

# The Relationship Between Antisemitism and COVID-19 Conspiracy on Twitter

This white paper identifies connections between COVID-19 conspiracy and antisemitism on Twitter. We identify prominent categories of COVID-19 conspiracy present on Twitter, each of which overlaps with common themes seen in antisemitic conspiracy theories. Implicitly antisemitic COVID-19 conspiratorial content may be less likely to violate social media hate speech policies but nonetheless contributes to extremist discourse.

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The Collaboratory Against Hate: Research and Action Center at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh aspires to develop and support innovative multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and cross-university research aimed at understanding how extremist hate is generated, how it circulates in online and real-life spaces, and how it polarizes society and provokes harmful and illegal acts, especially toward communities of color and other minoritized groups. We seek to develop effective interventions to inhibit every stage in the creation and growth of extremist hate groups and to minimize their destructive consequences.

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## 1. Introduction

Antisemitism can appear in many ways on the Internet, through abrasive hate speech or in coded, casual language.<sup>1</sup> A person who shares a message with antisemitic undertones may not be fully aware of how their writing connects to a long and fraught legacy of hate and violence. Others deliberately weaponize this legacy through social media networks, especially when social media platforms struggle to effectively identify and regulate antisemitic language.<sup>2</sup> Online extremism has real world effects. Research shows that social media has contributed to the recent spike in violent radicalization among youth throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> The perpetrator of the deadly attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018, had posted antisemitic messages on Gab, a platform created for extremists to express ideas with very few regulations.<sup>4</sup>

In the current pandemic era, extremists have aligned long-standing antisemitic conspiracies with the international COVID-19 health crisis.<sup>5</sup> This white paper aims to uncover these patterns for researchers and practitioners working to stem online radicalization. While there is extensive research on the promulgation of explicit hate speech through social media platforms like Twitter, researchers are increasingly investigating implicit extremist content.<sup>6</sup> Understanding covert hate speech on social media is important for monitoring extremist content on social media platforms. Our focus in this work is investigating the ways in which antisemitism and COVID-19 conspiracy are connected through implicit extremist rhetoric on Twitter.

Using qualitative analysis, we annotate patterns within a dataset of tweets related to COVID-19. We find that tropes and conspiracies directly or indirectly connected to antisemitism were constantly repeated, with varying degrees of extreme language.

Though much extremist content is on new websites and platforms like Gab, it still exists on Twitter. There is evidence that Twitter monitors such speech less than on other mainstream platforms: European Commission reports show that Twitter removes only 40% of reported hate speech content in Europe, much less than both Facebook and YouTube.<sup>7</sup> This speaks to the way mainstream platforms like Twitter can introduce users to more implicit forms of extremist content.

Such implicit extremist rhetoric found in our Twitter dataset includes the language of globalists, the Illuminati, race wars, red pills, and the “elite.” These terms have roots in antisemitic stereotypes and tropes. Though these terms do not inherently have antisemitic ties, we found that their use in these tweets is linked to conspiracies and phrases that contributed to antisemitic rhetoric. Text is an ambiguous marker of underlying social meanings; alternative readings of tweets with terms such as *globalists* could simply indicate blame toward powerful liberals. However, we noted the consistent association of such terms with conspiratorial themes, such as Jewish elites controlling media and governments.

## 2. Methods

We created our dataset from a larger Twitter dataset of tweets that contained COVID-19-related terms and hashtags (e.g. “coronavirus” and “covid-19”) from January 29, 2020 to June 12, 2022. These tweets were collected from the Twitter real-time stream, so included tweets that were later deleted. We then filtered this dataset to tweets that contained at least one of a list of terms that often signaled antisemitism, and that contained a media attachment of some form. Our list of terms likely to signal antisemitism was created by a university faculty expert on antisemitism.

From this initial data set of 7477 tweets, we randomly selected 753 tweets for our case study, excluding duplicates and retweets. In the qualitative analysis,<sup>8</sup> we followed an open coding process<sup>9</sup> over tweet texts. The annotators were interns with the Collaboratory Against Hate. Each of the three annotators first looked at 100 tweets. Once they had coded the first round of 300 tweets, they met to discuss the naming and applying of codes (themes). Based on agreement, they refined the codebook for the second round of open coding.<sup>10</sup>

We created the coding approach “X COVID-19 manipulation” in which “X” represents the perceived perpetrator of some form of manipulation of the pandemic. For the creation of the codebook,<sup>11</sup> these were then paired with a subcode that described the type of manipulation they were perceived to have taken in the tweet, if specific identification was possible. Once we finalized our codebook, we examined the rest of the data, an additional 453 tweets. We coded the new tweets with our codebook and then added some codes not seen in the first 300 tweets and changed some terminology to be as applicable as possible.

