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Faking and Conspiring about COVID-19: A Discursive Approach

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Abstract

In the more general climate of post-truth - a social trend reflecting a disregard for reliable ways of knowing what is true, mostly acted through massive use of misinformation and rhetoric calling for emotions - an alarming "infodemic" accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting healthy attitudes and behaviors and further lessening trust in science, institutions, and traditional media. Its two main representative items, fake and conspiracy news, have been widely analyzed in psycho-social research, even if scholars mostly acknowledged the cognitive and social dimensions of those items and devoted less attention to their discursive construction. In addition, these works did not directly compare and differentiate fake and conspiracy pathways. In order to address this gap and promote a wider understanding of these matters, a qualitative investigation of an Italian sample of 112 fake and conspiracy news articles, mostly spread during the first two COVID-19 "waves" (from March 2020 to January 2021) was realized. Our sample gathered news specifically coming from social media posts, representing easy and fast channels for viral content diffusion. We analyzed the selected texts by means of Diatextual Analysis and Discursive Action Model models, aimed to (a) offer "in depth" fine-grained analysis of the psycholinguistic and argumentative features of fake and conspiracy news, and (b) differentiate them in line with the classical Aristotle's rhetoric stances of *logos*, *ethos,* and *pathos*, thus bridging traditional and current lines of thinking. Even though they may share common roots set in the post-truth climate, fake and conspiracy news engage in different rhetoric patterns since they present different *enjeu* and construct specific epistemic pathways. Implications for health- and digital-literacy are debated.

Keywords

fake news, conspiracy news, COVID-19, critical discourse analysis, rhetoric

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Introduction

As a real plague in current times, especially in the domain of digital communication, the information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) is a social phenomenon mainly characterized by the combination of false and harmful intents concerning information sharing across society (Tandoc et al., 2017). The World Health Organization (2020) named the information disorder regarding the COVID-19 pandemic "infodemic." This disorder is a truly alarming issue for two main reasons: (a) the widespread misinformation did not improve any feature of the sanitary emergency, and (b) it rode the time-advantage related to the rather absolute initial uncertainty about the disease (Larson, 2020; Ratzan et al., 2020). In addition, the circulation of an overwhelming number of news stories reduces their quality and prevents any valuation of the content reliability and source trustworthiness (Qiu et al., 2017). Beyond any ethical consideration, this phenomenon negatively affected the healthy attitudes and

behaviors (Anaki & Sergay, 2021) mainly aimed to prevent a disease and to empower wellbeing and, therefore, opposed to the general efforts to contain the pandemic.

Infodemic is connected to several intersecting phenomena coming from different social domains, such as the initially chaotic political scenarios (e.g., for the USA, see Gadarian et al., 2021), the increasing distrust toward scientists (Battiston et al., 2021) and traditional media (Edelman, 2021), the feeling of frustration deriving from social isolation and lack of information, or a careless exposure to social media, leading to misconceptions, reduced risk perception, and compliance with security measures (Bridgman et al., 2020).

A great number of newspaper articles associated COVID-19 and "post-truth" have some initial tendencies to define COVID-19 as a "hoax" alone (Loftus, 2020); in addition, this relation is especially relevant since "the pandemic has engendered a socio-political situation where fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy have arrived at the centre of politics affecting the relation of the government with its subject and foreign countries" (Al-Mwzaiji, 2021, p. 241).

Considered a subclass of fake news (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008), beliefs in conspiracy were easily triggered, and in their turn, impacted healthy behaviors (Allington et al., 2021). In the examination of these beliefs, a complicated factor is that they can produce several different effects: lesser or greater adhesion to safety rules (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020), lessening risk perception and preventive practices (e.g., the use of masks; Romer & Jamieson, 2020), refusal of information provided by experts (Uscinski et al., 2020), and hostility or fear toward the vaccines (Freeman et al., 2020).

In line with this alarming background, a good amount of attention has been devoted to the study of fake and conspiracy news concerning COVID-19. In particular, scholars focused on sociodemographic variables (Duplaga, 2020), cognitive processes (Heiss et al., 2021), reasons to explain flourishing (Douglas, 2021; D'Errico, Corbelli, et al., 2022) and going viral (Gruzd & Mai, 2020) of misinformation, and the role of social media (Goreis & Kothgassner, 2020).

Considering the communicative features of this type of fake news, a recent work (Fong et al., 2021) proposed an interesting psycholinguistic analysis on conspiratorial contents in tweets. Nonetheless, data were analyzed through software for automatic detection, which present several strengths (e.g., it offers the opportunity to offer an overall perspective about negative emotions, main topics, and cognitive processes behind conspiracist worldviews), but inevitably could not focus on more implicit linguistic and discursive peculiarities, being based on "big data."

