Seismo

Lockdown scepticism: Australian and American doom discourse on Reddit

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Abstract
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent infodemic, user consumption of online news content soared, leading to the issues of doom-scrolling and doom-writing. This type of behaviour may have an adverse impact on individual well-being and increase exposure to misinformation on social networking sites (SNSs), including Reddit. The present critical discourse study combines Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Pragma-dialectics (PD) and critical theory to explore the roles of power and ideology in a corpus extracted from r/LockdownSkepticismAU and r/LockdownSkepticism, and to evaluate the Redditors' argumentation. The analysis shows that the users of both subreddits appear to compensate a perceived loss of agency by making improbable statements about the future. The doomers' arguments, as part of their online deliberations on issues relating to national COVID-19 prevention policy, reveal several fallacies. Linguistic evidence is provided for how biopower, in its ability to further life or death, is constitutive of the social norms to which both subreddit communities subscribe.

Keywords
systemic functional linguistics, argumentation, critical discourse studies, Reddit, COVID-19, social media

1 Introduction

Aiming to control one's fears through gathering as much information as possible on a particular issue at hand is a common human tendency. Since COVID-19 was a novel virus, a large amount of content was produced by the media to communicate its dangers to the public and to provide instructions on protection and safety. This plethora of facts, figures and anecdotes related to the pandemic was accompanied by various restrictions, such as mask-wearing or social distancing and led to activities such as "doom-scrolling," a phenomenon that has been studied in psychology (Anand et al., 2022; Price et al., 2022; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). The term doom-scrolling appears to have originated from a popular tweet posted by a user reminding themselves to put a hold on the noxious habit of incessantly scrolling their news feed on social media looking for COVID-19 updates (Jennings, 2020). It constitutes a social practice with no clear purpose that social media users may engage in on SNSs (social networking ser-

vices) which allow for easy scrolling, such as Twitter, Facebook, or Reddit. The negative effects of the online activity on the subjective well-being of – especially younger people – may consist of increased anxiety and depression, as demonstrated by Price et al. (2022), who studied its impact on mental health.

Tandon, Dhir, Almugren, AlNemer, and Mäntymäki (2021) have emphasised the need for a more multi-disciplinary approach to the topic, as the construct is largely context-dependent. So far, only a handful of studies have been conducted on the phenomenon, most of which adopted a solely qualitative and non-linguistic approach (Buchanan, Aknin, Lotun, & Sandstrom, 2021; Mannell & Meese, 2022; Paulsen & Fuller, 2020). However, as a social issue, doom-scrolling informs the discursive practice of SNS users interacting online, an activity which may be referred to as "doom-writing." Individuals who continuously scroll through their news feeds, looking for updates on the pandemic, are also regular contributors to online discussions and tend to express their own viewpoints

on topics pertaining to the COVID-19 crisis (Jiang et al., 2021). Hence, this paper adopts a three-pronged approach to investigate various samples of doom discourse on Reddit. The discursive practice may be defined as a type of disaster rhetoric based on an often unrealistic fear of the future. Meaningful grammatical patterns, fallacious moves in argumentation and putative ideological positions are the three angles taken to examine verbal exchanges between doom writers on two subreddits focusing on the same overarching topic of national lockdowns. The online discussions on the SNS appear to be motivated by doomerism (Reddit, n. d.), which is based on the belief that society is irreversibly headed for collapse (Omar, 2022). However, as the present study shows, the ideology itself appears to be an amalgamation of different forms of pessimistic thinking not limited to climate change.

Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) views discourse as a type of social practice which is both conditioned by the social structure, institution, or situation it occurs in, while, at the same time, constituting these elements, implying that social media discourse is shaped by its context but may also affect reality (Wodak, 2014). This paper hopes to contribute to the existing body of knowledge surrounding the social media practice of doom-writing by examining the roles of power and agency in the use of doom discourse related to COVID-19 lockdowns among two culturally distinct groups of Reddit users. It further aims to critically evaluate the doomers' argumentation and ideological motivations. More specifically, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Pragma-dialectics and critical theory are combined into a mixed-methods approach to CDS to explore the Reddit users' representations of "Doers" and "Instigators" within the comment threads of two subreddits created by anti-lockdown activists. The study examines how the users attempt to convince other Redditors of the veracity of their apocalyptic viewpoints as well as putative ideological motives for their digital discursive behaviour. It has high relevance for the intervention by online content moderators aiming to prevent the spread of misinformation.

2 Literature review

In this chapter, the doomer meme is explained. Some further information on Reddit as a social media platform is provided in sub-section 2.2. Then, the systems of transitivity and ergativity are discussed. The subsequent sub-section includes a description of the Pragma-dialectical approach to discourse analysis. Finally, the interlocutors' ideological motivations are being explored.

2.1 The doomer meme

Although the exact meaning of the term *meme* is rather obtuse, Dawkins' (1976/2006) definition of a meme as an acquired concept implies that it constitutes a form of culture-specific communication between a creator and a general audience, an entity that can be copied, similarly to how a gene is being replicated, through a process of natural selection. One such meme, created by Christian Grodecki or Wojak, was posted to Krautchan, a defunct German bulletin board, similar to 4chan, in 2010. It subsequently gained world-wide popularity in its shared expression of Millennial disillusionment and disaffection (Z, 2015). Drawing on Mouffe's (2013) theory on democratic agonism, Tuters and Hagen (2020) describe how digital communities often use memes for political purpose, an anonymous activity referred to as "memetic antagonism." The same can be said for the two groups of interlocutors on the subreddits which form the focus of the present investigation, as they criticise and reject governmental COVID-19 policies through the use of memes, as well as discourse.

Doom writers on Reddit constitute a collective which comprises various subgroups of individuals who congregate online, sharing similar affinities, and who each identify with a certain archetype, depending on their political orientation. The most well-known type is the left-wing climate doomer, who rejects climate activism based on their doomsday views (Aspinwall, 2022). The second type is the existential doomer, whose transition into adulthood is marred by their "boomer" parents' toxic consumerism (Huber, 2020). A third character, the political doomer, has emerged as well, promoting activism under the form of protest against perceived dictatorial powers, as is the case on the two subred-

dits under investigation. Barthel, Stocking, Holcomb, and Mitchell (2016) posit that the Reddit user population appears to mostly consist of young males. The quasi-omnipresent "geek" stereotype qualifies the average Redditor as "white, male, middle-class and heterosexual" (Kendall, 2011). Massanari's (2020, p. 182) description of Reddit users depicts them as individuals who are inclined to "engage and support conspiracy theories, especially if they relate to geek fandom or if it furthers their own vision of geek masculinity." This form of "toxic masculinity" appears to be founded on a sense of intellectual superiority. However, some Redditors self-identify as female or otherwise, as such representing a small minority on the two subreddits. In a counter move, the original Wojak meme of the doomer, which emerged in pre-COVID times, was later juxtaposed by the doomer girl or "doomerette" meme (Philipp, 2020).