## 2. Results and Analysis

We found that tweets in our dataset blame perpetrators, often Jewish, for profiting from or using COVID-19 to incite fear or a race war. Information about specific themes we identified (referred to as “codes” in qualitative analysis) can be found in Table 1 below.

Conspiracy theorists often blame a cabal of elites pulling the strings behind major national and international events, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Twitter users identify different perpetrators as being behind the manipulation, including Jewish people, globalists, and the Illuminati, largely used interchangeably and sometimes in tandem. The actions of powerful individuals like George Soros and Bill Gates are seen to be evidence for these theories. We provide an explanation of our findings and further analysis of each theme in the following sections.

**Table 1: Distinct themes (codes) identified in Twitter dataset**

Code	Number of tweets in dataset	Example tweet
<b>Jewish COVID-19 manipulation</b>	179	Wuhan virus or Trump plague? How about the truth instead. The globalist, hooked nosed pandemic
<b>Globalist COVID-19 manipulation</b>	100	#Coronavirus is the Globalist Answer to Mass Awakening!
<b>Illuminati COVID-19 manipulation</b>	82	Covid-19=illuminati project #MalaysiaLockdown
<b>COVID-19 and race war linked</b>	37	This whole "race war" subplot is a nice little subplot that adds to the COVID-19 Story Arc...
<b>Red Pill and COVID-19 linked</b>	37	Alert Covid-19 cure... take the Red Pill #TWGRP #RedPill #COVID19
<b>Elite COVID-19 manipulation</b>	35	LETS JUST CALL IT LIBERAL PROGRESSIVES ELITES GLOBALIST (LPEG) VIRUS
<b>Marxist/Communist COVID-19 manipulation</b>	32	This is the institution claiming that COVID19 cases are doubling every 7 days. An overtly Marxist institution.
<b>Zionist COVID-19 manipulation</b>	15	Please we don't need #COVID19 vaccine because it's is not for humanity, it's just for make money from #Zionist
<b>Chinese COVID-19 manipulation</b>	11	China Syndrome paid for by George Soros! Seize all Soros cash and property!
<b>Leftist/Democratic COVID-19 manipulation</b>	9	Democrats responsible for this with the coronavirus and race war!
<b>Media COVID-19 manipulation</b>	9	Whether it Delta or Omicron, there one thing you can be sure of, all about Media Control
<b>COVID-19 misinformation</b>	7	The sun kill Coronavirus #BillGatesIsEvil #illuminati #Adrenochrome
<b>Israeli COVID-19 manipulation</b>	6	With the Covid-19 issue right now, is there any helps from israhell? Nope
<b>Medical system COVID-19 manipulation</b>	4	Globalist Fauci changes tune, now says second COVID-19 wave may never happen, and mask-wearing is symbolic.
<b>TOTAL</b>	753	

## 2.1 Jewish COVID-19 manipulation

The most frequent theme in our dataset is rooted in antisemitic tropes and stereotypes. While most of the other themes link to antisemitism in a more covert or ambiguous ways, tweets within this theme directly blamed Jewish people (primarily high-profile individuals like George Soros and the Rothschilds). As one example, the use of the name *Rothschild* is rooted in antisemitic conspiracy about the wealthy Jewish Rothschild family of the 19th century. Much like George Soros of this century, they represented antisemitic fears that Jewish people would gain power under capitalism and go on to take over the world.<sup>12</sup> When these tweets discuss a Richard or a Jacob Rothschild, or even just the last name, it reinforces the conspiracy theory of gaining power and manipulating world systems. References to George Soros, an American Jewish philanthropist and businessman who often supports liberal political endeavors, are similar. Much like Rothschild, Soros is often accused of manufacturing or profiting from the pandemic in our dataset.

### Key Findings

Tweets in this theme commonly mentioned the conspiracy that the Rothschilds planned COVID-19 because they patented testing the virus in 2015, a false theory.<sup>13</sup> Tweets accusing high-profile Jewish individuals can seem indirect and isolated by themselves. However, in the context of many other tweets repeating such claims, narratives of Jewish control and manipulation emerge.

