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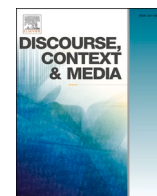
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(Don't) click here: Hyperlinks as a quasi-objectification strategy in epistemic legitimisation in extremists' blog posts on sexual violence

Kate Barber [1]

Centre for Language Communication and Research, School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, John Percival Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff CF10 3EU, UK

ABSTRACT

Hyperlinks in blog posts play an important role in supporting and legitimising the claims made by bloggers, particularly on sites associated with polarisation, extremism and echo chambers. Links containing discursive elements and which are embedded as part of the text – known as anchor text – have, as yet, remained under-explored as a discourse strategy in epistemic positioning and studies on legitimisation. This paper draws on Hart's (2011) work on subjectification and objectification categories of epistemic positioning to examine how anchor text hyperlinks in a corpus of blog posts, written by bloggers associated with the Alternative Right (Alt-Right) and Men's Rights Activists, are used to substantiate claims related to sexual violence against women. The results of the study show a lack of transparency in the claims supported through anchor text, which I argue, can be considered a quasi-objectification category of epistemic legitimisation in the hypertexts in the dataset. The study employs a cognitive linguistic approach to examine evidentiality in the anchor text and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the ways assertions are legitimised in polarising texts online.

1. Introduction

With increasing focus on the need to expose mis/disinformation online, the ways in which claims are substantiated and verified is under increasing scrutiny (Dance, 2023). This has become more challenging and critical given the recent discontinuation of third-party fact-checking on mainstream social media platforms (Arya and Kanozia, 2025). Linguistic analyses of claims made online have contributed to highlighting and potentially combatting mis/disinformation by examining the epistemological mechanisms underpinning such assertions. For example, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) approaches have been used to demonstrate how assertions are substantiated through legitimation strategies using conceptual frameworks (van Leeuwen, 2007; Reyes, 2011). These frameworks allow close analysis of how claims and actions are justified given the sociopolitical context in which they are made. Complementary analytical models for identifying degrees of evidentiality and epistemic positioning regarding claims have concurrently been developed by cognitive linguists (Bednarek 2006, Hart, 2011, Marín-Arrese, 2011; Hart and Fuoli, 2020). This range of theoretical entry points into the exploration of legitimisation, epistemic stance and positioning provides linguists with considerable choice in their analytical approaches to investigating the veracity of claims and their role in legitimising subsequent actions and mobilisations.

However, despite the range of linguistic frameworks available to analyse the substantiation of claims, little focus has been given to the ways in which claims being made online intersect with the affordances of hypertext (i.e. compositions of text online containing hyperlinks to other webpages, see Hicks, 2019). This study addresses this disconnect by examining the use of *anchor text* – the in-text, clickable sentence fragment which is often highlighted in a different colour to indicate a hyperlink (Lyons, 2022). While anchor text has a range of functions, for example, navigational and commercial, this paper examines its use as a citational device, through the cognitive linguistic lens of epistemic legitimisation (Hart and Fuoli, 2020).

The dataset used in this study includes blog posts from sites which publish polarising discourses, specifically those associated with the far right and a community associated with extreme misogyny: Men's Rights Activists (MRAs). The context for the analysis is the legitimisation on these sites of *rape culture*. This is broadly summarised as relating to a widespread societal mindset that downplays, justifies, and normalises sexual violence by upholding rigid gender norms, hostile sexual attitudes and sexism, and distancing aggressive sexual acts from the explicit

term "rape." (Johnson and Johnson, 2021). It also includes examples of how anchor text is used to substantiate extreme right-wing myths by refocusing discussions of rape onto immigrant men and legitimising the view that the prevalence of sexual violence is "a feminist-produced moral panic" (Gotell and Dutton, 2016: 66). Against this backdrop, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: In the dataset under investigation, how frequently does anchor text perform a legitimising function for claims being made in extremists' blog posts about sexual violence, rather than a navigational, social or commercial function?;

RQ2: When performing a legitimising function, is the linked source made explicit in the anchor text (or co-text) and, if not, does this lack of transparency relate to the type of source to which it is linked?;

RQ3: When performing a legitimising function, how does anchor text in these posts fit into existing frameworks regarding the legitimisation of assertions?