2.2 Reddit

Reddit is an American social networking site which describes itself as a "network of communities where people can dive into their interests, hobbies and passions" (Reddit, n. d.). The online platform effectively merges various social media functions, such as news feeds or shareability, and Usenet groups, guaranteeing full anonymity while actively monitoring posts and discussions. Despite its admirable aim to allow "open and authentic discussion and debate" on the website (Reddit, n. d.), the company is increasingly being confronted with subreddits that spread misinformation and controversial content among users (Taylor, 2021). Reddit moderators monitor various "subreddits" using an in-built system referred to as "Auto Moderator," which automatically applies checks on any web content that is being posted in the communities. Users can vote content up or down, promoting high-quality posts to the top of the feed and relegating less interesting ones to the bottom of the pile. The platform's CEO announced that "manipulating or cheating Reddit to amplify any particular viewpoint" is against its policies and that users are allowed to freely express themselves as long as their discourse follows the SNS's code of conduct (Reddit, n. d.). However, any participation in the production of doom dis-

course on a SNS may lead to an availability cascade "through which expressed perceptions trigger chains of individual responses that make these perceptions appear increasingly plausible through their rising availability in public discourse" (Kuran & Sunstein, 1999, p. 685), as will be shown.

2.3 Transitivity and ergativity

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) posit posits that text presupposes choice in a meaning-making process which unfolds in a context of situation. Every SNS user continuously makes linguistic selections to describe reality, to interact with other users and to produce coherent digital discourse. The use of this type of discourse has been investigated by several functional linguists (Bartlett & O'Grady, 2017; Zappavigna, 2021), primarily focusing on Twitter (Gardner & Alsop, 2016), using Appraisal theory (Martin, 2000; Martin & White, 2005; Ross & Caldwell, 2020), multimodal analysis (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018; van Leeuwen, 2005), and Corpus Linguistics (Miller & Luporini, 2018). As emphasised by Lukin (2019), a transitivity analysis may reveal important insights into the ideational representations of social actors, based on ideological discrepancies, a perspective followed in this study.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 284) distinguish between the transitive and ergative models of transitivity. Within the transitive system, the *Participant* initiating the action is referred to as the *Actor*, whereas, in the ergative model, the entity is referred to as the *Agent*. Subsequently, there are "doing" clauses, with two Participants, in which the process is instigated by an Actor:

(1) The government (Actor) is destroying (Process) our livelihoods (Goal).

In a causal event like the one above, the energy is being brought into the activity by the Actor, *the government,* while the Goal, *our livelihoods*, passively undergoes the act of *destroying*.

There are "happening" clauses as well, again, with two Participants, in which the process is actualised and represented as being "self-engendered." In the following exam-

ple, the Medium, *our livelihoods* instigates the action of the *crumpling*:

(2) Our livelihoods (Medium) are crumpling (Process).

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 285), the two models co-exist in the English language, which means that any clause can be interpreted in both ways. In the transitive or "linear" model, the Actor is the most important Participant, with an optional Goal, whereas, in the ergative or "nuclear" model, the main Participant is the Medium, with an optional or hidden Agent (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 295). Constructs with only one Participant exist as well (Davidse & Lamiroy, 2002):

(3) People (Actor) were dying (Process).

The following example shows an intransitive or inergative construction:

(4) The virus (Medium) spreads (Process).

Unlike a transitive clause, an ergative construal may be paraphrased using a causative, with the first example showing an incorrect construction:

(5) *The government (Agent) caused (Pro-) our livelihoods (Medium) to destroy (-cess).
(6) COVID-19 (Agent) caused (Pro-) our livelihoods (Medium) to crumple (-cess).

Some verbs can occur in both transitive and intransitive constructions. Thompson and Ramos (1995) argue that the question of causation or lack of it is stronger delineated through the use of such identical ergative pairs, which has an impact in terms of how Participants represent reality:

(7) The government (Actor) has ended (Process) the lockdown (Goal).
(8) The lockdown (Medium) has ended (Process).

In the agentive intransitive, with the verb *end*, the intransitive Subject, *the lockdown*,

is involved in the action, while the transitive construal forces the Actor, *the government*, to act upon the lockdown, rendering this particular entity more passive and inert. As Davidse (2002) explains, Participants in clauses are organised in "inherent voice relations" to the process within a construction paradigm (p. 143). When analysing discourse produced by various social actors, each of whom are construing reality by making their own linguistic choices, it is worthwhile to explore whether they adopt a transitive or ergative viewpoint, especially when investigating their representations of agency. Subsequently, the included grammatical analysis focuses on semantic categories which occur most often in the role of "Doer" in the extracted doom discourse but also on possible Instigators of actions or events.[1]

2.4 Fallacious moves in doom discourse

The Pragma-dialectical approach (Van Eemeren, 2018) is increasingly being applied to the analysis of digital discourse (Demir, 2020; Feng, Zhao, & Feng, 2021), since a data-driven project can search large data sets for potential biases (Table 1). Why and how digital discourses occur, however, still needs be looked into using a more detailed analytical and contextualising approach. Referring back to psychology, the multifarious concept of cognitive bias was coined by Tversky and Kahneman (1981). It pertains to the assumption that human beings are "predictably irrational" (Ariely, 2009). They tend to focus more on what they can easily remember and, often, information of an extreme character is easier to recall than banal facts. Subsequently, individuals tend to create their own subjective reality, through heuristics and based on various beliefs.