With some significant exceptions (Owojecho, 2021), less consideration has been given to the discursive construction of these news. To our knowledge, a rhetoric[1]/argumentative analysis of conspiracy news was not realized. Therefore, we proposed a critical discourse analysis of Italian fake and conspiracy news, since we believe that this interpretative lens can support "health literacy," an essential competence founded on adequate knowledge comprehension and enabling to improve decision-making processes and wellbeing (Rubinelli et al., 2010; Schulz & Nakamoto, 2005). Critical discourse research (CDR) can be defined as an emerging cluster of theoretical and methodological approaches to discourses, which may provide people with useful tools for identifying and debunking fake news stories and inform practices of epistemic self-defense (Vamanu, 2019). Mainly deriving from the contribution of the "Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse" (SKAD; Keller 2013) and the "critical discourse studies" (CDS; Wodak & Meyer, 2015) group, CDR converges in (a) conceiving discourses as social practices which can (re)produce and

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[1] We adhere to a contemporary rhetoric perspective, emphasizing the mutual construction of discourse, meaning, and experience (Harrienger, 1998) and defining knowledge, institutions, and people themselves as effects of discourses (Berlin & Inkster, 1980), in contrast with the ancient idea that talking just means to transmit ideas.

transform society, and can achieve concrete power effects, and (b) the efforts to develop concrete methodologies for articulating discourses and their power effects (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). As a general pathway, the CDR framework aims to sensitize the researcher to three major dimensions of a text; namely, the contexts within which it appears, the formal structure of the text, and its contents. We analyzed an Italian corpus of 112 fake and conspiracy news stories through critical discourse analysis; the proposed interpretative lens can support "health literacy" in understanding their finer-grained psycholinguistic and argumentative features, potentially improving meaningful interventions within educational contexts.

The Need for a Discursive Approach to Fake and Conspiracy News

Fake news is "an insidious form of post-truth rhetoric" (McComiskey, 2017, p. 19), since it is proposed by news articles, intentionally and verifiably false, and misleading the readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news phenomenon is founded on the combination of three features (Nyilasy, 2019): inaccuracy (partially or totally unmatching the truth), imitation, and deception (being just formally associable with official and factual news, having different organizational intents and processes; Lazer et al., 2018).

In line with its deceptive intentions, it can also fall into conspiracy theories, meant as complex and secret plans specifically devised by a limited group of individuals to alter the course of events through secret operations and actions (Pigden, 1995). Even if varying in their nature (from "good" to "evil"), conspiracy theories usually concern morally questionable plans, since their typical goals involve coups, gaining economic power, rights violations, and/or hiding vital secrets (Douglas et al., 2019). As an example, conspiracists attempt to explain some specific historical events through planned and covertly enacted actions by a powerful, restricted group (Keeley, 1999; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008). In line with their speculative core, believing in either a specific or a set of conspiracy theories is defined as "conspiracy belief" (Douglas et al., 2019).

It could be argued that conspiracy theories and beliefs are a marginal issue when compared with fake news and the more general phenomenon of disinformation, but the phenomenon of conspiration needs to be better investigated, in order to overcome naïve beliefs and mistakes about its nature and effects and avoid the risk of considering it "innocuous for society" (Zagarella & Annoni, 2019, p. 266). As a matter of fact, in contrast with common beliefs, conspiracy theories can: (1) sometimes, turn out to be true, (2) cut across socio-demographics and ideological attitudes (rather than being reserved to tiny minorities), (3) be pervasive across geographical areas, (4) affect individuals more than expected, having implications for society, and (5) contrast with the perception of scientific knowledge as legitimate and trustworthy (Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

However, when analysing fake and conspiracy news, scholars focusing on psychological frames mostly acknowledged their cognitive and social sides (cfr. Scardigno & Mininni, 2020; Zagarella & Annoni, 2019; D'Errico, Papapicco, et al., 2022): as for the first pole, naïve realism, confirmation bias, frequency heuristics, illusory truth effect, and social credibility are called into question to explain information reception, perception, selection, and so on, relating therefore fake and conspiracy news to the failure of our rational thinking and decision-making processes. As for the second pole, the references to Social Identity Theory and Normative Influence Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), as well as to the Echo Chamber Effect (Del Vicario et al., 2016) emphasized social needs and dynamics behind these phenomena. Even if all of these theories have been inspiring to widely understand fake and conspiracy news, they did not run out the deep comprehension of those items. As a matter of fact, despite the great attention (rightly) devoted to these matters, few studies focused on the discursive construction of fake news, though it represents a critical point for several reasons:

1. Fake news is usually written to look like real news; therefore, it can be compared to official media, just in its format rather than in its intentions (Lazer et al., 2018).
2. Focusing on sectorial (cognitive) perspectives can lead to some shortcomings, such as assuming that believing in conspiracy is completely irrational and, as a consequence, a wider rationality should be enough to contrast it (Zagarella & Annoni, 2019).
3. Both fake and conspiracy news meet (almost partially) incompetent fact-checkers; that is, readers that are not completely capable of checking for reliability of sources and of the proposed arguments.

