is highlighted.

2.9.1.1. Reactionary whitenesses: Anglo-Boer conflict, Apartheid, and collective identities

One of the white identities central to the white genocide narrative, among others (including white South Africans of British descent), is that of the Afrikaners. Before the term 'Afrikaner' can be meaningfully referenced within this research, however, it must be defined. Vanderhaegen (2018) notes that the term was first used by colonials who conceptualised themselves as being 'of Africa', and not 'European' (p. 2). As noted by Steyn (2001), "dissociation from European roots, has been important in Afrikaner identity since the earliest time of white settlement. This self-identification with the land also indicated a strong claim of entitlement to the land." (p. 102). As Afrikaner nationalism came to the fore, 'Afrikaners' became associated with being "white, Calvinist, Afrikaans-speaking nationalists and synonymous with 'racist'" (p. 2). More recently, nationalism has faded as a part of Afrikaner identity, but it still remains as a binder of markers including 'white', 'Afrikaans-speaking', and 'Christian' (p. 2). This binding is complicated, however, by what Giliomee (2009) identifies as a "considerable section of well-educated white Afrikaans speakers who no longer [consider] themselves to be Afrikaners" (p. 175).

In understanding one of the populations that often frequent the Facebook pages under analysis (Afrikaners, influencing and influenced by other South African whitenesses), and how a collective identity is fostered therein, their history must be briefly examined. A key component of Afrikaner identity, as highlighted by both Steyn (2004) and Vanderhaeghen (2018), is a victim constellation fostered throughout their history, and which was likely a key factor in the choreography of apartheid. Indeed, many researchers locate the growth of extremist Afrikaner nationalism in the earlier half of the twentieth century as resulting from the defeat of Boer forces by British colonisers during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902 (Porter, 2000; Dubow, 1992; Vail, 1989). This kind of victim constellation has been highlighted as a consistent precursor to violent regimes orchestrated by groups the world over; as Kressel (2002) succinctly notes, "[V]irtually all perpetrators of great evil in the world […] believed that they were victims of some longstanding prior outrage that justified their militancy." (p. xx) This victimhood is also intimately related to Afrikaners' positioning as a 'subaltern' whiteness resulting from their historical struggle with the British Empire (Steyn, 2004).

Further to this – adding context to the land expropriation issue – Afrikaners and the Afrikaans language is seen as having a privileged and intimate relationship with land in SA that arises from the deep bonds between *Boers* (farming people) and 'the land' (Steyn, 2001; Norval, 1996; Wicomb, 2001). Under British occupation, Afrikaners had to fight to retain ownership of land felt to be unequivocally 'theirs' (Korf & Malan, 2002), a particularly emotive struggle considering that their society was previously wholly agrarian. Afrikaners also had to fight to keep their language, religion, culture, and identity intact, while consistently being reminded of various 'threats' to the latter instilled by the British, including communism ('*Die Rooi Gevaar*') and indigenous black people ('*Die Swart Gevaar*') (Korf & Malan, 2002; Cloete, 1992), fears of which still exist today. Some researchers note the

continued use of the term '*boer*' as arising from this embattlement, framing the Afrikaner identity not only as victimised, but also as possessing the ability to endure and retaliate (Stephney, 2000, p. 1-2).

The arrival of democracy in 1994, signalling the end of the apartheid dispensation, was a pivotal moment in rejuvenating Afrikaner victimhood particularly, but which affected other whitenesses too. Major sociopolitical changes took place where, at least in the political sphere, the white majority turned minority, and vice versa (SA's black majority was afforded a more proportional political presence, but remain an economic minority). Under apartheid, Afrikaners occupied 60 per cent of the vote; now they constitute only 6 per cent (Vanderhaeghen, 2018), "a ten-fold reduction of political influence, that was for some traumatic to handle" (Joubert, 2012, p. 599, translated from Afrikaans in Vanderhaeghen, 2018).

A collective identity that encompasses fear, persecution, and victimisation is accompanied by some strategic opportunities. Vanderhaeghen (2018) argues, for example, that Afrikaners (and white South Africans generally, considering Britain's colonial activities in the country) implicitly or explicitly espouse a victimhood narrative in order to negate the lingering stigma of 'oppressor' fostered during apartheid. In doing so, they appeal to a universal humanitarian sympathy that "wipes away the past and focuses on the present" (Vanderhaeghen, 2018, p. 18), allowing them to "embrace an identity as the new 'others', victimised and put upon by those they have 'othered' – and continue to 'other' – by largely ignoring them" (p. 19). Their victim constellation allows the Afrikaner group to appropriate innocence, smudge lines of accountability, shift the blame, avert the gaze of accusers, and transfer any responsibility of transformation laying on the shoulders the resistant white parts of the South African community onto broader society (Steyn, 2004).

One of the groups most pertinent to this study is AfriForum: a self-described 'civil rights organisation', but which is more often referred to by both local and international media as a white nationalist group. Although AfriForum denies ever having explicitly used the term 'white genocide', the organisation has consistently promoted content and collaborated with figures who do insist on the existence of a white genocide, operating as the group most vocal – nationally and internationally – about farm attacks/murders and land expropriation. The latter activities are usually fronted by deputy CEO Ernst Roets. Ian Cameron, AfriForum's Head of Community Safety, is a central source of information regarding farm attacks/murders, and updates his Facebook (and Twitter) page following every new case.

2.9.2. Messages: Problematic information, information modes, and white South African discourse themes

The second component of the sociotechnical model proposed by Marwick (2018) requires a critical understanding of the media messages under analysis, namely by using content-, discourse-, or computational analysis in order to determine recurring themes, patterns, and underlying presumptions of the media messages. These methods presume that media texts can be interpreted in multiple ways: that they are polysemous, but not that there is an infinite number of meanings (Marwick, 2018). Most importantly, using qualitative or critical

approaches to content analysis may help elucidate the relationship between social control, power, and media messages (Marwick, 2018).

2.9.2.1. Modes and mediums of white genocide content: 'Facts', statistics, 'documentaries' and image macros

Central to the white genocide narrative, both on- and offline, is the use and manipulation of statistics as 'facts' to create the image of disproportionate and alarming levels of farm attack/murders, and aid the argument of an ongoing white genocide. The use of such figures is controversial (see Wilkinson 2017a; Wilkinson 2017b), not only because of unreliable data and ever-changing population descriptions, but also because of the complexity of SA's farm ownership history. A reliable timeline following the fluctuations in farm attack/murder rates, for example, cannot be established using any kind of official, state-sanctioned data, since the South African Police Service (SAPS) stopped publishing figures regarding farm attacks/murders between 2006/07 and 2010/11. This was not an unthinkable action by SAPS considering that farm attacks/murders are were not always officially categorised as a type of crime – a controversy in and of itself.

A few interest groups and agricultural organisations, including AfriForum, do collect and publish their own statistics regarding farm attacks/murders, but almost exclusively do so using definitions and population descriptions that differ from official police statistics (Wilkinson, 2017a). These groups frequently use an estimate of 32,375 full-time farmers from SA's 2007 commercial agriculture census to calculate wildly varying murder rates, ranging from 97 per 100,000 people (ACDP) to 156 per 100,000 (AfriForum) in 2017. Such figures could very easily lead one to believe that farmers are specifically targeted since SA's average murder rate for 2017 was 34.1 per 100,000 (Wilkinson, 2017b). However, the same census survey estimates an additional 770,933 employees, 4,923 owners or partners, and 10,272 family members involved in farming, all of which effectively lowers the farm murder rate to 5.6 per 100,000 people for the 2015/16 year (Wilkinson, 2017b). Furthermore, the latter calculation only applies to farms registered to pay value-added tax; the actual estimated number of people thought to be living in agricultural households is around 11 million (Wilkinson, 2017b).

Additionally, an analysis of farm attack incidences released in 2001 showed that more than 38 per cent of the 1398 victims recorded were not white (Wilkinson, 2017a); this data is old, however, so it may no longer be fully representative of current figures. A few years later, in 2003, an inquiry committee established robbery as the motive in the majority (89.3 per cent) of farm attack cases recorded between 1998 and 2001, in no way painting a picture alluding to the specific persecution of white South Africans (Wilkinson, 2017a). Evans (2011) also notes that, "because socioeconomic divides still run along racial lines in commercial farming areas, white farm owners feature more frequently […] as victims, which gives the crimes the appearance of racism" (p. 402).

A quick glance at the pages being analysed herein shows a tendency toward content that champions highly questionable statistics as factual evidence of a targeted persecution of whites in SA, specifically farmers. Perhaps it is the easily digestible format of statistics (especially when presented visually – often in ways that skew already

dubious data), or the general outlook on numbers and figures as unbiased that makes such formats so popular on social media platforms. As Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) state:

> We place expectations on statistics and expert testimony that strains them to breaking point. Rather than sitting coolly outside the fray of political argument, facts are now one of the main rhetorical weapons within it. (p. 448)

Another popular method of communicating white genocide content has been the documentary medium – both short-form (akin to 'explainer videos') and long-form. In fact, many of the byproducts of recent international attention paid to farm attacks have been long-form documentaries by far-right social media figures branding themselves as 'journalists'. Look no further than Canadian 'activist' Lauren Southern's *Farmlands* (2018) and English media pundit and columnist Katie Hopkins' *Plaasmoorde: The Killing Fields* (2018). Closer to home, AfriForum-funded studio Forum Films has released two documentaries that were subsequently met with strong criticism; one of these was titled *Disrupted Land* (Roets, Gagiano, & Reynecke, 2019) and aimed to reveal the 'truth' behind land reform measures in SA, praising apartheid architect Hendrik Verwoerd's 'philosophy'. Marwick and Lewis (2017) argue that, in the same way that anyone can create and share news on platforms like Facebook, so too can amateur filmmakers upload and share their own conspiracy documentaries on YouTube's platform (as all of the latter-mentioned films were), and subsequently share them on platforms like Facebook. Mattson (2016) discusses this tension between story and fact, arguing that the more social media's participatory nature is celebrated, the more negative our conceptions of objectivity in journalism become: facts no longer serve to unify but increasingly to refute oppositional viewpoints and reinforce partisan identities.

A further popular medium is that of 'image macros': images that succinctly convey humour or political thought, often accompanied by a fair amount of text (as part of the image), designed to be shared on social media (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). They are made to be shared from user to user via social media platforms, taking advantage of horizontal propaganda processes that spread content interpersonally, which are more effective than strategies utilising a top-down apparatus (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Because of their format, it is almost always impossible to tell the origins or source of an image macro unless a watermark or web address is included somewhere in the image. Additionally, since dozens of image macros convey very similar messages, people in networks through which these macros are circulated are consistently exposed to repetitive messaging, elevating the efficacy of a propaganda message (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

2.9.2.2. WHITE REACTIONARY DISCOURSE THEMES AND PATTERNS

When identifying patterns in the messages posted by the Facebook pages herein, a reference point from which to inform various themes is paramount. White reactionary South Africans have been leveraging their commentaries within the public sphere long before social media reached the country, thus much can be gleaned from discourse studies conducted on South African newspapers targeting white readerships. The work of Steyn

and Foster (2008) and Vanderhaeghen (2018) provide a solid foundation from which to develop further discursive themes, and is discussed below.

2.9.2.2.1. Steyn and Foster's 'White Talk'

Steyn and Foster's (2008) study of white discourse centres around analyses of South African newspapers with predominantly white audiences. The themes identified embody a more covert maintenance of white supremacy compared to the overt expressions found online, but there are many foundational points that still apply. The following is true in both cases:

> [B]y exaggerating white victimhood and stoking, even reactivating, constructions of the inimical nature of Africa and Africans to whiteness, resistant elements in white South Africa are able to underplay the dominance of their whiteness in the larger scheme of past and present global arrangements, and are able to 'hook' that power through racial solidarity, sympathy and Afropessimism abroad (Steyn & Foster, 2008, p. 46).

One of these themes refers to 'non-racialism', initially described by Frankenburg (1993) as 'colour blindness', which has become ubiquitous in white discourses the world over (Steyn & Foster, 2008). By denying or ignoring the effects of racialisation, colour blindness enables the reproduction of racism and builds white consensus (Van Dijk, 1992; Essed, 1991; Gallagher, 2003). Colour blindness allows for the reframing of the social and personal consequences of racialisation in a decontextualised way; its employment allows one to define racism only as those overt or violent acts of discrimination, oppression, or hate crimes, where the everyday perpetuation of white privilege and advantage pales into insignificance (Wellman, 1993).

Non-racialism further employs a general practice of 'spreading the blame' (Steyn & Foster, 2008). By emphasising the ubiquity of human oppression and conquest, for example, such events are made to seem run-of-the-mill, diverting attention away from the effects of colonialism and slavery in Africa (Steyn & Foster, 2008). This nonchalant perspective plays down the trauma of racialisation and apartheid, blurring the specifics of the context, obscuring the roles of the actors involved and the consequences of their actions, ultimately excising any questions of moral accountability for the present situation in SA (Seidel, 1988). These practices (as with many of the other discursive repertoires discussed herein) create the appearance of a morally blank canvas upon which white South Africans are able to paint themselves as victims of an unprovoked, 'reverse racism'-based persecution by the black majority and the ANC government.

A second theme outlined by Steyn and Foster (2008) concerns variations of amnesia/distortion/silencing in relation to the past. Some white South Africans covertly (or overtly, like on Facebook) believe that life was more 'normal', better, even, under the old dispensations. The obsession over the 'constant' images of neglect, decay, and human suffering, often detached from any historical causal factors, are contrasted with a time (British colonial rule, and subsequently apartheid) when (some) people's lives were more hopeful (Steyn & Foster, 2008). This gaze further defines crime, not poverty, as SA's biggest problem (Steyn & Foster, 2008), since an

extrapolated inquiry into the issue of inequality would in turn demand acknowledgement of the lasting effects of colonialism and apartheid.

A third theme is the trope of 'good blacks' (like Nelson Mandela) who are pitted against 'bad blacks' (Steyn & Foster, 2008). An ideologically accommodating 'other' is used to discredit and reprimand ideologically confrontational other 'others' (bad blacks). In the context of white genocide Facebook pages, the 'good blacks' are those who acknowledge farm attacks/murders as being racially motivated, and who do not dissent from the conspiratorial views held by white users therein. In some cases this can be taken to the extreme, where fake Facebook profiles and pages appear to belong to sympathetic 'good blacks', but are in fact created by white South Africans under false pretences to give further legitimacy to their messages (see Cilliers, 2017).

A fourth theme can be located in the accumulation of tropes of decay and falling apart, stacking up examples and images of errors, problems, and corruption (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Such relentless servings of pessimism create a powerful case toward the conclusion that the new SA is a fiasco, as was warned (Steyn & Foster, 2008). This is set against an almost immovable, sedimented take on what being an African country means that is tough to counter (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Whites are resistant to discourses of renaissance that put Africans in power of defining Africa on their own terms (Steyn & Foster, 2008), and see themselves as driving the improvement of black South Africans' lives: "whites solve problems, blacks create, or are the problems" (Steyn & Foster, 2008).

In this case, there is constant mention across the Facebook pages herein of Zimbabwe as a case study for SA's farming future. As with Zimbabwe, the common insinuation at all times is that the country is in a constant state of decline, changing from better to worse, and that current efforts to right the wrongs of SA's past are somehow even worse than the society's original faults (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Interventions driving change currently (like economic empowerment policies) are framed by reactionary whites as social engineering, but that same label is not applied to those colonial and apartheid policies that created such stark inequalities in the first place (Steyn & Foster, 2008).

The most prevalent exercise in the pessimism described above frames black people as violent and criminogenic, in turn justifying stricter policing and criminal justice systems that affect black people disproportionately (Steyn & Foster, 2008). The race/crime link is a common mainstay of white identities in SA and in many other countries (Gabriel, 1998), and was reinvigorated after the dissolution of apartheid, where crime became more democratised (Steyn & Foster, 2008). The cumulative effect of this theme cements post-apartheid SA as the problem, instead of just having problems (Steyn & Foster, 2008), and that black South Africans are "the cause of every negative development [… from the rapid decay of the housing stock to […] the general decline of morality" (Griffen, 1999), or in this case, inherently to blame for the issue of farm attacks/murders.

A fifth theme discusses the indignation, or sometimes even resentment of the emerging class of successful, moneyed black South Africans – 'elite blacks' (Steyn & Foster, 2008). The idea of African advancement is seen as the consequence of tokenism or corruption – black South Africans are often framed as being unable to handle an 'upgraded' status, and their mistakes taken as demonstrations of the folly of transformation (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Cases of mismanagement, poor judgment, and corruption become the focus, where the most attackable

examples, like Zimbabwe, are used and presented as the norm for all empowered black people (Steyn & Foster, 2008). This type of discourse foregrounds 'black elites' as a decoy, drawing attention away from those who still control the bulk of the SA's wealth: middle and upper-class whites (Steyn & Foster, 2008). For example, there is tangible resentment held by white farming communities toward those black South Africans on the receiving end of expropriated farmland. The general argument is that only established white farmers have the expertise necessary to work the land, and that 'blacks' will inevitably render the land unusable. Insisting that power and wealth (or farming land) are unsafe in the hands of black South Africans carries the subtext that these things were in more trustworthy hands once, and should be left there (Steyn & Foster, 2008).

A sixth theme casts those promoting social justice as the enemy (a natural defence by those protecting a hierarchical order), and demoralises the fight for change (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Van Dijk (1993, 1998) argues that multiculturalism and antiracism are often prime targets of racist discourses, characterising those who highlight social issues or issues of racism as being excessively self-righteous (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Casting dissenters (in this case, against the white genocide narrative) as zealous and illogical allows one to demoralise issues, and subsequently claim to represent value-free rationality that refrains from imposing its own morality when considering the issues (Steyn & Foster, 2008).

A seventh and more overtly right-wing theme of discourse issues threats, warnings, and dire predictions regarding the transformation of society, preparing white South Africans for fight or flight. In such narratives, whites are framed as unrecognised heroes, and negative white reactions as fair since the new SA is one "where the worthy are punished and the unworthy disproportionately rewarded, and where the victimized white group is undervalued, not fully respected, and unwelcome" (Steyn & Foster, 2008, p. 44). The narrative makes it clear that there is a re-assertion taking place, and that whites need to regroup, often drawing away from the margins of South African whiteness, retracting back toward the centres of Australasia and Euro-America where whiteness is more secure (Steyn & Foster, 2008). An argument is made that whites have no option but to leave due to black people 'taking over' and 'pushing them out': emigration and disinvestment are thus naturalised (Steyn & Foster, 2008).

2.9.2.2.2. VANDERHAEGHEN'S THEMES OF WHITE AND AFRIKANER DYSFUNCTION AND GRIEF

While Vanderhaeghen's 2018 book – *Afrikaner Identity: Dysfunction and Grief* – focuses on white Afrikaner identities as encapsulated by Afrikaans-language newspaper *Beeld*, there are many overlaps between these and other white identities in SA. The themes and discourses elucidated by this group therefore have some import regarding the current population under analysis.

A first theme outlined by Vanderhaeghen (2018) took root in a major commonality among stories about poverty in *Beeld*: there was an exclusive focus on white squatters, with no parallel coverage of black squatters. Vanderhaeghen highlights a possible reason for this: viewing black and white poor South Africans together in the context of class would destabilise the 'victim' component of their identity, whereby Afrikaners are subjected to alleged black economic prejudice. One can project this onto the agenda-setting biases present in farm

attack/murder pages: it is hard to find any stories posted on these pages about farm attack victims who are not white, of whom there are many (see Wilkinson, 2017a), since this might undermine the narrative that farm attacks/murders are racially motivated, targeting whites.

A second theme discusses death as a result of negligence, incompetence, or neglect. In the context of *Beeld*, and which can be extended to farm murder stories, violent death as a result of negligence addresses institutional breakdown and the direct effects of poor governance on South African citizens' lives (Vanderhaeghen, 2018). Vanderhaeghen argues that these stories employ multiple discourses, including the general degradation of services, especially as a result of ill-conceived policy or political inaction. One can extend this sentiment to the anger expressed by rural white farmers over the apparent lack of policing resources in their areas, leading to slow response times when a farm attack is reported, and possible death as a result – constituting death by neglect.

A third theme builds on Alden and Anseeuw's (2009) breakdown of discourses in the 'white settler' narrative – namely the discourse of privilege. White settlers (referring to both Afrikaners and British colonialists) feel they have earned the right to state privileges and protection in their capacity to produce economic goods, where the source of their privilege is no longer framed in terms of race, but in terms of economic criteria (Vanderhaeghen, 2018). In this sense, white South Africans invoke a universalistic human rights discourse in order to employ 'minority' protection, thus absolving themselves from their historical sources of privilege (especially in terms of land possession), but still framing themselves as an outpost of rationality and civilisation in a country steeped in 'chaos' (Alden & Answeeuw, 2009, in Vanderhaeghen, 2018). Vanderhaeghen (2018) argues that this discourse of privilege is not only defensive, but also celebratory, and that it grants value and agency in a narrative where the subjects are virtuous, innocent, and white.

The state of 'innocence' inherent in the discourse of privilege silences the history of oppression and extermination of indigenous populations (Vanderhaeghen, 2018), mirroring the discursive theme of amnesia/distortion/silencing highlighted by Steyn and Foster (2008). When isolated from any historical context, accusations of a genocide enacted against whites by black South Africans is seen as a victim 'hitting back' at perpetrators who have no way to justify their actions (Vanderhaeghen, 2018). When placed in context, however, such claims paradoxically frame farm murders as violent acts of vengeance for evils committed in the past, which affirms grievances, but also undermines any moral claim to innocence to begin with (Vanderhaeghen, 2018).

The fourth theme refers to the narrative of crime in *Beeld* which presents crime in SA as a serious and pervasive social issue, but also frames whites/Afrikaners as being targeted not because they embody a relative amount of wealth and own assets that might be attractive to criminals, but because of their identity as whites/Afrikaners (Vanderhaeghen, 2018). The central narrative of victimisation locates crime not as a social factor borne of structural causes, but instead stresses the agency of attackers, where farm attacks and murders are presented as vengefully violent and gratuitous, constituting 'proof' of a targeted persecution (Vanderhaeghen, 2018).

2.9.3. AFFORDANCES: FAKE NEWS, FACEBOOK, AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Moving on to the third component of Marwick's (2018) sociotechnical model, Gibson (1977), and subsequently Evans, Pearce, Vitak and Treem (2017), define an affordance as a 'possibility for action', determined by the features or functions of the technology itself, the user, and the outcomes for which the technology is used. More simply: affordances refer to what users perceive a certain object – or social media platform – can do (Gibson, 1977). The perceived affordances of any given platform are influenced by social norms and what Gershon (2010) refers to as 'media ideologies': peoples' beliefs about the right and wrong ways to use a certain type of media. Considering affordances in the context of fake news emphasises the efforts to move away from technologically determinist assumptions regarding communication technology, especially by acknowledging how user agency is affected by material conditions (Marwick, 2018).

Marwick (2018) highlights three significant differences between the affordances of social media as opposed to traditional media, which will be elaborated below: (1) that through social media, anyone can become a producer and distributor of content; (2) that content is shared in social contexts through social networks; and (3) that content on social media is promoted algorithmically, premised on what platform designers think will keep users on their platform.

Regarding the first point, that *anyone can produce and distribute content* on social media as opposed to professionals operating through traditional media gatekeeping, the implication is that people with viewpoints outside of the 'Overton Window' – referring to the range of policies that are politically acceptable to mainstream populations at any given time (Giridharadas, 2019) – can now produce and disseminate their own 'news' stories, blogs, and tweetstorms (Marwick, 2018). While this has allowed for various activist groups to organise around pressing issues that are largely absent from mainstream media (for example, police brutality or homophobic violence), it has also enabled and sometimes even encouraged the creation of false and/or biased information that is often indistinguishable from professionally produced news (Marwick, 2018). Cost and skill barriers to producing content for social media are notably lower in comparison to traditional media (Marwick, 2018). Even when not directly producing content, differing levels of user participation impact how far content reaches – many users may 'like' a Facebook post, share posts, publish comments on news stories, or weigh in on a discussion war on other users' posts (Marwick, 2018). Others simply 'lurk' – listening, reading, or scrolling through feeds (Marwick, 2018).

The second notable difference is that *content is shared in the context of social networks*. Political or news content is relayed as a small part of someone's social feed amidst a constant flow of information including personal stories, photographs, gossip, advertisements, and other social material – an experience that Hermida (2010) refers to as 'ambient journalism'. Papacharissi (2015) highlights this flow of information as affective, meaning that – for social media users – news is "collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion, all sustained by and sustaining ambient news environments" (p. 34). Thus, in the context of social media, 'objectivity' as a journalistic value no longer holds since most stories are accompanied by users' opinions; the boundaries between spaces for news and commentary are broken down (Hermida, 2017).

The context of the social media platform itself influences the reasons for people sharing or reposting news stories on their profiles. As Marwick (2018) succinctly states, "people are not necessarily looking to inform others: they share stories (and pictures, and videos) to express themselves and broadcast their identity, affiliations, values, and norms" (p. 505). This includes problematic information, which functions as an identity-signalling mechanism online: when someone makes the decision to share a fake news story on their social media, whether aware of its questionable veracity or not, they are likely doing so to "signal their identity and affiliate themselves with like-minded others" (Marwick, 2018, p. 505).

The third difference involves *the algorithmic sorting or recommendation of content on a platform*. The motivations behind this function are not that far off from television content being designed to keep viewers from changing the channel: social media content ranging from the sensational to the grotesque (such as gratuitous farm attack images) is often more engaging to viewers than content which is more nuanced and thoughtful (Marwick, 2018). It is very possible that problematic information is given priority on social media platforms because it demonstrably leverages more engagement, even if that engagement only goes so far as users disputing or criticising that content (Marwick, 2018). Another factor of algorithmic sorting on platforms relates, of course, to user preferences and perceived interests in the realm of the filter bubble theory.

It is also important to consider social media platforms' tendency toward the 'bandwagon heuristic', whereby each post is accompanied by popularity ratings (Sundar, 2008). The popularity of certain news items is a self-fulfilling cycle, even when not influenced by social media bots, because when a post is accompanied by many engagements, it is more likely to gain attention from other users, and be further commented on, shared, or liked (Thorson, 2008). This bandwagon effect, partly an algorithmic problem and partly a behavioural one, lends itself well to the sharing of unverified information.

All of these considerations play a huge role in *how* people use social media: "the material affordances of technology amplify or stifle certain types of human behaviour" (Marwick, 2018, p. 506). They do not, however, play the only role. Information flows both on- and offline in broadcast media and face-to-face interactions: stories are discussed on Facebook and in person (Marwick, 2018). In other words, online sharing and interaction does not exist in a vacuum – isolating social technology platforms ignores the myriad of other channels through which problematic information has flowed freely for decades, and continues to do so (Marwick, 2018). In farming communities in more rural parts of SA, one can reasonably expect much of the local news (and gossip) to occur interpersonally and face-to-face since residents in rural areas tend to form tight-knit communities. In the South African context, community groups are often formed for security reasons, where citizen-driven security programmes are common due to the lack of police presence in rural areas, but which may also lead to physical echo chambers that foster persecution complexes.

What platforms such as Facebook do compound, then, is the reach and efficiency of pre-existing social networks. While Marwick and Lewis (2017) discuss subcultures such as the 'alt-right' as being highly networked, and their members agile – able to assemble and disassemble teams for campaigns as required – this concept can also be applied to the network of white genocide believers. For example, in previous work, the author focused on the

nation-wide #SwartMaandag protests in 2017, which arose following calls from a group on Facebook spearheaded by a white farmer and a university student. They were inspired by a small roadside gathering of vehicles brandishing large white crosses, consisting of friends and family in mourning after a Klapmuts farmer was murdered, and subsequently used affective Facebook posts to transform the mourning into a nation-wide protest.

There is another affordance to consider in this case: the internet, and Facebook, allows authors (or page administrators) to conceal and reveal themselves at will, and who are not obliged to offer a truthful representation of their identity, let alone fully disclose it (Stephney, 2000). In this way, the distributors of seditious content avoid any sense of accountability that traditional journalists or media figures would be held to. Furthermore, as was found by Farkas, Schou and Neumayer (2018) in their study of cloaked Facebook pages, the affordances offered by Facebook not only allows for administrators to remain completely anonymous, but also enables them to delete any comments made on page posts without notifying the authors. Page admins can and often do also block users whose comments do not align with the pages' perspectives or 'rules', and are often open about doing so with their page followers. These affordances allow administrators to appear democratic and participatory while still maintaining a strict control over the content on their pages (Champoux, Durgee, & McGlynn, 2012).

2.9.3.1. The rise of white-fear, alternative news Facebook pages in SA

In the context of the 2016 US election, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) reported that, although social media was an important source of political information and news, it was not the dominant mode of media, lagging far behind more traditional media like television. The same cannot be argued in the context of the white genocide considering the extreme political belief it represents: the gatekeeping of traditional news media typically does not allow viewpoints lacking factual evidence to be disseminated. The white genocide is thus relegated to private, partisan media houses and informal networks of 'alternative news' websites and social media pages. The latter set of terms is used to refer to those informal news entities such as the Facebook pages analysed throughout this study, who have no formal journalistic credentials, and who therefore operate outside of traditional news media gatekeeping, independent critical examination processes, and consequence.

Social media platforms and the internet further afford – as Novak (1993, p. 6) argues – an "inherent malleability of content" that lends itself to the "acting out of mythic realities". In the current context, that mythic reality is the systemic persecution and genocide of whites in SA. Generally, these platforms constitute a world where the "combination of computer and verbal skills equals high status and prestige" (Bromberg, 1996, p. 149). Positioning oneself as a news media entity affords the formal title of 'editor' (or 'administrator'), attracting fan mail (direct messages, comments, and likes) from appreciative users, and also drawing attention from page visitors who are less than complimentary. All of this constitutes strategies of imagined re-empowerment (Evans, 2011) and validation of the mythic reality spun by the page admins.