Dialogical exchanges on SNSs may be regarded as a form of deliberation, especially on Reddit. The users' verbal interactions may be seen "as part of an explicit or implicit discussion between parties who try to resolve a difference of opinion [...] by testing the acceptability of the standpoints concerned" (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2004, p. 21). As

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1 Of course, each of the individual users may opt for a transitive or ergative representation as well.

such, the Redditors' posts and comments are likely to include strategic manoeuvring, with users aiming to convince others of the truth of the information they share. As part of a critical discussion within a pragma-dialectical framework, the digital discourse that is being exchanged among doomers, needs to be *externalised*, meaning that it constitutes a public expression of a particular viewpoint, *functionalised*, meaning that it has a specific purpose, *socialised*, meaning that it takes place between two or more users, and *dialectified*, meaning that it aims to resolve a difference of opinion (Van Eemeren & Garssen, 2015). While trying to maintain an adequate balance between effectiveness and reasonableness, however, the process of deliberation may be obscured by various fallacious moves (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2004). In an online environment, SNS users often make judgements and decisions based on previous individual experiences, other users' perceived authority, or general group tendencies, without first evaluating their claims using rational thinking, which may have an undesirable impact on their verbal behaviour and decision-making. With the help of argumentative indicators, the user arguments may be reconstructed and evaluated in terms of their rhetorical reasonableness and effectiveness asking critical questions (Rocci, 2009; Van Eemeren, Houtlosser, & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007).

2.5 Ideological motivations

In recent years, social research has turned away from rationality and shown a renewed interest in the study of affect, inspired by the work of scholars such as Whitehead (Stenner, 2008), Deleuze (Massumi, 2002), or Guatarri (Poynton & Lee, 2011), which might lead to the assumption that a study of the impact of power and ideology on language use and the analysis of logic-based argumentation in digital discourse may not be worthwhile. Nothing could be further from the truth. SNS users still express individual viewpoints, including politically coloured ones, on a large number of topics, through the exchange of discourse with other users, and their arguments remain located within a wider context that has a considerable impact on their reasoning. This renders the study of online dialogical inter-

action more pertinent than ever. SNSs such as Reddit do not only "validate individual's emotive understanding of the affairs but also encourage a dynamic of communication that rewards such behavior" (KhosraviNik, 2018, p. 433).

As neoliberal subjects, users are constantly exposed to consumer-driven algorithms which target and control the content of SNSs. Subsequently, power remains an equally important and highly relevant concept in the analysis of digital discourse. KhosraviNik (2018, p. 440) posits that the algorithms that regulate social media platforms constitute "ideologically laden systems, which work with a normalized market logic in line with the increasing corporatization of digital platforms." They may seem devoid of any sentiment but turn out to exert a political influence over both the content that is being shared in digital communities and their members. Since SNS users participate in discussions or engage in debate with other users, concepts such as power and truth thus remain valid – the latter more than ever, with misinformation being increasingly prevalent on SNSs.

Doomerism has various characteristics that may link it to neoliberalism, an ideological system which emerged in the 1970s, but which origins trace back to the post-war era. It profoundly remoulded Western economy and the system's impact reverberated on the rest of the world (Piketty, 2020). It needs to be noted that neoliberalism is not a stable system and materialises depending on when and where it arises, including on social media (Grieveson, 2018; Phelan, 2018). Within an overarching neoliberal context, Foucault's (1977–1978 / 2004) concept of biopower constitutes "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy" (p. 1). Since the start of the pandemic, the American and Australian governments have been engaged in biopolitics, with as their main aims the management of citizens' health and the prevention of COVID-19. Based on minimal governmental interference, biopower also leaves it to subjects to regulate themselves. Subsequently, power is no longer a unilateral given between a government and citizens, in terms of domi-

Table 1:　Research framework

	SFL	Pragma-dialectics	Critical theory
Focus	Grammatical meanings	Rhetorical patterns	Power structures and ideological motivations
Goals	Agency / power	Logical fallacies and pragmatic effects	Impact of power and ideology
Analytical tools	Transitivity / ergativity analysis	Reconstruction and evaluation of argumentation	Critical evaluation based on the literature
Parameters	Context of situation	Context-sensitive	Socio-cultural context

nation and resistance, but a dynamic notion, which implies that subjects are governing both themselves and other subjects. Thus, it is worthwhile to conduct an investigation of power structures predominantly focusing on the complex power relationships that exist between human subjects. According to Foucault (1984/1997, p. 288),

> we must distinguish between power relations understood as strategic games between liberties – in which some try to control the conduct of others, who in turn try to avoid allowing their conduct to be controlled or try to control the conduct of others – and the states of domination that people ordinarily call power.

Strategic power games are especially played out on SNSs, where users interact with others, in an attempt to influence or even change their behaviour and thought. It is important to add that this type of governmentality entails individual freedom, rather than sovereign rule:

> when one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions as the government of men by other men – in the broadest sense of the term – one includes an important element: freedom. (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 221)

Since power and knowledge are closely related in Foucault's work, the concept of power needs to be studied within social practice, such as online discussions.

Doomerism, as a set of beliefs adhered to by doomers, plays a key role in the dynamic interplay between power, knowledge, and truth (Nath, 2011). It offers subjects the choice of either accepting or rejecting rules and regulations issued by institutional power, of which the latter action may be seen as a form of covert resistance. COVID-19 policies such as lockdowns are concrete examples of biopolitics aiming "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order" (Foucault, 1976/1998, p. 138). They embody governmental mechanisms linked to the regulation of citizens' health and health-related behaviour. However, doomerist rebellion is not a type of positive resistance against the repressive powers of the government, a topic often discussed in CDS. What actually underlie the digital discourses uttered by doomers and their intentionalities are shared neoliberal values, such as self-reliance or self-interest, deeply entrenched in individualist thought and directed towards other users.

3　Research method

Two data sets were developed by interrogating the Reddit API using Python 3 and through the extraction of text from the comment threads of the subreddits r / LockdownSkepticismAU (1374 subscribers), created on 31 July 2020, and r / LockdownSkepticism (46 684 subscribers), created on 25 March 2020. The data include the 500 top comments on the most up-voted posts in both subreddits on 12 September 2021. The Australian subreddit shares the same theme as the American one but is smaller in terms of subscribers. Only text contained within the comment threads was included in the analysis. As Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler (2011) point out, some of the challenges linked to the analysis of excerpts extracted from SNSs pertain to the representativeness of the samples and trolls who incite the other users

with hateful utterances. Even though the discourse that is being exchanged could be linked to various groups of lockdown activists in both countries, the present paper does not claim that the users' discursive exchanges reflect those of existing offline movements. Any contributions made by trolls were clearly indicated by the subreddit's moderation bot and highly repetitive in character, which made them easy to avoid. The subreddit r/ LockdownSkepticism adds content labels to a large number of their posts, such as "positivity / good news", "announcement", "analysis", "vaccine update", "opinion piece", and so on. Moderators also label weekly comment threads as "positivity threads", "vents and rants", "humour and memes", "Unpinned Megahub", and "Sunday Best-of". Most of these labels are missing on the r/Lockdown-SkepticismAU subreddit, probably because the group is smaller. Even though Redditors use pseudonyms, considerable efforts were made to completely anonymise the data by conducting a regex search for all capitalised letters, excluding "I", using Notepad++ and using replacements for names, geographical locations, dates, and the like in any examples, when necessary. The author never added any posts or comments to the subreddit and has no contact with any of its users.