The findings indicate that anchor text is used to link to seven types of source to substantiate claims being made about sexual violence. However, it was found that in the majority of instances, no clear indication of the source used is given to the reader. Further, the findings show that this lack of transparency relates to the type of sources being linked to, with the majority of non-transparent anchor text used to substantiate claims linking to the bloggers' own site or ideologically-affiliated sites. Frequent links to mainstream media sites is also evident in the data, supporting research which challenges traditional assumptions on the reliance on echo chambers within the extreme right-wing. The results of the analyses suggest that existing models for the categorisation of epistemic positioning strategies can be extended to consider anchor text. Specifically, the study proposes that *non-transparent* (i.e. no linked source indicated) anchor text that is used to legitimise an assertion, can act as a *quasi-objectification strategy* on the cline of subjectification (Hart and Fuoli 2020). This paper aims to expand existing literature on how claims are substantiated in online discourses and may be of interest to discourse scholars examining evidentiality in sociopolitical texts and to digital literacy educators.

2. Review of literature and research context

2.1. Extreme right-wing discourses online

The extreme right wing's reliance on the internet is well-established (Hale, 2012). The affordances of online platforms to connect like-minded people, spread ideological messages, recruit, and mobilise members have contributed significantly to helping groups within this ideological paradigm to evolve and expand (Caiani and Kröll, 2015; Perreault, 2023). Post-truth discourse, which rejects political authority, knowledge, and expertise in favour of emotional and personal belief, is widespread on these sites. Tebaldi's (2021) study of the far right online, for example, highlights how content creators on these sites position themselves as truth-seekers against cultural elites, "speaking post-truth to power" (2021: 211). In place of political and academic expertise to substantiate claims, they project implicit expert knowledge as 'gurus', based on their experiences in opposition to the mainstream (see Dayter and Rüdiger, 2019; Barber, 2022). This expertise is also projected through the metaphorical rhetoric of having taken the *red pill*, which instils a supposed epistemic awakening and which "purports to liberate men from a life of feminist delusion" (Ging 2017: 638).

Mainstream narratives are often reframed on extreme right-wing sites via hyperlinks to more ideologically-affiliated blogs (Bacigalupo and Borgeson, 2022: 152). These hypertextual redirections are used to lead readers to more extreme content, facilitate the spread of dis/misinformation, and propagate conspiracy theories (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). They also allow content creators to disperse extreme content over a wide range of sources to avoid moderation and possible censorship (Benkler et al., 2018). Opposition to feminism has proliferated in these online spaces, which lack traditional gatekeeping and allow anonymous,

transnational male grievances to be aired (Holm, 2023: 423). Far-right and misogynistic hypertexts have been widely identified as containing exaggerated and false claims, many of which are intended to further hateful ideologies and conspiracy theories (Hermansson et al., 2020) which have the potential to fuel offline violence (Borgeson and Bacigalupo 2022: 130).

2.2. Hyperlinking and anchor text as citational devices

Hyperlinking, as a *general* feature of digital discourse, has primarily been explored within research on journalism and online networks. Ryfe et al (2016) argue that hyperlinking has four key purposes: *navigational* (e.g. helping users find other content on the site); *commercial* (e.g. linking to advertisements to generate revenue); *social* (providing links for social media embedding); and *citational* (e.g. linking to information for authority and credibility) (2016: 42). Citational links demonstrate facticity, strengthen the credibility of an online post, and are often *external*, which relates to information provision (Heft et al., 2021: 487-488). The study outlined in this current paper focuses on hyperlinking as a citational device used for information provision rather than on other possible functions.