Even when scholars work on the style and the language of the articles, they mostly show that, e.g., fake news proceeds through heuristics rather than through sound arguments (Horne & Adali, 2017), again focusing on the cognitive domain.

An approach specifically set on the discursive construction of fake and conspiracy news can be framed in the pragma-linguistic, social-constructionist, and rhetoric perspectives (Danblon & Nicolas, 2010; Oswald & Herman, 2016) in the more general disciplinary field of social discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992, 1993), as they claim the power of discursive practices to construct reality and knowledge. Contemporary rhetoric especially tried to overcome the obsolete equivalence between "talking" and "transmission of ideas." On the contrary, emphasizing the mutual construction of discourse, meaning, and experience, this discipline defines knowledge, institutions, and people themselves as effects of discourses (Berlin & Inkster, 1980; Harrienger, 1998). Therefore, rhetoric can be considered "epistemic" since it is knowledge-producing and reality-creating (Harpine, 2004; Schiappa et al., 2002); in addition, rhetorical interactions can lead people to accept claims as true or false (Brinton, 1982) regardless of objective knowledge and direct experience, since when a concept is shared by groups and communities, it becomes a part of their acquired knowledge (Herrick, 1997).

A discursive approach can be particularly relevant in the socio-cultural scenario of COVID-19. As a matter of fact, the pandemic has been strictly related to the phenomenon of post-truth, meant as a "discursive situation" (Al-Mwzaiji, 2021, p. 239) in which: (a) appeals to emotion and personal beliefs are more influential than objective facts (Oxford Languages, 2016), (b) misrepresentation and lies are "unchallenged" (Ball, 2016, p. 10), and (c) people believe in something regardless of good evidence (McIntyre, 2018, p. 12). If compared with other events, COVID-19 was particularly and paradoxically related to post-truth, since the same pandemic was originally defined as a "hoax" by very prominent figures and institutions, such as the U.S. president Donald Trump and some right-wing U.S. media (Loftus, 2020). In addition, the massive scale of the phenomenon has led to several interpretations of – and disinformation about – its origin, impact, and future (Al-Mwzaiji, 2021). As many as ten conspiracy theories were created and spread (Lynas, 2020).

The study of how both fake and conspiracy news originate and are discursively/rhetorically constructed, as well as of their argumentative/inferential structure, can both contrast the phenomenon of information disorder and prevent attitudinal and behavioral harms, especially when health issues are at stake.

The Research

Aims and Procedures

In line with the theoretical background and in order to deepen some neglected dimensions of fake and conspiracy news, especially having to do with their rhetoric/discursive core, the overall aims of this work are: (1) to offer a qualitative "in depth" fine-grained analysis of the psycholinguistic and argumentative features of fake news and (2) to compare the discursive construction of fake and conspiracy news in an Italian sample on the basis of the classical Aristotle's rhetorical stances.

In particular, we took into account what emerged from psycholinguistic and argumentative analysis and connected those elements to the Aristotelian triad (*logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*). We believe that the three stances must be considered mutually supporting and interweaving in order to describe the complex discursive structure of fake and conspiracy stories in a more comprehensive way. In line with previous contributions (Zagarella & Annoni, 2019), analysing of how contents are generally presented (*logos*), how the orator's credibility is construed (*ethos*), and how the emotions are elicited (*pathos*) can shed significant light on how the most widespread items of misinformation about COVID-19 are discursively structured in order to provide their persuasive effect.

Procedure

As a first step, we selected fake news articles from two online sources: (a) websites aimed to report and "fact-check" them (www.bufale.net, www.open.online, the Italian Ministry of Health website), and (b) a specific dataset related to COVID-19 (Shapiro et al., 2020). From the initial database (n = 200) we further selected those items accompanied by textual news, so our final sample was composed of 112 news articles, mostly spread during the first two COVID-19 "waves" (the overall timespan covered the months from March of 2020 to January of 2021). The other items, mostly constructed by images accompanied by a brief sentence commenting the same image, were excluded from the sample, as our aim was to analyze the discursive construction of fake news. Following the current definition of conspiracy theory (Douglas et al., 2019), we proposed an additional distinction between fake (n= 66) and conspiracy news (n= 46), the second ones being codified on the following criteria: (a) connection between pandemic and disjointed items (e.g., the implementation of 5G), (b) focus on "power figures" (single persons, such as Bill Gates, institutional targets, such as governments and media, and private organizations, such as pharmaceutical industries), and (c) individuation of hidden malevolent intents.