First, the Redditors' transitivity and ergativity choices were analysed using Notepad++ and following Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) SFL framework, to explore the impact of power and ideology through their use of material verbal processes. Then, some of the users' arguments were reconstructed and evaluated, with a specific focus on the most common fallacious patterns of reasoning encountered in the discourse samples. Finally, an attempt was made at uncovering any ideological motivations behind the exchanged doom discourse.

4 Transitivity and ergativity analysis

In the following sub-sections, the results of the transitivity and ergativity analysis are shown and discussed. A detailed interpretation of the data is provided, as well as several concrete examples.

4.1 Australian doom discourse

The extracted data from r/LockdownSkepticismAU included 758 verbal processes, of which 624 were [transitive] and 134 [intransitive]. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), Actors who appear both in transitive and intransitive clauses constitute the most powerful Participants or "Doers" in discourse. The main Actor in the Australian doomers' transitive constructions is the Australian *government*, which exerts power over *vaccinations*, or *boosters*, together with *politicians* such as Victorian Premier Dan Andrews, who controls the *roadmap* out of the pandemic, or *playgrounds*:

(9) *They* (Actor) *'ve made* (Process) *this* (Goal) into a full-on religion for two years.

(10) No doubt *they* (Actor) *will* (Pro-) still *be rolling out* (-cess) *the boosters* (Goal) regardless.

(11) *Dan Andrews* (Actor) *is going to release* (Process) *his roadmap* (Goal) on Sunday.

(12) *The premier* (Actor) *closed* (Process) *playgrounds* (Goal) based on no fucking evidence that it spreads from kids to kids there.

Other entities with authority, such as Gladys Berejeklian, *people* in general, various places, and abstract objects are Actors as well:

(13) *She (Gladys Berejeklian)* (Actor) *hasn't ordered* (Process) *five or more lockdowns* (Goal) over tiny amounts of cases.

(14) None of these people (Actor) would do (Process) this sort of thing (Goal) if they actually thought being punched was a real possibility.

(15) *The UK* (Actor) *is dropping* (Process) *their vaccine passport* (Goal).

(16) What *are* (Pro-) *all these measures* (Actor) *doing* (-cess) *to society* (Goal)?

When making transitivity choices, doomers represent themselves as Participants who mainly have an impact on text:

(17) *I* (Actor) *will post* (Process) *it* (Goal) there soon.

Doomers further use the effective structure regarding all the new things they must deal with, such as *hand sanitiser*, as well as various individuals such as *double dosers* or *neckbeards:*

(18) If you get serious discomfort from hand sanitiser, *you* (Actor) *should stop using* (Process) *it* (Goal) right away.
(19) *Let's* (Actor) *break* (Process) *the double dosers* (Goal) into different acceptable risk groups amongst themselves.
(20) *Let's* (Actor) *ban* (Process) *all the fat slovenly neckbeards on r/Australia* (Goal) from accessing healthcare due to their "refusal to take responsibility for a preventable disease."

The same members, mentioned earlier as Actors in transitive construals, appear in intransitive constructions, which reveals their importance in the doomers' representation of a pandemic reality. Some of these are entities with authority, such as the *government* or *politicians*:

(21) *They* (Actor) also *can't go* (Process) full china and start killing people.
(22) *She* (Actor)*'s hiding* (Process) in her basement just like Joe Biden.

Others are the *doomers* themselves, and other *people*:

(23) *I* (Actor) push my shoulders back, keep my head up and smile and *walk* (Process) past them.
(24) *The rusted on supporters* (Actor) *are* (Pro-) visibly *dwindling* (-cess).

Finally, places and abstract objects appear in intransitive constructions as well:

(25) *Australia* (Actor) *has fallen* (Process) because Australians themselves are stupid, cowardly, and pathetic.
(26) See, *lockdowns* (Actor) *work* (Process).

The Australian Redditors also choose to represent reality as it is happening by opting for various ergative constructions, without adding an Agent. As mentioned earlier, Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) ergative model is one of

cause-and-effect and the middle structure can include a hidden Agent or Instigator. Common nouns such as *things* or *it* are used most frequently, indicating the users' lack of knowledge of what exactly is going on in the wider context of society:

(27) Stay strong, *good things* (Medium) *are coming* (Process).
(28) …then *it* (Medium) *doesn't* (Pro-) really *work* (-cess).

By means of these ergative structures the Redditors describe various actions as if they were occurring on their own, evoking an atmosphere of chaos and loss of control. In the sample, abstract entities, such as *antibodies, COVID spikes, cases,* or *virus behaviour* are all involved in self-engendered actions as Mediums (see examples below). The anti-lockdown activists mainly describe actions that refer to change, such as *decay, clear up, drop,* or *change,* as well as to the speed at which the entities are changing using adverbs such as *faster,* or *quicker*. Modality (*will, should*) or negation (*won't*) are used as well:

(29) *Antibodies from vaccination* (Medium) *decay* (Process) faster than from natural immunity (Manner).
(30) *Our Covid spikes* (Medium) *will clear up* (Process) quicker than in overcautious states (Manner).
(31) *Cases* (Medium) *should start dropping* (Process) going into summer.
(32) *Virus behaviour* (Medium) *won't change* (Process).

The Australian doomers further depict a reality that includes drastic actions and movements spiralling out of control, such as *spread*, *shift*, or *end*. They use adverbs of manner such as *easily, quicker,* or *pretty quickly* to describe the events:

(33) *The virus* (Medium) *spreads* (Process) easily (Manner).
(34) *Public opinion* (Medium) *can shift* (Process) quicker than a state can gather info and react (Manner).
(35) *The hysteria* (Medium) *would end* (Process) pretty quickly (Manner).

Most of the inergative clauses are quasi-autonomous events with a hidden Agent. Possible Instigators for this type of clauses are predominantly non-human. For example, the construction *Things may escalate quickly from there,* which is used by the doomers, can be rephrased as:

(36) *Opening up again* (Instigator) may escalate things quickly from there.