Notably, more informal information networks using modes different to that of the formal language of news media can assist in undermining official narratives that are already distrusted by news audiences in SA (Wasserman, 2017). An example of such networks include Facebook 'news' pages that cater to specific audiences, but which should not be confused with pages constituting the social media presence of traditional mainstream news houses. In the context of farm attacks/murders, certain white audiences already have a high level of distrust toward formal news media that refuse to endorse the existence of a white genocide. Thus, fake news on the subject that affirms their anxieties, produces affective emotional appeal, and validates social identities in a divided country like SA (Chakrabarti, Rooney, & Kweon, 2018, p. 47) likely resonates more strongly with white audiences' everyday experiences than mainstream traditional media that is state-owned or elite-oriented (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

A similar reason that groups like the Facebook pages herein arise is due to users partaking in media manipulation as a means to gain acceptance and status within like-minded online communities (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). On social media platforms like Facebook, status is largely generated through an accumulation of comments, shares, and likes that incentivise users to create and share content that resonates with their followers, friends, and groups (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). When viewed more broadly, communities may feel that by manipulating or completely diverting around media outlets, they gain some status (at least among their peers) and a measure of control over a powerful media institution, which most of them strongly dislike and distrust (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

The Facebook pages herein have strong similarities to those Afropessimist websites run and attended by expatriates analysed by Martha Evans in 2011. As is reflected in her findings, the Facebook pages being analysed tend to proclaim their dedication to exposing the 'real' goings-on in SA, and typically consist of links to carefully selected news reports (sometimes by credible organisations, but mostly from sites known to fabricate news) and reposted statuses by Facebook users. In her study, Evans (2011) found that most of the content posted referenced negative news reports on mismanagement, crime, corruption, the failings of affirmative action, images of deteriorating neighbourhoods and infrastructure, and – most importantly in the context of farm attacks/murders – gratuitous photographs of victims of crime. The Facebook pages in question reflect these same topics almost exactly.

Evans' (2011) research also noted these topics as having piqued the interests of white supremacist media figures the world over. There is a feeling that SA's unique population and history, when framed as "a hellish place that is swiftly sliding into anarchy under black rule" (Evans, 2011, p. 403), serves as the perfect example of what might happen if white majorities in other countries are allowed to become minorities. SA's example becomes even more newsworthy to international media figures such as Lauren Southern and Katie Hopkins if there is 'evidence' of a white genocide going on.

2.10. CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed varied foundational literature regarding the relatively new research field of disinformation studies, actively linking theories and examples to the current context. General information about the nature of fake news, online networks, and the impact of group behaviour and cognitive biases were laid down as the groundwork, followed by discussion of Marwick's (2018) sociotechnical model of media effects, drawing from key studies, and aligning relevant parallels to the South African context.

The contestation in academic circles between different definitions of 'fake news' was relayed, where the term 'problematic information' was found to resonate most strongly with the current study. Factors of propaganda discourse were discussed in their affective and operational similarities to problematic information. The contemporary news landscape and its role in the rise of 'fake news' was explored, which was especially important in understanding a main precursor to the post-truth era: growing levels of distrust in mainstream news media. The active audience media effects theory was discussed alongside the pitfalls of early fake news research, which typically favoured deterministic views of audiences and the direct effects model.

The subsequent four sections took a conceptual turn away from more foundational literature and toward social and group behaviours and cognitive psychology theories, discussing their impact on fake news phenomena. Sharing behaviours on social media platforms were discussed, with special attention paid to the participation paradigm and spreadable media spectacles, as well as the concept of social proximity as derived from network theory. Filter bubble and echo-chamber theories were explored, as well as the criticisms these theories invite for leaning on technologically and socially deterministic assumptions. Social and collective identity theories were described, as well as many of cognitive biases that offer some explanation as to why fake news has become such a pervasive issue. Social correction practices were discussed as a response to fake news posts, and as a potential way to combat fake news, which has particular import for RQ 3.

The final section of the literature review thoroughly explored Marwick's sociotechnical model of media effects and the three main factors it touches on: actors, messages, and affordances. First, some background, history, and social context is relayed regarding the actors in this case: reactive white identities in SA. Second, the 'message' component was discussed, with particular emphasis on the modes of messaging that fake news often employ, as well as an in-depth exploration of many pertinent discourse themes that form the backbone of message content herein. The main authors referenced in this regard were Steyn and Foster (2008) and Vanderhaeghen (2018), whose works are used as a foundation for both RQ 2 and RQ 3. Third, the 'affordance' component was explored, with specific attention paid to the way reactionary Facebook pages exploit platform allowances to their benefit, and which helps inform RQ 2's focus on technological affordances. RQ 1 draws on literature from all aspects of the review, where the resulting survey aimed to gather broad, qualitative information from respondents about their interactions with problematic information.

The following chapter will discuss the methodological considerations made regarding the research design for this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The current study employs a triangulated approach, including a qualitative survey component, and a two-pronged content analysis, both largely explorative and descriptive in function. Since online populations are notoriously hard to define, and given the obstacles and constraints encountered throughout this research, non-probability sampling techniques were deemed the most appropriate. Although a triangular approach was originally intended, as outlined during the ethical considerations of the current study (see Appendix A), there was a period of time where the survey was to constitute the sole research instrument due to time constraints. However, after the global pandemic hit in early 2020, it was decided that the original research plan be re-introduced since a focused, meaningful, and sizeable set of survey responses was no longer guaranteed. An entirely new, globally pervasive network of fake news arose around the novel coronavirus, especially during the earlier months when the survey was set to be distributed, where the pandemic seemed to dominate most social and news agendas. Even the most dedicated farm attack/murder-focused Facebook page communities were, at best, distracted for a time by a new and pressing issue, meaning they might have been less able to reflect on the deeper, more open-ended survey questions.

In answering RQ 1 (*How do users on farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages typically engage with problematic information, and why?*), a qualitative survey was shared as a link across two farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages, the results of which are interpreted against reviewed literature, and complemented by the results of RQs 2 and 3. Regarding RQ 2 (*What are the most prevalent qualitative and format-related themes (with specific attention paid to platform affordances) among farm attack/murder-related Facebook posts with high share counts, and why?*), a Qualitative Content analysis (QCA) was performed on Facebook posts as a whole, including text content, images, and technological affordance factors. The latter drew from extant literature (Steyn & Foster, 2008; Vanderhaegen, 2018; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Marwick, 2018) and produced emergent themes. In terms of RQ 3 (*What are the common adversarial themes of discourse invoked in response to social corrections within farm-attack/murder-related Facebook posts and comment threads containing false information?*), a critical discourse analysis (CDA) was performed. The latter drew from extant literature on the practice of social corrections (Colliander, 2019; Bode & Vraga, 2018), the discursive themes mentioned earlier, and propaganda theory (Walton, 2007; Ellul & Kellen, 1973), where themes were also inductively identified.

A big advantage of online, virtual communities as sites for research is the access they allow to individuals who share specific interests, beliefs, values, and attitudes regarding a problem, issue, or activity (Wright, 2017; Regmi, Waithaka, Paudyal, Simkhada, & van Teijlingen, 2016). Eysenbach and Till (2001) outline three distinct categories of online research: 'traditional' research where data are generated through focus groups, interviews,

or surveys conducted online; 'active' researcher participation within the online community in question; or the 'passive' use of existing data without the researcher's involvement in the online community. The current study touches on both the 'traditional' and 'passive' components, with the latter referring to the QCA and CDA components. Purposive sampling, which "relies on the researchers' situated knowledge of the field and rapport with members of targeted networks" (Barratt, Ferries, & Lenton, 2015), was used across all sections of research due to the specificity of the research questions, and limited access to the population in question due to ethical, safety, and legal constraints. Although purposive sampling does not typically produce generalisable data, Barratt et al. (2015) argue that there is value in purposive samples set in a framework of emic knowledge. In short, purposive samples interpreted within a grounded theory framework, where the researcher has become intimately familiar with the population, still hold some value when actively contextualised.

Each portion of the research and the methods they employ are discussed below.

3.1. Qualitative survey

Survey research typically refers to a systematic collection of self-reported data offered by a sample of the target population (Siegel & Jones, 2018), where the survey design herein focused more on qualitative questioning. Surveys and other related methods tend to rely on participants to make active choices to participate (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002). The latter is definitely true herein: the only way the current researcher could satisfy strict ethical demands that protected both herself and her research subjects was to foster a relationship with Facebook page administrators, implore them to share the survey link with their followers in return for a summary of the results, and hope that enough Facebook users felt compelled to participate. While this may have resulted in an element of self-selection bias, potentially excluding more paranoid users, these results are never framed as generalisable, and are discussed in the context of the other research results.

Each step of the decision-making process regarding the survey's research design is discussed below for posterity.

3.1.1. Population

The target population herein constitutes followers of Facebook pages dedicated, at least in part, to the issue of white genocide and farm attacks/murders in SA. The researcher has kept tabs on dozens of such Facebook pages for the duration of this study and beyond – a full list of which can be accessed in Appendix B attached. While it is impossible that all Facebook pages of this nature were identified, considering their fluid, ephemeral nature due to constant deletion and recreation, the pages identified arguably span the breadth of the population. By the end, many obstacles were encountered that narrowed the final sample down significantly, as is discussed below.

3.1.2. Sampling Frame

A sampling frame for the survey participants was identified more or less out of ethical necessity: of the Facebook pages identified, only those displaying an identifiable email address could be selected for potential inclusion. This is because the researcher needed to remain anonymous for safety reasons, as outlined in Appendix A.

An initial definition of requirements regarding the Facebook pages to be included in the sampling frame was outlined, informed partly by Pollock (2009): pages needed to have over 10,000 'likes', needed to be reasonably active, and needed to have posted a substantial amount of content relating to farm attacks/murders or the white genocide. After the ethical requirement of an email address was identified, these requirements were relaxed since very few pages shared working email addresses. All in all, out of the nine administrators contacted (see those highlighted in Appendix B), only two were willing to co-operate:

- *Stop Boer Genocide* (*SBG* henceforth); and
- *South Africa Today News* (*SATN* henceforth)

Establishing a reliable sampling frame for surveys of online communities like the one herein is often a dubious effort. A researcher can attempt to construct one by "counting the number of participants in an online community, or the published number of members, over a given period of time" (Wright, 2017). Ultimately, the sample frame was therefore defined as, but not restricted to, all page followers of *SBG* (approximately 3,491 at the time of writing) and *SATN* (previously *South Africa Today* – approximately 4,773 followers at the time of writing, but closer to 2,000 followers at the time the survey was shared). The reason the sample frame could not be restricted to these figures is that users who are not followers would also have had access to the survey. The researcher did consider asking the page administrators to make the survey link viewable only by followers, but the researcher herself would have to then follow the pages in order to assess the community's reactions, opening herself up to identification and potential harassment.

The unit of analysis here constitutes each individual survey response.

3.1.3. SAMPLE

For reasons discussed above, a non-probability sample had to be employed in this case, especially since sample frame parameters were hard to estimate. Of the three categories of survey samples described by Medlin, Roy and Ham Chai (1999), the current study employed (among other sampling techniques) 'unrestricted sampling', whereby the availability of the survey was intended to be communicated widely across the participating pages in order to recruit as many respondents as possible.

Unfortunately, there was no way to calculate a response rate for the survey, which is a common issue according to Van Selm and Jankowski (2006). "There is no way in which to know how many individuals might have seen the survey or its links but declined to participate. Only the number of completed surveys is known and not the number of refusals" (Kay and Johnson, 1999, p. 326). Due limiting circumstances surrounding ease of communication with the target population, there were no real opportunities to heed the advice given by Van

Selm and Jankowski (2006) to remedy this issue. Considering that the current study is almost entirely explorative/descriptive, however, response rate accuracy is not a huge concern.

In total, between April 13th 2020 and July 31st 2020, 21 responses were received from followers of the two Facebook pages, but four responses were incomplete and thus excluded from analysis as per ethical decisions. This left a final sample of 17 survey responses.

3.1.4. DATA COLLECTION

The survey software used in this case, Qualtrics (2005), was chosen for its survey design and flow tools, and its confidentiality and security features. Another huge factor was the software's GDPR compliance which, as mentioned in Appendix A, serves as the data security standard for any research involving the collection of personal data from international participants online. Furthermore, Qualtrics provides a conveniently automated process of data collection, storage, and collation, reducing the amount of time and effort spent and allowing for focus in other areas. Using Qualtrics also protected against data loss since all data is stored indefinitely on the platform until deletion. The use of this software also allowed for a vast reduction of research costs: no funds were spent on recording equipment, travel, or telephone costs, nor transcription costs since all online responses are automatically documented (Wright, 2017).

Electronic surveys have particular advantages over face-to-face or telephonic surveys. Accessing individuals from virtual communities who are in geographically disparate locations or difficult to access for other reasons becomes much easier through the use of an electronic survey (Wright, 2017; Regmi et al., 2016). The current study population exhibits both of these factors: many of the page followers live all over SA, and internationally too; and due to the sensitive nature of the topic at hand and controversial political values held by most followers, many participants would be hard to access elsewhere. Another advantage of electronic surveys was the potential use of "pop-up instructions, error messages, and illustrative graphics; they also can use complicated skip patterns that are not possible in other self-administered modes of data collection" (Ritter & Sue, 2007, p. 37).

A prominent disadvantage of electronic surveys, however, is that participants can misrepresent their demographics information or their true feelings about the survey content in the name of social desirability (Wright, 2017). The best defence against the latter is replication: by conducting multiple online surveys with similar online communities (in this case, Facebook pages), researchers can gain a more reliable overview of participant characteristics (Wright, 2017). This was attempted, but ultimately only two pages were administered the survey, so there is no guarantee against respondents misrepresenting their answers. In an effort to prevent multiple responses being submitted by participants – a common issue highlighted by Wright (2017) – the option to 'prevent ballot box stuffing' was enabled through Qualtrics, which restricts people from taking the survey more than once.

No incentives were offered directly to participants, since reimbursement or other prizes tend to motivate multiple responding (Bowen, Daniel, Williams, & Baird, 2008) and would necessitate collecting identifying

information from participants (Barratt et al., 2015). Instead, the author told admins that they would be issued with a summary of the survey results, which they could choose to pass on to their followers if so inclined. Wright (2017) highlights the latter as a way of fostering 'good will' between a researcher and community participants.

The issue of access was a notable problem. The author considered that page followers might find posts linking to the survey to constitute 'spam' or an invasion of privacy (as noted by Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003), which might result in the researcher being inundated by irate messages or even threats. The researcher tried to avoid this by engaging in diplomatic dialogue with admins first (Reid, 1996), encouraging them to post the survey link and removing some of the doubts followers might have. It could not be anticipated that so few administrators would even respond to emails, however, which Andrews et al. (2003) mirrored: community leaders (administrators), despite attempts to convey the potential benefits of the study for their communities, largely ignored their requests as researchers. One of the co-operating administrators indicated a potential reason for this (in addition to fears of being 'caught' and facing legal ramifications for spreading fake news): they shared concerns for their page followers who have experienced farm attacks, and their exposure to a potentially traumatising survey. The researcher thus encouraged the administrators to look through the survey before deciding whether or not to post the survey link.

Another small obstacle encountered was that one of the administrators initially posted the survey link on their page as a Facebook 'event', which the researcher feared would lead to fewer responses since it expired after one day. When this fear was confirmed (only two responses after a week), it was requested that the administrator re-post the survey link as a normal post, which they agreed to do.

There was also potential for nonresponse errors (where respondents start but do not complete their survey response) to occur that may introduce systematic bias into the data, but which was weighed against the ethical decisions made prior. A common fix for such incomplete data, and one that was used herein, is to remove incomplete responses in their entirety (Siegel & Jones, 2018), as per the promises made in the survey cover letter. A drawback to this approach is the potential decrease in accuracy of the population estimates (Siegel & Jones, 2018), but the resulting data was not generalisable anyway, and thus the decision was upheld.

3.1.4.1. Survey Design

The survey component was designed so that respondents would first see a cover letter explaining the important details of the study and their participation. Wright (2017) underscores the importance of a researcher including information about the study, their contact details, and information about their credentials when inviting participants to take part in a survey. Ritter and Sue (2007) further suggest that the conditions of anonymity and confidentiality be explained, the estimated completion time outlined, and the process of accessing incentives detailed. All of these suggestions were heeded, where a secure email address was offered as a way to contact the researcher. Some of this information was repeated again on the 'thank you' screen that appeared at the end of the survey, encouraging the participants to send any questions about the survey, or potential grievances to the researcher herself.

As Sheehan and McMillan (1999) argue, the assurance of respondents' anonymity is a key issue regarding online surveys. As such, throughout the survey, including the cover letter, the respondents were ensured that no identifying information was to be recorded, as a deliberate factor of the survey design. It was also taken into consideration that longer surveys, while able to plumb respondents for more information, may also lead to more participant fatigue and potential response errors (Siegel & Jones, 2018). A fine balance between survey length and the production of enough qualitative data was located after testing performed during pilot studies.

The final survey design (see attached Appendix C) was ultimately split into seven sections: (1) a cover letter; (2) Demographics; (3) Facebook and sharing; (4) Mainstream news media and trust; (5) Facebook pages and news sources; (6) Group identity; and (7) Information format.

3.1.4.2. PILOT STUDIES

Pilot studies were conducted, as suggested by Regmi et al. (2016), in order to help ensure the best comprehension of question content, optimal ordering of questions, clarity of instructions, feasibility of technology/software, and to identify skipping patterns, among other reasons.

One pilot study was conducted in person shortly before the pandemic started in 2020, involving a participant from outside the population group. Their completion rate was timed, and a short face-to-face interview conducted to determine any problems or elicit suggestions. Although this participant was not part of the target population outlined, they were active on Facebook, and they were familiar with the politics surrounding the issue of farm attacks/murders and fake news, having studied for many years in Bloemfontein – a city in the Free State province of SA with a densely Afrikaans population where agriculture and farming is a cultural keystone.

Thereafter, the finished survey draft was sent to the participating admins and they were asked for any suggestions they might have, including pointing out any offensive questions. The latter worked as a screening process to prevent backlash when the survey was opened to the populations as a whole. Ultimately there was not much feedback from either of the administrators, and they seemed quite content with the survey questions and its design.

3.1.4.3. USER-FRIENDLY DESIGN

As mentioned by Siegel and Jones (2018), there are many factors that influence the amount of measurement error present in a survey, but most relate to the design of the survey itself, especially the way questions are written, the ordering thereof, and the survey's appearance. The survey format thus needed to be straightforward and easy for participants to navigate (Regmi et al., 2016), especially since the respondents were projected to be older Facebook users. As such, the design was simple and minimal, and a larger font was employed. Media files, including images, were avoided as far as possible in order to help the survey perform better over slower internet speeds, and reduce mobile data costs where applicable. As suggested by Ritter and

Sue (2007), the layout ensured enough space between question items to avoid confusion, but avoided having response sets appear separate from the questions.

General directions for completing the survey, as suggested by Ritter and Sue (2007), were included in the cover letter, where extra information was triggered near the more complicated question items. As noted by Siegel and Jones (2018), a good survey employs simple rather than complex words, where the former might lead to guessing, potentially reducing the validity of the data. Qualtrics further assisted in identifying other wording errors.

As per Ritter and Sue's (2007) suggestions, similar questions were grouped together in blocks according to topic. This also allowed for a balance between scrolling and use of navigational buttons, where Ritter and Sue's (2007) suggestions regarding multipage formatting for longer surveys were adhered to. In fact, according to Couper, Traugott, and Lamias (2001), the use of multiple pages generates faster completion times and reduces missing data. Additionally, and as was emphasised in the ethics document (Appendix A), by design, participants were not forced to answer questions in order to progress through the survey (aside from the first response signalling their consent), and were given the option of paging back to change or withdraw responses from specific questions at any point. Respondents were also given the option to withdraw from the survey at any point, and have their responses removed from the final dataset.

Regmi et al. (2016) further highlight the possibility of research participants being more open to sharing personal or sensitive information after completing relatively run-of-the-mill questions. As such, demographics-based questions were asked first, followed by blocks of questions that asked for more personal information, and which required more reflection and thought. Placing more demanding questions toward the end of a survey considers that respondents are more likely to have been 'warmed up' by that point, and feel committed to completing the full survey after having already invested their time and effort.

Ritter and Sue (2007) further argue that shorter surveys tend to elicit greater response rates and less abandonment. As such, the survey was reviewed many times in order to ensure that all unnecessary or repetitive questions were removed in an effort to streamline the survey design, and cut down the average response time. It was also suggested that some kind of progress bar be included (Ritter & Sue, 2007), where Couper et al. (2001) found that such an inclusion reduces respondent loss. According to Qualtrics, the final survey design had an estimated average completion time of 17 minutes, where the pilot test took 13 minutes, most likely due to conditional skip logic, which also reduces survey demand placed on respondents (Siegel & Jones, 2018). Ultimately, the final set of responses returned a median completion time of 14.5 minutes, and an average completion time of 22.8 minutes.

3.1.5. DATA ANALYSIS

The entire dataset collected through Qualtrics was exported into a Microsoft Excel document, constituting 69 fields, including the metadata produced by Qualtrics (start and end dates, completion times, and so on). Before

data analysis began, all incomplete survey responses were filtered out of the dataset to form the final sample, as discussed earlier.

During the analysis process, the researcher first ran through each response in their entirety on the Qualtrics platform itself in order to follow the journey of each response and elucidate interesting relationships between different answers by the same respondent. Thereafter, focus was turned to the Excel document and the grouped responses analysed against the reviewed literature, as well as the results of the other two research components.

For those close-ended, multiple-choice questions that produced meaningful quantitative data, the results were visualised and subsequently discussed. For those more open-ended questions where respondents could submit their own answers through textboxes, the results were summarised and discussed, with efforts once again made to link these results to the other two datasets, and to the literature reviewed earlier. All results were relayed and discussed through the lens of RQ 1.

3.1.5.1. Dependability and Conformability

When reflecting on research design, it is important to consider the transparency of one's actions so that readers are able to understand why certain decisions were made. According to Pollock (2009), the dependability of one's study refers to the "extent to which the research process can be audited" (p. 14), where keeping complete notes for each stage of the research is important. By keeping a detailed chronicle of all events, obstacles, and decisions made throughout the duration of the research, the author has attempted to outline the steps taken and methodological decisions made in support of transparency and dependability, including the (many) dead-ends encountered.

Pollock (2009) also identifies conformability as an important value to reflect on, wherein researchers act impartially and in good faith, not allowing "personal feelings or values to influence the research process or findings" (p. 14). While acting impartially regarding the topic of fake news and the white genocide would be a near-impossible task for any media scholar, the interactions that took place between the researcher and the page administrators – as necessitated by the study design – took a more impartial stance. Interpersonal communications loaded with values that opposed believers of the white genocide narrative were not an option.

On the other hand, the test of conformability helps to ensure that one does not 'go native' – becoming so immersed in the study setting that one's identity and values are disregarded (Pollock, 2009). While the current research does not involve the researcher's physical presence 'in the field', the only way to access survey participants in this case was by collaborating (to a degree) with the administrators of the Facebook pages under analysis. The researcher had to employ an unbiased, value-less language throughout email communications and in the survey design itself in order to obtain the most open and honest responses from participants. The latter is noted by Van Selm and Jankowski (2006) as an important consideration: "[k]nowing something about respondents' attitudes, perceptions, needs, decisions, behaviour, lifestyle, and demographics may have implications for how (sections of) questionnaires are prepared" (p. 441). While 'going native' is a potential concern, especially amid frequent gratuitous imagery and prolific racism, the current researcher is demonstrably

critical of the white genocide narrative, despite needing to empathise with participants who have potentially experienced farm attacks, or who are close to someone who has.

3.2. Qualitative Content Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), according to Mayring (2000), is a method conducive to the systematic and rule-guided description and classification of texts, with special consideration paid to latent contents and contexts, and which is used to address RQ 2 herein. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1278) offer a particularly resonant definition: "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns". Typically, text segments are assigned codes present in the coding scheme developed by the researcher, where the coding procedure is a key element of the entire analytic process (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Often, however, and as is the case herein, the coding scheme mixes deductive and inductive approaches, taking into account extant literature, as well as identifying emerging themes and codes (Burla, Knierim, Barth, Liewald, Duetz, & Abel, 2008). The deductive portion in this case involved developing classifications from the literature reviewed earlier, producing a partly-formed categorisation matrix (Polit & Beck, 2012) complemented by categories that emerged during analysis.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used to understand the qualitative intertextual and inter-discursive relationships present in defences against 'social corrections' within farm attack/murder-related Facebook posts comment sections, addressing RQ 3. Jointly in this regard, thematic analysis tools (van Dijk, 2000) were used to supplement extant themes of discourse outlined by previous researchers. CDA primarily understands discourses as social practices of sign use and language that both reproduce and transform society, creating concrete power effects through the employment of a material and ideational infrastructure that includes technologies, artefacts, regulations, and policies (Keller, 2012). CDA also encourages researchers to consider three dimensions of a text: the context in which it appears, its formal structure, and its content (Vamanu, 2019).

Both research components described here, and the methods used, are strongly rooted in 'grounded theory methodology', which aims to produce results that are "faithful to everyday realities of a substantive area" through the process of induction applied to diverse data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 239). A more contemporary definition includes the following features, as described by Charmaz (2002, p. 677):

> (a) simultaneous data collection and analysis, (b) pursuit of emergent themes through early data analysis, (c) discovery of basic social processes within the data, (d) inductive construction of abstract categories that explain and synthesize these processes, (e) sampling to refine the categories through comparative processes, and (f) integration of categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions, and consequences of the studied processes.

A large influence over the design of these research components concerned Facebook's Terms of Service (ToS), which stipulates that no one, not even an academic researcher, is allowed to access or collect data from any Facebook products using automated means, nor can anyone attempt to access data that they have not received

permission to access (Facebook, 2019). According to Freelon (2018), “there is currently no way to independently extract content from Facebook without violating its ToS” (p. 1).

Thus, both approaches necessitated a research design that involved manual data collection and legal use of Facebook’s interface functions. There was a small advantage to this, regardless of the time-consuming processes: using an application programming interface (API) to collect data tends to “detach the digital inscriptions from the context of their production” (Venturini & Rogers, 2019, p. 5). More direct methods of harvesting data force researchers to observe online social dynamics through the same interfaces as the human actors in their studies. Ultimately these approaches took a lot of time, and involved much trial and error before arriving at a complete set of data that could answer the RQs herein.

3.2.1. Population

The populations for both datasets were framed within a time range – only data published in 2019 was collected. This provided a full span of different events that typically happen during the course of a year within such communities, producing a rich dataset, but also avoiding the complications of the online atmosphere during the 2020 pandemic. The details for each of the populations are described below.

3.2.1.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

An in-depth preliminary analysis was performed across many of the larger Facebook pages that had been observed for some time. The population in question consists of all farm attack/murder-related posts made by Facebook pages that have a considerable focus on the white genocide and farm attacks/murders in SA. These span both privately-run communities (that is, administrated by citizens without financial motives in mind), and commercial pages framing themselves as bona-fide news houses, earning some sort of profit through advertising revenue. The unit of analysis in this case is the individual Facebook post and all of its periphery information (images, links, engagements statistics etcetera).

3.2.1.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

The target population for this section of the research encompasses all farm attack/murder-related posts and comments published defensively against social correction, spanning an extensive array of Facebook pages, as outlined in Appendix B. The units of analysis in this case are both the individual Facebook posts themselves (the post content), and/or individual comments.

3.2.2. Samples and Sampling Frames

The samples for both the QCA and CDA were derived largely through purposive and judgment-based sampling techniques, which are discussed in more detail below for the sake of transparency. Although there are some disadvantages to these techniques, the final samples covered extensive sections of the communities analysed, where a degree of generalisability can be extrapolated to the broader populations.

3.2.2.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

The sampling frame in this case was limited to all the farm attack/murder-related posts published in 2019 by the following five Facebook pages: (1) *South Africa The New Killing Fields*, (2) *South Africa Today* (since deleted), (3) *South Africa Uncut*, (4) *Stop white Genocide in Zuid Afrika*, and (5) *Stop White South African Genocide*. These pages spanned both privately-run pages, and those for-profit pages framing themselves as veritable news sources (namely *South Africa Today* and *South Africa Uncut*). The final sampling frame came to a total of 543 posts. As was the case for Pollock's 2009 study, the most important factors regarding the sampling frame was the level of activity of each of the chosen pages, the heterogeneity of emergent themes, and the diversity of subject matter.

The final sample constituted a purposive or judgement-based sample, where "units [were] selected for inclusion in a study based on the professional judgment of the researcher." The decision to use this technique arose since the desired characteristics of units from the population of interest are specific (posts needed to have very high share counts), making probabilistic sampling unsuitable (Maul, 2018). Ultimately, the top ten posts with the highest share counts from each page were included in the final sample (50 posts), as well as the ten posts with the lowest share counts from each page (50 posts). This came to a final sample of 100 posts. The bottom 50 posts were included as a control against which to compare the top 50 posts – any common factors shared by these two datasets were obviously not noteworthy when it came to determining the factors that make posts shareable.

3.2.2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

The sampling frame in this case constituted all identifiable posts made by the 26 Facebook pages in Appendix B that: (a) were returned in searches when entering specific keywords; (b) were posted in 2019; and (c) contained – either in the post content itself, or in the comments underneath – evidence of social corrections. The latter factor, specifically mentioned in RQ3, not only served as a helpful way to maintain a workable scope of data, but also brought in discourse factors that pertain directly to the issue of problematic information. Analysis of social corrections as a potential community-led effort against fake news is a research area that is relatively unexplored, especially in terms of analysing bona-fide comment threads and interactions. The keywords used to search for the posts in question were: 'correction', 'edit', 'update', 'fake', and '*regstelling*' ('correction' in Afrikaans).

Ultimately this method returned thousands of posts that were manually filtered for relevance by the researcher to form a sampling frame of 40 posts/comment sections. There was a final number of 296 analysis units.

3.2.3. DATA COLLECTION

Data collection processes for both methods herein relied on manual data-scraping techniques performed by the researcher through Facebook's user interface, while logged in with her personal account. As mentioned earlier, and discussed in detail in Appendix A, there were no automatic data-scraping tools available for Facebook, largely due to the platform's strict policies. Thus, in the hope of saving time, the researcher made an effort to identify posts during the QCA data collection that contained false information, and made a note of these to follow up during the CDA data collection. None of the Facebook page administrators, nor those interacting under the posts collected were made aware of the QCA and CDA components of this study (as per Appendix A).