This work was originally conceived for the graduation dissertation of the second author, under the supervision of the first author, this last having already worked with the rhetoric construction of fake news in the political domain (Scardigno & Mininni, 2020). The proposal of the topic and of the methodological perspective was fully embraced by the (at that time) graduating author, resulting in a widely appreciated dissertation. After the graduation, both the theoretical background and the methodological tools were deepened and integrated, also thanks to the suggestions of the third author, being the scientific coordinator of an international project concerning racial hoax (https://www.irit.fr/sterheotypes/). Even despite having different backgrounds, all three authors were fully engaged in this work through an ongoing dialogic and interactive working attitude.

Method

Discursive data were analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA – Fairclough, 2010; Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2013), a theoretical and methodological perspective aimed to deepen the relationships between discourse structures, power, dominance, and ideology reproduction, starting from the definition of discourse as "social practice" (Fairclough, 2001) as well as "text-in-context" (Leitch & Palmer, 2010). CDA makes use of several interpretative tools deriving from theoretical reflections and concrete methodologies coming from the "Critical Discourse Studies" (CDS) group (composed by Norman Fairclough, Siegfried Jäger, Florentine Maier, Michael Meyer, Martin Reisigl, Teun van Dijk, Theo van Leeuwen, and Ruth Wodak as the most important contributors; Vamanu, 2019). In their perspective, discourses act as social practices having the power to (re)produce and transform society; their material and ideational infrastructure, including artefacts, technologies, policies, and regulations (Keller, 2013, p. 72) can achieve concrete power effects.

In particular, we worked by means of two main CDA approaches:

a) the SAM model, whose main object is to catch the Subjectivity, Argumentation, and Modality emerging from texts meant as diatexts (Mininni et al., 2014) through the use of psycho-semiotic markers. The diatext works as a semiotic device aimed to catch the dynamic-constructive and dialogical-contractual nature of context: the prefix "dia-" – "through" in Greek – wants to overcome the limits of a text, since what is meant in the internal context of a text can be completely understood only including the external context, that is, where enunciation is planned and acted. In this work, we specifically made use of:

    i. Mitigation (vs accentuation) markers (Caffi, 2007), including all the communicative choices aimed at reducing (vs. stressing) the possible unwanted effects of a given speech act by taking into account the risks and responsibilities concerning conversations and their perlocutionary effects (Bonelli, 2015).

    ii. Embrayage/débrayage markers, referring to any strategy aimed to reveal whether the author is involved or not (I-here-now) in discursive acts.

    iii. Metadiscoursive markers (Crismore et al. 1993); that is, non-propositional aspects of discourse represented by expressions of comment and reformulation concerning text organization and author's credibility.

    iv. Metaphors and other rhetorical figures.

b) The Discursive Action Model (DAM, cfr. Edwards & Potter, 1992), a conceptual framework enabling the highlighting of the distinctive features of discursive practices by identifying the rhetorical devices emerging from them. Specifically, we focused on:

    v. Narrative plot, that is the particular narrative sequence used by the enunciator in order to improve the argumentative plausibility.

    vi. Source labelling, referring to any self/other categorization, usually accompanied by value attribution.

    vii. Generalizing procedures, including adjective, adverbs and any discursive cues emphasizing the extreme "size" of what is said.

viii. Repetition, tripartite list and contrast, aimed to improve completeness and salience of the proposed argumentation.

ix. Disclaimers or diniego (Potter & Wetherell, 1995), enabling the enunciator to express disagreement and even hard positioning in a social "unpunishable" way.

An open coding procedure was conducted: as an emergent coding technique drawn from grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), open coding aims to identify the meaning within a text without any clear driving framework and to generate a participant-generated theory from the data (Blair, 2015). The coders (the first two authors) were acquainted with the definition and application of both psychosemiotic markers and rhetoric devices; they were asked to accurately read each news article and to codify each sentence in an Excel page. After a first round, where the same 20 news stories were annotated, a first comparison of the emerging results was proposed in the presence of the third author. Having clarified some doubts, the remaining sample was codified. As a last point, an integration of markers/devices and rhetoric stances was acted through an open discussion among the three authors. This procedure was considered particularly fitting with our main objects and data: recurring both psycholinguistic and argumentative features could be appreciated and, consequently, a comparison between fake and conspiracy news could emerge. In addition, the fit between an open procedure and our sample was particularly suitable since no clear hypothesis derived from literature; therefore, we could better comprehend the distinctive "enjeu" hidden in fake/conspiring news.

Main Results

Both fake and conspiring news deal with several topics, such as care methods, prevention measures, emergency management, and risks; both are most focused on the topics of vaccines and reporting specific cases. Interestingly, the issues strictly concerning the disease are the prerogative of fake news, whereas questions about the origin of COVID-19 are covered by conspirative ones (Table 1).