This and most of the other possible Instigators are out of the users' control, such as *vaccinations* or *fake news:*

(37) *Vaccinations* (Instigator) are calming down things in the south.
(38) *Fake news* (Instigator) can shift public opinion quicker than a state can gather info and react.

The doomers cannot control other people's *coughing*, or *social distancing* behaviour:

(39) *Coughing* (Instigator) spreads the virus easily.
(40) *Social distancing* (Instigator) will clear up our Covid spikes quicker than in overcautious states.

Nor can they control the most powerful entity of all, *the government*:

(41) *The government* (Instigator) should end the lockdown.

Some of the ergative constructions, however, can only include one Participant, a Medium that, unlike the Medium in inergative clauses, is involved in the action. For example, *antibodies from vaccination,* which participate in the action of *decaying*:

(42) *Antibodies from vaccination* (Medium) *decay* (Process) faster than from natural immunity (Manner).

Similarly, cases are involved in the action of dropping:

(43) *Cases* (Medium) *should start dropping* (Process) going into summer (Time).

Again, both entities are out of the users' control.

4.2 American doom discourse

Retrieved data from r/LockdownSkepticism included 600 verbal processes, of which 408 were [transitive] and 192 [intransitive]. The American doomers represent themselves as having an impact on various entities within their own direct environment, such as *girls,* or *masks:*

(44) *I* (Actor) *'ve pulled* (Process) *girls* (Goal) IRL who probably wouldn't even see me in their stacks on Tinder.
(45) *Are* (Pro-) *you* (Actor) actually *using* (-cess) *masks* (Goal) in the Netherlands?

The main Actors in their world, however, are *people* and not the government. Various individuals exert power over Goals which may be situated as being limited to their own individual world and bodies. These closely resemble the Goals impacted upon by doomers, such as *infections, grandmas,* or the COVID-19 *virus:*

(46) Inevitably, *some people who travelled to hot spots* (Actor) *will bring* (Process) *infections* (Goal) home.
(47) *All those damn anti-maskers* (Actor) *<are> killing* (Process) *all the grandmas and* soon *all life on earth* (Goal).
(48) *So many vaccinated* (Actor) *are catching* (Process) *this virus* (Goal) and *circulating* (Process) *it* (Goal) in their elite vaccinated bubbles.

Similar to their Australian counterparts, the American doomers appear to favour middle structures to describe entities that are moving from one state to another by themselves, such as *science*, *confidence*, or *the world population*. Again, most of the ergative constructions relate to change, with doomers using verbs such as *change, drop,* or *increase,* indicated by adverbs of manner to indicate the way in which things are occurring, or modality (*might*):

(49) *The science* (Medium) *changed* (Process).
(50) *Confidence* (Medium) *might be dropping* (Process) in countries whose Zero-Covid

approach is locking their borders (Location).

(51) *The world population* (Medium) *increased* (Process) at the same pace as in prior years (Manner).

The r/LockdownSkepticism users also describe actions and movements of entities that seem out of their control, such as *public opinion,* or *the virus:*

(52) *Public opinion* (Medium) *continues to shift* (Process) toward requiring vaccinations as a means to restore normalcy (Location).

(53) *The virus* (Medium) *is moving* (Process) slowly (Manner).

The American users further mention several entities that are involved in the actions of *ending* or *continuing,* such as *restrictions* or *deaths:*

(54) *Any new restrictions* (Medium) *end* (Process) when those in power arbitrarily decide (Time).

(55) *The deaths* (Medium) *continue* (Process) in Florida (Location).

All ergative construals in the sample have a possible Instigator, which means that the actions are semi-autonomous. The American doomers do not have any control over possible human Instigators such as *the general public*, *experts*, or *individuals*:

(56) *The general public* (Instigator) might be dropping confidence in countries whose Zero-Covid approach is locking their borders.

(57) *Experts* (Instigator) have moved the measuring sticks continuously.

(58) *Individuals* (Instigator) spread the virus around.

They also do not have an impact on various non-human Instigators, such as *vaccines*, *changes*, or *chemicals*:

(59) *Vaccines* (Instigator) have changed things.

(60) *Changes* (Instigator) end any new restrictions when those in power arbitrarily decide.

(61) *Gene-altering chemicals* (Instigator) have grown and mutated those seeds.

Now the transitivity and ergativity analyses are complete, it is worthwhile to examine the Australian and American doomers' argumentation.

5 Reconstruction and critical evaluation of argumentation

First, the notion of fallacies is explained. The remaining sub-sections discuss several examples of illogical reasoning pertaining to the preventive measure of lockdowns during the pandemic. Some of the interlocutors' most pertinent arguments are reconstructed and critically evaluated.

5.1 Sarcasm as strategic manoeuvring

Some of the doomers' arguments appear to be illogical. They continuously attempt to evaluate information posted by other users. Possible illocutionary effects of the Redditors' speech acts include inviting other doomers into sharing the same presumptions. Some of the perlocutionary effects of their posts and replies could even result in their participation in protests or riots, since anti-lockdown movements occur when a collective of bodies assume that their discourse and actions might affect the political powers and perceived anti-democratic measures against COVID-19. Any fallacies may be signalled by argumentative indicators in the discourse and summed up in a brief argument scheme. Finally, by asking critical questions associated with the argument schemes, the unreasonableness of the users' argumentation may be elucidated.

It needs to be added that the doomers advance standpoints in the belief that the readers of their comments and replies may not accept the views they express (Houtlosser, 1998), since, in pragma-dialectics, the concept of "standpoint" is different from "attitude." Subsequently, any sarcasm, as a manifestation of irony, should be seen as a form of strategic manoeuvring (Van Eemeren, 2010).

Some of the doomers' perceived inappropriate utterances to be interpreted as "derailments" violating the norms of a reasonable discussion, thus rendering the statements fallacious (Van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002). A reconstruction of the doomers' arguments may exemplify the most salient logical fallacies in the samples, and by posing critical questions, the unreasonableness of the users' arguments may be laid bare. Several excerpts taken from the two subreddits under investigation contain causal and symptomatic argumentation, better known under the more popular terms used to describe the rhetorical phenomena, as discussed in the analytical examples that follow.

5.2 The bandwagon effect

When SNS users appeal to a questionable source of authority, their argumentation may derail into an *argumentum ad populum* or "bandwagon effect," a type of reasoning that is omnipresent in both samples. Two examples, taken from each of the subreddits, are presented below. Any argumentative indicators are indicated in bold. The reconstructed argumentation and several critical questions (CQ) are included as well:

r/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: "Singapore shows Australia that 80 per cent vaccination won't stop infections surging" (Dasey, 2021).