3.2.3.1. QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The data collection process for this section of the research occurred in two stages. Firstly, each of the five pages was searched using set keywords decided upon during preliminary tests. These included: 'farm', 'genocide', '*plaas'* ('farm' in Afrikaans), and '*boer*' ('farmer' in Afrikaans). Post results were limited to those published in 2019, and only those posts specifically discussing the white genocide, farm attacks, or farm murders were included. Five Microsoft Excel files were created, one for each page, and each post assigned a unique ID number. Each data entry included fields for the post date, the collection date, the post's text content, the post URL link, whether or not a post included disinformation (at a glance), the total number of reactions on each post, and, most importantly, the total number of shares on each post.

Thereafter, for each of the five Excel files, the top ten posts with the highest share counts were grouped in a separate tab, and the same was done for the ten with the lowest share counts. This formed the final sample, ready for analysis.

3.2.3.2. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The data collection process for posts/comments addressing social corrections relied heavily on preliminary tests and analyses of useful keywords with which to search the aforementioned list of Facebook pages (Appendix B). Any posts/comment sections found to contain evidence of social correction were screen captured in their entirety by selecting the 'All Comments' view (as opposed to 'Most Relevant' or 'Most Recent') on the Facebook interface, expanding all comment threads. All longer comments were expanded to their full length using the 'See More' tabs (by default, Facebook automatically shortens comments that exceed a specific character limit). Google Chrome plugin *GoFullPage* (Coles, 2012) was then used capture the posts as PDF files for the sake of posterity. A reference list of all the URL links for each post captured was also filed into a Microsoft Word document. Thereafter, all evidence of social corrections and defensive responses in each PDF was highlighted in preparation for data analysis, allowing the data to be analysed within its original context.

3.2.4. Data Analysis

Where image macros or other media included in the datasets were relevant to the study, these were preserved in their original format for the sake of reference. There were not any particular concerns regarding identity protection in these cases, since the origins of nearly all image macros are impossible to find, and any videos discussed were meant to reach as wide an audience as possible, defeating any concerns related to privacy.

3.2.4.1. Qualitative Content Analysis

Emergent themes (in terms of textual and visual content) across the posts with the highest share counts, analysed against the control posts, were elucidated, linked back to the literature, and analysed against the results of the other research components herein. Thereafter, the same process was repeated, but this time in terms of Facebook's platform affordances and post formats.

Once all possible themes were identified, the dataset units' classifications were double-checked and re-assigned where necessary in order to ensure that 'saturation' was achieved. Thereafter the number of instances under each classification were counted and the results discussed, forming a quantitative component to help relativise the final set of themes. Some themes were inevitably going to be more prevalent that others, which is worthy of discussion.

3.2.4.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

As far as possible, common patterns of discourse and arguments were identified across all instances of defensive comments/posts against social corrections. Themes were drawn from extant literature, and emergent themes were noted as well. All the relevant comments/posts constituting the individual units of analysis were collected and classified into the final matrix, where categories were iteratively combined and eliminated to produce a robust and saturated matrix. Any text content referenced as an example was paraphrased and/or translated from Afrikaans by the researcher (where applicable), as per Appendix A.

3.3. Limitations

As is hinted throughout this chapter, in addition to a few other potential limitations, one of the main limitations across all the research components herein related to sampling techniques. Purposive and judgment-based samples do run the risk of becoming prone to researcher bias, and cannot always be framed as representative samples, drawing their generalisability into question (Maul, 2018). The researcher remains wary of this issue, but has explained the reason for using such techniques and argued for sample relevance. Other limitations within each research component are discussed below.

3.3.1. Survey

When it comes to online survey research, there are always some limitations regarding the validity of data, sampling issues, and concerns regarding the survey's design, implementation, and analysis (Wright, 2017). It is widely acknowledged that electronic surveys often result in sampling issues (Wright, 2017), to which the current research is not immune. Random sampling could not be employed in this case, as discussed earlier. Some people would have inevitably been more enthusiastic than others regarding participation, where self-selection bias is a major limitation within online survey research (Thompson, Surface, Martin, & Sanders, 2003; Stanton, 1998; Witmer, Colman, & Katzman, 1999; Barratt et al., 2015). 'Lurkers' would be far less likely to participate in the survey than community regulars (Wright, 2017), which may have produced a skewed response regarding questions about post interaction behaviour and sharing. Although survey respondents were asked some basic demographic questions, many chose not to answer, and there is no guarantee that those who did respond answered truthfully. It was also not guaranteed that those who participated in the survey are dedicated followers of the pages in question, as discussed earlier. All the above would therefore impact the generalisability of the results.

3.3.2. Qualitative Content Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis

There were a few limitations involved across these two research components. Both involved the filtering of content by keyword searches, meaning there was the possibility that posts sans text components may have been excluded from search results. Many of the posts collected across both methods also included dead links – many of the original articles were seemingly removed by the authors, most likely due to having posted disinformation. This means the researcher did not have access to the original content being shared, and the important contextual information present therein, including the images that would have appeared within posts. Thus, analysis took place at the level of the post or comment, with supplementary analysis performed where links were available.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The quantitative findings as to all three RQs and each of the corresponding research methods employed are discussed in this chapter. The final category matrices for the QCA and CDA are briefly described, and some examples provided. The qualitative aspects of these findings, their links to the literature, and to each other, are discussed in Chapter 5. Though the survey results are outlined fully for the sake of posterity, their relevance is only manifested in the discussions chapter, due to the small sample size.

4.1. QUALITATIVE SURVEY RESULTS

In total, 17 full responses (and four incomplete responses that were excluded from the results) were recorded from respondents from either the *SBG* or *SATN* Facebook pages. There were nine (9) responses form the former page, and eight (8) responses from the latter page, constituting a relatively even spread. Each set of results are discussed in the sections below as they correspond with the survey question blocks themselves.

4.1.1. DEMOGRAPHICS

The majority of respondents indicated that they were over 46 years of age, with only four (4) respondents indicating their age as being between 26 and 45. None of the respondents were younger than 26. Most respondents identified as male (11), as opposed to female (6). All respondents (17) indicated their ethnicity as being 'white'. Most respondents (10) listed English as their home language, six (6) listed Afrikaans, and one (1) listed 'Other'. The majority of respondents (13) said that they view religion as being extremely important in the context of their world view, while three (3) of the remaining respondents indicated lesser degrees of importance. This combination of demographic factors including older, white, English/Afrikaans-speaking, and religious already has some potential implications regarding respondents' level of insulation against fake news. Older users and conservatives tend to form homophilous networks and share more problematic information than other groups (Boxell et al., 2017; Narayanan et al., 2018).

Regarding emigration status, most respondents (11) indicated residing in SA and having never lived overseas. Two (2) respondents indicated their current status as 'emigrated', and one (1) respondent indicated having emigrated but later returned to the country. The remaining three (3) respondents indicated that they were not South African. Only two (2) out of five respondents indicated their foreign country of residence, both being the UK. Regarding the South African provinces that local respondents reside in, figure 4.1 below indicates a relatively even spread:

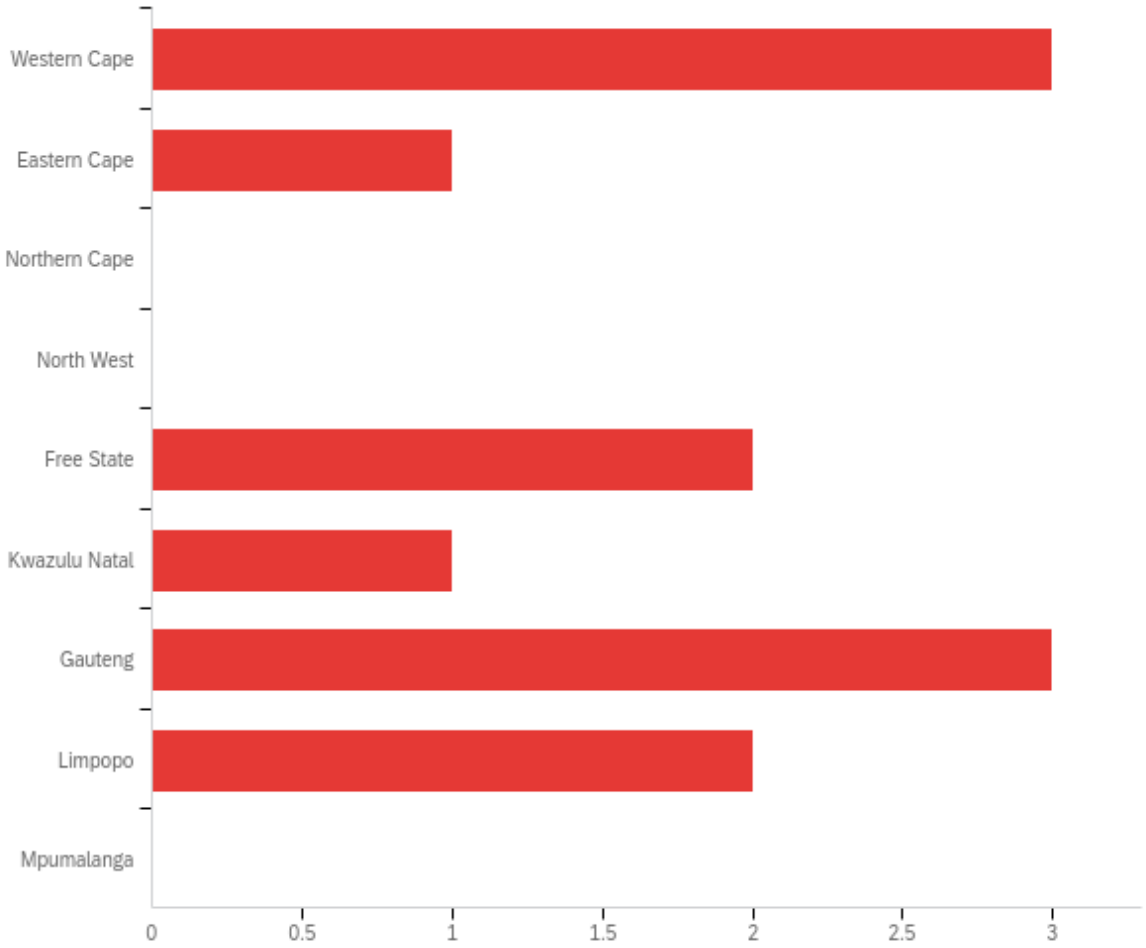

FIGURE 4.1: THE SOUTH AFRICAN PROVINCES IN WHICH LOCAL RESPONDENTS RESIDE

In terms of the types of areas that respondents reside in, most (10) indicated living in urban areas, with three (3) indicating that they live in peri-urban areas, and four (4) indicating that they live in rural areas. Most (12) also indicated that they do not live or work on a farm or small holding, with the remaining five (5) indicating that they do. The majority of respondents (11) did indicate that either themselves, immediate family, extended family, or close friends have been the victim of a farm attack/murder. The fact that most respondents do not live or work on a farm, but know someone close to them who has experienced a farm attack/murder indicates an interest in the subject that is motivated by empathy or sympathy.

4.1.2. FACEBOOK AND SHARING

All 17 respondents indicated that they use their real name and identifying information on Facebook, and most (9) indicated that they use the platform more than three times a day. Five (5) respondents said that they use Facebook once or twice a day, two (2) said they use it more than once a week, and one (1) uses the platform less than once a week.

Just under half the respondents (8) indicated following between two and three farm attack/murder-related Facebook pages, four (4) indicated following at least four such pages, three (3) indicated following only one

page, one (1) indicated following six or more pages, and one (1) respondent did not follow any such pages. The latter indicates that at least one respondent keeps an eye on farm attack/murder-related Facebook pages without explicitly 'following' them. The fact that so many respondents indicated following two or more pages implies an increased chance that they receive repeated messages on the topic, which is indicated in propaganda messaging (Ellul & Kellen, 1973).

Regarding post engagement, when asked what actions they typically take when they see a post published or shared by the pages in question, respondents indicated the following, as pictured in figure 4.2 below. The two most popular choices included 'liking' or 'reacting' to the post (12), and sharing the post on Facebook (10), followed closely by the option of reading the post and linked article (9), and reading the post comments (9). None of the respondents said that they would not read the linked article, and none indicated that they would likely scroll past the post. These responses point to an active, engaged audience, whose various engagements with posts may influence the algorithmic promotion of farm attack/murder-related content.

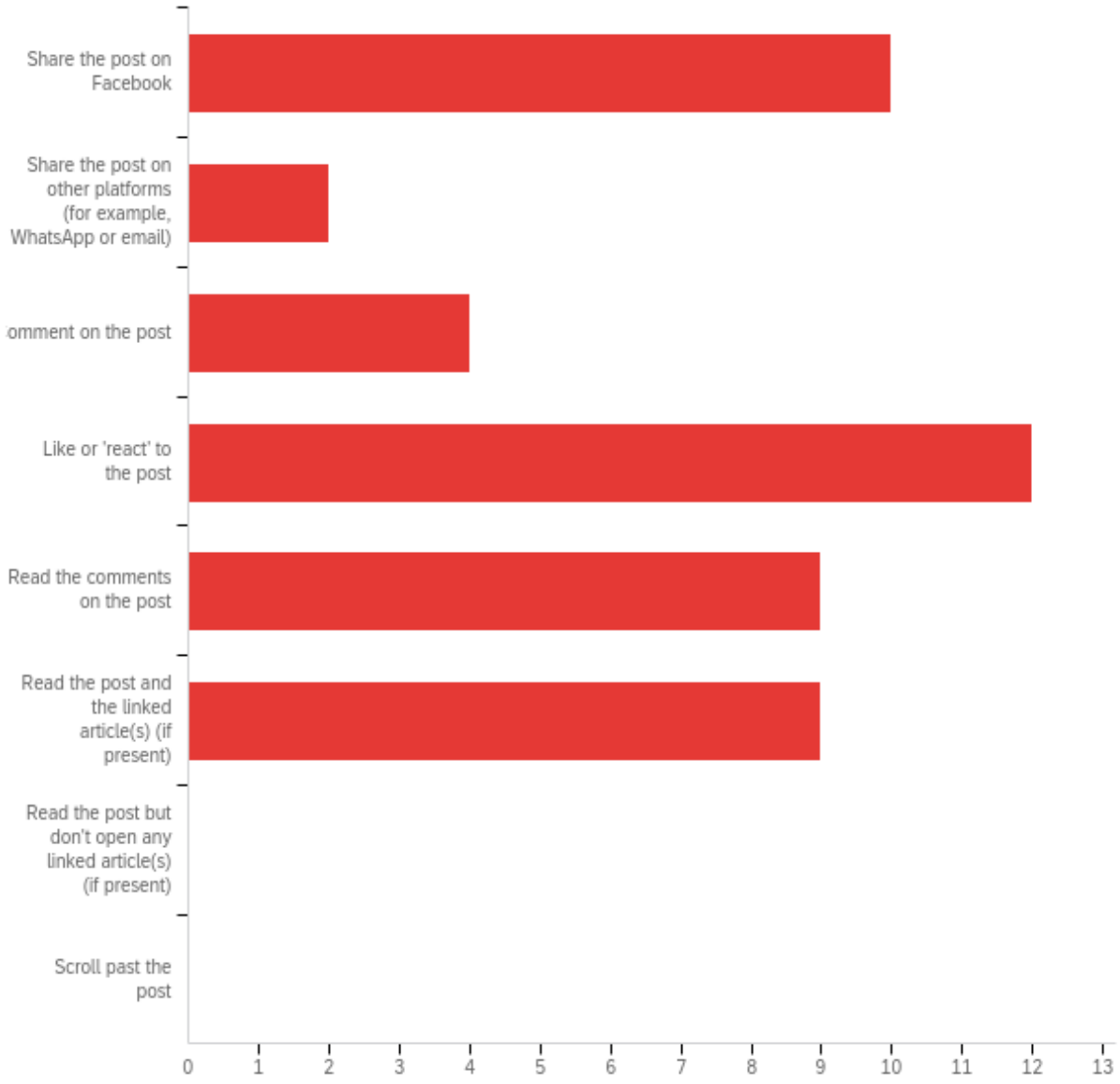

FIGURE 4.2: RESPONDENTS' TYPICAL ACTIONS TAKEN WHEN THEY ENCOUNTER A FARM ATTACK/MURDER-RELATED POST

A follow-up question was presented to those ten respondents who indicated that they tend to share such posts, asking their motivations for doing so. They were able to select all options that applied to them:

- All (10) said that they share news that they believe is, or should be, in the broader public interest;
- Six (6) said that they share such news because it might be immediately useful to those in their personal networks, especially as a form of warning or advice;
- Six (6) said that sharing such posts indicates to others in their social network where they stand on the issue of farm attacks/murders;
- Four (4) said that they see many users in their social network share news from the same source, and would share a post thinking they might be interested in seeing the latest update;
- Four (4) said that they largely adhere to the same political values present in the type of reporting performed by such news sources, and that they share other posts published by them on various subjects;
- Four (4) said that sharing such news signals their opposition to those currently in political power; and
- One (1) supplied their own reason: "These attacks should be well known to everyone, and we must irritate the government until they do something".

The above indicates that users might view their sharing as a civic duty to their fellow citizens rather than a means to signal their identity, as initially outlined by Marwick (2018).

Most respondents (10) further said that they would not be more compelled to share a post if it already had many engagements, with four (4) indicating they sometimes do, and three (3) indicating they would. Most respondents indicated to some degree that Facebook posts expressing outrage about farm attacks/murders published by black users are more likely to be shared than if a white user published the same post: four (4) said 'definitely yes', six (6) said 'probably yes', and five (5) said 'might or might not'. The same question was presented again, but asked whether this factor helps confirm their beliefs more personally, with most (9) responding 'not at all', five (5) responding 'sometimes', and four (4) responding 'definitely'.

All respondents bar one (16) said that, to the best of their knowledge, they had never shared a farm attack/murder-related post that they considered to be unverified/incorrect at the time of sharing. The one respondent that had, when prompted, said they did so because it was similar to many other posts they share on the subject. On a related question, most respondents (15) indicated that they (to the best of their knowledge) had never shared a farm attack/murder-related post that had later turned out to be unverified/incorrect. One (1) of the respondents who did said that they learnt of the post's questionable veracity through a 'verified source', and subsequently deleted the false post. The other respondent that had also shared such a post only said that "the date was wrong" when asked how they learnt of the post's questionable veracity. For the two (2) latter respondents, neither indicated subsequently feeling distrustful toward news content shared on Facebook, nor did they indicate feeling subsequently distrustful of mainstream news media. These results are slightly suspicious when compared to how much bona-fide fake news is typically shared by this population of users. It is

possible that respondents did not reflect deeply enough on their sharing history, or that perhaps they were too embarrassed to reveal the truth.

4.1.3. MAINSTREAM NEWS MEDIA AND TRUST

When asked whether they trust mainstream news media in SA, prompted with the logos of some news organisations (*Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *EWN*, *eNCA*, *News24*, and *Rapport*), respondents' answers varied greatly, though there was a marginal skew toward distrust: five (5) answered 'not at all' and four (4) answered 'not really'; while four (4) answered 'definitely' and a further four (4) answered 'somewhat'. When asked which mainstream news sources they trust the most (a control question to establish that respondents understood the term 'mainstream news media'), six (6) respondents answered as follows, in their own words:

- R1: *News24*, *eNCA, Rapport, Eyewitness News*
- R2: *EWN, eNCA*
- R3: *SABC2*
- R4: *SA Today*, *South-African White Crisis* [private Facebook group], #ShutSADown [hashtag], etcetera. (Evidently, it was not clear to this respondent what was meant by 'mainstream news media')
- R5: *eNews*
- R6: *eNCA, Sunday Times, The Herald*

When those respondents distrustful of the mainstream news media in SA were asked the reasons for their distrust, all nine (9) answered in their own words:

- R1: "They LIE a lot"
- R2: "They don't publish anything about farm murders"
- R3: "They are worldwide fake"
- R4: "Controlled, no freedom of speech"
- R5: "They are saying only what the liberals and government wants to hear"
- R6: "Do not report on Farm Murders and attacks. Will only report if the victim is black person. *News24* especially will not report at all on farm attacks and farm murders. Only in *Netwerk24* in Afrikaans and you must pay to get the content. Hiding the truth from the world"
- R7: "They do keep the truth sometimes"
- R8: "They are far too biased!"
- R9: "South African media have not published farm murders for years. It's only in these last few years that more murders are hitting the news desks because of international pressure. Thanks to the work of the late Adrianna Stuijt from Holland, much of the statistics of farm murders was kept up to date."

The above results point to mainstream news media as operating in the service of 'liberals' and 'the government', reflecting a conspiratorial streak among this population. The preference for English-language content also has some implications regarding audiences outside of SA.

Of the 16 respondents that answered the next question (whether mainstream news media in SA are adequately covering farm attacks/murders), 14 responded 'not at all', while two (2) responded 'definitely'. The 14 who answered in the negative were subsequently asked whether they believe mainstream news media to be intentionally avoiding covering such stories for insidious reasons – most (13) said 'yes', and one (1) said 'sometimes'. These respondents thus qualified to be asked what they think the reasons are for mainstream media's lack of coverage, and were allowed to select all applicable options, where the results indicate conspiratorial tendencies:

- Many respondents (11) thought the reason to be anti-farmer/anti-white sentiment
- Nine (9) believed the government to be involved
- Eight (8) said that mainstream news media do not have farmers' or whites' interests in mind
- Seven (7) thought mainstream media to be attempting a cover up
- Six (6) provided their own reasons/responses:
    - R1: "All of the above"
    - R2: "No response from my attack from SAP since it happened in 2015"
    - R3: "The strategy has been tried and tested in Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to name a few African countries. The methodology is based on Marxist/Leninist/Maoist ideology and aims at terrorising a specific group, usually race"
    - R4: "Try to be politically correct"
    - R5: "Farm murders/attacks must be top priority!! No Farmers NO food! The CancER and the media does not expose/respond to this horrific (white) farm murders/executions as it is white farmers. The CancER controls the media..."
    - R6: "There is so much of it and other murders, rapes etc that it simply is no longer newsworthy to the press"

A further conditional question was presented to the 14 respondents who thought mainstream media coverage to be lacking. They were asked whether they thought mainstream media in SA avoid such coverage due to potential reader upset and consequent financial fallout: six (6) respondents said 'no', five (5) said 'yes', and three (3) said 'sometimes'.

In a further question about trust, respondents were asked whether they tended to judge the veracity of farm attack/murder-related Facebook posts based on who shared that post. Responses were uniformly spread: five (5) said 'yes', seven (7) said 'sometimes', and five (5) said 'no'. These results, in isolation, therefore cannot confirm a two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1966) when it comes to Facebook and sharing, but it is possible that not enough emphasis was placed on the level of self-reflection required to answer.

Respondents were also asked whether they agreed with many 'alternative' news sources' claims to publishing content exposing the 'real' truth about SA. Most (11) said they strongly agree with the latter claim, four (4) said they 'somewhat agree', one (1) respondent said they neither agree nor disagree, and one (1) said they strongly disagree. The final question in this block asked respondents whether they believe news content shared by pages

like *SBG* and *SATN* to be more accurate because they operate independently from mainstream news agencies. All answered affirmatively, with 13 answering 'definitely yes' and four (4) answering 'probably yes'. This indicates a final nail in the coffin regarding any sort of trust toward mainstream news media, and points to a homophilous network that will grow increasingly distrustful of fact-checked, professional news media (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

4.1.4. FACEBOOK PAGES AND NEWS SOURCES

When asked whether they get most of their updates regarding farm attack/murder-related news from pages like *SBG* and *SATN*, most respondents answered affirmatively: eight (8) said 'yes', eight (8) said 'a fair amount', and one (1) said 'no'. Regarding other kinds of news platforms they turn to for updates in this regard, respondents indicated their preferences as per figure 4.3 below. Many (10) indicated using WhatsApp with family or friends, and many (9) indicated using 'alternative news' websites. The apparent reliance on WhatsApp is slightly alarming – these networks are far harder to gain access to and measure the extent of problematic information shared, and far less likely to invite correctional messaging.

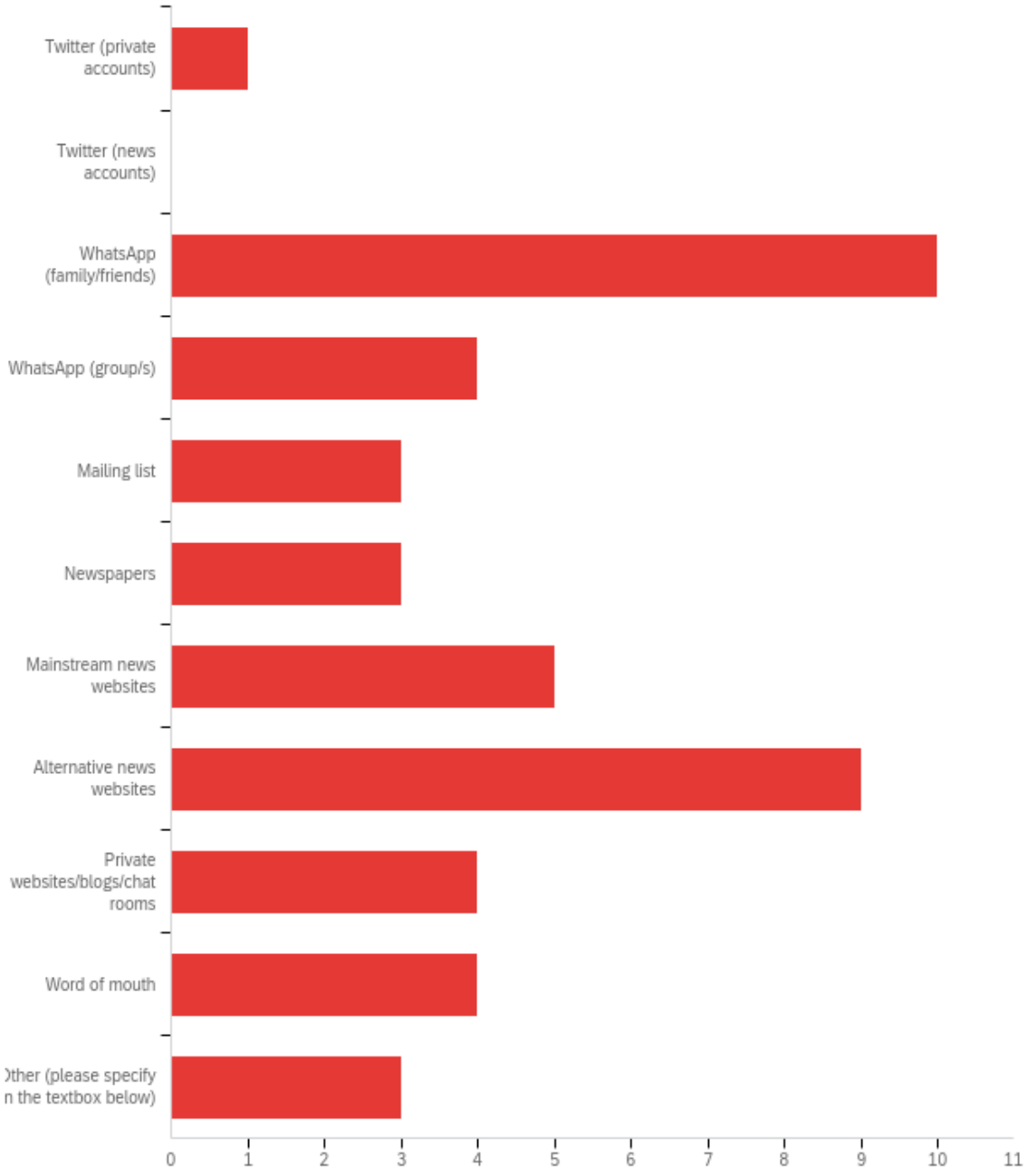

FIGURE 4.3: THE PLATFORMS THAT RESPONDENTS USE TO ACCESS UPDATES ABOUT FARM ATTACK/MURDER-RELATED STORIES

The three respondents who provided their own answers wrote the following:

- R1: “Facebook groups”
- R2: “Family”
- R3: “Private reliable sources”

A further question asked whether respondents find Facebook pages like *SBG* and *SATN* to be useful for discovering information about petitions or protests against farm attacks/murders. Eight (8) said they found such pages ‘extremely useful’, six (6) found them ‘very useful’, two (2) found them ‘moderately useful’, and one (1) found them ‘slightly useful’. Respondents were also asked to list the ‘alternative news sites’ that they follow for

updates, and responded as per figure 4.4 below. Many (9) indicated using *South Africa Today*'s website, and equally as many (9) indicated using *Maroela Media*.