Table 1
Number of articles dealing with the specific topics

Topics	Fake news	Conspiracy news
Vaccines	13	15
Specific cases	15	6
Care methods	5	2
Prevention measures	2	1
Emergency management	8	5
Risks	6	4
Disease	6	0
Origin	0	7
Other topics	11	6
Total	66	46

These tendencies are in line with literature concerning the narratives of conspiracy theories, mainly having to do with power (e.g., Bill Gates, governments, and so on) and death issues (the threats concerning vaccines, depopulation, and so on; Fong et al., 2021; Ratzan et al., 2020).

As for the discursive construction of these matters, the several interpretative tools offered by CDA enabled us to organize the discursive strategies through the lenses of the three "entechnic" proofs of classical Aristotle's rhetoric: *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* [1].

The first dimension, *logos*, refers to the argument of a discourse, in its power to argue that "something is the case."[2] In this work, the focus on logos goes beyond the presented issues, since it mostly concerns how contents are argued. In our qualitative analysis, we found a difference in the content proposals which can be organized along a continuum from "mitigation," mainly acted by fake news, to "accentuation," mostly found in conspiracy news. Since discourses usually make use of mitigation to attenuate "one of the parameters of interaction, for example the epistemic certainty, the accuracy of the propositional content, the intensity of the illocutionary force" (Caffi, 2007, p. 6), fake news is rather set on the first pole to appear as non-constrictive toward interlocutors and to wear the mask of "possible" and therefore plausible contents.

> Ex 1: "Now it seems we have the proof that Pfizer vaccine can produce the same problems."

In the Ex. 1, the mitigation strategy is almost acted through the impersonal and dubitative verb, "it seems," as well as through the modal verb, "can." In other excerpts, also adverbs ("maybe," "slightly"), conditional modes ("the virus could answer," "it would mean"), contextualization ("according to sources"), and sources labelling ("according to parents, it would…") contribute to weaken the illocutionary force of sentences. Therefore, the proposed claims appear as rightly "cautious" and fake news can even hypothesize serious effects and consequences of treatments, vaccines and so on, keeping its true likeness.

On the opposite side, conspiracy news use "accentuation" as a strategy to emphasize and give strength to the proposed claims. This tendency was mostly constructed through the use of generalizations and extreme formulations, such as "always" vs "never," "everybody" vs "nobody," so that the proposed claims appear as natural, objective, and generalizable, as well as through argumentative strategies, such as specific narrative plots.

> Ex. 2: "The mRNA technology has never been endorsed above."

> Ex. 3: "It has never been heard."

In Ex. 2, the assertive intent is promoted by the adverb of time "never;" in Ex. 3, the same adverb supports an impersonal sentence, so that the objective intent is further empowered. The same functioning has been found with generalizing expressions concerning space and persons.

> Ex. 4: "Just in the moment when … curiously two days later … then it happens … speaking about timing … inter alia … it's just now that an interesting thing occurs."

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[2] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Rhet. I.3, 1358a 37 ff.

Ex. 4 is an example of a discursive strategy aimed to "accentuate" what is said: the narrative is developed through temporal markers and references, having the function to construct a pressing and consequential plot. The role of pressing narrative is also strengthened by the association between specific time markers and modal adverbs and adjectives (such as "curiously," "obviously," "strange," "evidently," "interesting"). On the one side, the rapid sequences drop the readers in the flow of events and happenings having an historical – and therefore apparently authentic – anchorage. On the other side, what is said is heightened through the assumptions about the human intervention in the events' reconstruction.

The second dimension, *ethos*, mainly refers to the capability of the speaker to be felt as worthy of credibility. Especially when there is no exact knowledge about a matter, this feature is critical in order to perceive claims as true. Our qualitative analysis enabled us to emphasize different nuances of the enunciators' trustworthiness. On the whole, these differences can be set on the continuum between "objective" data and "subjective" claims: the first pole principally captured by fake news stories, the second by conspiracy news. In particular, in fake news, the objective style supporting trustworthiness is proposed by means of the importance of data (percentages, international comparisons, and so on), of scientific sources (mainly doctors, researchers, and institutions), technical jargon (e.g., concerning COVID-19 and vaccine functioning), and metadiscursive markers, acting as solid foundations for one's own credibility.

> Ex. 5: "The Johns Hopkins University showed, through data, that Italy has the highest mortality in all the world: 111,23 deaths per 100.000 inhabitants, ahead of Spain (104,39), United Kingdom (99,49) and United States (94,97)."

> Ex. 6: "This mutation changes the structure of the so-called spike protein."

In Ex. 5, the enunciator's credibility is constructed through an assertive style which is founded on both institutional source and precise data enabling an international comparison as well. The affirmative verbs are also accompanied by the insert, "through data," emphasizing the validity of what is claimed. More generally, as shown in Ex. 6, the argumentation develops through the alternance between data, sources, and scientific claims, increasing therefore the perception of enunciators' competence.