Tweets in this theme explicitly link antisemitism and COVID-19. They spell out how Jewish perpetrators are supposedly responsible for an aspect of the pandemic, for example, "Allow me again: #COVID19 patent: Created:2015 Patent holder: Rothschild Purpose: #WorldDepopulation".

Another prevalent narrative is that George Soros and Bill Gates bought a company to profit from COVID-19. This conspiracy is based in truth; these men both invested in Mologic, a UK-based testing company. But the tweets insinuate nefarious plans. Some tweets take it further: "George Soros owns the company in Wuhan where corona virus broke out. #Soros #666 #SorosWuhanLab". This tweet not only blames Soros for the origin and spread of COVID-19, but also demonstrates another theme that connects China and Soros together. The reference to the "WuhanLab" not only has racist origins, but also connects to narratives about the manufacture of COVID-19 present elsewhere in our dataset. The conspiracy that COVID-19 was created in a lab also insinuates that the virus was manufactured with a clear goal and long planning, consistent with antisemitic conspiracies that accompany names like Rothschild and Soros. This connects to the term "plandemic," the notion that the pandemic was planned, a common hashtag and reference in our dataset.

These conspiracy theories further the notion of a Jewish world conspiracy. They do not do this by outright accusing Jewish people, but instead accuse prominent Jewish individuals like George Soros, or reference a Jewish name that represents Jewish history and influence, like Rothschild. These tweets place blame for the pandemic on the group who has been accused of plots to take power for centuries.

## 2.2 Globalist COVID-19 manipulation

According to the American Jewish Committee (AJC), *globalist* refers to "a person who advocates the interpretation or planning of economic and foreign policy in relation to events and developments throughout the world"<sup>14</sup>. However, globalism has deep ties to antisemitism and can be used as a dog whistle. The AJC states that, "*Globalist* is used to promote the antisemitic conspiracy that Jewish people do not have allegiance to their countries of origin, like the United States, but to some worldwide order—like a global economy or international political system—that will enhance their control over the world's banks, governments, and media."<sup>15</sup> Thus, whether intentionally or not, usage of the term *globalist* in certain contexts can further antisemitic conspiracy theories.

### Key Findings

"Globalist COVID-19 manipulation" is the second most prevalent theme that we encountered, appearing 100 times across our dataset. Such tweets accuse "globalists" of manufacturing or profiting from the pandemic to expand power, inciting fear and a race war, and threatening the United States. They are said to have ties to the New World Order, the Great Reset, Bill Gates, and the Rothschild family. In this way, globalists seem to act as a catch-all term spanning a plethora of popular anti-leftist conspiracies.<sup>16</sup> Tweets in our dataset conceive of globalism as a political movement rather than a way of describing global trends. Twitter users thus create an adversarial relationship between globalists (or those in favor of interconnected global planning) and those with a more nationalistic mindset.

The most explicitly antisemitic use of the term *globalist* occurs in a tweet that reads, "Wuhan virus or Trump plague? How about the truth instead. The globalist, hooked nosed pandemic." While the creator of this tweet never uses the term *Jewish*, it is clear they identify Jews as being behind the pandemic due to the use of an antisemitic stereotype (hooked nose). The use of the term *globalist* in this example clearly refers to Jews.

Other tweets use more coded language to tie globalism and antisemitism. For example, "LETS JUST CALL IT LIBERAL PROGRESSIVES ELITES GLOBALIST (LPEG) VIRUS". In this tweet, globalism is tied to "elites," which can be an antisemitic dog whistle. While multiple readings of the term *globalist* are possible, at best the term has an antisemitic connotation. At worst, it is simply used as a synonym for Jewish people, drawing upon the pervasive and insidious stereotype that Jews are incapable of national loyalty. Regardless, the fact that a term with such deep ties to antisemitism is so prominent throughout our dataset is striking.