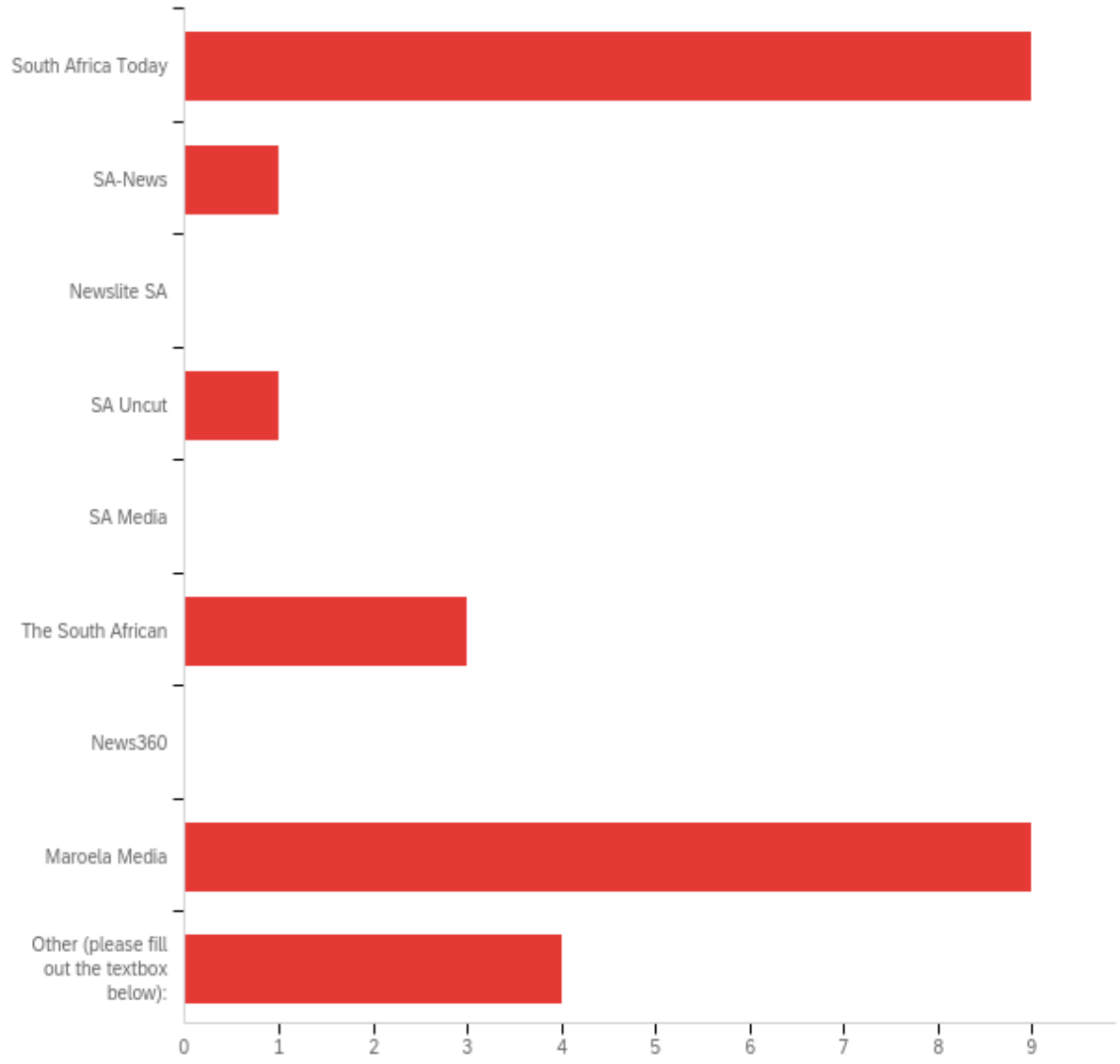

FIGURE 4.4: THE 'ALTERNATIVE NEWS' WEBSITES THAT RESPONDENTS FOLLOW FOR FARM ATTACK/MURDER UPDATES

The four (4) respondents that listed their own options (where clearly there was some confusion as to regarding the question) said the following:

- R1: "AfriForum"
- R2: "AfriForum (and, in the past: Crimestoppers and CensorBugBear)"
- R3: "*News24*"
- R4: "*Daily Mail, BBC* – but it is hard to find"

When asked what it is about the alternative news websites above that respondents trust, they gave various answers, as pictured in figure 4.5 below. Most (10) asserted that such websites tend to cover stories regarding farm attacks/murders that other publications do not. This indicates that respondents' trust in news media is not

satisfied by any measure of accuracy, but rather by news media's alignment with their personal beliefs, where confirmation bias and selective exposure are the overriding motivations.

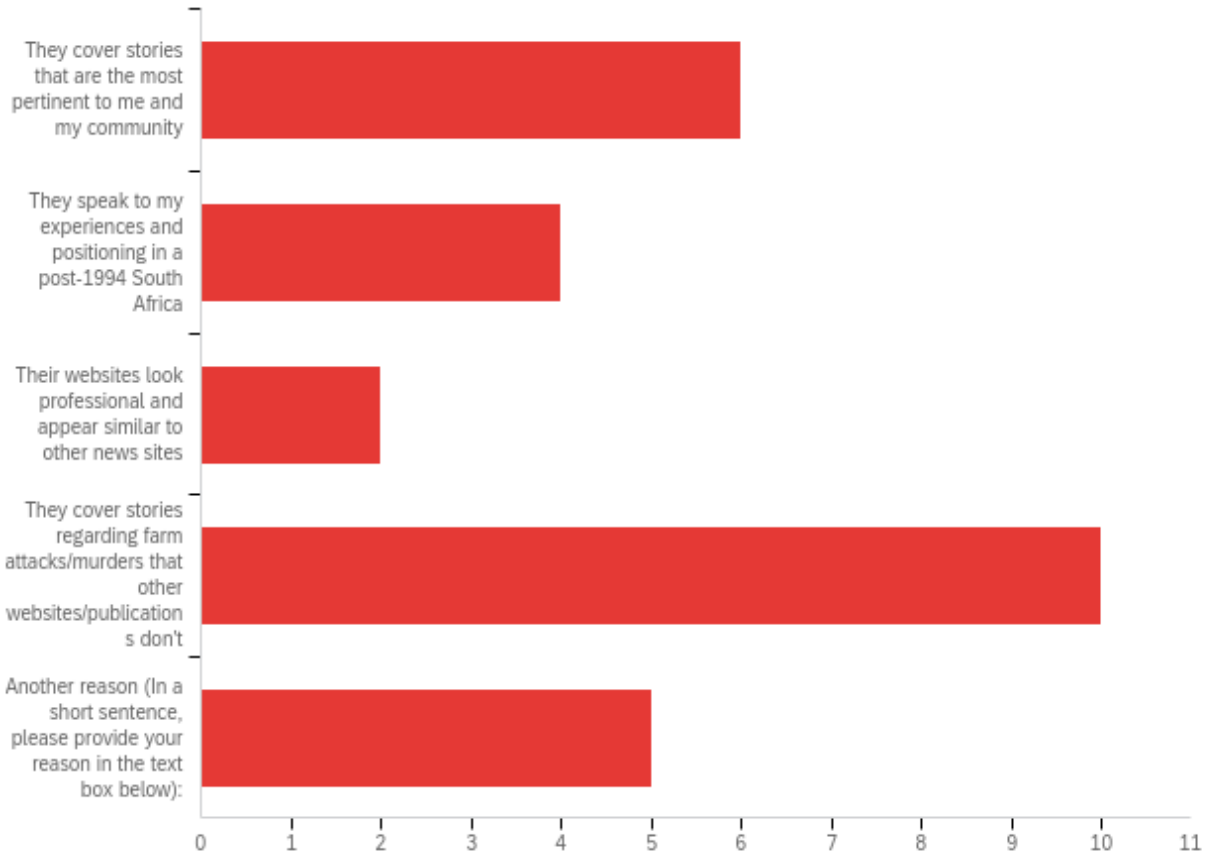

FIGURE 4.5: RESPONDENTS' REASONS AS TO THEIR TRUST IN ALTERNATIVE NEWS SITES' CREDIBILITY

Of those respondents (5) who gave reason(s) in their own words for trusting the sites that they do, only one (1) readily understood the question:

- R1: "Only one I look at"
- R2: "My life in Africa and the emergency services has allowed me to understand the people and politics better than most"
- R3: "Only site publishing news about Farm Attacks and Farm Murders in English. Link to Source is available on every article for verification"
- R4: "I trust *Algoa FM*"
- R5: "Trustworthy"

4.1.5. GROUP IDENTITY

Respondents were asked whether they felt that their Facebook friends largely share similar interests to themselves, including an interest in the issue of farm attacks/murders. Most (10) said they felt that their friends 'somewhat' shared similar interests, six (6) said 'definitely yes', and one (1) said 'not really'. When asked whether

they felt other followers of the Facebook pages feel the same way that they do about farm attacks/murders, respondents overwhelmingly responded in the positive: 15 said 'definitely yes', and two (2) said 'somewhat'. A further question in this vein was asked whether they felt that other page followers share their political viewpoints. The response was still uniformly positive, but more lukewarm: 10 said 'somewhat' and seven (7) said 'definitely yes'. A similar response was given to the following question, asking whether farm attacks/murders were a prevalent subject of discussion within respondents' offline interpersonal groups. Most (8) said the issue is 'somewhat' discussed, seven (7) said that it definitely is, while two (2) said that it is 'not really' discussed. This indicates that respondents view the Facebook pages in question (more so than their personal friend networks) as 'spaces of shared meaning' (Jenkins et al., 2013), which form the perfect conditions for 'spreadable media spectacles' (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

4.1.6. INFORMATION FORMAT

When asked what post format they found the most pressing or impactful, five (5) respondents pointed to posts detailing individual accounts of farm attacks/murders as being the most pressing; four (4) pointed to posts including images of the victims or crime scenes; three (3) pointed to posts including statistics or infographics stressing the prevalence of farm attacks; one (1) pointed to posts detailing a list of recent farm attacks/murders; and four (4) said they do not find any particular format to be more impactful or urgent than others. All three (3) respondents who singled out posts including statistics/infographics as being the most impactful said that they believe such posts are more accurate because they are derived from data. All respondents were further asked about which organisations they trust to publish accurate statistics, and selected all the options that applied to them. Most (13) selected AfriForum, many (9) selected AgriSA, two (2) selected SAPS, and one (1) selected AfricaCheck. These results indicate a tendency toward more emotionally affective posts over analytical or statistical content, but that when the latter is encountered, respondents are convinced by what often constitutes a deceptive 'accuracy' that data portray.

A further question asked respondents whether they had watched any documentary-style videos on the subject of farm attacks/murders, and to select all the options that applied. Nine (9) said they had watched Katie Hopkins' *Plaasmoorde: The Killing Fields* (2018); six (6) had watched Lauren Southern's *Farmlands* (2018); two (2) had seen Forum Films' *Disrupted Land* (2019); four (4) had watched documentaries not listed; and six (6) had not viewed any documentaries on the subject. Of the four (4) indicating they had watched unlisted 'documentaries', two (2) gave further information, but neither could specify titles; one (1) just said "YouTube", and the other (1) said they "do not remember names". The 11 respondents who indicated having watched documentary-style videos on the subject were further asked whether the documentary format lends credence to the filmmakers' message, and the issue of farm attacks generally: seven (7) answered 'yes', and four (4) answered 'somewhat'. These results indicate an interesting relationship between respondents and video content. The fact that those who tried to provide the names of the 'documentaries' they watched were not able to remember, with one respondent referring to the whole of YouTube, might point to a low amount of importance regarding the specific

creators of video content. The focus may purely be on the content itself, and whether or not it affirms what users already believe.

4.2. QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS

Ten farm attack/murder posts published in 2019 with the highest share counts from five Facebook pages, totalling 50 posts, were analysed across various qualitative and format/affordance dimensions for common 'shareability' factors. The ten posts from those same pages with the lowest share counts were also analysed, serving as a control against which to compare the main data. Many potential themes were ruled out this way. The following themes constituted definitive results, however, and are further discussed in the following chapter. In order to restrict the scope of analysis, posts were analysed only in the context of Facebook's platform and what is immediately visible to users without navigating to external sites. This still includes article titles, and what is visible of the by-line of the article.

4.2.1. FORMAT-RELATED THEMES

4.2.1.1. LARGE, VISIBLE IMAGES

For all 50 most-shared posts, either a full-sized image was uploaded by the admins themselves, or a full-sized image was displayed based on the link posted therein (see figure 4.6 below for an example). The nature of the content analysed means that many of the linked web pages were already dead at the time of data collection, resulting in black images where content was once displayed (see figure 4.7 below). There was once, however, a full-sized image there, which is pertinent.

In contrast, of the 50 least-shared posts, 24% had either no visible images, or smaller, thumbnail-sized images sourced from a linked website. This is indicative of a network beholden to the 'attention economy' (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), where striking pictures are ultimately more engaging than walls of text.

FIGURE 4.6: FACEBOOK POST WITH IMAGE FROM WEBSITE LINK

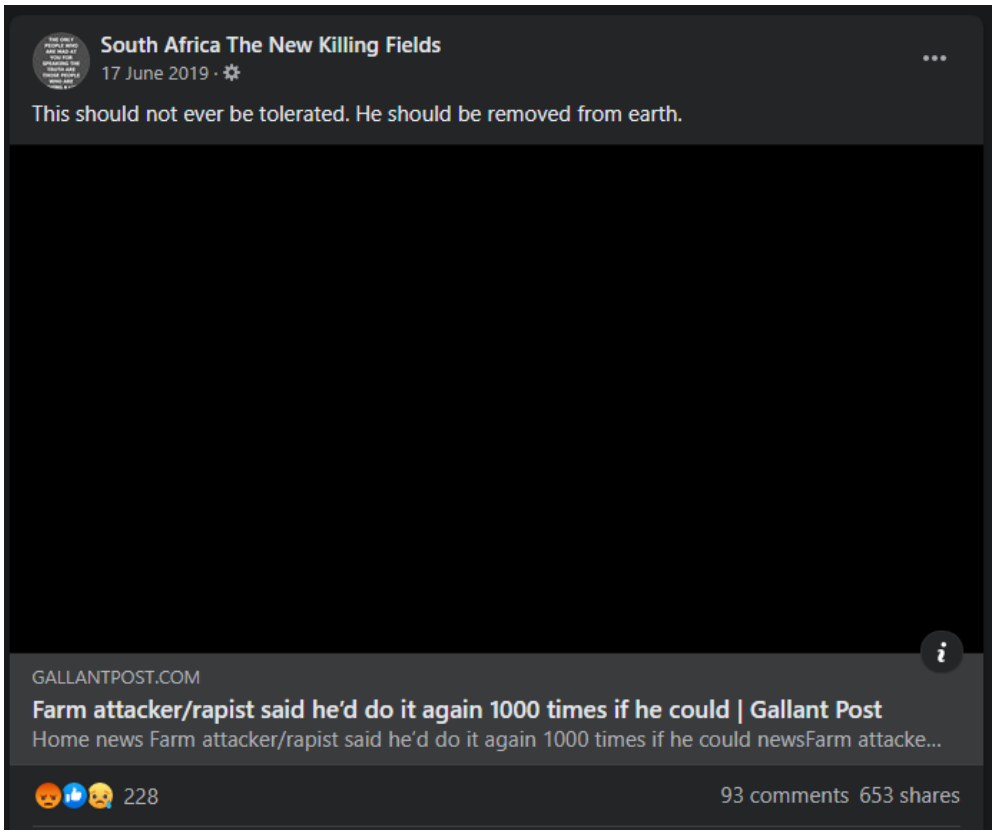

FIGURE 4.7: FACEBOOK POST WITH BLACK IMAGE FROM A DEAD WEBSITE LINK

4.2.1.2. *'ORIGINAL' POSTS*

All top 50 posts bar one were 'original' posts, meaning the post was published directly by an admin of the page in question. One can reasonably imagine that users would want to share a post from its original source, rather than sharing a shared post, which would create a confusing nested effect. Conversely, a notable percentage (24%) of the control posts had been shared from other 'shares'.

4.2.1.3. *ENGLISH-LANGUAGE POSTS*

Most of the top 50 posts (90%) were either written in English, or linked to English content, as opposed to Afrikaans. In contrast, only 72% of posts in the control set were published in English. While a post's language would not logistically make much difference to users (Facebook automatically translates Afrikaans), it is possible that English-language posts receive priority status from Facebook's promotional algorithms. Other possibilities are discussed in the next chapter.

4.2.1.4. *SHORTER TEXT CONTENT*

Among the top 50 most-shared posts, only two (4%) featured text content exceeding 12 lines. In the context of the attention economy (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), larger blocks of text have a lot of competition in shorter, snappier captions where the image is championed. In contrast, 20% of the control posts exceeded 12 lines of text. This might indicate that posts with minimal text components receive relative favour from Facebook's promotional algorithm.

4.2.1.5. *FACEBOOK VIDEOS*

Of the four most-shared posts that included video links/content, three (75%) had been uploaded to Facebook by the page admins, and were directly playable on the platform without having to navigate to an external site. This could indicate users' aversion to navigating off-platform to watch videos, or perhaps that Facebook videos are more likely to receive the favour of Facebook's algorithm, and in turn receive more shares.

Conversely, six of the control posts included video content, but only one (16.6%) was directly playable within Facebook, and only consisted of a still image and a song. The remaining five all consisted of YouTube links or videos published by external websites, both of which require users to navigate away from Facebook.

4.2.1.6. *ADDITIONAL FORMAT-RELATED THEMES*

While the above-listed themes exhibited more definite links to shareability, there were further inconclusive patterns they may at least play a role in the algorithmic factors of shareability. In at least one instance, the same website link was posted twice by one page, with different text captions, both among the top 10 most-shared

posts for that page. In fact, the second time the link was posted, the post received 31.7% more shares. This may indicate an admin actively pursuing increased engagements, and who is willing to re-post content in this regard.

Another logistically interesting instance occurred when one of the bigger farm murder cases in 2019 (Braam Blignaut's attack and subsequent passing) received coverage on the *South Africa Today* Facebook page. An article written and shared by the page on 5 October 2019, outlining details of the attack and Blignaut's passing, was their third most-shared post published in 2019, with over 8,600 shares. The fourth most-shared post was published three days later, where *South Africa Today* wrote and shared a story on their page about Blignaut's widow and her pleas for financial assistance, receiving over 7,900 shares. This could indicate that repeated coverage on a high-profile case might dramatically increase the shareability of posts, especially when some of the other identified themes are leveraged as well.

4.2.2. CONTENT-RELATED THEMES

4.2.2.1. GRATUITOUS/PROVOCATIVE IMAGES

While 28% of the top-shared posts displayed 'black' images from dead website links, there was a notable theme among those posts with visible images (36 posts in total). Exactly one third (33.33%) consisted of provocative or gratuitous content, the latter depicting victims and the injuries they sustained (lots of blood), crime scenes, or alleged perpetrators maimed or killed in the pursuit of 'justice'. In at least two cases, such images were taken from unrelated events (a cash-in-transit heist, and a gory art installation) and used misleadingly. Many images of victims were said to have come from 'WhatsApp', and are therefore unverifiable. For some posts (but not as many as one would expect), Facebook had blurred the images and included a warning – users must choose to reveal the images in full. Less gory, but still 'provocative' content included images where weapons or guns are brandished, or images of destroyed or burning property/cars (see an example in figure 4.8 below).

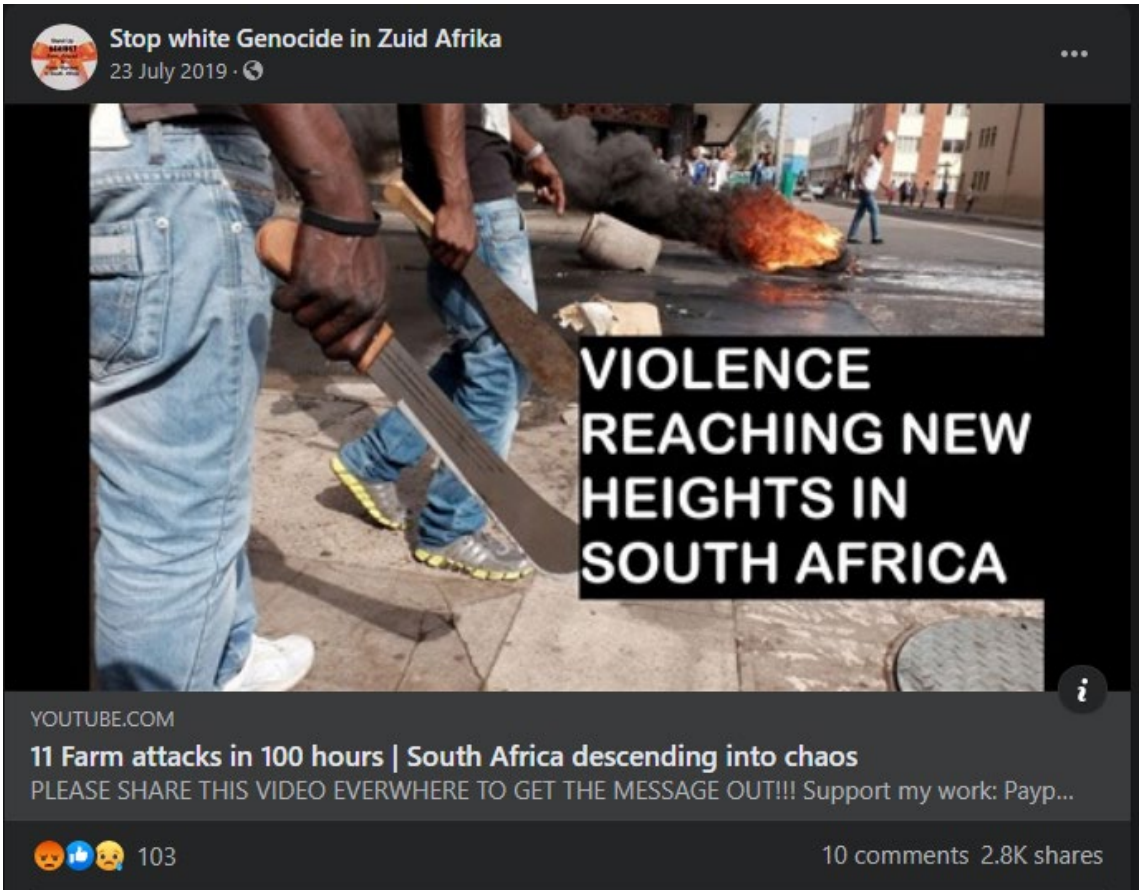

FIGURE 4.8: EXAMPLE OF A POST CONTAINING 'PROVOCATIVE' IMAGERY

Within the control set, only 66% had visible images (whether full-sized or thumbnail-sized), and of those, only nine per cent contained gratuitous or provocative images.

4.2.2.2. GRATUITOUS AND AFFECTIVE LANGUAGE

A substantial amount of the top-shared posts contained gratuitous language and descriptions of attacks or murders. These included excessively gory descriptions of the injuries – fatal or not – of the victims, as well as heavily affective language used to describe assault/murder ('brutalised' or 'slaughtered'). Of the most-shared posts, 38% were found to contain gratuitous language, often in the article headlines, consistent with click-bait content. The control set featured a considerable drop-off in this regard: only 18% were coded as containing gratuitous or affective language.

4.2.2.3. COUNTING OR LISTING CASES

Posts would often 'stack' or 'count' separate incidents, often tallying up the cases on a monthly basis, or over a longer time period (see figure 4.9 below). Sometimes farm attacks/murders were tallied over weekends where more than one crime was recorded. The final goal here is to create the illusion that attacks/murders are

happening more frequently, where numbers and figures in article headlines and image macros are often used to hook readers and convince them of a white genocide. Among the most-shared posts, 32% stacked/counted cases. The control set featured much less of this kind of language, with only 14% containing stacking references.

FIGURE 4.9: AN EXAMPLE OF A POST CONTAINING 'STACKING' LANGUAGE

4.2.2.4. ADDITIONAL QUALITATIVE CONTENT THEMES

The focus of this portion of the research was on format or affordance-related factors, where results seem to indicate that these may affect the shareability of a post more than the post content itself. That is not to say that other qualitative themes were not examined: six further theme codes were pinpointed for analysis, but produced mixed results from which conclusions could not be drawn. These themes often counted toward a 'bigger picture' however, being used in conjunction with some of the themes already described, or with each other, especially among the most-shared posts.

The first of these concerned posts asking that users pray for particular farm attack victims, or for monetary donations, often at the same time. While there was not a considerable difference between the top 50 dataset and the control set, the latter did include five instances of this theme (10% of posts), while the former included only two (4%). The two instances noted in the top 50 set, however, were secondary in nature, evoked in

conjunction with other qualitative themes that may have influenced their share counts. The posts in the control set, however, centred around the requests for donations (see figure 4.10 below) or prayers. If any conclusions *were* to be drawn, it would be that content requesting prayers/donations may negatively affect a post's shareability. This may be due to a general aversion to online donation campaigns, where users may be sceptical about being ripped off, and therefore would not realistically share what might constitute a scam.

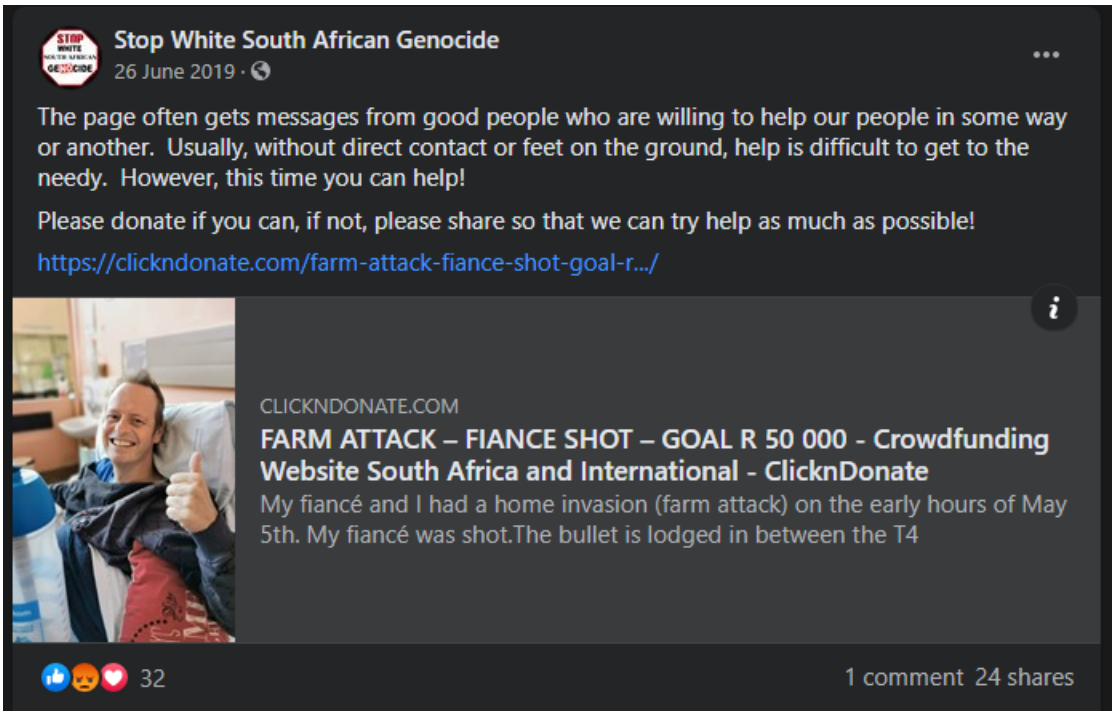

FIGURE 4.10: EXAMPLE OF A POST REQUESTING DONATIONS TOWARD A VICTIM

A second theme that came up across both datasets concerned placing emphasis on farm attack/murder victims' age if they were elderly (see figure 4.11 below). This is not surprising considering that elderly people are easier targets for criminals precisely because of their vulnerability, but which adds to the affectivity of such cases. Of the top 50 posts, 16% placed emphasis on the age of elderly victims. Amongst the least-shared posts, 22% referenced this theme. The relatively small difference between the two datasets meant that no firm conclusion could be made about this theme's influence over shareability, but it was worth noting for its prevalence across the board.

FIGURE 4.11: EXAMPLE OF A POST EMPHASISING THE AGE OF AN ELDERLY VICTIM

A third theme placed emphasis on the presence of children in the context of farm attack/murders, singling out cases where children were the victims, or children grieving the loss of a family member (see figure 4.12 below). This theme exercises a similar affectivity to the last theme – like the elderly, children are also particularly vulnerable, and most would likely consider the assault/murder of a child to be among the most heinous crimes possible. Once again, however, emphasis on the involvement of children does not seem to guarantee shareability on its own. Among the top 50 posts, this theme was coded 16% of the time, while the control set depicted this 10% of the time.

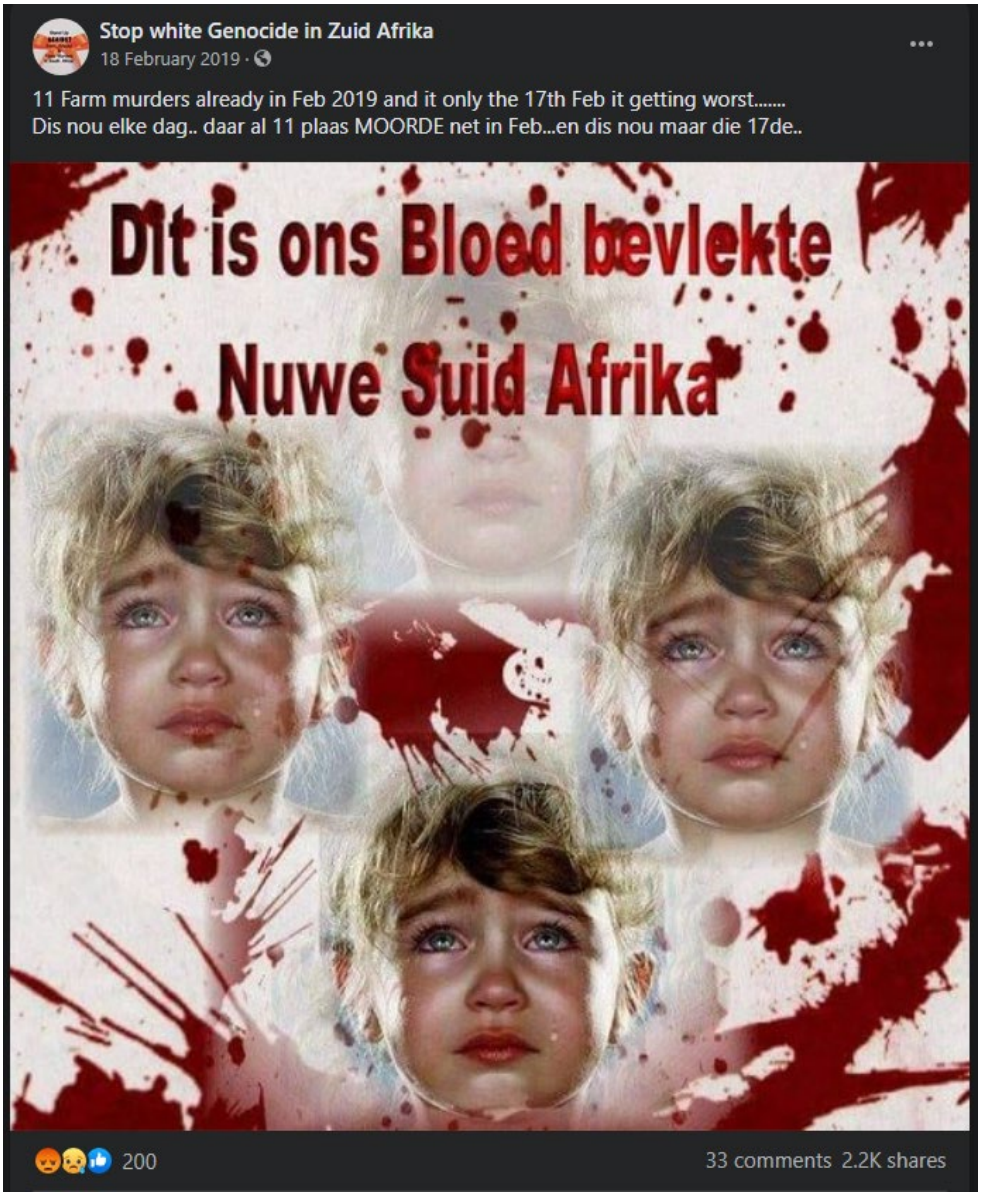

FIGURE 4.12: A POST CONTAINING AN IMAGE MACRO WHERE A CHILD'S FACE IS JUXTAPOSED BY BLOOD

A theme in this same vein emphasises the devasting effects of a farm attack/murder on surviving family members. The example pictured in figure 4.13 below was also coded for some of the other themes already described (presence of children, asking for donations), as was the case for many of the posts analysed. This category was also prevalent across the board, where figures between the two datasets did not differ substantially. Among the most-shared posts, only slightly more instances of this theme were coded (26%) compared to the control set (18%), meaning one could not definitively conclude that this theme influenced shareability.