In the same light, fake news makes massive use of specific, non-propositional aspects of discourse, known as metadiscursive markers (Crismore et al. 1993); that is, expressions of comment and reformulation that facilitate the readers not only through coherent text organization, but also through the development of the author's personality and credibility.

> Ex. 7: "[…] that is they do not produce actual effects […] in practice […] it is therefore […] even […]."

In Ex. 7, textual markers (logical connectives, frame markers, endophoric markers, and gloss practices) are specifically used to anticipate and make explicit the author's intentions concerning the discourse structure. In other cases, we also found interpersonal markers (adverbs such as "in reality," "sincerely," known as relationship markers), whose specific function is to offer a confident structure to the interaction between enunciators and target. Both textual and interpersonal metadiscursive markers, through the proposal of both well-organized and trustworthy enunciators, support the text comprehension and reliability.

On the contrary, conspiracy news is oriented toward a more "subjective" style, mostly deriving from colloquial and suggestive speech, which is constructed through insinuations,

rhetorical questions, euphemism, metaphors, and other discursive construction such as labelling and disclaimers.

> Ex 8: "Are these results casual or has the 5G coverage a 'causal' role in the epidemic exacerbation of coronavirus?"

In Ex. 8, a typical rhetorical question is set whose suggestive aim is further improved by the pun involving "casual" and "causal" (this last word is in single quotation marks).

> Ex. 9: "Prudence has gone out the window."

> Ex. 10: "When serious adverse reactions are found, they are usually swept under the carpet."

Even if mostly proposed through rhetorical figures, the subjective style in conspiracy stories appears to be "tuned" with the target, especially because it is constructed through common speech references, such as in the examples 9 and 10, where common-sense images and idioms are widely used and the suggestive aim is empowered by the quoted sources, which are more inspired to apocalyptic scenarios, such as George Orwell's literature ("this raving situation […] drawing broad inspiration by G. Orwell and his work, *1984*") or Matteo the Evangelist's evocative words (Matthew 7:15: "Be on the watch for false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inside they are cruel wolves), than to the scientific/rational world.

> Ex. 11: "Far from assuming an ideological positioning…"

The enunciator' s credibility is also emphasized through the recourse to disclaimer (or diniego), that is typically used to introduce a content, even extreme, in such a way that it becomes socially accepted, "unpunishable," and consequently, more trustworthy. Ex. 11 is an "incipit," which allows the enunciator to freely present their position without being perceived as one-sided or partial, precisely because of this disclaiming tenor.

The enunciators also made use of metadiscursive markers, especially interpersonal ones, in order to match the narrative plot with the suggestive speech.

> Ex. 12: "As you can see, they either have bad translators or try to make us do anything they want, in any way, without letting us know how things really are."

Finally, ethos is created by category-labelling and ingroup-outgroup dynamics (D'Errico & Poggi, 2012; Poggi et al., 2011): in this perspective, "we" is competent, morally intact, and culpably neglected by "they;" "they" is discredited as belonging to mainstream, powerful, and in bad faith.

In Ex. 12, the opposition between ingroup and outgroup, introduced by the metadiscursive expression, "as you can see," is set on a moral dimension, opposing the will of "they" and the powerlessness of "we," as explained by the impossibility to know "how things really are." On the contrary, the powerful fraudulent intent of "they" is constructed not only through the verb "to want," but also through the generalising words "anything" and "any," as well as through the false and rhetoric conjunctions "either/or." In other news, the goodness of the inclusive "we" is empowered through more explicit references, such as "we love the truth and the journalism."

The third dimension, *pathos,* concerns the audience's emotional state, which represents an essential dimension since emotional disposition can affect our judgements and attitudes concerning specific matters. Generally, both fake and conspiring news stories are set on the negative pole of emotions, in a continuum from anxiety to anger, including worry, fear, resentment, and indignation. These emotions are clearly expressed through an emotionally charged speech (e.g., "zombie-injections," or "an atrocity of incredible proportions"). Nonetheless, different discursive cues concur to distinctive pathemic patterns: whereas fake news is more oriented to elicit "content/effects-related" emotions, conspiracy stories are mostly "pathway-oriented." In other words, whereas the first kind of misinformation emphasizes questions specifically concerning COVID-19 meant as a disease and its supposed effects, the second one focuses on what is "behind" the pandemic. Consequently, different emotional pathways are proposed.

Specifically, fake stories make use of repetitions and tripartite lists to propose an argumentation comprehensive, corroborated, and noteworthy, which can inspire an emotional escalation in readers.

> Ex. 13: "There are no scientific findings about an eventual attenuation of Coronavirus. There are no facts about the infectious potential of asymptomatic persons. There are no proofs that anti-influenza vaccines offer a partial protection from COVID—19."