### 2.3 Illuminati COVID-19 manipulation

Between World War I and II, fascist propaganda began to frame the Illuminati as a “subversive element” behind global capitalism and Soviet communism and “were plotting to create a New World Order.”<sup>17</sup> This version of the Illuminati paralleled themes found in classic Jewish conspiracies: themes of control, manipulation, and planning for global takeover and power. The Illuminati of the present falls into both a mythical unreal conspiracy fueled by celebrity gossip and sensationalism, as well as more sinister roots of elite, powerful individuals mysteriously involved in groups that have unknown amounts of power and resources.<sup>18</sup> The use of the term *Illuminati* often referenced conspiracy theories related to antisemitic tropes such as Jewish people abusing positions of power and having ties to globalism and Satanism.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Key Findings*

References to the Illuminati, while not always the main focus of tweets, were often present in our data through hashtags, references to celebrities (often thought to be members of the Illuminati), or more general calls of a global order. A key part of the Illuminati, a part that also connects to the more overtly antisemitic rhetoric, is the idea of planning and manufacturing of schemes and bids for power. As seen in one tweet: “Everything is planned #coronavirus illuminati is not a joke.. They plan and execute everything #illuminati”. While not explicitly antisemitic, in the context of other tweets under the same code, this tweet contributes to a larger narrative of a world conspiracy to create and gain power from COVID-19. Tweets, such as “IS NOT COVID-19 IS COMLOT CRIMINAL TO CONTROL THE PEOPLE FROM SATANIC GRUP GEORGE SOROS BILL GATES ILUMINATI MASON”, demonstrate how the idea of the Illuminati becomes associated with antisemitic tropes. References to George Soros and Bill Gates insinuate narratives of planning and taking control of the pandemic. The Freemasons, another secret group that is referenced less than the Illuminati in our dataset, are also blamed by this tweet. References to a “Satanic” group also fits in with classic themes used to portray Jewish people. Antisemitic tropes like this often present Jewish people with “grotesque characteristics such as devil’s horns, sharp claws, jagged teeth, pointy ears, and other satanic features to portray the differences between Christianity and Judaism”<sup>20</sup>. The idea that Illuminati are unknown elites also connects them to globalist tropes. One tweet reads, “Covid 19 is a lie pushed be the Globe earth Illuminati to sell false vaccines”. The reference to “globe earth Illuminati” associates this tweet with other conspiracy theories associated with antisemitic themes. Even if the Illuminati COVID-19 manipulation narrative can seem relatively harmless, it links together more dangerous and extreme ideas.

### 2.4 COVID-19 and race war linked

This theme describes tweets in which users draw a connection between the pandemic and the threat or incitement of racial violence. The concept of a race war is deeply entrenched in white supremacist beliefs, which blame Jews for being behind the imagined conflict.<sup>21</sup> Modern white supremacy emphasizes that the white race is “dying” in the face of assimilation and that Jewish people are directly orchestrating movements for equal rights in order to “replace” white people,<sup>22</sup> sometimes known as great replacement theory. This fear is connected to racist narratives that have existed since the 19th century in Europe that had impacts on the development of eugenics and the Nazi theory that “racial hygiene” was in decline due to Jewish “plots.”<sup>23</sup> Great replacement theory is evident in the slogan “you will not replace us” or “Jews will not replace us” repeated at the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.<sup>24</sup>

Some tweets in our dataset connect this conspiracy theory to the COVID-19 pandemic through the separate conspiracy of the New World Order, “a cabal of world leaders using the global stage to create an almighty, totalitarian regime that strips people of their individual liberties and consolidates power at the very top.”<sup>25</sup> Many extremists believe that COVID-19 is an opportunity for this cabal to restructure the way that governments and the global economy work.<sup>26</sup> The pandemic and the great replacement theory of Jews seeking to gain power through a race war may then be explained as two events working toward the common goal of Jewish global domination, or the New World Order.

### *Key Findings*

An example of a tweet with this code is, "Since Covid-19 didn't work lets start a race war to try harder to distract us from what's really going on." The way that this user describes the race war as an event that will or has followed the pandemic was repeated in other tweets. The sense that one destructive or traumatic event will follow another provokes fear or resentment of the alleged perpetrators. Other tweets followed this format, insinuating that the advent of COVID-19 and a "race war" was purposeful. Many tweets also mention Democrats, or specific leaders, insinuating a plot. Again, what makes these tweets effective is that they do not outwardly say anything antisemitic, but by mentioning each phrase in conjunction, they form associations between topics and movements.

## **2.5 Red pill COVID-19 manipulation**

On social media, vocabulary and references serve as an important means of broadcasting one's allegiance to certain extremist movements.<sup>27</sup> One such reference, to the "Red Pill," acts as a throughline among related far-right ideologies on social media. The Red Pill is a reference to the 1999 blockbuster film, *The Matrix*, in which the main character, Neo, is confronted with a choice: take the Blue Pill and remain ignorant of the world around him or take the Red Pill and see the true inner workings of the world.