FIGURE 4.13: A POST DEPICTING A GRIEVING FAMILY WHO WERE THE VICTIMS OF A FARM ATTACK

Another theme that appeared more or less in equal amount across both sets of posts concerned allusions to 'fighting back', celebrations of violent or lethal self-defence, or indulgence in 'justice' being served (see figure 4.14 below). Within the top 50 posts, this theme appeared 12% of the time, and in 14% of the least-shared posts. As such, no definitive conclusion was made.

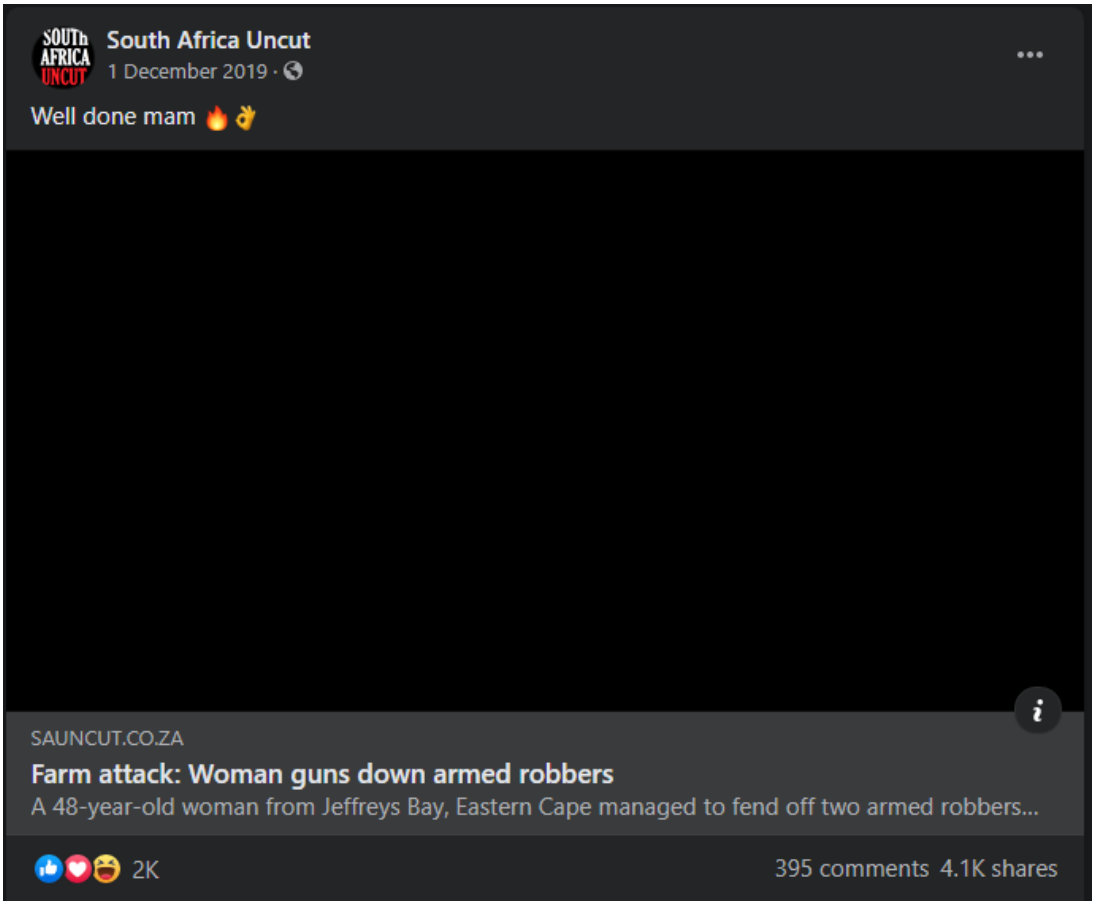

FIGURE 4.14: A POST WHERE VIOLENT SELF-DEFENCE AGAINST A FARM ATTACK IS CELEBRATED

A more general theme was noted, especially among posts published by the *South Africa Today* Facebook page, where posts contents concerning specific cases, or the stacking thereof, were far more likely to receive high share counts than more political posts. Of the ten least-shared posts collected, seven focused on more analytical, political subjects, often mentioning key political figures. Some of the article titles include:

- 'AfriForum: Farm attacks increase in 2018, new action plans for 2019';
- 'Enemies of Israel: Friedman and Sachs. God bless the Whites!';
- 'S.A. election last phase of socialism, Dr. Pieter Groenewald'; and
- ''The situation in SA': Interview with Simon Roche from Suidlanders'.

This could indicate that more emotionally affective posts are inherently more shareable than posts whose subjects are more analytical in nature, which is indicated in propaganda messaging techniques (Stanley, 2015).

The final theme described herein was coded for its potential appeal to users who experience conspiratorial ideation, alluding to government involvement in farm attacks/murders, or their active involvement in information suppression (see figure 4.15 below, cropped for the sake of brevity). While the theme was prevalent enough to necessitate coding, both datasets returned an equal amount of posts in this category – 12% each. As such, this theme cannot be singled out as influencing a post's shareability.

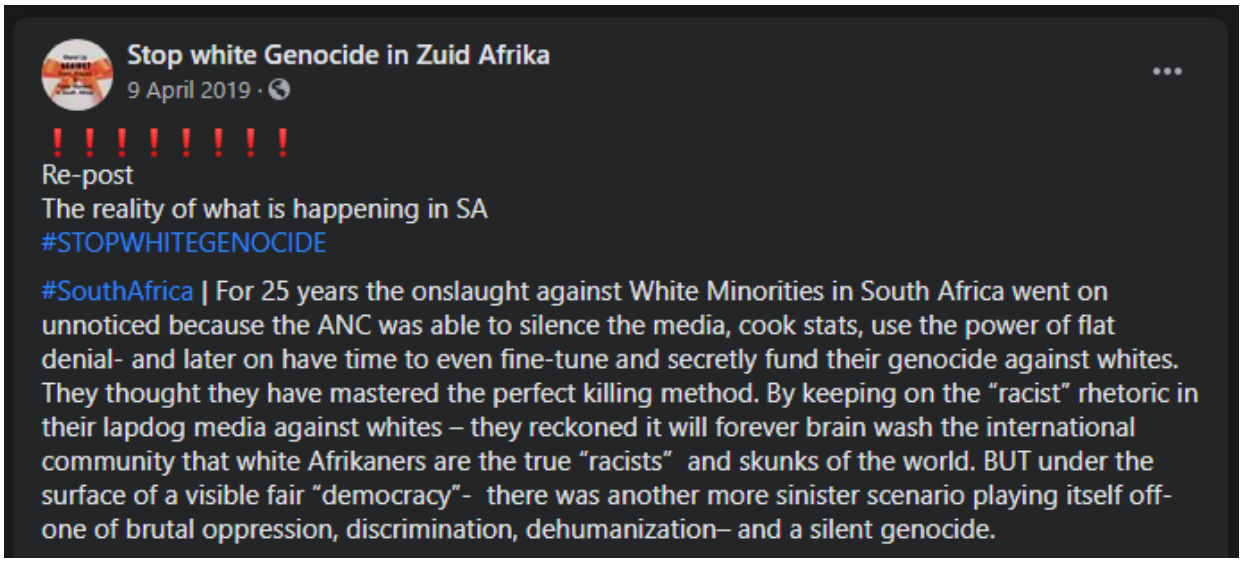

FIGURE 4.15: A POST ALLUDING TO AN ANC 'COVERUP' OF THE 'WHITE GENOCIDE'

4.3. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS RESULTS

Of the thousands of comments analysed, 296 comments that were published in response to social corrections (and a few paragraph sections from post captions) qualified to be coded into the categories that will be outlined herein. It was decided that only those comments/posts made in opposition against, or which responded negatively to social corrections would be thoroughly analysed for their discursive similarities. Comments (which would sometimes constitute entire paragraphs) often embodied more than one discursive theme, and were coded under several categories accordingly. From the initial 52 patterns or themes identified, categories were eliminated and merged to ultimately form 12 main themes and two minor themes (themes which, while still prevalent, did not embody specific discursive repertoires that could be discussed at length in relation to farm attacks/murders). Those actors who instigate the comments coded herein by either socially correcting a specific piece of false information or the white genocide narrative more generally are referred to as 'dissenters' throughout these results. The main themes are discussed below, in order of prevalence, followed by the minor themes, all of which are discussed more in depth and linked to the literature in the following chapter.

4.3.1. MAIN DISCURSIVE THEMES

4.3.1.1. DISSENTER'S COMMENTS ARE INCORRECT, OR LIES

The most common defence invoked against correctional comments, apparent 20.9% of the time, was for users to simply assert that the dissenters' comments were incorrect without further elaboration. Sometimes comments were further labelled as "lies" or "ridiculous", framing dissenters as knowing the 'truth' about the white genocide, but as choosing to lie about it.

A recurring vein within this theme included users offering reverse accusations of fake news in defence of their misguided beliefs – a strategy arguably popularised by Trump. One user went as far to accuse citizen-led Facebook page *Busting The Myth Of White Genocide In SA* – often used as a source by dissenters – as being administrated by black people pretending to be white to gain trust under false pretences.

A further offshoot within this theme had users defending a piece of misinformation as "not fake", backing up their counterclaim with further misinformation in the form of dubious website links, sources, or image macros. These 'sources' often took the form of other users' Facebook posts or videos, and YouTube links.

4.3.1.2. Dissenter is naïve, foolish, in denial, or racist (against whites)

The second most prevalent discursive theme, observed in 13.5% of the material analysed, casts dissenters as naïve or foolish for not seeing the 'truth' about of farm attacks/murders. Dissenters were, among other things, accused of being "cocooned" from the grim reality by those around them, living in a "fool's paradise", "under a rock", or in "cloud cuckoo land".

Dissenters were also framed as being in denial – that they are "asleep" while the believers able to see the 'truth' of the targeted persecution of white farmers are "awake". Similar rhetoric framed dissenters as going about life "with their eyes shut", or having "shades over their eyes" while believers' eyes (and ears) are "open". A few times they were accused of "hiding their head in the sand", or actively choosing to "look the other way", but that "looking the other way does not make the truth disappear".

In other instances, dissenters were accused of being blinded by their own beliefs, unable to consider the "truth staring them in the face", or, in a few cases, blinded by 'racism' against whites. If the dissenters were black, the commonly invoked phrase 'reverse racism' was used.

4.3.1.3. Black people are inherently criminogenic

A third discursive theme invoked quite often in response to dissenters framed black people (not exclusively South Africans) as being inherently criminogenic, committing a disproportional amount of murders in SA, and which are particularly cruel. This kind of discourse appeared in 12.8% of the dataset, and utilises longstanding racist stereotypes to frame SA's majority population as aggressively and unarguably violent, especially so toward the minority white population. While some comments constituted direct assertions ("all people killed in SA are killed by brutal blacks"), most were framed as a question, attempting to force dissenters into acknowledging the 'answer' they know to be true, or perhaps to avoid being reported for hate speech:

- "Enlighten us as to who exactly commits 95% of murders."
- "Were the genocides that have happened in Africa by blacks or whites?"
- "Who are the victims and who are the perpetrators in 99% of the cases?"
- "Who is killing the majority of farmers and people more generally? Be honest, please."

Other times, assertions constituted covert dog whistles, assuming a universal understanding of black people as inherently criminogenic, but without appearing overtly racist:

- "99% of farm attacks are committed by outsiders or barbarians."
- "The criminals they apprehend are most definitely not the same race as the farmers."
- "We all know who is to blame – the majority of SA."

In a similar vein, many responses to dissenters challenging the white persecution narrative demanded that dissenters provide examples where white South Africans attack/murder black people, their families, or black farmers:

- "Show me one article where a group of whites breaks into a black family's home and violently torture and murder them."
- "Give me five examples [of whites murdering blacks]."
- "Were any of these cases blacks killed by whites?"
- "I can't remember more than five cases last year that were violent white-on-black crimes."

Commenters further cemented the idea of a specific black-on-white persecution of farmers by alleging that black farmers are not killed by black perpetrators, or even in general:

- "How many black farmers did they kill this year?"
- "Perhaps you [the dissenter] do not follow the news – if it happened [white on black farm murders], it was covered!"

4.3.1.4. Government or political parties are orchestrating, or at least complicit in the white genocide agenda

A further discursive theme concerned allegations that the South African government and black-fronted political parties are orchestrating the white genocide agenda, or are at least complicit therein. Government and political parties are, among other things, accused of inciting the 'genocide':

- "The ANC, EFF, and BLF are telling black people to kill us."
- "This is why governments kill their own and get away with it."
- "What is happening in SA is atrocious, led by politicians and the media."

In other comments, the government or black-fronted political parties are accused of sympathising with farm attackers, or lying in order to cover up their involvement:

- "He [the president] never acknowledged it [farm murders]; as a result, he doesn't commit any resources on a governing level, indicating that he sympathises with the killers."
- "You [dissenter] look like an EFF supporter – always covering up the oppression of white people."
- "ANC government is covering up, as per usual."
- "No doubt the 'true information' was provided by the ANC's foreign department of propaganda."

Image macros – images conveying political thought with superimposed text, designed to be shared on social media (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) – were a common part of the latter responses (see figures 4.16 and 4.17 below).

FIGURES 4.16 AND 4.17: IMAGE MACROS ALLEGING GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN A COVER UP OF THE 'WHITE GENOCIDE'

A less conspiratorial vein within this theme blamed the government for farm attacks, but the cause being due to corruption, institutional breakdown, and ineptitude, largely regarding a lack of committed policing resources. Corruption especially is pinpointed as a common causal factor:

- "We need proper security and a proper justice system from national government, who do not have the money because it was stolen!"
- "The ANC is not taking land and giving it to citizens; the land goes to ANC family members that don't give a damn about our country."
- "The president [Cyril Ramaphosa] is linked to corruption and organised crime, as were his predecessors."
- "The ANC government had 26 years to change, instead they stole from us to the point of bankruptcy."

At other times, the national police force is highlighted for its shortcomings regarding farm attacks/murders, especially due to their 'ineptitude': "The private sector has been fighting their own security battles because our police force is so inept". Commenters were sometimes more general in their criticism of the country and its government: "Our country is a dumpsite full of failures, rotten to the core."

4.3.1.5. DISSENTER OR THEIR INFORMATION SOURCE DOES NOT LIVE IN SA, AND THEREFORE CANNOT KNOW THE 'TRUTH'

One of the discursive patterns had commenters dismissing dissenters' claims or proof by arguing they cannot know the 'real truth' because they do not live in SA. This was extended to correctional expert sources – they had not gathered 'on the ground' information, and were therefore dismissible. This theme was present in 8.1% of the material, with commenters further framing themselves as having access to the 'true' story because they either live in SA, or hear first-hand information from family/friends that live in SA:

- "Snopes does not have the last word on everything. Do they live in SA? No, but I do, and this [the white genocide] is happening."
- "I can tell you that we hear first-hand from people on holiday in the country, and from family of friends, about what is happening in SA."
- "He's [dissenter] not even from SA – he doesn't know what he's talking about."
- "Why don't you [dissenter] come here on holiday? You have no idea what you're talking about."

Commenters were particularly dismissive of South African expatriates attempting social correction:

- "Easy for you to say while you're not living in SA – come back to the country and you'll see how quickly you run away again."
- "Says the one who left SA – you have no clue about how bad things are."
- "Come back to SA and face the same thing we have to every day, seeing as you think you know everything from all the way in the UK."
- "You obviously don't have a clue what is going on in SA. It's easy to make judgments from the safety of wherever you ran off to."

Sometimes commenters would accuse dissenting expatriates of being hypocritical for rejecting the white persecution narrative, or of being cowardly for leaving the country:

- "You [expat dissenter] are a brainless, spineless coward who ran away, and now you have a big mouth after living abroad."
- "She [dissenter] moved away for better job opportunities – affirmative action policies discovered she was white, so she could not get a job."
- "… the minute things get hot, they [expat dissenters] run with their tails between their yellow legs, and continue to fight from a safer vantage point, out of harm's way."

4.3.1.6. THE FAKE DETAILS OF ONE INSTANCE DO NOT MATTER, BECAUSE THE OVERARCHING NARRATIVE IS UNDENIABLY TRUE

One of the discursive themes of great import to theories of social correction concerns a pattern of responses proposing that singular instances of mis- or disinformation do not matter, because the overarching white genocide narrative is undeniably true. This theme was present in 9.6% of the material. Fake details pointed out by dissenters often include an incorrectly reported time/date, incorrect locations (crime not occurring on a

farm), that the victim was not a farmer, or that the perpetrator was white. Regardless, believers argued that these 'standalone' instances of misinformation do not matter:

- "What does it matter whether the attack happened on a farm or in town? It's still an attack – our people are brutalised daily!"
- "What the f*** difference does it make where it happened? It happened."
- "Just because this case wasn't a 'farm murder' doesn't make all other farm murders irrelevant…"
- "A friend killing his friend, who happened to be on a farm, and suddenly it's no longer true that farmers are killed on a daily basis by terrorists?"
- [Translated from Afrikaans] "Whether it happened now, or two years ago, the point is that it happens DAILY."

4.3.1.7. THE DOCUMENTED GORY DETAILS OF FARM ATTACKS AND VICTIMS' PERSONAL STORIES PROVE THE EXTRA-ORDINARY SEVERITY OF THE CRIMES

A further discursive theme located the highly-documented details of both the crimes themselves and the personal stories relayed by victims or their families as definitive proof that farm attacks/murders are more severe than other crimes. What makes the genocide real, in the eyes of believers, is the high level of recorded cases online (in contrast with relatively little documentation of violent crimes committed against black South Africans). This documentation is easily accessible through social media, constituting a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of confirmation bias. This theme was present in 9.6% of the material analysed:

- [To a dissenter] "Can we take you to farm murder crime scenes?"
- [To a dissenter] "Let us meet so I can show you want is happening to my family right here in Gauteng … so that the next time you comment, you have the real facts."
- "So, all the photos of the farm murders, and all the information from all the media outlets is not real?"
- "The attacks on farmers are much more brutal and cruel than other crimes. Go visit the crime scenes and see for yourself, if you're able to stomach it."

A few commenters further hoped that dissenters or their families would become victims of farm attacks themselves, so that they would finally see the 'truth'. Those who remain unconvinced by all the 'evidence' online would surely "see the light" if they experienced an attack themselves:

- "Let's tie you [dissenter] up on a farm that's about to be attacked […] and see if you survive."
- "You [dissenter] would think differently if you had friends or family on farms and smallholdings being systematically killed."
- "I wait for the day that they [dissenters] get attacked and their mother or daughter is gang-raped and murdered. The world must know what the new SA has become."

4.3.1.8. SELECTIVE NON-RACIALISM

An eighth theme appearing across the dataset (6.7%) concerned a discursive leaning toward non-racialism or colour blindness, but only in selective contexts. This was invoked in cases where it was initially thought that an alleged farm murderer was black (as per the popular narrative), but where information came to light that the perpetrator was white, and their victim was black. White genocide believers suddenly had an about-turn in cases like these, where they framed such crimes as completely non-racialised after their narrative had been up-ended:

- "Murderers, thieves, etc are not differentiated by colour. There are just evil-natured 'people'…"
- "No matter the colour of your skin, murder is murder. I have often asked myself why we humans have this cruel streak in us."
- "Crime knows no colour."
- "It is still a farm murder, and the person who committed it is still a subhuman criminal, no matter his race, colour, origin, or anything!"
- "Greed brought us together, now it will tear us apart again because the world still sees colour."

4.3.1.9. DISSENTER MUST BE SYMPATHETIC TOWARD THE ANC/EFF/COMMUNISM/LIBERALISM

Another theme proposed that non-believers or dissenters must be sympathetic to the ANC, EFF, or communism, which made their dissent dismissible by default. This kind of discourse was present in 6.4% of the coded material:

- "You [dissenter] are not helping anyone but the ANC government, the EFF, or the BLF. You sound like every other left-wing nutcase that says it's [the genocide] not happening and that there's nothing to worry about."
- "You're not helping anyone, unless you're a racist ANC, EFF, or BLF member."
- "You are openly supporting the ANC, EFF etc. Are you a communist?"
- [To a black dissenter] "It [farm murders] is happening more and more. Your cANCer denies it, you deny it."
- "You [dissenter] are probably one of those idiots who is homeless and going hungry, but still listens to the pathetic lies you've been told by your government."

Using the same kind of rhetoric so often used by right-wing US figures, dissenters were often cast as "liberals", or belonging to the "liberal establishment" that actively conceals the 'truth', making their social corrections completely defunct:

- [In response to a Snopes article] "Snopes [three laughing emojis], the liberals' debunking bot."
- "Something has been happening for the last 25 years in SA that the liberal elite world establishment forbids even the mention of…"
- "You're just another bleeding-heart liberal who got out in time."
- "Snopes must be run by liberals…"
- "You libtards are an even bigger threat to the wellbeing of white people than the savages themselves."

4.3.1.10. Stacking cases and conflating details from violent cases

The tenth pattern utilised the discursive strategy of 'stacking' cases, conflating the most gratuitous details from disparate cases in order to shock dissenters into acknowledging the universal barbarity of farm attacks/murders. This rhetoric was detected in 3.7% of the material (some examples could not be relayed due to their graphic nature):

- "We don't go around torturing, mutilating, raping, burning, and hacking black people to death – that is what your [black dissenter] people are doing to us…"
- "Forget about whites who are silently killed with pangas etc by the thousands then, will you [dissenter] at least care about our animals? Blacks also torture them to death, cutting the shins off cattle and sheep, cutting open the wombs of pregnant cows and leaving them to die, poisoning our dogs and cats, slaughtering sheep in open areas in the most brutal ways… [continues]"
- "Do farmers go around with iron bars and beat black workers within an inch of their lives? Do farmers confine and beat black workers senseless, put them in a confined bakkie, and set them alight? Do farmers physically abuse black women and then rape their daughters, or threaten them with rape?"

4.3.1.11. Amnesia or nostalgia for apartheid, where the past is not the cause of SA's current issues

Believers often posted defensive comments pining after the days of apartheid where they experienced a higher quality of living than currently, which they argue is indicative of the targeted persecution against whites. This was true in 2.7% of the material analysed, where commenters also located the past as having nothing to do with SA's current issues:

- "My problem is that no matter how degrading apartheid was, you must be honest with yourself that it was never as bad as the current murders of our farmers and the white population."
- [In response to a dissenter highlighting black farmworkers' deaths at the hands of farmers] "Maybe 30 years ago, but it is now triple that amount the other way around [blacks on whites]."
- "Every country has an ugly past, but why create the same future?"
- "Before 1994, not many white people were murdered, but now it is a national sport."
- "Whose fault is the inequality? Since 1994, […] the ex-apartheid country (that was 'so bad') was flooded by neighbouring countries. […] More people, less jobs. […] Still blaming the whites, after 25 years."

4.3.1.12. Dissenters must recognise SA's trajectory toward becoming Zimbabwe

The final main theme was a notable tendency for commenters to bring up Zimbabwe in defence against dissenters, alleging SA is en route to becoming another Zimbabwe, alluding to the country's failed land reform efforts during the early 2000s. This kind of rhetoric was present in 2.4% of the material:

- [To dissenter] “When SA becomes like Zimbabwe and you haven’t got any food on your plate, I’m going to have a fat laugh at you, dumb ass.”
- “Without our big farms, we WILL become the next Zimbabwe.”

This discursive strategy frames white farmers as SA’s economic saving grace, stimulating the economy and providing jobs – a pattern repeated in the celebration of colonisation and the ‘superiority’ of the whites:

- “Thank goodness for the white people who employ uneducated black people! If we fired all black workers, there would be high levels of unemployment and the economy would be even worse off than it is now.”
- “Those few individuals [white farmers] that you [dissenter] are talking about keep our economy going and keep the Rand strong.”
- “The irony is that you [black dissenter] are typing your message on a cellphone that wasn’t invented in Africa, and you’re writing in a non-African language.”

4.3.2. Minor discursive themes

As mentioned earlier, in addition the main discursive themes outlined above, some minor themes were observed. These are minor in the sense that they do not necessarily relate to the issue of farm attacks/murders and problematic information on the subject.

The first of these outlines the strong tendency for commenters to express profanities, character attacks, or sarcastic attacks toward dissenters for whom they have a complete lack of respect, and who constitute an annoyance. That is not to say that dissenters do not engage in this rhetoric too, out of frustration, but the pattern stands nonetheless, where 11.1% of defensive comments exhibited this theme. Dissenters, among other things, were accused of having had a lobotomy, being brain dead, called ‘*doos*’ (Afrikaans for ‘stupid’), ‘dumb’, ‘stupid’, ‘pricks’, ‘idiots’, ‘twats’, and told to ‘f*** off’. Black dissenters often received extra servings of vitriol, once even being racially characterised as “breeding like flies”.

The second minor theme had commenters being flippantly dismissive toward dissenters, indicating boredom or that dissenters were wasting their time. This sometimes took the form of feigning ignorance about points that dissenter tried to make. This was coded across 3.4% of the comments/posts. This rhetoric usually worked to shut down conversations within comment threads, and dismiss further engagements.

4.4. Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the quantitative results of the three research components, which correspond with the research questions that form the direction of this study.

The first section herein outlined the results of the qualitative survey conducted across two farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages, indicating some interesting, albeit ungeneralisable outcomes when analysed on their

own. The second section outlined the final affordance/format-related themes and qualitative themes produced by the content analysis of the top 50 most-shared posts from five Facebook pages. The final section outlined a set of discursive themes evidenced in posts/comments published in defence against social corrections regarding misinformation, or the white genocide.

The following chapter will discuss these results in greater depth, focusing on qualitative analysis, referencing the literature outlined in Chapter 2, and exploring the complementary and contrasting relationships between the three sets of results.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The current chapter analyses the results outlined during Chapter 4 through the lens of the respective research questions:

RQ 1: How do users on farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages typically engage with problematic information, and why?

RQ 2: What are the most prevalent qualitative and format-related themes (with specific attention paid to platform affordances) among farm attack/murder-related Facebook posts with high share counts, and why?

RQ 3: What are the common adversarial themes of discourse invoked in response to social corrections within farm attack/murder-related Facebook posts and comment threads containing false information?

Further discussion is provided regarding the congruence (or lack thereof) of results with the reviewed literature, and links results between the three research components where applicable. First, the survey results are discussed, followed by discussions of the QCA and CDA results respectively. The next and final chapter will outline the conclusions from this study.

5.1. SURVEY ANALYSIS

During planning stages, a qualitative survey was deemed the most appropriate tool for answering RQ 1, especially considering the way to best answer such a question was to ask the Facebook users themselves. As proposed by Marwick (2018), when pursuing the study of a fake news phenomenon, one should aim to listen to how the actors involved describe their use of media. This survey component thus aims to address the first premise of Marwick's sociotechnical model: "people make meaning from information based on their social positioning, identity, discursive resources, and skill set" (2018, p. 487). The survey, despite its small sample, was designed to produce richer, qualitative answers over quantitative data. Thus these results carry some weight when contextualised by extant literature and supplemented by the QCA and CDA findings.

5.1.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE GENOCIDE FACEBOOK PAGE COMMUNITIES

Respondents belonged to a relatively older age bracket, where most were over the age of 46. According to Boxell et al. (2017), older social media users are more likely to succumb to the effects of polarisation and homophilous networks online, but less likely to use social media compared to their younger counterparts. This could imply decreased social media literacy levels, where older users may not have adequately fostered the tools necessary to distinguish between well-evidenced news stories and problematic information.

Many responses relating to questions around mainstream media and trust pointed to a conspiratorial streak among respondents. One accused mainstream news media of being "controlled" and having "no freedom of speech", while another alleged that mainstream media "[hide] the truth from the world". Many believed the

government to be involved in mainstream news' lack of coverage of farm attacks/murders, with one respondent further asserting that the "cANCer" controls the media (also likening the ruling party – the ANC – to cancer). As argued by Bessi et al. (2015), and which is largely confirmed by other results herein, populations with high levels of conspiratorial ideation tend to form more insular communities – a common precedent for the proliferation of fake news. The prevalence of conspiracy beliefs within these communities has important implications for the effectiveness of social correction, among other things, which is discussed further down.

Respondents seemed to constitute an active audience, but one that only remains engaged insofar as to confirm pre-existing beliefs. Their standard for news credulity among what has been termed 'alternative news' websites herein was not satisfied by visual heuristics as described by Flanagin and Metzger (2007). Rather, credulity was awarded based on the news agenda itself, accepting the source and subsequently becoming less likely to seek further verification regarding the site's veracity (Tandoc et al., 2018). One respondent said of *South Africa Today* that "links to information sources are available in every article for verification". This indicates a population that at least partly constitutes an active audience in their need for news to be verifiable, but who are not immune to cognitive biases such as selective exposure. Respondents also indicated that they would always read articles attached to posts, affirming an audience that is engaged with the content they are consuming, but where the Facebook pages in question filter out content that is incongruent with the white genocide narrative.

5.1.2. THE CONSEQUENCES OF TRUST AND DISTRUST

Respondents largely indicated distrust in mainstream news media. They felt that mainstream news outlets avoid covering the topic of farm attacks/murders for various insidious reasons. These include mainstream news generally not having farmers'/whites' interests in mind, or that they actively hold anti-farmer/anti-white sentiment. Respondents felt much less strongly about the reasons for a lack of such coverage being potential reader upset and consequent financial fallout. One respondent did, however, allege that mainstream media are "trying to be too politically correct" in their avoidance of the topic. These sentiments might be linked to the increasing consolidation of news media outlets, which has led media to become more vulnerable to manipulation (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Consolidated media companies, in an effort to save costs, tend to discourage local reporting in favour of content which is broadly applicable (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). This results in a public that is less informed about the local issues affecting them day-to-day (in this case, farming communities), creating an agenda-setting vacuum (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) filled by informal ('alternative') news sites that are not beholden to any form of fact-checking. If mainstream news were to cover the issue in a responsible manner – relativising the attacks within the general landscape of crime, de-escalating the status of farm attacks/murders – manipulative alternative news sources might become less popular. On the other hand, such news still would not evidence a white genocide, which seems to be the content sought by many of the users herein.