In Ex. 13, the anaphoric repetition of "there are no" coincides with the threefold argumentation coming from the scientific sociolect ("findings," "facts," and "proofs). These rhetorical strategies strengthen the emotional activation concerning the COVID-19 contents and effects, even if in the second part of each sentence we found mitigation markers ("eventual," "potential," and "partial"), giving, again, a trustworthy print.

On the other hand, the pathemic side of conspiracy news is mostly pathway-oriented, meaning that negative emotions concern what is "under the hood" of the COVID-19 pandemic. This tendency is constructed by means of strategies emphasising several levels of "closeness," such as:

a) Direct appeal to the readers and anticipation of their thoughts, which highlighted common-thinking dynamics:

> Ex. 14: "Does it sound familiar to you? At this point, someone could say 'the hypothesis of the international diffusion does not stand up since…'"

In 14, both the rhetoric question and the consequent hypothetical sentence concur to create a "familiar" atmosphere, made of supposed shared perceptions ("sound") and legitimate logical inferences ("at this point").

b) Inclusive ingroup valuation, implying common belonging:

> Ex. 15: "Whereas we lock ourselves at home, whereas we fight on the web, whereas we avoid each other as if we were plagued [...]"

In 15, common belonging is enhanced through shared and suffered "ordinary" practices, related to the extraordinary situation, such as staying at home and maintaining social distance, as well as by a connotative lexicon recalling negative situations (verbs such as "lock," "fight," "avoid," "plagued").

c) Provoking strategies, such as contrast and sarcasm, which outlines proximity as a "common destiny" perception:

Ex. 16: "Who isolated it, claims that the Chinese COVID--19 virus is not the same Italian one (so, do we dispose of COVID--17 virus?)"

The Ex. 16 is composed of two parts: the first one is an affirmative sentence reporting an apparently serious claim; the second one puts in brackets a rhetoric and suggestive question which overturns what is previously said. The brackets, far from putting in second place their content, are specifically aimed to get the readers closer, underlying their common destiny by mocking the same pandemic appellation.

Table 2 offers a global and synthetic outlook of the discursive strategies used in fake and conspiracy news stories as referred to the rhetoric stances of *logos*, *ethos,* and *pathos*, thus facilitating a direct comparison among the two items.

Table 2
Main discursive strategies used in fake and conspiracy news referring to "logos", "ethos," and "pathos"

	Fake news	**Conspiracy news**
Logos	Mitigation - Reduced illocutionary force	Accentuation - Pressing narrative plot - Generalizing formulations
Ethos	Objective style - Data - Scientific sources - Metadiscourse	Subjective style - Suggestive and common speech - Literary sources - Disclaimer - Ingroup vs outgroup labelling
Pathos	Contents/effects-related emotions - "Reinforcement" (repetition and tripartite list)	Pathway-oriented emotions - "Closeness" (common thinking, common belonging and common destiny)

Discussion

The dangerous symptoms and effects and the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic went hand-in-hand with the alarming information disorder concerning the disease. Therefore, the WHO was engaged not only in containing the virus and saving human lives in the battle against the pandemic, but also in containing the misinformation and saving healthy attitudes/behaviours in the battle against the infodemic. In this conjoint fight, since global health and well-being are at stake as well as socio-political implications, both medical and psycho-social scholars tried to improve knowledge and right information through an incredible amount of scientific research.

Studies about infodemic especially focused on those items - fake news and conspiracy news - which found in the pandemic a fertile ground for proliferation. As the first global health crisis of the new millennium, in the flourishing Information Era, it generated an adverse loop: the shortage of precise and accurate information available for institutions and scientific communities increased the degree of uncertainty (in persons) and contradictions (in

news production); as a consequence, trust in institutions and mainstream mass media further decreased (Edelman, 2021) in favour of an increased exposition to fake news (Ognyanova et al., 2020). In parallel, the global crisis led to the prosperity of conspiracy news as a "coping strategy" (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), especially because of the high and long-term risk perception (Heiss et al., 2021).

The studies about these issues offered important gains about contents, cognitive processes, and socio-cultural dynamics related to the wide world of misinformation. Nonetheless, few studies deepened an essential dimension of these (discursive) "post-truth" products; that is just their discursive construction. This work tried to address this gap by proposing a critical discourse analysis of an Italian sample of 112 fake and conspiracy news widespread through social media. This direct comparison represents a new opportunity to better understand the wider dynamics of infodemic: despite sharing a common background, we expected that fake and conspiracy news stories would follow different rhetoric patterns, since they aim to construct distinctive epistemic pathways. The several interpretative tools came from the theoretical and methodological perspective of critical discourse analysis: the psycho-semiotic markers of the SAM model (Mininni et al., 2014) and the rhetorical devices of the DAM model (Edwards & Potter, 1992) enabled us to both deeply analyze and compare the texts. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first effort to match the psycho-semiotic and rhetorical-argumentative approaches and to propose a comparison of the emerging and recurring discursive strategies in the light of the three instances of classical Aristotle's rhetoric.