Among online extremists, the Red Pill refers to any sort of political awakening, though it is most often aligned with far-right ideology.<sup>28</sup> To be "Red Pilled" is to have a political awakening that dramatically shifts one's worldview and opens one's eyes to the "true" workings of the world. Unlike the original *Matrix* reference, online extremists typically present the Red Pill as something that is done to you, rather than a choice you willingly opt into. As such, "The term became synonymous with the violent attitude of the alt-right movement—we're going to make you aware of our reality, whether you like it or not"<sup>29</sup>.

### *Key Findings*

References to the Red Pill in our dataset are often cryptic. For example, one tweet simply reads, "Tell all your lib friends. The cure for the coronavirus has been found. It's a red pill." Common usage of the Red Pill in reference to COVID-19 implies the belief that the public is being lied to about the pandemic. By taking the Red Pill (i.e., becoming indoctrinated with far-right ideology), one will be able to see through the lies people in power (who often have ties to Judaism) tell the public regarding COVID-19.

The cryptic nature of the tweets can be interpreted in different ways. On one hand, Red Pill terminology is a way to signal allegiance to far-right ideology without drawing attention from those outside that ideology. On the other hand, Red Pill tweets may be intentionally vague to draw the attention of those who are not familiar with the reference. Red Pill tweets without further context may encourage outsiders to "do their own research" into the meaning of the term and experience their own Red Pill "awakening." Of course, these two analyses are not mutually exclusive: it is likely that the vagueness of Red Pill tweets acts to signal group allegiance and draw outsiders into far-right ideologies.

Red Pill terminology is not as directly antisemitic as other themes we identified, but it is central to far-right ideologies that often include antisemitism. As the ADL points out, the Red Pill can be "the first tentative step down the rabbit hole toward radicalization" into movements with white supremacist and anti-feminist ties.<sup>30</sup>

## **2.6 Elite COVID-19 manipulation**

The term *elite* has a centuries-long history of being used to accuse Jewish people of undue influence and power. *Cosmopolitan elite* can act as a far-right code word to accuse Jews of "controlling America and/or being disloyal and unpatriotic by supporting internationalism over isolationist policies."<sup>31</sup> This theme is closely related to "globalist" COVID-19 manipulation, but has a specific focus on elites.

### *Key Findings*

Many of the tweets in this theme explicitly reference an "elite" or imply it through references to wealthy or influential figures such as Bill Gates and George Soros. This tweet exemplifies an antisemitic use of elite: "Coronavirus planned ages ago by the zionist

paedophile elite." It demonstrates several layers of perceived threats codified by the term elite by associating it both with Jews and Zionism but also with pedophilia conspiracies that have become popular in right-wing extremist discourse through theories like QAnon and Pizzagate. This links a perceived Jewish elite with the conspiracies of nefarious prominent and wealthy politicians.

These tweets in our dataset often relate to creation and control, suggesting that Gates, Soros, and the general "elite" are perceived by extremists to have created or planned COVID-19 as a way of subjugating the rest of the world. One tweet states, "Well it was the Globalist elite who did this! They've had the coronavirus in a lab ready for release!"

#### 4. Conclusion

Our research and analysis reveal links between antisemitism and COVID-19 conspiracy, particularly through pre-existing extremist rhetoric. In addition to explicitly antisemitic tropes, COVID-19 conspiracy theorists on Twitter promulgate implicit antisemitic references such as globalism, the Illuminati, elites, Red Pill, and race war conspiracy. While these terms are not always antisemitic, the context in which they were used in our textual analysis of tweets often demonstrated a link to antisemitism. The prevalence of these implicit antisemitic conspiracies presents a unique challenge to social media hate speech monitoring. These conspiracy theories lack references to Jews as a group, or individual families or people who are often seen as representing Jews as a whole, yet often reinforce antisemitic ideas about Jewish control. We recognize the difficulty of monitoring antisemitic speech that is designed to fly under the radar of censorship, though we believe it is essential in combating online extremism. Our research has focused on antisemitism in COVID-19 conspiracy on Twitter as it relates to COVID-19 conspiracy on Twitter, but further research is necessary to better understand the intentions of those spreading extremist rhetoric and the mechanisms through which radicalization occurs. Moreover, understanding exactly how social media content leads to radicalization is an important part of effectively combating online extremism and its real-world consequences. Specific radicalization mechanisms were outside the scope of this study, though it is an important piece of this puzzle. We hope that our work helps lay the foundation for effectively combating antisemitism on social media platforms.

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