Further evidence of the above agenda-setting vacuum came when respondents overwhelmingly indicated believing pages like *SBG* and *SATN* to be *more accurate* because they operate *independently* from mainstream

news agencies. Similar to findings in Evans' 2011 study of expatriate-run Afropessimist websites, Facebook pages and their website counterparts proclaimed to expose the 'real' truth about the goings-on in SA, including the white genocide. Most respondents agreed with the latter claim.

Respondents neither confirmed nor denied the argument that a piece of information's credibility has less to do with the publisher, and more to do with who shared said information within an individual's network (Madden et al., 2017; Media Insight Project, 2017). However, since respondents largely trust the content shared by pages like *SBG* and *SATN*, they are technically depending on other citizens (not journalists) to share compelling news/information (Jenkins et al., 2013). Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) argue that this dependence encourages the creation and perpetuation of problematic information in citizen-led networks. Furthermore, positive, in-person contact with someone holding the same belief or opinion (opinion leaders) imbues media with a certain persuasion (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948). The opinion leaders in this case are the page administrators, making the problematic information they share very persuasive to someone who already believes in the possibility of a white genocide.

5.1.3. GROUP IDENTITY AFFIRMATIONS

One of the main departure points of this study foregrounded Marwick's (2018) theory that social media users share certain posts, including problematic information, in order to express their identity: "people are not necessarily looking to inform others: they share stories (and pictures, and videos) to express themselves and broadcast their identity, affiliations, values, and norms" (p. 505). The survey did aim to address this, but it seems the questions expected too much of respondents in terms of how deeply they were able to reflect on their sharing behaviours. Nonetheless, When those who tended to share posts published by *SBG* and *SATN* were asked their reasons for doing so, all of them indicated a sense of civic duty. Specifically, they share news about farm attacks/murders because they believe the issue is, or should be, in the broader public interest, or they share as a form of warning/advice to those in their personal networks. The answers indicating reasons for sharing as being an identity-signalling mechanism were far less attended. These results resonate with a previous fake news study in Africa, which also indicated a sense of civic duty among those sharing misinformation (Chakrabarti et al., 2018).

This concept of 'sharing to signal identity' can be indirectly examined, however, by looking at the kinds of identity narratives championed within the QCA and CDA. Identity-signalling behaviour was certainly more prevalent in the CDA component, where dichotomous rhetoric was often used to differentiate a collective 'us' from 'them'. In this vein, it was discovered that *Stop white Genocide in Zuid Afrika* (managed in South Africa) had conducted a Facebook poll asking whether users believed there was a white genocide taking place in SA – 96% responded 'yes'. An interesting comment was posted underneath (paraphrased, emphasised):

> The sad thing is that all of us on this platform are similar-minded. Were this poll open to the general white public, I'm sure at least half of them would have said 'no'. The disillusionment *out there* is frightening.

Rhetoric asserting that the intra-group population is "in the know" is emphasised by describing, in dichotomous terms, those people who do not believe in the white genocide as being "out there", where disillusionment is rife.

Some responses spoke to the social identities inherent in different news organisations. When respondents indicating distrust in mainstream media were asked their reasons why, one person accused mainstream media outlets of "only saying what liberals want to hear". Another respondent said mainstream media's efforts to remain "politically correct" was one of the reasons they did not cover farm attacks/murders. This indicates that some users associate mainstream news outlets with a liberal or left-wing identity, and might be less likely to share their content for the risk of appearing left-wing to others in their social networks (Marwick, 2018). Conversely, sharing articles by alternative news sources (coverage that almost always has a right-wing spin) might reinforce their right-wing or conservative identities, signalling their political leanings. Six of ten respondents indicated sharing farm attack/murder-related posts because it communicates where they stand on the issue to their social networks; slightly fewer respondents viewed sharing as a way to signal their opposition to those currently in political power (ANC).

5.1.4. SHARING MOTIVATORS AND DEMOTIVATORS

The majority of respondents indicated having never knowingly shared a farm attack/murder-related post containing false information, nor unknowingly shared a post that they later discovered contained false information. They may, however, have been too embarrassed to admit sharing fake news, even accidentally, especially when these results are compared to other studies. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) indicated that 26% of South Africans have shared news online they knew to be incorrect, and 35% shared news they later found to be incorrect. If taken at face value, however, the results herein could indicate that other users in their social networks are not correcting them when they post problematic information. This aligns with previous studies – social corrections are relatively rare (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2020). A lack of social corrections might mean that these respondents' social networks having been groomed into echo chambers devoid of dissenting users, or that the expectation placed on users to call out their Facebook friends is too great. Regarding the latter, Tandoc et al. (2020) explain users' hesitancy to engage in social correction as being due to the perception of such actions as aggressive, or due to what is perceived as a lost cause, where the sharing of fake news is seen as the expression of unalterable opinions.

Another interesting point raised during the survey was that most respondents indicated turning to WhatsApp conversations with family members or friends for updates about farm attacks/murders. This indicates that most sharing on the topic may happen more interpersonally, away from social networking sites like Facebook. Many respondents also indicated that the issue was a prevalent subject of discussion that happened face-to-face in their offline social groups. Marwick's (2018) assertion thus rings true: information flows both online and offline in face-to-face interactions (and broadcast media). Online sharing does not occur in a vacuum; information – problematic or not – has flowed freely through a myriad of offline channels for decades. The difference lies,

however, in social media platforms' ability to extend the reach and efficiency of pre-existing social networks, including those that are problematic and dangerous. Therefore, although much sharing on the topic of farm attacks/murders happens interpersonally, platforms like Facebook have joined disparate social networks to create a problematic community whose size sustains its growth and momentum.

Many respondents indicated that black users' posts covering the issue of farm attacks might generally attract more shares than if the user was white. The respondents *themselves,* however, indicated that such posts would not be more convincing than if the user was white. During the CDA data collection, one commenter, ignoring all the black dissenters who had commented, said: "Only one black person commented: [user's name], I salute you for not remaining silent!". It may thus be the case that 'good blacks' are celebrated for their support of the white genocide narrative, especially in their ability to potentially convince other users who are undecided on the topic. 'Good blacks' are further celebrated in order discredit or reprimand the ideologically confrontational other 'others' – 'bad blacks' – (Steyn & Foster, 2008), where most black commenters dissented against the white genocide narrative.

Respondents did not explicitly confirm the bandwagon heuristic (whereby a post's many visible engagements tends to invite further engagements) in terms of share-count (Thorson, 2008). Most, when asked whether they would be more compelled to share a post if it already had more likes, comments, or shares responded in the negative. The question, however, did not inquire whether users would pay more *attention* to such posts, which may indirectly result in higher share counts should users find the content agreeable.

5.1.5. PLATFORM AFFORDANCES AND THEIR INFLUENCE

Respondents provided some evidence as to Harkinson's (2017) assertion that social and participatory media such as Facebook have allowed those with fringe views to find one another. Respondents largely indicated that other followers of *SBG* or *SATN* feel the same way they do about farm attacks/murders, and, to a lesser degree, share the same political leanings as themselves. It follows, then, that these Facebook pages allow collaborative knowledge dissemination and media production, permitting users to share viewpoints that would ordinarily be unacceptable to air (Harkinson, 2017). Thus, affordances inherent in social media platforms allow those with viewpoints outside of the acceptable window of political opinion to produce and disseminate their own 'news' (Marwick, 2018). These kinds of pages constitute spaces of shared meaning (Jenkins et al., 2013) – a necessary requirement for spectacles to emerge, where shared narratives work to reinforce the values at the heart of such networked communities. Ultimately, the very nature of Facebook pages, and the platform generally, allows for the proliferation and maintenance of problematic worldviews.

On a note regarding Facebook's platform affordances, a few of the posts observed during the CDA collection offered interesting insights into the relationship between page admins and their followers. The admin of *Stop Farm Murders and White Genocide in SA* lamented that they had received numerous comments accusing them of posting fake news, and asked that users unfollow the page if they are upset. Every single comment posted in response praised the admin in their tireless mission, thanked them for the work they do, and showed gratitude

for users' access to the 'truth' about the white genocide that the admin provides. This resonates strongly with Bromberg's framing of the internet and social media as a setting where the "combination of computer and verbal skills equals high status and prestige" (1996, p. 149). Positioning oneself as a news media entity affords a semi-formal title of 'editor' (or 'administrator'), and attracts fan mail (in the form of comments and direct messages) from appreciative users. The above interactions, even when negative, contribute to strategies of imagined re-empowerment (Evans, 2011), validating admins and the mythic reality (white genocide) they perpetuate. By diverting around mainstream news outlets, users are granted status among their peers, and a measure of control over a powerful media institution that most of the community strongly dislikes and distrusts (Marwick & Lewis, 2018).

Viewers of content shared by pages such as *SBG* and *SATN* are able to engage with a post in various ways other than sharing, as highlighted by respondents. When not actively sharing posts, differing levels of user participation still definitively impact how far that content reaches (Marwick, 2018). In this case, most users typically 'like' or 'react' to posts, followed by sharing, reading externally linked articles, and reading the post comments. The latter two actions, classified as lurking (listening, reading, or scrolling through content), still contribute to the post reach to due to the algorithmic measurements that Facebook uses to prioritise content (Marwick, 2018).

5.1.6. BIASED NEWS AND PROPAGANDA PROCESSES

The type of homophilous environments fostered across Facebook pages like *SATN* and *SBG* – especially where admins affirm certain users' post comments and delete others – is the perfect environment for "mutual exchanges" to take place. Such interactions, along the lines of horizontal propaganda structures, allow an individual to "gradually discover his own convictions (which will also be that of the group)" (Ellul & Kellen, 1973, p. 81). Users already feel that the other page followers – more so than their friend network in general – share their grievances and political leanings (as discussed above). Problematic information is repeatedly distributed by admins and users in the comment sections, functionally ensuring that all group members discover "the correct line, the anticipated solution, the 'proper' convictions" (Ellul & Kellen, 1973, p. 81).

In addition to the distrust in mainstream news already outlined, one respondent noted that *Netwerk24* does cover farm attacks/murders, but that one has to pay to access their content, which is tantamount to "hiding the truth from the world". Social media users are generally averse to paying subscription fees for news, forcing digital publishers (and alternative news websites) to rely almost exclusively on advertising (Currah, 2009). This may encourage authors of pages/websites like *South Africa Today* to create sensational content akin to clickbait: "[w]eb content designed to generate attention and online advertising revenue at the expense of quality or accuracy, relying on sensationalist headlines or eye-catching pictures to attract click-throughs and shares" (Bakir & McStay, 2018, p. 159). So, the 'free' content users prefer to consume is often inherently sensationalist in a bid to attract advertising revenue, encouraging the proliferation of problematic information.

Most respondents also followed two or more farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages, where nearly all the pages examined repeatedly posted content from the same few sources. Seeing the same content repeatedly may strengthen extant cognitive biases via the repetition effect – the process whereby people acquire beliefs (or have their beliefs strengthened) by repeatedly being exposed to belief materials (Gelfert, 2018). The act of repeatedly distributing false information is also indicated in horizontal propaganda processes (Ellul & Kellen, 1973).

Facebook page admins were observed during the CDA data collection deleting dissenting users' comments, or banning then entirely. Sometimes the admin was very open about doing so, other times the deletions happened long after the fact and flew under users' radars. One of the admins most guilty of this behaviour runs *Break The Silence About SA,* and is explicitly open about their 'moderation' (see figure 5.1 below; comment not paraphrased since author is a community page admin).

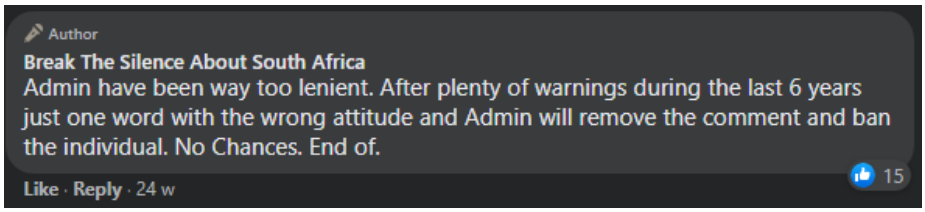

FIGURE 5.17: A PAGE ADMINISTRATOR'S COMMENT OPENLY REVEALING THEIR STRICT 'MODERATION' PRACTICES

The same admin, on a different post, openly told a commenter that some "housework" needed to be done (alluding to deleting comments and/or banning users). Another user responded in protest (paraphrased):

> This administrator really seems to try minimise everything that people say by saying 'don't do this or that'. I've never seen this kind of behaviour to this extent on other sites. It makes people not want to comment. I understand it in the context of swearing and rude language, but the site says 'break the silence'. No need for you to completely silence everyone.

Administrators are thus able to appear democratic and participatory (except in the above exception) while still maintaining strict control over their page content and participation (Champoux et al., 2012). The further affordance where admins are, by default, able to conceal their identity and avoid any sense of accountability that professional journalists might be beholden to (Stephney, 2000) is especially dangerous considering the seditious content they promote. In this way, admins (some more than others) engage in an affordance-related "media ideology" (Gershon, 2010) that views the ability to delete comments/ban dissenting users as the "right way" to guide discussion. This is an extreme example of maintaining a single perspective on an issue, definitively engaging in propagandistic behaviour (Walton, 2007).

5.1.7. INFORMATION FORMAT

Only three respondents highlighted statistical/infographic formats as being the most pressing type of farm attack/murder-related content. Furthermore, none of the top 50 most-shared posts from the QCA included

statistics or infographics as their focus. The only statistics/infographics-focused posts appeared among the least-shared posts. This information format is thus perhaps not as popular in the current context as initially expected. In the context of the QCA, however, this makes sense: white genocide believers seemingly are not convinced by detached, analytical content; rather, they are galvanised by affective content. Far more survey respondents indicated finding posts detailing an individual account of an attack/murder, or images of victims thereof, as being the most pressing post format.

At least one respondent views YouTube videos – which anyone can record and upload due to significantly lower barriers relative to traditional media (Marwick, 2018) – as having the same credibility as bona-fide documentaries. This false equivalence may arise due to 'documentarians' covering white genocide (Katie Hopkins, Lauren Southern) having to resort to publishing on YouTube, since no formal media institution would back such biased content. As Marwick and Lewis (2017) argue, amateur filmmakers are able to upload and share their own 'documentaries' to YouTube or other video-hosting platforms, and subsequently share them on social media sites. In this way, and when social media's participatory nature is celebrated, negative conceptions of objectivity in journalism are encouraged. 'Facts' traditionally championed by the documentary format no longer serve to unify, but rather to refute oppositional viewpoints and reinforce partisan identities (Mattson, 2016).

5.2. QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The following section considers the common format/affordance-related and qualitative content themes present in posts with the highest share counts from five Facebook pages in 2019. Discussions aim to address RQ 2, and consider the results of the other two research components. It should be noted that all the themes discussed operate within the context of the 'attention economy', where the most valuable content is that which attracts the most attention (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

5.2.1. FORMAT-RELATED THEMES

These themes highlight the role of Facebook's platform affordances in the context of shareability and fake news. This speaks to the third premise of Marwick's (2018) sociotechnical model of fake news: "the material settings of media consumption […] have particular technical affordances that affect both meaning-making and messaging" (p. 488). These themes also consider the main difference between social media news content and traditional news media – the algorithmic sorting or recommendation of content on a platform (Marwick, 2018). The additional format/affordance-related themes highlighted in the results chapter were already discussed at length, and are thus only discussed elsewhere in their relation to other results. The main themes include:

1. Large, visible images
2. 'Original' posts
3. English-language posts
4. Shorter text content

5. Facebook videos versus off-platform videos

5.2.1.1. LARGE, VISIBLE IMAGES

Every one of the top-shared posts analysed included a full-size image, which are more attractive and attention-grabbing than, for example, long blocks of text. It is not surprising, then, that Facebook might algorithmically promote posts containing images in a bid to keep users engaged. The use of images to portray a message might also be preferable to text since they are harder to filter for hate speech. Additionally, images published in the context of farm attacks/murders work to elicit an affective response in users, as is discussed further down in the context of content-related themes. This may leverage a feedback loop of engagements that work in favour of algorithmic promotion.

Applying a lens of propaganda messaging lends additional credence to large images as being predicators to shareability, where propaganda message content is almost always expressed pictorially, verbally, or both (Walton, 2007). Image macros – encapsulating photos and text together in an image disconnected from any verifiable source material – thus constitute the perfect propaganda message. The most-shared example of the latter is pictured in figure 5.2 below, listing the deliberate efforts by the ruling party to target, disenfranchise, and incite others to murder white South African farmers. This kind of content is designed to be shared between users across various social media, taking advantage of the relative success that horizontal propaganda processes have over top-down apparatuses (Paul & Matthews, 2016). The image macro format, especially in this context, exploits the inherent malleability of internet-based content and lends itself to the acting out of mythic realities (Novak, 1993). This highlights one of the main affordances that differentiates social media from traditional media: that anyone can be a producer and distributer of content (Marwick, 2018).

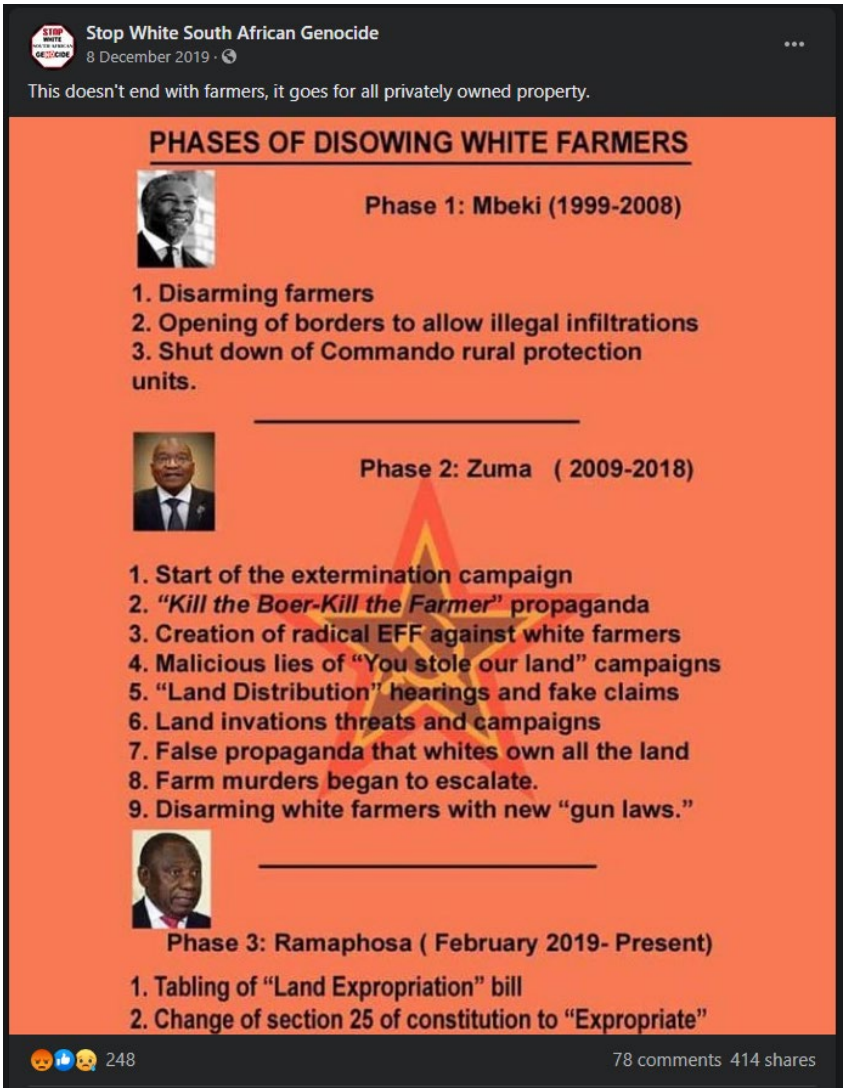

FIGURE 5.18: A WIDELY SHARED POST FEATURING AN IMAGE MACRO

5.2.1.2. 'ORIGINAL' POSTS

'Original' posts might be more shareable in the context of social media that tend to blur and complicate the origins of information sources (Tandoc et al., 2018). Instead of having to navigate a various "layers with various levels of proximity to the reader" (Kang et al., 2011, p. 721), a Facebook user may prefer to navigate to the original publisher of a post and share that. According to Tandoc et al. (2018), receiving information from sources more socially proximate to a user might help them navigate the complexities of source-attribution, and legitimate the credibility of information shared in their social network. In short, the sharing of 'original' posts might help users increase proximity to the information source, thus reducing the complexity of source-attribution for those in their social networks.

The latter may become undesirable in terms of the fake news problem. An overreliance on peers (and the 'original' posts they share) as credible curators of news may foster a dangerous false sense of security (Sundar, 2016). Individuals may become less likely to scrutinise the information presented to them, and therefore less

critical of content that may be problematic. This in turn could lead to users being more easily convinced to share said original content, without scrutiny, due to previously confirmed trust in the 'curators' of news in their Facebook feed.

It is also very likely that Facebook would algorithmically promote only those posts that are 'original'. To promote nested posts would discourage content creation, which is the driving force behind any social media platform.

5.2.1.3. ENGLISH-LANGUAGE POSTS

The most popular alternative news sites indicated by respondents were English-language site *South Africa Today* and, equally, Afrikaans-language site *Maroela Media.* Nine respondents indicated the latter, even though only six respondents listed Afrikaans as their home language. It could be the case that some English-speaking South Africans are able to read Afrikaans proficiently enough that they happily read *Maroela Media* for its news agenda. What should be factored in, however, is the increased time it would take for English-speaking users to read Afrikaans posts (especially when Facebook's translation tool is unusable). The latter does not bode well in the context of the attention economy. Users might also feel that non-English posts might not resonate with those in their social networks living outside of SA.

International audiences are indicated as constituting a large part of the farm attack/murder network on Facebook, explicitly so by the admin of *Break The Silence About SA* (as evidenced in a quote in section 5.3.1.5). As such, non-English posts become instantly less shareable, especially since farm attack/murder networks actively appeal to international audiences for aid and intervention. A few commenters underneath Afrikaans-language posts explicitly complained that the articles shared were not in English, with one even mentioning their desire to share the post with international friends. This is probably why many admins copy and paste entire Afrikaans article contents into the caption of their post, aiming to leverage Facebook's translation function, leaving the original article link in for posterity. Ultimately, however, Facebook's algorithmic rules likely favour posts written in English over Afrikaans, producing a 'snowball' effect in terms of share-count.

5.2.1.4. SHORTER TEXT CONTENT

Shorter text content is indicated as lending increased shareability to a post. Images are king, as mentioned earlier, which means a post's text content is often only included in a secondary capacity. Logistically, long text posts simply take too long for users to read, and so attract less attention to begin with. Even if users were to read a long text post, agree with it, and consider sharing the post, those in their social networks most likely would not be impressed. Page admins might also consider publishing less textual content to avoid inviting fault-finding within smaller details. Briefer text content is also less specific, making posts more relatable, or easier for users to project their beliefs onto. Finally, there is the matter of Facebook's promotional algorithm, which would ultimately aim to promote briefer, snappier posts, lending them more visibility, and thus more shares.

5.2.1.5. FACEBOOK VIDEOS VERSUS OFF-PLATFORM VIDEOS

Posts with Facebook video content tended to have higher share counts than posts linking off-platform videos. Being able to directly view a video on the Facebook platform satisfies constraints presented by the attention economy. When combined with affective subject contents, this function is not that different to television content being created and formatted in such a way to keep viewers from changing the channel. The monetary aspect cannot be ignored either: Facebook has started monetising video content on its platform by cutting short advertisements into their runtime, sometimes multiple times throughout a short video. Thus increased shareability is most likely awarded to Facebook videos by the platform's algorithm, and not by users who appreciate the immediacy of access. Survey respondents indicated that they would typically always read an external article if it were linked in a post, illustrating that these communities are not totally averse to navigating away from Facebook to, say, YouTube.

Regarding format-related associations users might have, only six respondents indicated having not watched documentaries on the topic of farm attacks/murders, meaning most were familiar with video-format coverage. As indicated earlier, respondents providing answers regarding unlisted documentary videos could only remember having watched *something*. This could imply that there is not much importance attributed to the specific video creators. These audiences may seek out any video content that affirms what they already believe, without any critical examination of the information producers. The respondents that had watched documentary-style videos on the topic all believed the format to lend some credence to the creators' messages. This combination, then, of a ready supply of farm attack/murder videos, and the format's credibility, leads to an unsurprising popularity of such video content. It is this foundation that Facebook's algorithm may be exploiting, where, additionally, video content is among the hardest formats to filter for hate speech.

5.2.2. CONTENT-RELATED THEMES

As evidenced by Marwick (2018), affective social media content is generally more engaging than content that is more thoughtful and nuanced, and tends to receive the favour of algorithmic promotion as well. Thus, in addition to the affordance-related themes above, specific kinds of post contents seemed to increase shareability, the main themes of which are:

1. Gratuitous or provocative images
2. Gratuitous and affective language
3. Counting or listing cases

There were eight additional themes coded for, but which did not definitively contribute to shareability, and therefore are discussed only in the context of the CDA due to overlapping convergences. The fact that so many of the themes coded for were quantitatively inconclusive might point to affordance-related themes as being stronger indicators of shareability for farm attack/murder posts.

5.2.2.1. GRATUITOUS OR PROVOCATIVE IMAGES

Many of the most-shared posts included images that were gratuitous in nature, or provocatively depicted weapons being brandished, or the destruction/burning of property/cars. Posts championing violent images certainly constitute "spreadable media spectacles" (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017), explaining their high level of shareability. Gratuitous images of victims of violent crime are 'spectacular' since they are "out of the ordinary and habitual daily routine" (Kellner, 2009, p. 1), where these homophilous communities very easily "create, extend, and sustain spectacle with little support from mainstream media" (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017, p. 442). The images shared were almost always uploaded directly, and contextual information provided by the admin, sometimes listing an unverifiable source ("from a WhatsApp group"), sometimes not (see figure 5.3 below, image blurred). Some of the since-deleted website URLs may also have featured gratuitous images, visible on Facebook via the link. Gratuitous images of this nature can only logistically be published outside of bona-fide journalism and ethical constraints. This ironically might strengthen white genocide believers' conceptions of mainstream media as ignoring farm attacks, encouraging the spectacle's maintenance without support from mainstream news.

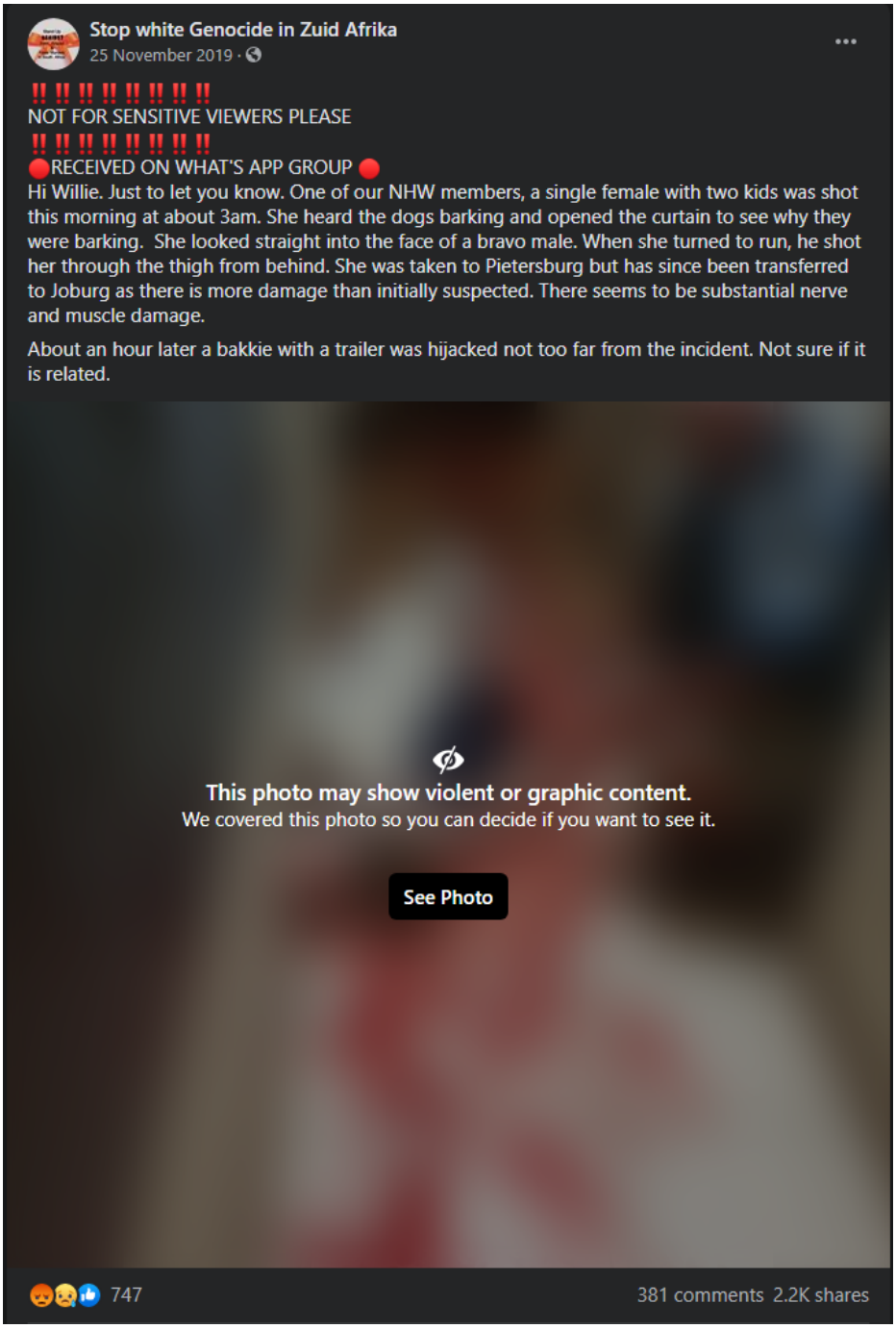

FIGURE 5.19: EXAMPLE OF A POST CONTAINING A GRATUITOUS IMAGE, WITH AN UNVERIFIABLE SOURCE

The shareability evoked by gratuitous images corresponds with propaganda characteristics, where messages are able to "overload various affective capacities, such as nostalgia, sentiment, or fear" (Stanley, 2015, p. 53). Fear is the emotion most activated in this case. In the same way humans are morbidly fascinated by violent accidents, so too are they enthralled by gratuitous images of farm attack victims who embody the most graphic symbol of an event they fear and wish to avoid. Shareability may thus be borne of users hoping to warn others about potential threats to their lives. Most notably, however, images depicting the more gory farm attacks ultimately work to classify the crimes in a class of their own – one which supports the narrative of white genocide.