While some studies in the field of *language and communication* have focused on hyperlinks as citational devices in digital discourse, these are limited to educational and academic contexts, such as Ling and Elgort's (2023) study of hyperlinks in students' academic work and Zou and Hyland's (2020) work on hyperlinks in academic blogs. These citational hyperlinks largely replicate non-digital writing practices, in which citations are formatted with the author's name and the publication date, e. g., author and year. The hyperlinked citation in digital academic discourse then takes the reader directly to the online source. Anchor text, however, is embedded in the discourse as part of the claim itself, maintaining narrative flow and keeping the reader's attention on the writer's rhetoric.

Studies on anchor text using eye-tracking technology show it plays a crucial role in text processing (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020; Lioa et al., 2024). Writers' selection of a sentence fragment as anchor text generates an automatic change in format, usually a contrasting colour or underlining. This visual salience impacts readers, especially those skimming the text. Fitzsimmons et al. (2020) found that more attention is given to anchor text compared to its co-text, and it is used as a marker to aid greater understanding. Lioa et al. (2024) also argue that anchor text receives more in-depth processing while the reader decides whether to click on it. Further research shows at least 60 % of hyperlinks are never clicked (Zhou et al., 2019). In a study on political discourses, this figure is more pronounced, with 87.3 % of readers of fake political news stories not clicking links in Facebook posts (Loos and Nijenhuis, 2020: 76). Anchor text, therefore, renders information more noticeable to readers but, statistically, it is unlikely to lead to further verification.

The use of hyperlinks in the legitimisation of assertions in extremist contexts is largely under-researched, with the exception of Millar et al. (2020), who investigated hyperlinks in the comments section of Danish online news stories. In their study, the links were posted in the comments section as hate speech and linked to extreme and offensive content. The focus of their study was the presence and provenance of hate-related links as a form of evidentiality: "Whether provided by YouTube or manually produced, these snippets from linked information act as a form of verbal and visual quotation which can function as evidence, regardless of whether readers follow the link or not." (2020: 247). While Millar et al's study is relevant to this paper, the links posted in the comments section were often *naked* links (showing the full URL and, therefore linked source). They were also shared in reaction to the news article and not embedded into discourse, unlike the anchor text investigated in this paper.

Table 1
Overview of the corpora in the study.

Blog	Dates Active	Main contributor(s)	General Ideological Affiliation	Tokens (no. of blog posts)
Alt-Right Corpus				
Matt Forney	2012–2018	Matt Forney	Alt-Right and Far Right	6,386 (7)
Amerika	1998 – present	Brett Stevens & Jonathan Peter Wilkinson	Alt-Right and Far Right	7,442 (10)
Vox Popoli	2003 – present	Theodore Beale (known as: Vox Day)	Alt-Right and Christian Nationalist	14,237 (24)
				28,065 (41)
MRA Corpus				
Chateau Heartiste	2007–2019	James C. Weidmann (known as: Roissy in D.C.)	Men's Rights / Pick Up Artist	14, 283 (21)
Return of Kings	2012–2018	David G. Brown	Men's Rights / Pick Up Artist	39,916 (37)
				54,199 (58)
TOTAL				**82,264 (99)**

2.3. The legitimisation of assertions

As noted in the Introduction, anchor text can perform a legitimising function when used as information provision. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, the legitimisation of assertions relies on *epistemic positioning strategies*, i.e. "an (unconscious) attempt on behalf of the speaker to influence the hearer's epistemic stance towards the proposition in such a way that their logico-rhetorical module is satisfied and the assertion is thereby accepted." (Hart, 2011: 757). This positioning is then further relied upon when legitimising and justifying *actions* based on these assertions (ibid.). Hart outlines two idealisations of epistemic positioning strategies, based on the degree to which a speaker is confident "that the hearer will 'take their word' for the truth of the assertion'": *subjectification* and *objectification* (2011: 759). The former relies on epistemic modality and certainty, whereby the speaker/writer is the sole provider of the knowledge and credibility for the claim relies on belief in the speaker, their reputation, and their access to knowledge. The latter strategy concerns evidentiality, specifically the speakers' means of knowing which, in theory, the receiver can then check (ibid) (see Bednarek, 2006 for key discussions on the relationship between evidentiality and epistemic positioning). The admittance of the evidence and the capacity to independently verify the source removes accountability for the assertion from the speaker/writer and backgrounds their reputation as a reliable source of knowledge. Within this dichotomy of subjectification and objectification, lies a cline of subjectivity (Hart and Fuoli, 2020: 19) and an intersubjective position whereby evidence for a claim is shared by both speaker/writer and the wider receivers, usually marked by linguistic cues indicating shared belief and knowledge (e.g. "we all know that") (Marín-Arrese, 2011: 793).