T1: So, mental health professionals are trying to help Singaporeans live in a new normal. So **even** psychologists are in on this bullshit too.
T2: The majority of psychologists are mentally ill and psychopaths.
T3: *Yeah,* I've noticed this too. Long before Covid, the ones I've met seem to have issues…
T4: Psychologists are the reason for all of this…

T1 excludes the assertion expressed in the article. If psychologists are included in the government's plot, then it is impossible for them to help people adjust to life in the new normal. T3's response underlines the similarity between their own standpoint and that of T2, indicated by the expression "too." T3 further uses "yeah" to indicate that they accept T2's standpoint. Subsequently, T4's argument may be reconstructed as:

X is true
for A, B and C say X is true

CQ: Is X true?

r/LockdownSkepticism

Post: "Federal government to require vaccinations for all federal public servants, air and train passengers." (Tasker, 2021, October 6).

T1: The top comment on r / worldnews promotes making unvaccinated people second-class citizens. We are surrounded by Nazis.
T2: *Yes* we are. Induced mass psychosis has visited humanity once again. This will not end well…
T3: *I'm with you.* Humanity is disgusting. Life has no value…
T4: Wow, that's hard-line! *But actually* in hindsight preferable?

T1 reasons that, if the top comment is that unvaccinated people should be treated as second-class citizens, then they must be surrounded by Nazis. T2 accepts T1's standpoint, indicated by "yes" and uses the strong modal auxiliary verb "will" to make a prediction about the future. T3 agrees with T2 ("I'm with you"), concluding that "humanity is disgusting" and that "life has no value". T4 uses the stance adverb "actually" to qualify their standpoint to indicate that something unexpected is about to follow ("in hindsight preferable"). They also use "but" to signal to T1, T2 and T3 that they are willing to accept their extreme views. The interlocutors are using causal argumentation to justify their predictions about the future:

X is true
for A, B and C say X is true

CQ: Is X true?

5.3 The gambler's fallacy

Another fallacy constitutes "the belief that runs of one binary outcome will be balanced by the opposite outcome" and that "the longer the run, the stronger the belief that the opposite outcome is due to appear" (Barron & Leider, 2010, p. 118). Based on this type of bias, referred to as the "gambler's fallacy," individuals' perceived risk of the same event re-occurring decreases, as shown in the examples below.

R/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: "NSW 1,124 cases today." (cluns_killa, 2021).

T1: Winter is over, they (cases) *should* start dropping going into summer. Isn't that what every single graph from around the word shows?
T2: *See,* lockdowns are unnecessary.

Seen from a binary perspective, case numbers can either increase or decrease. T1 reasons that, since cases have been constantly increasing in winter, they should start decreasing in summer based on the premise that this is what happened in the rest of the world. Their standpoint ("cases should start dropping") is indicated by the deontic modal verb "should" and modified by the question that follows, seeking confirmation from other Reddit users. T1 is implying here that lockdowns are not necessary. T2 agrees with T1's standpoint. The expression "see", used by T2, indicates symptomatic argumentation, as T2 argues that cases drop naturally, without any government measures such as lockdowns. Overall, the interlocutors' argumentation is pragmatic, since it indicates a causal process with a particular desired result:

X is desirable
for X leads to Y
and Y is desirable

CQ: Does X lead to Y?

r/LockdownSkepticism

Post: "Dr. Scott Gottlieb expects coronavirus to be an 'endemic' virus in U.S. after delta surge" (Singh, 2021).

T1: Delta is *probably* the last big wave. *Because* it's so contagious, by the end of the summer, early fall, most people *will* already be immune via natural immunity or vaccine acquired immunity. Sure, we can expect seasonal resurgences for several years, *but* it *will* just become a virus that circulates like the flu.
T2: They *will* be ready with Quadruple Omega 5000.

The virus can either remain an issue or not. T1 reasons that, since the influenza virus behaved in a certain way in the past, COVID-19 will follow its example. They are using the epistemic modal adverb "probably" to indicate that their standpoint of the virus behaving in the same way as influenza can be justified in an objective fashion. The marker "because" has an explanatory function, but also signals that T1 is arguing why they think that Delta is the last wave. An exclusion *a minore* occurs here as well, as T1 is using "but" followed by the strong assertive verb "will", which is an indicator of confrontation. T1 flouts Dr Gottlieb's standpoint that COVID-19 will remain an issue in the future by asserting that their perception of the virus spreading like the flu excludes seasonal resurgences of it and, as such, maintains that it will not be a problem at all. T2 accepts T1's standpoint and reasons that, if the virus becomes an issue, the government will have a new vaccine ready, which is more of a sarcastic remark, indicated by the hyperbole "quadruple." This is pragmatic argumentation:

X is desirable
for X leads to Y
and Y is desirable

CQ: Does X lead to Y?

5.4 Loss aversion or doom reasoning

Focusing more on losses than wins is another common human tendency. Individuals tend to avoid losses when making decisions. This type of bias is related to the "fear of missing out" (FoMO). Loss aversion may be used to

persuade people to get into action by avoiding to lose something, a tactic which is extensively used for marketing purposes. However, if the situation appears too overwhelming and people are effectively deprived of something, the result of this type of "doom reasoning" may be anger or refusal. Consider the following examples taken from the two subreddits:

r/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: "Interesting Information about Medical Exemptions" (TheHoovyPrince, 2021).

T1: They're simply trying to make life next to impossible without it. Vax passports *are going to* govern everything in Aus.
T2: Damn.
T3: GPs aren't *even* allowed to issue mask exemptions. Madness.
T4: Wow, what the hell!

T1's standpoint constitutes a prediction about future government policy, indicated by the future tense marker "going to." T1 asserts that, since one needs a vaccination passport to engage in everyday activities, the effect will be that passports will determine all activities in the future. The interlocutors do not seem to be willing to tolerate simple inconveniences such as vaccinations or masks, even though the measures were put into place to help protect them. T2 and T4's interjections ("damn"; "wow"; "what the hell") express their shared frustration at the restrictions. T3 presents their standpoint as an argument that trumps any previous argumentation by using "even." The cause-to-effect argument structure is as follows:

if X happens
then Y happens
CQ: Will Y happen?

r/LockdownSkepticism:

Post: "COVID plague may take years to end, experts tell UCSF forum" (Allday, 2021).