In line with previous literature concerning these matters (Arcos & Wilhelm, 2021), our results emphasize that the infodemic is a wide and multifaceted phenomenon, where common features often give way to contextual and specific peculiarities, also resulting in the dialectic dimensions synthesized in Table 2. In proposing their diversified contents, ranging from vaccines to specific episodes to the origins of the pandemic, fake and conspiracy news follow different patterns, which can be organized around three kinds of continuum in line with Aristotle's classical stances of *logos*, *ethos,* and *pathos*:

a) *Logos*: the axis "mitigation vs accentuation" testifies specific ways to propose credible contents, through either a realistic and reasonable uncertainty/vagueness or a more impressive and resolutive argumentative strength.

b) *Ethos*: the axis "objective vs subjective style" certifies different routes to propose reliable sources, founded respectively on a "prudently competent" enunciator – founding his position on scientific data and logic argumentation – and on a "markedly relational" one – whose trustworthiness is constructed through suggestive/common speech and ingroup-outgroup dynamics.

c) *Pathos*: the axis "contents/effects vs pathway" shows a different emotion activation process. We would like to highlight that even this last point proposed an innovative result when compared with existing studies: our aim was not to stress which emotions were elicited (as in, e.g., the work of Fong et al., 2021), but rather to individuate how discursive strategies concur to anchor negative emotions to different facets of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A global reflection about these results can be summarized as follows: in trying to appear as much as possible close-to-real news, fake argumentations are more focused on a plausible logos and a credible ethos, whereas (negative) pathos is related to the contents and

effects related to the pandemic. On the other side, efforts to convince consumers of an alternative conspiring reality create an emphatic logos and ethos, mostly founded on suggestions and accentuations, which in turn contribute to elicit negative pathos, especially concerning macroscopic hidden COVID-related flaws. Therefore, the rhetorical continuum emerging from our critical discourse analysis reveals two complementary "enjeu," focused either to "accompany" the readers in an untrue knowledge or to "reveal" to the audience a presumed submerged world.

The interpretative tools upon which we relied were particularly fitting with these emerging peculiarities since they joined the importance of micro-analytic markers (e.g., metadiscourse, embrayage/debrayage, and so on) and macro-analytic strategies (e.g., narrative plot, disclaimer, rhetoric questions, and so on). The most innovative and unexpected result of this work has to do with the clear differences among fake and conspiracy stories both in micro- and macro-analytic dimensions: where we began this work, a greater homogeneity was expected.

Our qualitative approach showed significant applicative opportunities in promoting overall and specific awareness. This more contextualized understanding of psycho-linguistic and rhetorical cues in misinformation can (a) support practices of epistemic self-defense skills (Vamanu, 2019) by reinforcing fine-grained linguistic competencies, (b) strengthen the health- (Paakkari & Okan, 2020) and digital-literacy, especially for digital natives, living both the pandemic emergency and the "post-truth" climate and specifically needing for subjective and social health-related awareness, (c) improve effective discursive patterns in public communication and social advertising acted by institutional actors, and (d) offer a qualitative support for quantitative tools based on deep learning methods for curbing the spread of misinformation, as realized in India (Nigam et al., 2021). More generally, even if misinformation is particularly hard to disprove (Roets, 2017), this work can help to contrast the infodemic in educational domains through both debunking (Chan et al., 2017) and prebunking (Jolley & Douglas, 2017) pathways based on inoculation approaches (Van der Linden & Roozenbeek, 2020) and indirect interventions such as counterfactual thinking (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2022). The limits of the present work concern some dimensions: firstly, a very great amount of fake and conspiracy news stories was spread during the whole pandemic emergency, appearing and disappearing through several channels. Therefore, our sample is just exemplifying the whole phenomenon. Nonetheless, our corpus was gathered from the most representative Italian fact-checking websites, including the Italian Ministry of Health website.

Second, a national sample was selected and analyzed. We believe that different socio-cultural backgrounds can affect the discursive construction of false news and explain the spread of misinformation. As a matter of fact, a previous study has already presented the societal responses to the pandemic outbreak and the geographic variations in the same country, Italy, looking at social, emotional, and policy perspectives (Fernandez et al., 2021). Therefore, an international/intercultural comparison could offer additional interesting research perspectives. This step represents one of the starting points for future research.

Third, in accordance with the different waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the time factor should also be considered to improve knowledge about communicative and social dynamics of fake news. In this light, we limited our sample to the first two waves in order to have a rather consistent corpus.

In addition, future investigations could promote the application of the multifaceted perspectives of CDA – in our case combining psycho-linguistic and rhetorical analysis – to the disinformation world through more extensive thematic domains (e.g., the political world, the migrants' questions, and the ecological issues).

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