Two of the posts analysed herein contained comment threads regarding the use of gratuitous images. Some users, though not against sharing news about farm attacks/murders, were opposed to gratuitous images of dead bodies presumed to be farm attackers (but who were actually cash-in-transit criminals). Other users justified the posting of such images in alignment with the theory of affective content above. Sentiments included:

- Opposers should see the photos of farm attack victims so that they're never able to feel anything but disgust for 'these savages'.
- Opposers should leave the Facebook page because this is 'reality'.
- Opposers would not be so against the posting of images of dead farm attackers if they or their family were victims of a farm attack.

Some of these assertions are mirrored by the CDA themes, namely that dissenters are in denial and unable to stomach the 'reality' of the agenda, and that widely accessible details of more gratuitous farm attacks are proof of a targeted genocide.

5.2.2.2. GRATUITOUS AND AFFECTIVE LANGUAGE

Similarly to the use of gratuitous and provocative images described above, many of the most-shared posts used gratuitous language to describe farm attack/murder cases that appeals to affective activation. This runs parallel to propagandistic messaging, which commonly makes use of rhetorical figures, persuasive definitions, and emotive language in a bid to further its cause (Vamanu, 2019). Operating against the backdrop of an increasingly emotionalised contemporary media landscape (Richards, 2007) and a proclivity for the sensational (Marwick & Lewis, 2018), it is no small wonder that emotionalised language may be a strong determinant of shareability. Gratuitous language may even affect algorithmic favouring – El-Sharawy (2017) argues that the Facebook tends to favour striking, emotional content whether it is factual or not. By emphasising the 'cruelty' and 'brutality' of these cases, whites are framed as being targeted not because they control a relative amount of wealth, but *because* of their identity as whites/Afrikaners (Vanderhaeghen, 2018). Foregrounding violent details stresses the agency of attackers and aims to prove the targeted persecution of whites (Vanderhaeghen, 2018).

Furthermore, the use of graphic language to describe crimes in painstaking detail constitutes a mode of language different to that of formal news media. This can assist in further undermining more official narratives already distrusted by the audience herein (Wasserman, 2017). Informal coverage of farm attacks/murders – especially of affective/emotional nature – affirms the anxieties of white reactionaries, and validates social identities in a divided African country (Chakrabarti et al., 2018). Ultimately, as was the case among the population in Wasserman and Madrid-Morales' study (2019), this content resonates more strongly with reactionary white audiences' experiences and perceptions than more mainstream media that is state-owned or elite-oriented. In fact, six survey respondents explicitly indicated trusting alternative news websites because they cover stories pertinent to themselves and their communities.

It was noted that, at least for *South Africa Today*, this kind of content garnered far more shares than that which was more analytical, political, and disaffected (such as interviews with political figures, statistical analysis of caseloads, etcetera). Political or news content appears only as a small part of an individual's social feed amidst a constant flow of information including personal stories, photographs, gossip, etcetera – an experience that Hermida (2010) terms 'ambient journalism'. The overall flow of information on platforms like Facebook, then, is affective, where news is "collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion, all sustained by and sustaining ambient news environments" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 34). What this process results in is journalistic objectivity no longer holding value since most stories, written by non-journalists in this case, are accompanied by users' opinions. The boundaries between spaces for news and spaces for commentary are broken down (Hermida, 2017), and more objective, analytical content, even if only in appearance, is glossed over in favour of affective content.

5.2.2.3. COUNTING ATTACKS/MURDERS

A common thread among the top 50 most-shared posts was a tendency to stack farm attack/murder cases for a given period of time. The goal seemed to be to create the illusion that attacks/murders are happening more frequently than previously recorded (where in fact, cases are decreasing). The frequency of violent crimes against whites is emphasised, serving users large doses of pessimism and creating a powerful case toward the conclusion that the new SA is a big fiasco, as predicted (Steyn & Foster, 2008). These posts aim to convince users that the threat of white genocide is looming ever closer, inciting fear among those paying attention, and invoking the common insinuation that SA is in a constant state of decline (Steyn & Foster, 2008).

This theme works to affirm white South Africans' position as 'victims' under the new dispensation by stacking cases as evidence that whites are disproportionately targeted. As argued by Vanderhaeghen (2018) in the context of Afrikaner identity, an identity narrative encompassing persecution and victimisation works to negate the lingering stigma of 'oppressor' fostered over the duration apartheid and – extending to other whitenesses – the duration of British colonial rule. By doing so, whites appeal to a universal humanitarian sympathy that "wipes away the past and focuses on the present", allowing them to "embrace an identity as the new 'others', victimised and put upon by those they have 'othered'" (Vanderhaeghen, 2018, p. 18-19). In this way, white South Africans are able to appropriate innocence, smudge lines of accountability, shift the blame, and avert the gaze of accusers.

This theme arguably increases shareability, especially among international audiences, due to the powerful case it makes that white South African farmers are being totally overwhelmed by the black majority. This may strike a chord in other countries where white populations are becoming political minorities due to increasing refugee populations. It also helps that such posts do not explicitly constitute fake news in the classic sense – they are merely extremely biased and one-sided, making them harder to report/filter.

5.3. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The CDA discussed herein aims to address the second component of Marwick's sociotechnical model: "media messaging is often structured in particular ways to further a variety of agendas" (2018, p. 487-488). The very presence of the comment threads analysed is indicative of an active audience of Facebook users affirming, considering, or denying the information presented to them in posts, and in conversation with other commenters. Comment sections also indicate that page followers interpret and decode messages from the admins based on their social positioning, and the discursive resources available to them (Hall, 1973). Commenters defending against social corrections are doing so from their social positions as largely white, reactive, 'disenfranchised' South Africans, drawing from discursive repertoires that have been used elsewhere in the public sphere for some time. Active respondents are essential to a horizontal propaganda structure (Ellul and Kellen, 1973), since conversation is the key medium through which individuals develop the attitudes, acquire the beliefs, or engage in the calls to action espoused by the propaganda proponents (the admins).

Most of the discursive themes discussed herein leverage various cognitive biases (cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, selective exposure, motivated reasoning, etcetera), so these will only be referenced in the most extreme cases. It was apparent during analysis that users, in line with group identity theory, tended toward 'conformity', where "individuals often [engaged] in … conscious and deliberate attempts to gain the social approval of others" (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, p. 610). Users defending a post, or even each other, against 'attacks' by dissenters consistently acknowledged and congratulated each other's efforts in this regard, and generally interacted with each other on positive terms. Additionally, the consistent use of dichotomous rhetoric throughout worked to "signal [users'] identity and affiliate themselves with like-minded others" (Marwick, 2018, p. 505).

It should also be noted that socially corrective comments left by dissenters occurred in a network context of weak ties, where dissenters were viewed as outsiders by page followers. These followers, not definitively sharing strong ties – connections featuring intimacy, emotional intensity, time, and reciprocal services (Granovetter, 1973) – do, however, inhabit a space of 'shared meaning' (Jenkins, 2013). Having weak ties and being outside the space of shared meaning meant that dissenters' corrective information was easily dismissed due to a lack of trust (Bode & Vraga, 2018). These naturally insular communities, made more insular by conspiratorial ideation, logistically limit potential exposure to corrective information, and offer increased scepticism toward corrections when they *are* exposed (Bessi et al., 2015).

The very presence of dissenting comments – albeit not many – does contradict any sweeping assertions of page followers as existing purely in echo chambers or filter bubbles. The fact that users have developed and co-opted so many discursive strategies with which to respond to dissenters indicates that their social media feeds may not be entirely insulated. However, there was not much proof that politically active users "search for and double check problematic political information, and expose themselves to a variety of viewpoints" (Dutton et al., 2017, p. 1). In fact, survey respondents' complete distrust of any media that does not validate the white genocide

indicates the influence of self-perpetuated echo chambers, more so than filter bubbles borne of algorithmic processes.

One commenter explicitly alluded to their awareness of the algorithmic promotion of Facebook posts, and the strategies users engage in to spread awareness of the issue (paraphrased):

> Most replies I get are from liberals denying the facts, but I recommend replying in a sensible way, which probably still won't have the desired effect, but it keeps the article popping up, and more people will read it. Baby steps.

Ultimately, the fact that only 40 out of the hundreds (possibly thousands) of farm attack/murder/white genocide-related posts observed during data collection contained evidence of social corrections is congruent with findings by other researchers. Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) indicate that the vast majority of made-up/inaccurate news in the UK goes unchallenged. Tandoc et al. (2020) indicate that 73% of social media users in Singapore generally ignore fake news when they come across it, even given platform functions to report such content. Of the data collected herein, 21.6% of the initial analysis units (379) constituted social corrections that were completely ignored.

Having discussed the more general findings, the main discursive themes to be discussed are as follows:

1. Dissenter's comments are incorrect, or lies
2. Dissenter is naïve, foolish, in denial, or racist (against whites)
3. Black people are inherently criminogenic
4. Government or political parties are orchestrating, or are at least complicit in the white genocide agenda
5. Dissenter or their information source do not live in SA, and therefore cannot know the 'truth'
6. The fake details of one instance do not matter because the overarching narrative is undeniably true
7. The highly-documented gory details of farm attacks and victims' personal stories prove the extra-ordinary severity of the crimes
8. Defensive non-racialism
9. Dissenter must be sympathetic toward the ANC/EFF/communism/liberalism
10. Stacking cases or conflating details from violent cases
11. Nostalgia for apartheid, and selective amnesia about the past's role in SA's current issues
12. Dissenters must acknowledge SA's path toward becoming Zimbabwe

Some more minor themes are also discussed that did not make the cut since they were not technically discursive in nature. These include the tendency for commenters to express profanities at dissenters, and the flippant dismissal of dissenters.

5.3.1. MAIN DISCURSIVE THEMES

5.3.1.1. DISSENTER'S COMMENTS ARE INCORRECT, OR LIES

The most common discursive strategy leveraged against dissenters was to merely assert that their corrections are incorrect, or that they constitute well-rehearsed lies. One of the most explicit strategies deployed herein saw reverse accusations of dissenters' corrective sources as being 'fake news'. This foregrounds the pervasive power of Trump and other politicians' framing of the term, who use it to brand traditional media sources with which they disagree (Jankowski, 2018). This further resonates with Tripodi's (2018a) argument that conservatives interpret mainstream media coverage as fake news due to close-reading assessment techniques similar to biblical interpretation. This is especially resonant considering the high percentage of very religious survey respondents. Furthermore, allegations of fake news against uncomfortable corrective information work to marginalise and delegitimise dissenters who oppose the core work of what can be considered a propaganda message (Gelfert, 2018; Dentith, 2017). Users are able to simply dismiss corrective information that conflicts with their already-established beliefs on white genocide as 'fake news'.

One example extends the conditions under which this behaviour typically happens. A few users left comments alleging that an article posted constituted fake news. The article in question highlighted the US's formal stance on South Africa's land expropriation outcries as containing "a lot of misinformation". Interestingly, the article was written by *The South African*, a known publisher of problematic information, and posted by veritably problematic Facebook page *SA Exposed*. Whether or not is was written with increased audience engagement in mind, where negative engagements are equally rewarded algorithmically speaking (Marwick, 2018), the implication remains that it might not matter where dissenting content comes from. It could be the case that any information opposing beliefs in the white genocide is dismissible as 'fake news', even if the source in question usually confirms the narrative. If nothing else, the latter does indicate an active audience that is not blindly loyal to specific news websites/pages, but which is strongly influenced by cognitive biases.

Commenters also often defensively clapped back with their own 'evidence' to justify their points. This was especially common under false posts alleging that the US was planning to imminently intervene in SA on behalf of white farmers. Those who fervently believed the stories posted links to a bill hosted on the official US congressional website as proof that the story was real (further speaking to Tripodi's point about close reading). Other times, they posted links to other Facebook users' talking-head videos explaining why the bill and impending intervention was definitely real. This clearly illustrates the process of doubling down in the face of cognitive dissonance, and users' abilities to find and share content that supports their misguided beliefs.

5.3.1.2. Dissenter is naïve, foolish, in denial, or racist (against whites)

This theme makes active use of powerful dichotomies – a common trope of propaganda messaging (Vamanu, 2019). Dissenters accused of being in denial regarding the white genocide were almost always framed as being either wilfully or unknowingly "asleep", while commenters defending the existence of the genocide were "awake". This dichotomy works to frame believers and the pages they follow as "custodians of the truth", brave enough to carry its heavy burden, while dissenters are cowardly for choosing to "stick their heads in the sand".

Such righteous self-positioning corroborates some other results herein, especially the sense of civic duty that problematic information sharers espouse, and the blind praise awarded to admins for the "good work" they do.

Ultimately, the pejorative terms of this dichotomy work to create polarisations that result in "affective arousal bias", contributing to increasing levels of "partisan bias and evaluative judgments" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 112). By consistently reinforcing themselves as the group privy to "the truth", and all non-believers as "blind" to the distressing reality of the white genocide, this network of users deepens divides in a country already plagued by racial disparities. Where the dissenters happened to be black, and they often were, these dichotomising processes worked to further justify their marginalisation and oppression (Walton, 2007). Commenters opposing black dissenters, in addition to assertions of denial, often embellished their accusations with overtly racist insults.

5.3.1.3. BLACK PEOPLE ARE INHERENTLY CRIMINOGENIC

This discursive repertoire appealed to longstanding, deeply and globally entrenched narratives (but especially in SA) that black people are inherently criminogenic. There was once again a heavy reliance on dichotomous terms that work to maintain and increase polarisation levels (Gelfert, 2018) and further subjugate marginalised and oppressed peoples (Walton, 2007). SA's black population – who have a long history of being viewed as violently criminogenic – are consistently referred to as "they", often in a covert, dog-whistle capacity. The latter worked to communicate a user's racist position on the subject of farm attack/murder perpetrators, but avoided provocation. The other side of this dichotomy refers to "we" – the 'embattled' white population of SA framed as disproportionate victims of violent crimes committed by "them", due to a race-based, targeted persecution. The additional strategy of framing these assertions in the format of a question also utilises a dog-whistle approach, but expects dissenters to acknowledge the universal 'truth' of the answers. In doing so, users aimed to undermine any corrective action that contradicts the white genocide narrative. Furthermore, dog-whistle framing may help users avoid being reported for hate speech on Facebook's platform.

The race/crime link is a prevalent mainstay of white identity in SA (Gabriel, 1998), and was reinvigorated after apartheid was dissolved, when crime became more democratised in that it affected both white and black South Africans more proportionately (Steyn & Foster, 2008). For some white South Africans, the end of apartheid signalled the start of the 'black onslaught' that "ideologues of apartheid had long warned would be one of the consequences of African rule" (Shaw & Gastrow, 2001, p. 235). The presence of this discursive framing indicates that the white genocide community is still heavily invested in the latter narrative. Kynoch (2013) encapsulates this well:

> The wanton violence and racist utterances attributed to some black perpetrators reinforces the belief that violent crime is inseparable from racial antagonism. These sentiments underscore an all too common perception of a white population under siege by a mass of vengeful black criminals, while the (black) government stands idly by. (p. 430)

It seems to be the case that the serious racial, cultural, and political differences in SA's social backdrop do indeed result in communities more prone to believing problematic information, where "the success of fabricated items relies on pre-existing social tension" (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 143). SA being a country with complex race relations issues, both historically and currently, it is not surprising that problematic information surrounding a non-existent white genocide has spread so well, especially considering the pervasive fear of '*Die Swart Gevaar*' (Korf & Malan, 2002). Social divisions facilitate citizens' willingness to read and believe content that affirms their enmity toward another group, in this case, SA's black population (Tandoc et al., 2018). Ultimately, this discursive strategy justifies stricter policing and criminal justice systems that affect black people disproportionately (Steyn & Foster, 2008). In 2020, the dangers of the latter were highlighted more than ever, where George Floyd's killing by excessive force on behalf of US police sparked unprecedented global protests against police brutality toward minorities, calling for police funding to be diverted toward other social support functions.

5.3.1.4. GOVERNMENT OR POLITICAL PARTIES ARE ORCHESTRATING, OR AT LEAST COMPLICIT IN THE WHITE GENOCIDE AGENDA

Another popular retort alleged that the South African government (and leftist political parties) is somehow involved in the white genocide. The less conspiratorial vein of this discursive theme locates farm attacks and murders as a result of negligence, incompetence, or neglect on behalf of the government, due largely to institutional breakdown and poor governance (Vanderhaeghen, 2018). As Vanderhaeghen (2018) argues, these sentiments employ multiple strands of discourse, including the general degradation of services, especially as a result of ill-conceived policy or political inaction. Some commenters specifically highlighted the South African president's inaction over the issue of farm attacks/murders, and the consequent lack of policing resources dedicated to rural areas where farmers are attacked. They attribute blame for farmers' deaths to the presidents' political decision-making (or lack thereof). Most often, corruption was highlighted as the main form of institutional breakdown resulting in the lack of state resources dedicated to farmers.

This less overtly conspiratorial, but still accusational theme regarding the government can be further framed within Cramers' (2016) "politics of resentment". The latter describes rural residents – in this case, farmers – believing that urban institutions and governments, purposefully or not, ignore rural concerns and deprive their communities of much-needed resources (Cramer, 2016). What rural communities refuse to acknowledge, however, is that the majority of a country's population lives in dense, urban settings, where the majority of crimes (and therefore, policing resources) are located. Instead, a perceived relative lack of access to policing resources affirms white rural communities' longstanding beliefs that the South African government is discriminating against them. The survey herein has interesting implications regarding the politics of resentment: most respondents indicated not living in a rural area, and not living or working on a farm or small holding. This would indicate that most users might be invested in the narrative of white genocide for reasons other than their own immediate safety or wellbeing, perhaps instead being invested in the maintenance of white victimhood and, by extension, white supremacy.

The longstanding distrust in South African government, especially due to widespread corruption, does provide a firm foundation for more conspiratorial sentiments, which are more likely to occur when beliefs in government corruption and general uncertainty are high (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013; Bruder et al., 2013). Marwick and Lewis' (2017) findings in this regard certainly resonate with the communities herein: conspiracy theories generally express anxieties over losing status or control in a particular milieu, where white South Africans experienced a drastic reduction in political power when apartheid ended. Evidently, this population's conspiratorial beliefs are specifically tailored to their racial and political anxieties – none of the survey respondents were sceptical enough about data privacy to use fake names on Facebook.

Ultimately, when commenters allege government involvement in response to dissenters, it becomes clear that, as argued by Bruder et al. (2013) and Miller et al. (2016), providing corrections might not be sufficient in population groups that tend toward conspiratorial ideation. This is not surprising since those who tend to hold conspiracy beliefs also tend to have lower levels of interpersonal trust, making them less receptive to social correction (Lewandowsky et al., 2013; Jolley & Douglas, 2014a; Bode & Vraga, 2018).

5.3.1.5. Dissenter or their information source does not live in SA, and therefore cannot know the 'truth'

In the case of the comment sections analysed, some dissenters happened to be South African expatriates (expats) living in other countries. Many commenters strategically located this positioning and highlighted it in a bid to discredit dissenters' proof against the white genocide. Dissenting expats (or corrective information sources published by foreign journalists) were targeted for their lack of physical proximity to the issue at hand. Believers argued that "seeing is believing", and that being on the ground, closer to the threat at hand would have a definitive sway over one's belief in the targeted persecution against whites. The latter is perhaps what made Lauren Southern and Katie Hopkins' 'documentaries' so persuasive among this population – although both are foreign media entities, both came to visit SA to assess the situation first-hand.

Ironically, many of the page admins were expats themselves, but this was tolerated by followers because the admins are "fighting the good fight". Posting information proving the existence of a white genocide not only justifies administrators' own decision to leave, but their positions as expats paradoxically lends credence to their posts. The logic of the latter is along the lines of "they must have experienced a bad enough farm attack that they were forced to leave". Where believers were expats themselves, their comments indicated they had family, friends, or 'reliable sources' on the ground in SA feeding them 'true' information of the country's goings-on. The (very vocal and participatory) admin of *Break The Silence About SA* did, in one comment, allude to the large international component of their audience:

> We have an advantage in that this is a community page managed from Britain, which has a massive following from outside of SA. On this basis, our posts are not hidden from people living outside of SA – this is what makes our page different from other groups and pages.

When commenters were asked why they do not just leave the country if they feel so threatened, many indicated wishing they could, but that they could not afford to do so. One of the justifications for this "white flight" (other than the white genocide, of course) is perceived 'reverse racism' at the state level, especially measures such as affirmative action policies. The implication is that developments under the new democracy are, at best, antithetical to white interests, so much so that leaving the country is seen as the rational thing to do (Steyn & Foster, 2008). In this context, whites are framed as unrecognised heroes, and their negative reactions as fair since the new SA is one "where the worthy are punished and the unworthy disproportionately rewarded, and where the victimized white group is undervalued, not fully respected, and unwelcome" (Steyn & Foster, 2008, p. 44). An argument is made that whites have no option but to leave due to black people violently pushing them out of the country: emigration and disinvestment are thus naturalised (Steyn & Foster, 2008).

5.3.1.6. THE FAKE DETAILS OF ONE INSTANCE DO NOT MATTER, BECAUSE THE OVERARCHING NARRATIVE IS UNDENIABLY TRUE

Many commenters, in the face of proof that at least one crucial detail about a post was false, dismissed these incidences as exceptions to the norm that do not matter because the overarching white genocide narrative is undeniably true. The deep-set belief held by individuals in these communities that there is a targeted persecution against whites supersedes any conflicting information noted by dissenters. Information that highlights cut-and-dry false facts present within posts are immediately dismissed due to the discomfort caused by two sets of conflicting beliefs – the mental state known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). By reducing the value of accuracy, users are able to reduce the uncomfortable feeling produced by cognitive dissonance (Van Bavel & Pareira, 2018).

One of the posts discovered during the QCA highlights these communities' complete dismissal of cases where black farmers are attacked (threatening the stability of the white genocide narrative), where many readers found such coverage laughable (see figure 5.4 below, and the prevalent 'laugh' reactions). These cases are thus explained away as rare examples among a sea of black-on-white farm attacks that are the norm, or are relativised into meaninglessness through the employment of non-racialism.

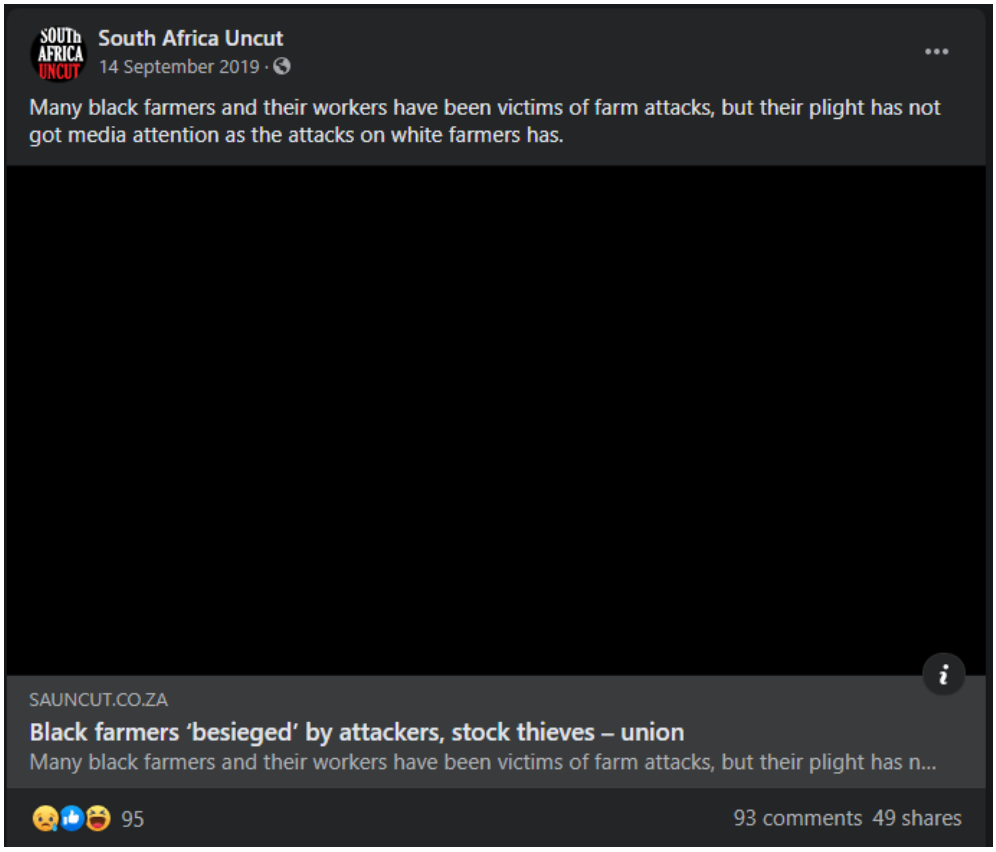

FIGURE 5.4: A POST HIGHLIGHTING THE PLIGHT OF BLACK FARMERS FACING ATTACKERS

It should be noted that there was little evidence that any of Facebook's efforts to flag false information – jointly recommending a fact-checking article – were acknowledged by users. A very likely reason for this could be that Facebook's flagging processes are too slow in the face of viral posts, where the flag is usually only implemented after the damage is done. A similar problem saw admins making correctional updates to posts after the fact: even though their corrections are often explicitly highlighted, to do so even 24 hours after publication is to attempt correction after the post has already been seen by thousands. Corrections by admins, however, would arguably be more respected by page followers than those imposed by Facebook content flaggers from within the platform's institution (Marwick, 2018). Of course, positive responses to the flagging function would be harder to measure since their success would constitute users navigating away from the post in question without leaving measurable engagements.

5.3.1.7. THE DOCUMENTED GORY DETAILS OF FARM ATTACKS AND VICTIM'S PERSONAL STORIES PROVE THE EXTRA-ORDINARY SEVERITY OF THE CRIMES

Another discursive theme appearing in response to dissenting comments framed what constitutes extra-ordinary access to a highly-documented set of crimes online (farm attacks/murders) as proof that these crimes are unusually cruel and severe. This documentation includes explicit information about the cases and the

victims'/families' experiences in their own words, where such information about other crimes is not nearly as documented/accessible.

What this discursive theme highlights is the agenda-setting influence leveraged by the alternative news websites and white genocide-focused Facebook pages. The groundwork has already been laid by a mainstream media publishing bias that amplifies and prioritises white crime victims' stories over those of black victims. This foundation is further strengthened by whites' preconceived notion that SA's administration is openly hostile toward the white population (Kynoch, 2013). A (completely unfounded) perceived lack of coverage of farm attacks/murders by mainstream news has led to an agenda-setting vacuum filled by the websites/pages described herein. These entities now operate in their own right as media authorities on the subject, legitimising or de-legitimising particular viewpoints, and determining what people consider to be significant issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The heavily lopsided coverage of white farm attack/murder victims as opposed to cases of black violent crime victims places propagandistic emphasis on only certain aspects of an issue, discouraging counterarguments or alternative perspectives (Walton, 2007).

The negative effects of consuming persistently biased news coverage were especially evident in the case of the Hoyana murder (described further in section 5.3.1.8 below). Many commenters incorrectly assumed that *another* white farmer had been killed by a black perpetrator, before it was revealed that the victim was black, and the perpetrator white, allegedly a farmer. Vanderhaeghen's (2018) analysis of *Beeld* indicates an exclusive focus on white squatters, where there was no parallel coverage of black squatters: white genocide coverage is the same in its exclusive focus on white farm attack/murders by black perpetrators. The reasons Vanderhaeghen provides for this bias can be transcribed onto the current study: that (1) covering both types of cases – where the victim is white and the attacker black, as well as cases where the victim is black and the attacker white – would undermine the carefully curated white victimhood narrative; and (2) that post-apartheid/post-colonial white identities would be destabilised should cases of whites murdering black South Africans come to the fore, harking back to apartheid-era white identities who executed such crimes without consequence.

The lens of Alexander's (2004) "collective cultural trauma" offers a complementary insight regarding this discursive theme. Mediated mass communication, embodied perfectly by social media, "allows traumas to be expressively dramatised and permits some of the competing interpretations to gain enormous persuasive power over others" (Alexander, 2018, p. 18). The trauma, in this case, could be the crimes themselves, where the majority of the survey respondents indicated that either they or someone close to them have been the victim of a farm attack. However, there is also a more longstanding collective trauma being dramatised in this case: white South Africans' sudden introduction to more (democratically distributed) violent crime after the fall of apartheid (Kynoch, 2013). For Afrikaners, the collective cultural trauma may be doubly so. They were initially disenfranchised by colonial Britain, who violently disrupted Afrikaners' agency and connection to "the land" (Steyn, 2001), and then subsequently ousted from political power when apartheid was dissolved. The compounded threat of land expropriation may have once again triggered a traumatic response among the Afrikaner population.

A final consideration of this theme turns to the digital divide: white South Africans have increased access to the internet and social media relative to economically disenfranchised black citizens. This affords them the opportunity to more readily document their traumas relating to violent crime – in this case, farm attacks/murders. The fact that so many of these cases are so easily accessible within informal news networks creates a compelling narrative that white South Africans disproportionately experience unusually brutal and cruel violent crimes.

5.3.1.8. DEFENSIVE NON-RACIALISM

The discursive theme of non-racialism was certainly one of the less overtly negative set of responses given to dissenters, but was still strategically invoked, and has negative implications for addressing SA's lasting racial inequalities. Most of these comments were made defensively, either in response to the Hoyana case, or to dissenters bringing up historically evidenced persecutions against black South Africans. There were a few comments that genuinely tried to appeal to the 'rainbow nation' notion, condemning the murder of any South African, but these were few and far between, and were not well appreciated by more reactive commenters.