T1: It *could* be "over" tomorrow if we decided we wanted it to be.

T2: Exactly, this *could* have been done with a year ago. Instead we are back at square one and *actually,* in an even worse position. Now we've got these vax passports that *will* ban people from carrying out normal everyday tasks.
T3: All it takes is to turn off the TV and stop testing. All of a sudden, common cold and flu *would* reappear and we *would* go on with our lives.

The post suggests that restrictions will continue to be in place for several more years. T1 is using cause-to-effect argumentation and reasons that, if one simple decision is made to stop the restrictions, the issue of ongoing loss of freedom will be resolved. T1, T2 and T3 are using modal auxiliary verbs to construe a more desirable reality. T2 qualifies their standpoint by using the marker "actually" to announce a surprising fact ("in an even worse situation"). They also use the strong assertive verb "will" to predict that vaccination passports will have a negative impact on everyday life. T2's argues that, if the government decides to continue the COVID-19 emergency situation, things will only get worse. Subsequently, the argument may be reconstructed as:

if X happens
then Y happens

CQ: Will Y happen?

5.5 The Dunning-Kruger effect
It is a human tendency to overestimate one's own abilities. This illusion of knowledge may lead to risk-taking behaviour and poor choices. Those with little expertise in the extensive field of epidemiology often seem to pose as public health experts on SNSs, as the following examples show.

r/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: "Unvaccinated people should be denied healthcare if they refuse to take responsibility for a preventable disease" (Meme, 2021).

T1: Hospitals in the US got paid to list patients as having died from Covid. The number of deaths is fraudulent.

T2: Covid was 4 % of world deaths last year. Heart disease and strokes took the number one spot … *again.*

T3: *OFFICIALLY,* <it was> 4 %.

T1's standpoint ("the number of deaths is fraudulent") is based on the unlikely premise that American hospitals were paid to list patients as having died from COVID-19. T2's standpoint aligns with that of T1 when asserting that the fatality of COVID-19 was low based on the premise that heart disease and stroke led to a higher number of deaths. T3's standpoint implies that the actual number of deaths was probably lower than 4 %, whereas calculating how deadly a new virus is can be challenging, even for experienced scientists. When qualifying their standpoint, T3 uses the domain adverb "officially" to assert that they possess correct information regarding COVID-19.

This is position-to-know argumentation, which may be reconstructed as follows:

A, B and C assert that they are in a position to know some expert knowledge containing propositions X, Y and Z.
A claims that X is true (false).
B claims that Y is true (false).
C claims that Z is true (false).
Therefore, X, Y and Z are true (false).

CQ1: Is A really in a position to know that the number of deaths is fraudulent?
CQ2: Is B in a position to know that heart disease and strokes took the number one spot?
CQ3: Is C in a position to know the actual number of deaths?
CQ4: Are A, B and C trustworthy sources?

r/LockdownSkepticism

Post: "Federal government to require vaccinations for all federal public servants, air and train passengers." (Tasker, 2021).

T1: This looks hinky as HELL *to me,* especially when TPTB are *still* touting fxxxing *masks*, KNOWING they do nothing against an aerosol spread virus only 96 microns in size, and -AGAIN- the virus has a 99.9 % survival rate for all but the oldest and fattest, and they have a 90–95 % survival rate; Hell, Tammy "666 pounds" Slaton survived.

T2: In SF you now need a vaccine to do *anything* indoors.

T1's standpoint ("This looks hinky as hell") is based on the premises that The Powers That Be (TPTB) are recommending masks despite being aware of their ineffectiveness and that the virus still has a high survival rate, even for older adults or people with obesity. Even though T1 presents their views as facts, they appear to be based on nothing but anecdotal evidence. T1 uses the force modifying expression "to me" out of fear that their standpoint may not be accepted by other Reddit users. T2's standpoint ("In South Florida vaccination is required for all indoor activities") is based on vague personal experience alone, signalled by the hyperbole "anything."

This is, again, position-to-know argumentation, which may be reconstructed as follows:

A and B assert they are in a position to know some expert knowledge containing propositions X, Y and Z.
A claims X and Y are true.
B claims Z is true.
Therefore, X, Y and Z are true.

CQ1: Is A really in a position to know that masks are useless against the virus and that the virus has a 99.9 % survival rate for young and slim individuals?
CQ2: Is B in a position to know that one must be vaccinated to be able to carry out any indoor activities?
CQ3: Are A and B trustworthy sources?

5.6 Information cascade

With doom-scrolling, another cognitive bias occurs: upon scrolling through a constant flow of information on a particular topic, individuals may reach a conclusion based on anecdotal evidence presented by others who do not have any expertise on the matter or who present information that has been taken out of context, as the result of an information

cascade. This becomes clear in the examples added below.

R/LockdownSkepticismAU

Post: "NSW Health limits residents of locked-down tower block to six beers per day" (Nilsson & O'Doherty, 2021).

T1: They do th*is for China's social credit system* as well.
T2: Imagine when your vaccine passport *is able to* control how many units of alcohol you *can* purchase on a daily / weekly basis.
T3: Once introduced, this *won't* be far from the truth. Expect all your medical data to be integrated into the passport.
T4: It's a digital class system. You *can* be elevated or demoted and have your rights expanded or removed on a whim.

The discussion starts with T1 drawing a comparison between a particular lockdown restriction and China's social credit system, indicated by "as well" (X does Z as well). T4 asserts that Australian society may turn into a digital class system that resembles the Reddit SNS. However, a digital class system pertains to unequal access to the Internet and has nothing to do with vaccination passports. T2, T3 and T4 are using various modal verbs to make predictions about the future. T4's argument is based on the untrustworthy information shared by T1, T2 and T3. Argument scheme:

X is true
for A, B and C say X is true.
CQ: Is X true?

r/LockdownSkepticism

Post: "Federal government to require vaccinations for all federal public servants, air and train passengers" (Tasker, 2021).

T1: It's hard to maintain optimism when things are happening this quickly.
T2: They want 100 % (or very close to it) of the population vaccinated.
T3: Oh, *I have no doubts* mandatory boosters *are coming*.

T3 concludes that mandatory booster injections will be required in the near future, indicated by the strong assertive force modifying expression "I have no doubts". Their standpoint is based on subjective information shared by T1 and a fact proposed by T2, who weakens their proposition by adding "or very close to it" to leave some room for doubt.

Argument scheme:
X is true
for A and B say X is true.