For context, the Hoyana case was one of the big stories of 2019 published as a farm murder, even though details eventually came to light that no one involved was definitively a farmer. The perpetrator, however, did live on a smallholding and committed the crime there, which satisfies the official SAPS definition of a farm murder. Initial coverage assumed that the victim must have been white, and the perpetrator black. As it turned out, the perpetrator, Fritz Joubert, a white sub-contractor for Eskom, murdered his black friend and *sangoma*, Anele Hoyana, after an argument broke out late one evening. Joubert filmed himself committing the murder, and Hoyana's wife and child were present when he was violently killed. Joubert was later fatally shot after he attacked the police attempting to apprehend him. There were mixed opinions regarding the crime's classification: some commenters, alternative news websites, and agricultural organisations attempted to exclude the case from the farm murder category (Head, 2019), perhaps because the victim was black and the perpetrator white.

For those commenters confronted with the fact that this was a white-on-black crime (emphasised by dissenters), a common response was to negate their discomfort by invoking the discursive strategy of non-racialism. This allows for the reframing of the social and personal consequences of racialisation in a decontextualised way (Wellman, 1993). By asserting that "crime knows no colour" in this case, commenters circumvent the obligation to confront their own biases propping up beliefs in the white genocide, and avoid acknowledging the continued subjugation of black South Africans by whites.

Furthermore, the specific strain of non-racialism asserting the ubiquity of human cruelty ("there are just evil-natured people") employs a general practice of spreading the blame (Steyn & Foster, 2008). In doing so, commenters divert attention away from the effects of colonisation and apartheid, when violent white-on-black crimes were commonplace. One (seemingly South African Indian) commenter, responding to a dissenter referencing the latter, attempted to relativise the issue and spread blame: "An eye for an eye makes the whole

world blind. Africans were murdered, and now Europeans are being murdered, and Indians were brought as slaves […]". Such a nonchalant perspective plays down the trauma of colonialism, apartheid, and racialisation, blurring context specifics, obscuring actors' roles and the consequences of their actions, and ultimately excises any questions of moral accountability for SA's present situation (Seidel, 1988).

5.3.1.9. DISSENTER MUST BE SYMPATHETIC TOWARD THE ANC/EFF/COMMUNISM/LIBERALISM

This discursive repertoire dismissed dissenters and their corrective comments since anyone opposing the white genocide narrative must be sympathetic toward 'universally' hated and distrusted actors that include the ANC, the EFF, communists, and/or liberals. The dichotomising efforts here nod toward polarisation effects within the Facebook page communities analysed. The argument is made that if one does not believe in the targeted persecution of whites in SA, they must belong to the ideological opposition – the left-wing. The effects of partisanship are notable, where positioning dissenters as being 'outside' of their collective community identity implicitly signals their own, more right-wing conservative values. Furthermore, comments seem to indicate that liberalism is as demonised within these communities as communism – '*Die Rooi Gevaar*' – likely due to patterns of rhetoric popularised by US conservatism. As indicated by Marwick and Lewis (2017), right-wing critics of mainstream media tend to argue that it is dominated by liberal elites, contributing to conditions resulting in subcultural media manipulation, a hyper-partisan far-right press, and in this case, a network of informal/alternative news entities.

In fact, one of the posts highlighted framed dissent as coming from the "liberal elite world establishment", which was also present in the QCA as the most-shared post across all five pages analysed (over 21,000 shares). Hyper-partisan right-wing media producers tend to form a "distinct and insulated media system" (Benkler et al., 2017) and produce coverage devoted to framing the mainstream media as unreliable and synonymous with 'left-wing'. The audiences attending such sources thus grow to become even more distrustful of, and insulated from external coverage (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

This dichotomy further casts left-wingers and liberals promoting social justice as the enemy, de-moralising the fight for change (Steyn & Foster, 2008). This is a natural defence by those protecting a hierarchical order, in this case, white supremacy. Casting dissenters as dogmatic, zealous and illogical in their political beliefs allows one to de-moralise issues, and further claim to represent value-free rationality when considering the issue of the white genocide (Steyn & Foster, 2008). The latter especially rings true in the face of these communities' constant assertion that they alone are privy to the 'truth' and, by sharing white genocide posts, they are executing a civic duty to promote that 'truth'.

5.3.1.10. STACKING CASES OR CONFLATING DETAILS FROM VIOLENT CASES

A common discursive theme followed in the footsteps of one of the QCA themes discussed earlier – that of stacking or counting cases, though deviating slightly. Commenters referenced gratuitous details from various

farm attack/murder cases and conflated them in such a way as to create the appearance that extreme cruelty is present in *all* cases. This works to convince dissenters that the 'inherently cruel' nature of farm attacks is evidence of a racially motivated genocide.

Selective exposure is taken to the extreme, where users' abilities to seek out case details that confirm their belief in the white genocide assists the deployment of this discursive strategy. In anyone's mind, the most shocking details from various cases would be the most memorable, but believers seem to actively collect details in order to relay them at a later stage should others require convincing of a white genocide. It does not help that there already exists a vast online bank of documented cases from which to draw the most sensational details. Dissenters are also unable to argue that the cruel actions committed by some perpetrators did not happen, or that these details are untrue. The only point they are able make is that the actions of few perpetrators do not prove that all farm attacks are racially motivated, which is easily dismissible by believers.

5.3.1.11. Amnesia or nostalgia for apartheid, where the past is not the cause of SA's current issues

In response to dissenters pointing out gaps in reasoning regarding the white genocide, users retorted by attempting to convince dissenters that SA was better off under apartheid. They alleged that far more white South Africans are killed now than during apartheid, which must be indicative of a targeted persecution. They fail to take into consideration, however, the natural consequences of re-integrating the disparate parts of South African society after the fall of the old dispensation, resulting in a more democratic experience of crime, as discussed earlier. This nostalgia for apartheid indicates some South Africans' complete amnestic denial of the grim realities experienced by any citizens who were not white, or perhaps a lack of empathy for those on the receiving end of state-sanctioned discrimination and violence. Apartheid was demonstrably *only* more ideal for the white population, to whom the majority of civil rights and state resources were devoted.

Furthermore, some commenters located the actions of the new democratic government as the reason for SA's current problems with inequality, actively denying the role that both colonialism and apartheid played in establishing the country's current ills. The general obsession over constant images of neglect, decay, and human suffering (farm murders), when framed as a current issue, are detached from historical causal factors, and contrasted with a time when *some* peoples' lives were more hopeful (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Crime, instead of economic inequality and poverty, is strategically located as SA's biggest problem (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Acknowledging the root problem of inequality would make it impossible for one to avoid acknowledging the lasting effects of previous governments, in turn corrupting the narrative of white innocence and victimhood with the spectre of the 'oppressor' identity.

This discursive repertoire ultimately aims to preserve white South Africans' 'innocence', and silence a history of the oppression of indigenous populations (Vanderhaeghen, 2018). Isolated from any historical context, accusations of a genocide against whites by black South Africans frames perpetrators as having no way to justify their actions (Vanderhaeghen, 2018), even though the overriding motive is robbery. When such crimes *are*

placed in context, however, farm murders are framed as violent revenge for the evils committed by whites in the past, affirming grievances, but paradoxically undermining any moral claim to innocence to begin with (Vanderhaeghen, 2018).

5.3.1.12. DISSENTERS MUST RECOGNISE THAT SA IS ON THE PATH TO BECOMING ZIMBABWE

Some commenters pointed dissenters in the direction of Zimbabwe as a perfect example of what will happen if the targeted persecution of white farmers is allowed to continue in SA. This discursive repertoire is set against an almost immovable, sedimented idea of what being an African country means, which is tough to counter (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Interventions attempting to address the ills of the past (land redistribution efforts) are framed as social engineering (Steyn & Foster, 2008): frivolous and ill-informed efforts, ultimately doomed to fail and possibly borne of insidious greed because this is, after all, an African country.

The implicit argument is made that white South Africans are the only thing standing between economic success and complete collapse, and any attempts to further disenfranchise them moves SA one step closer to becoming another failed African country (Zimbabwe). In this sense, white South African communities invoke a universalistic human rights discourse in order to employ minority protection, absolving themselves from their history and longstanding sources of extant privilege. The underlying notion is that "whites solve problems, blacks create, or are the problems" (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Cases of mismanagement, poor judgment, and corruption become the focus, where the most attackable examples – in this case, Zimbabwe's economic collapse – are used and presented as the norm for all black people (Steyn & Foster, 2008), and African countries. This notion insists that power, wealth, and commercially viable farming land are unsafe in the hands of black South Africans, and should be left in the care of whites (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Vanderhaeghen (2018) argues that this line of discourse is not only defensive, but also tangibly celebratory, and that it grants value and agency in the context of a narrative where the white subjects are virtuous and innocent.

Furthermore, this discursive repertoire implicitly invokes a discourse of 'privilege', where white South Africans feel they have earned the right to state privileges and its protection (in the form of policing resources) in their capacity to contribute to the country's economy. This frames the source of their deserved privilege no longer in terms of race, but in terms of economic criteria (Vanderhaeghen, 2018; Alden & Anseeuw, 2009). The source of this deserved privilege was further extended to include the globalising and technological advancements introduced by whites, framing colonisation as something that should be appreciated by black South Africans.

5.3.2. MINOR DISCURSIVE THEMES

A prevalent theme observed commenters' tendency to use profanities and insults against dissenters. This was unsurprising given that discussions between commenters and dissenters, complete strangers to each other online, basically constituted arguments about an extremely emotional subject, where dissenters often also resorted to this kind of rhetoric. It may be indicative, however, of the backlash effect produced when

commenters double down on their beliefs in order to avoid admitting mistakes and the accompanying embarrassment (Tavris & Aronson, 2007). Tandoc et al. (2020) locate this kind of response as one of the reasons why most social media users tend to avoid socially correcting misinformation that they see online. Resorting to the use of profanities signalled the end of any kind of discussion, working to shut down and dismiss dissenters as quickly as possible.

A similar theme, albeit less profane, had commenters flippantly dismissing dissenters in the context of boredom or their time being wasted. This also worked to shut down conversations, signalling the end of a commenter's participation. Sometimes, in a bid to overwhelm a dissenter, commenters would feign ignorance about basic South African history, asking commenters questions along the lines of "what exactly is SA's past?". This is a popular online phenomenon informally referred to as 'sea-lioning': a type of 'trolling' consisting of persistent requests for evidence of basic, universally understood concepts, while maintaining an air of sincerity and civility (Chandler & Munday, 2016).

5.4. CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the results from all three research components in depth, addressing the RQs, the reviewed literature, and the links between the sets of results. The following chapter concludes this study, making salient the outcomes to the three RQs, outlining the study's contributions, and giving recommendations regarding further research and practical outcomes.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This chapter will discuss the final conclusions borne of the research conducted herein, addressing the RQs that inspired this study. The outcomes mirror some previous studies, whose findings often had to be adapted to what constitutes a relatively new sphere of research. Some outcomes went against previous research in notable and interesting ways. The research processes herein have not been straightforward: many ethical precautions were taken considering the potentially dangerous population, and ever-changing obstacles – such as difficulty acquiring survey software that met professional standards, and the global pandemic – required flexible research techniques. One can only hope to maintain reflexivity, and that the processes herein are transparent and reproduceable. Hopefully this study contributes toward new methodological guidelines that might assist future research of hard-to-reach, reactive online populations, as well as ever-changing fake news phenomena. The following RQs were answered by this study:

6.1. RQ 1: HOW DO USERS ON FARM ATTACK/MURDER-FOCUSED FACEBOOK PAGES TYPICALLY ENGAGE WITH PROBLEMATIC INFORMATION, AND WHY?

Based on survey participants' responses, and corroborated against the outcomes of the other two research components, this section outlines the final conclusions as to the above RQ. The small sample of responses – and thus potential lack of generalisability of the results on their own – was kept in mind.

6.1.1. TRUSTWORTHINESS OF A NEWS SOURCE IS PREDICATED ON WHETHER ITS CONTENT AFFIRMS THE WHITE GENOCIDE, WHILE COGNITIVE BIASES HELP DISMISS CONTRADICTORY INFORMATION

The population of users following farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages *did* constitute an active audience. Users appeared to be somewhat critical of the 'news' they were consuming, but only remained engaged insofar as to confirm what they already believed to be true.

There were clear indications as to why users might turn to farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages and other informal/alternative news sources as opposed to mainstream/legacy media, in which they displayed a profound distrust, often for reasons including conspiratorial allegations of government involvement. The biggest reason for their distrust, however, was mainstream news media's refusal to cover farm attack stories in a way that satisfies users' pre-existing beliefs, namely the motivation being a targeted persecution against whites. The availability of content confirming what they already believed was therefore the strongest heuristic of a trustworthy news outlet.

Marwick's (2018) suggestion to consider offline flows of information proved to be helpful, since personal messaging service WhatsApp was found to be the most popular platform for sharing farm attack/murder-related news. This confirmed the population's longstanding engagement in white persecution narratives, which were

circulating long before social media networks were introduced. The population is thus one whose beliefs are hardy in the face of correctional attempts, and who therefore tend to dismiss contrarian information due to cognitive dissonance, among other cognitive biases, further explaining their trust of news outlets that confirm their beliefs.

A perceived lack of coverage of farm attacks/murders by mainstream news media, and astronomical levels of distrust fostered as a result, has led to an agenda-setting vacuum on the subject. This has been filled by informal news sites and Facebook pages run by individuals with no journalistic training or values. In fact, respondents overwhelmingly confirmed that they believe farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages to be *more accurate* because they operate *independently* from mainstream news media.

6.1.2. Users trust Facebook page administrators as aggregators of news content

Users seem to trust the judgment of farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages admins (who are technically just other citizens) to be reliable opinion leaders in the context of the two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1966) . The admins often shared second-hand information (website links, stories from WhatsApp), and therefore operate within users' networks as trusted aggregators of information. Users may thus indeed judge the veracity of posts by who shared them, as argued by Madden et al. (2017).

The praise awarded to page admins for sharing the 'real truth' about farm attacks/murders contributes to strategies of imagined re-empowerment (Evans, 2011) and validation of the myth of white genocide. By having successfully diverted around mainstream media, admins are given status among their peers and a measure of control over a media institution that most of the population strongly dislikes and distrusts (Marwick & Lewis, 2018).

6.1.3. Users operate within a horizontal propaganda structure fostered by Facebook's platform affordances and the participatory nature of social media

Facebook's platform affordances have allowed fringe communities like white genocide believers to find each other (Harkinson, 2017) and create spaces of 'shared meaning' (Jenkins et al., 2013). This has provided the environment necessary for 'spreadable media spectacles' to emerge, operating without the support of mainstream news media (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Propagandistic content is repeatedly distributed across such Facebook pages, where admins are sometimes highly involved in guiding users toward discovering "the correct line, the anticipated solution, the 'proper' convictions" (Ellul & Kellen, 1973, p. 81). They do so by affirming certain users' comments and deleting or banning others. The latter affordances allow admins to appear democratic and participatory, but who are essentially maintaining a single perspective on the issue, and thus are definitively engaging in propagandistic behaviour (Champoux et al., 2012; Walton, 2007).

The participatory nature of social media has thus turned dark in the case of white genocide, especially regarding video content. The accessibility of platforms like YouTube attracts creators who use video documentary formats to disguise their content as 'fact', but without having to adhere to any form of protocols imposed by regulatory bodies. This, in turn, has created a new set of affiliations that white genocide believers have with video formats more generally. Negative conceptions of objectivity in journalism are thus encouraged, where facts no longer serve to unify, but rather to refute oppositional viewpoints and reinforce partisan identities (Mattson, 2016).

Users generally follow two or more farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages, strengthening cognitive biases on the topic by being repeatedly exposed to belief materials – a repetition effect often present in horizontal propaganda processes (Gelfert, 2018; Ellul & Kellen, 1973). Furthermore, white genocide communities are not as convinced by statistical/infographical post formats. Rather they are inclined toward affective content embodied in stories of individual case accounts and images of the victims or crime scenes. The fact that propaganda messaging relies on the ability to "overload various affective capacities, such as nostalgia, sentiment, or fear" is no coincidence (Stanley, 2015, p. 53).

That almost none of the survey respondents indicated having either knowingly or unknowingly shared posts containing false information is telling. If it was not simply the case that they were too embarrassed to admit doing so, then this might imply a lack of social corrections by other users within their Facebook friend networks. These results resonate with studies outlining social corrections as relatively rare (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2020), especially where homophilous networks tend to decrease exposure to dissenting views (Bessi et al., 2015).

6.1.4. Users' aversion to sharing certain news sources and their defensive engagement in comment sections work to maintain a group identity

A foundational theory this study aimed to explore was that social media sharing is the act of an individual signalling their identity to others (Marwick, 2018). Though the survey aimed to address this, no results directly confirmed the theory. Users, like the page admins, instead espoused a civic duty when it came to their reasons for sharing farm attack/murder-related content on Facebook.

However, this theory did resonate throughout the CDA component, especially if posting comments, whether unprovoked or in response to a dissenter, is viewed as an act of 'sharing'. These interactions still happen within spaces of shared meaning in comment sections since there is a reasonable assumption that other users interested in the topic of farm attacks/murders share the same views. Social identities were further communicated through comments using dichotomous rhetoric: 'us' versus 'them'. 'Us' refers to victimised, reactive, right-wing white identities constructed in opposition to 'them', referring to (depending on context) black South Africans, communists, and liberals. 'They' are either the alleged perpetrators of the crimes themselves, or sympathisers.

There was also cause to believe that this population avoids sharing news from mainstream outlets because it would risk indirectly signalling a left-wing identity to others in their networks. Conversely, sharing articles by right-wing, alternative news sources may work to reinforce the social identity mentioned above (victimised, reactive, right-wing whites) and signal users' stance on farm attacks/murders, and their political leanings more generally.

6.2. RQ 2: What are the most prevalent qualitative and format-related themes (with specific attention paid to platform affordances) among farm attack/murder-related Facebook posts with high share counts, and why?

Popular format-related themes among highly shared farm attack/murder posts indicated a strong adherence to constraints imposed by the 'attention economy' (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), and Facebook's promotional algorithms, which favour content based on its ability to keep users engaged and on the platform. Qualitative themes that definitively elevated post shareability included emotionally affective content, working to provoke fears about the white genocide in a manner not dissimilar to propagandistic messaging.

Large images were championed for shareability across all posts analysed, especially in their ability to attract and hold attention – a valuable characteristic within Facebook's 'information overload', and favoured by the platform's promotional algorithm. The use of image macros was indicative of propagandistic processes, highlighting the dark side of internet content's inherent malleability, which lends itself to the acting out of mythic realities (Novak, 1993), like white genocide. Image formats further allow for affectively gratuitous or provocative visuals – a qualitative theme predicating increased shareability due to its ability to overload affective capacities relating to fear (Stanley, 2015).

High share counts of 'original' posts indicated users' aversion toward the complications that 'nested' posts present in terms of social proximity, sharing, and trust. Original posts present in such a way that the source of content is made more immediately evident, but which may discourage critical scrutiny of the information therein. Facebook may not promote posts that are not original – to do otherwise would discourage content creation. On-platform video content was notably more shareable than externally-hosted videos, where Facebook would undoubtedly promote content that keeps users from navigating elsewhere.

English-language posts were favoured by way of accessibility among international audiences invested in SA's white genocide narrative, who cannot read Afrikaans. English-language posts also likely attracted Facebook's algorithmic favour for their universality. Shorter text content was automatically more shareable compared to long blocks of text amidst the 'attention economy'. Shorter text content also invites less cause to find error with small details, and is easier for users to project beliefs onto. Gratuitously descriptive text content regarding farm

attack/murder cases, offering an alternative language 'mode' to formal news media (Wasserman, 2017), proved inherently more shareable in its affectivity, and less likely to be flagged compared to gratuitous images.

Stacking farm attack/murder cases for a given period of time presented an urgent case that the white genocide process is speeding up, activating believers' civic duty to warn their contacts by sharing such posts. These posts, constituting evidence of the white genocide, are also highly shareable in international contexts where there is white anxiety over impending minority-ship.

The relative lack of success of many other coded themes indicates a definitive shareability preference toward highly affective content that provokes fear and urgency regarding an ever-worsening white genocide, perfectly embodying a 'spreadable media spectacle' (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Ultimately, content presenting the best evidence of a targeted white persecution, by way of framing farm attacks/murders as unusually cruel and brutal and disproportionately frequent relevant to other crimes, is inherently more shareable.

6.3. Research question 3: What are the common adversarial themes of discourse invoked in response to social corrections within farm-attack/murder-related Facebook posts and comment threads containing false information?

The presence of prolific 'comment wars' in itself indicatives an active audience, proving to be an important requirement of horizontal propaganda processes (Ellul & Kellen, 1973). Users, when not opposing dissenters, tended toward conformity by "[engaging] in […] conscious and deliberate attempts to gain the social approval of others" (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004, p. 610). Dichotomous rhetoric throughout the defensive discursive themes cements a group identity that excludes and dismisses non-believers of the white genocide and their social corrections. The relative infrequency of social corrections resonates with other studies (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2020), and even then, many social corrections were ignored entirely.

Framing correctional comments as incorrect or lies indicated a population so deep-set in their beliefs that contrarian information is easily dismissed as simply 'untrue', or ironically as 'fake news'. Cognitive dissonance thus affected critical reasoning, where further misinformation was leveraged in defence of the original false news, illustrating a doubling-down effect. A further theme framed the incorrect details of a particular post as irrelevant, because the overarching white genocide narrative, and most proof thereof, is unshakably true. Cases where believers had to admit the presence of false information constituted dismissible exceptions – categorically rare events within the reliable stream of trustworthy 'news' that these Facebook pages provide.

Dissenters were accused of being in denial while believers knew the 'real' truth, further activating their civic duty function to share what constitutes problematic information. This dichotomising language further marginalises and oppresses *real* minorities, and results in "affective arousal bias" leading to increased "partisan bias and evaluative judgments" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 112). A similar discourse strategically located non-believers as

sympathisers to 'universally' distrusted leftist actors, including the ANC, EFF, and liberalism/communism generally, thus branding their corrections null and void. This is a clear example of polarisation within this community, casting left-wingers/liberals as the enemy and de-moralising the fight for change (Steyn & Foster, 2008) – a natural defence by those protecting a hierarchical order (white supremacy).

More extreme rhetoric appealed to the well-versed, racist notion that black people are inherently criminogenic, conversely positioning white South Africans as embattled, innocent victims. The race/crime link references in no subtle terms the 'black onslaught' that "ideologues of apartheid had long warned would be one of the consequences of African rule" (Shaw & Gastrow, 2001, p. 235). This discursive repertoire lends credence to the assertion that a social backdrop riddled with racial tensions is indeed a predicator to communities being more prone to problematic information processes (Tandoc et al., 2018).

A further set of discourses blamed government for SA's farm attack/murder 'problem', alluding to a general sense of degradation, neglect, and most notably corruption as contributing factors. The lack of police resources dedicated to outlying farmland is blamed on government viewing white lives as unimportant, instead of a matter of prioritising resources within dense populaces . More conspiratorial allegations highlight white South Africans' anxieties regarding loss of control within political and racial milieus following the fall of apartheid.

Another theme positioned expatriate dissenters as unable to see the 'truth' about farm attacks/murders due to their lack of geographical proximity to the issue, but local and expatriate (or even foreign) believers as having privileged access to on the ground information from trusted sources. This theme most readily embodied hypocritical logic and motivated reasoning. Furthermore, locals indicating their desires to emigrate supported the notion of 'white flight'. This is justified by allegations of 'reverse racism' at the state level (land expropriation policies etcetera), framing the "victimized white group [as] undervalued, not fully respected, and unwelcome" (Steyn & Foster, 2008, p. 44).

One strategy misleadingly equates the highly documented bank of farm attack/murder case information online with the frequency and unusual cruelty of the crimes. The dedicated efforts of dozens of sources' biased coverage is not considered. Believers' unprecedented access (thanks to whites' favourable position within the digital divide) to gory case details and victims' stories 'proves' the white genocide, while the disproportionate amount of coverage the topic receives is actively underplayed. This compounds an extant media publishing bias that amplifies and prioritises white crime victims, emphasising only certain perspectives in line with propaganda messaging (Walton, 2007). This coverage bias champions the 'victimhood' component of post-apartheid white identities, embodying the 'collective cultural trauma' of whites' more democratised experience of violent crime after 1994 (Alexander, 2004; Kynoch, 2013). Practical use is made of this highly accessible bank of case information, where users conflate the most shocking details from disparate farm attacks/murders to argue that extreme cruelty/torture is a factor in *all* cases. Users' ability to seek out information that confirms their belief is strategically employed in a bid to overwhelm non-believers with a gratuitously affective 'gotcha' regarding the white genocide.

Among less overtly negative discourses, defensive non-racialism allowed for the reframing of the social and personal consequences of racialisation in a decontextualised manner (Wellman, 1993). By asserting that "crime knows no colour" when the white persecution narrative was destabilised by white attackers or black victims, believers circumvented obligations to (a) confront the biases that help maintain their misguided beliefs, and (b) acknowledge the historical and continued subjugation of black South Africans by whites. These assertions also spread the blame, downplaying whites' role in the trauma of colonialism, apartheid, and racialisation, obscuring the consequences of their actions, excising questions of moral accountability (Seidel, 1988), and preserving the white 'innocence' necessary for a genocide narrative.

Commenters attempted to convince dissenters that SA was better off under apartheid, and that the regime had no hand in the country's current issues. This rhetoric is borne of a worldview that is in complete denial of the grim realities faced by black citizens during apartheid, to the point of selective amnesia, or one devoid of empathy for those on the receiving end of state-sanctioned violence. Apartheid was demonstrably *only* more ideal for SA's white population, who are once again demanding their privileges be upheld by receiving police resources over other communities in need. Furthermore, by concealing the impact of colonialism and apartheid, the narrative of white innocence and victimhood is maintained, and the spectre of the alternative 'oppressor' identity is avoided.

A final discursive strategy had believers pointing to Zimbabwe as a looming threat of what SA will become if the white genocide is not formally addressed. This is set against the sedimented idea of African countries' only successes being due to whites' involvement and leadership, asserting that "whites solve problems, blacks create problems" (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Pointing to Zimbabwe's economic failures under black leadership as a 'typical' example thereof insists that power, wealth, and farmland would be mishandled by black South Africans, and should instead be left in the charge of whites (Steyn & Foster, 2008). Invoking a discourse of privilege, white South Africans feel they have earned the right to state resources and protection due to their 'inherent' ability to preserve the country's economy.

All in all, discursive repertoires used in the defence of problematic farm attack/murder information maintained the illusion of white innocence, and manifested a fictional attack on whites that is more brutal and frequent than other crimes. The latter argues the existence of a genocide that, from the perspective of a privileged worldview, demands more attention and resources than other communities in SA.

6.4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This research uncovered a few areas where social media platforms like Facebook might consider implementing new functions that could help address the prolific problem of fake news. It was clear that users are often unaware of having shared mis- or disinformation because they are not retrospectively notified when a post is flagged or removed due to reports of fake news. If users were to be notified when this happens, they may become more wary of the content they share and recognise patterns of misinformation published by certain pages, especially if the notifications are accompanied by fact-checking articles.

It was also clear that most damage is done (in terms of high rates of exposure) long before Facebook implements false information flags on posts. Although this helps limit negative future impacts should post engagements be rekindled at a later time, it is evident that flagging processes cannot match the speed at which false and dangerous information proliferates. It is thus recommended that attention is paid to these processes and efforts made to make flagging functions more efficient.

In terms of further research recommendations, one cannot impress enough that problematic information phenomena taking place in the Global South and in Africa need to receive critical, multi-disciplined attention. Additionally, research focusing on social correction practices taking place within actual, on-platform exchanges is sorely lacking. Social corrections should be studied for their potential to interrupt horizontal propaganda processes that top-down interventions cannot re-produce. More ethnographic research efforts should be made to communicate directly with populations prone to spreading problematic information regarding their motivations and the anxieties driving their behaviour, despite the potential dangers. Research regarding interpersonal exchanges taking place on WhatsApp should also be a focus moving forward, since it may be the platform most conducive to problematic information proliferation.

6.5. CONTRIBUTIONS

The current study has provided a holistic analysis of a notable problematic information phenomenon that has plagued SA for many years, and which has an overtly negative impact on the country's fragile race relations. In doing so it has also highlighted that some fake news communities are more robust than others depending on social and historical contexts, which is of import to future studies. Furthermore, this study adds to the relatively small pool of problematic information research conducted on countries in the Global South. The current research has contributed to knowledge regarding Facebook and its platform affordances, and the specific ways fake news proliferates therein. Additionally, this study included a foray into the analysis of bona-fide social correction exchanges and the strategies that fake news believers use to reject them – a yet unexplored research focus, as far as the researcher is aware.

6.6. CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The introduction of social media in SA created a whole new chapter for the white genocide. Affordances offered by participatory media have been exploited by various actors fighting to preserve what is left of white supremacy's foothold in SA, and the country pointed to in arguments against multiculturalism in countries with threatened white majorities. A once disparate network of conspiracy-streaked believers has found validation and support in online spaces like Facebook, becoming brave enough to proudly and publicly announce their beliefs. The utopia of user-generated content and citizen-led 'journalism' has taken a dark turn. Farm attack/murder-focused Facebook pages and websites are administered by ordinary citizens operating outside the realm of formal regulations, but are still benefitting from professional associations with various formats.

Homophilous networks and the dichotomised partisans fostered therein have compounded an already fractured set of race relations in SA, their operations seeming only to further strengthen and double down in the face of problematic information interventions.

However, by shining a light on their operations and motivations, there is hope that the overwhelming issue of fake news, in this case about SA's white genocide, is exposed for what it is: attempts by relatively small networks of misguided people to sow unnecessary fear and maintain a status quo that benefits longstanding and outdated supremacies. This study, using Marwick's (2018) sociotechnical model of media effects as a holistic guide to exploring all facets of 'fake news' phenomena, has considered (1) the population involved and the social backdrop of the issue, (2) the agendas and powerplay maintained in messages, and (3) the influence of novel affordances presented by material environments online.

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