CQ: Is X the case?

Some of the most prominent fallacious patterns in the Australian and American Redditors' argumentation have now been elucidated.

6   Ideological motivations

Political doomerism inspired worldwide anti-lockdown movements, over-emphasising the negative impact of COVID-19 prevention actions taken by the government and protesting against new rules and regulations. Based on the Great Barrington declaration, a fraudulent open letter, political doomers favoured a herd immunity approach to protect the economy, a solution that was heavily condemned by scientists (Great Barrington Declaration, 2021). In the American Reddit sample, for example, one of the doomers criticises the Australian approach to the pandemic by claiming that "they are dramatically delaying herd immunity" (Van Poucke, 2021b). It further emerges from the samples that the doomers' strategy involves a focused protection plan aimed at segregating vulnerable individuals to allow others to continue their everyday activities. According to one of the Australian doomers, the government wants to "force vaccination and lockdown is just a political play to impose the idea that state has control over you" (Van Poucke, 2021a). The same sceptical attitude towards lockdowns is advanced by both groups of doomers, and recalls Schmitt's (2010), *Ausnahmezustand* or "state of exception," referred to by Agamben (2008). Agamben's reasoning may be used to justify measures that deviate from the law, of

which the avoidance of mask-wearing, promoted in the examined doom discourse, is a good example.

SNSs further constitute the perfect tool for allowing subjects to monitor both their own and other citizens' behaviour by measuring it out against a set of shared, established norms. Fallacies such as the Dunning-Kruger and bandwagon effects exemplify this type of online practice. When users claim knowledge of how one should deal with a pandemic and other members of the group follow their example, it often leads to a critical evaluation or even a public condemnation of how other individuals conduct themselves. For example, the group consensus in the Australian subreddit sample is that masks are useless, which leads its users to openly ridicule mask wearers: "I almost can't believe my eyes when I see a morbidly obese person pulling their mask over their nose when walking outside" (Van Poucke, 2021a). Any established policies or "regimes of truth" may encourage right-wing populist political doomers to adopt the same binary view and to dichotomise between themselves as healthy bodies and others as deviating from their norms.

Neoliberal subjects are expected to be entrepreneurs of themselves, but, at the same time, they are strictly controlled and, in some cases, exploited. As mentioned earlier, Foucault (1978–1979/2004) refers to this type of entrepreneurship of the self as biopower. Their social relations are being organised around the concept of enterprise, including their interactions with other users on SNSs. Subsequently, to the "homo oeconomicus," the Other will also be an entrepreneur and subjectively judged on how well they manage themselves, which may lead to discrimination (Reisigl & Wodak, 2005). Several examples of the alienation of people with obesity can be found on both subreddits.

Self-promotion further plays a significant role in the online behaviour of neoliberal subjects in social networks, creating the illusion of individuality and free speech while primarily targeting human capital. This also is the case for the Reddit users on r / LockdownSkepticism and r / LockdownSkepticismAU, whose doom discourse largely promotes self-interest. They are involved

in strategic games aiming to determine the "value" of other subjects, as they engage in critical discussions which, often, amount to expressions of bias, rather than consensus. The doomers primarily employ causal argumentation ("if x, then y"), with the aims of displaying their superior knowledge, establishing "truths," and sharing a desired reality as an alternative to the dystopian world they have co-constructed themselves through discourse and subjective experiences.

7 Conclusion

The systemic functional grammatical analysis in this paper focused on transitivity, intransitivity and ergativity. In terms of transitivity, the r / LockdownSkepticismAU users represent the Australian government and politicians as the most powerful Actors or Doers who primarily impact entities within the public sphere. As for the Australian doomers, their reach extends over online messages and various pandemic-related objects. Apart from these, they also have an influence over "double dosers," a derogatory term to indicate people's double vaccination status, or "neckbeards," which is Internet slang for "socially inept, overweight, and dirty" male individuals (Lawson, 2019). In contrast, the r / LockdownSkepticism users tend to depict people as the main Doers. These Actors manipulate entities within the personal domain. However, they also have an impact on other doomers' comments and replies, as they exchange views on various topics linked to COVID-19.

The verbal processes of "happening," as uncovered through the ergativity analysis, provide further insight into how the Australian and American doomers represent reality. Various entities as well as several human and non-human Instigators are considered beyond the users' control, revealing a shared perceived sense of loss of agency. The Australian Reddit users' ergativity choices concern abstract COVID-19-related things over which they have no reach. These entities are involved in actions of irrepressible change. Hidden Instigators are beyond the Australian doomers' power as well, primarily including things that are related to other people's be-

haviour. They cannot control the authorities and seem to feel overwhelmed by the online presence of fake news. In a similar fashion, the American Reddit users' ergativity selections also relate to change. They agree with the Australian doomers that the virus and public opinion are beyond their control. The hidden Instigators in the users' ergative constructions mostly constitute positive items. Unlike the other group of Redditors, the American users also focus on the human entities themselves.

A critical evaluation of the American and Australian doomers' argumentation, using a pragma-dialectical approach, further shows how the interlocutors of both subreddits mainly use causal argumentation and epistemic modality to make groundless predictions about the future. Deontic modality is used as well, to indicate the users' expectations regarding the behaviour of the COVID-19 virus. The arguments put forward by the doomers contain several impediments to appropriately reasonable discussion which may be linked to popular phenomena such as the Dunning-Kruger effect, or information cascade. Even though possible perlocutionary effects of doom discourse might include the interactants' engagement in acts of anti-lockdown protest, the Reddit users' main aim appears to be the mere validation of their claims.

Knowing the facts that digital discourse is highly dynamic in nature and that SNS user behaviour tends to be erratic and irrational in character might thwart the insights provided in this paper. Another limitation concerns the size of the excerpts. An even larger sample of doom discourses could yield different results. Subsequently, the current study merely provides a partial view into how digital doom discourse behaves at a certain point in time. A multimodal approach could add additional valuable insights. Nevertheless, it has become clear that political doomers appear to be motivated, not immediately by a fear of imminent societal collapse, as in the archetypal doomer's case, but rather by biopower and self-interest. A critical evaluation of the doomers' argumentation has further unveiled that, whenever individuals sharing a set of common values interact online, ideological dichotomies are bound to arise, which may lead to the alienation of other users who do not meet the collective standard. It is hoped that the study's insights on the use of digital doom discourse and its possible effects on SNS users may help provide valuable insights into human behaviour both on and outside of Reddit.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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