In their investigation into the persuasive influence of subjectification and objectification strategies in political discourses, Hart & Fuoli (2020: 25) found that the latter were more effective as an epistemic legitimisation strategy. They determined that reliance on the speakers' personal authority resulted in less credibility when legitimising assertions than the presence of external evidence: "the mere citation of evidence is sufficient to elevate epistemic status of the proposition and positively influence support for an action." (ibid). Similarly, Ullmann (2019: 397) argues that the reliability of a claim in political discourses is largely dependent on how objectively it is communicated. Attribution of sources of evidence through objectification, therefore, not only serves an evidential role but also creates the impression of the writer maintaining distance and impartiality (Coddington and Molyneux, 2023: 667-668). A gradual change in explicit evidentiality has been observed in online news discourses, however. In their review of the representation of evidence in news over a 12-year period, Coddington & Molyneux note that the move towards a more intertextual form of journalism has resulted in evidence supporting claims becoming increasingly less transparent, putting a greater emphasis on the "audiences' assumed epistemological literacy" (2023: 680).

Studies demonstrating how epistemic positioning theories and

evidentiality can be applied largely focus on the language in case study examples of transcribed political speeches or newspaper articles. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, these include Marín-Arrese's (2016) work on parliamentary and public inquiries ; and Ullmann's (2019) examination of political responses to the 2013 chemical weapons attack in Syria. Research on legitimisation within *digital media* (from a CDS perspective) has acknowledged the complexities of including technological elements of online communication such as hyperlinks but have similarly focused on the discursive features in the hypertext (Hansson and Page, 2022). The present study outlined in this paper addresses this gap in the research by examining the function *and* technological affordances of anchor text in relation to the legitimisation of assertions in digital discourses.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Data context

This study investigates extremist blogs within distinct but ideologically-aligned communities of the extreme right-wing. The first, the Alternative Right (Alt-Right), is a far-right, white supremacist collective (Hermansson et al., 2020: 2) which gained influence online from 2016 to 2018 and which relied heavily on blogs and websites to spread their far-right ideology. The second is part of the manosphere, which includes various men's rights groups, from those opposing the repression of traditional gender roles to misogynistic groups promoting male supremacy and vilifying feminism (Ging, 2019). The manosphere blogs used in this study fall loosely within the Men's Rights Activist (MRA) subcommunity.

3.2. Data collection and corpus construction

The data analysed here have been collected from five blogs, all of which self-identify as having extreme right-wing ideological affiliation. These blogs are: *Vox Popoli* (VP), *Matt Forney* (MF), *Amerika* (AM), *Return of Kings* (ROK) and *Chateau Heartiste* (CH). The initials in brackets are used with the example extracts below to indicate the blog from which they are taken. The blog posts which form the dataset for this study were collected for my doctoral research on sexual violence; for that reason, they included the search terms *rape* and *sexual assault* and were collected over a two-year period (2016–2017). The posts were manually-annotated using extensible mark-up language (XML) to identify key linguistic features, hyperlinks/anchor text, and their linked source. Two main corpora were constructed: the Alt-Right corpus (28,065 tokens from 41 blog posts) and the MRA corpus (54,199 tokens from 58 blog posts), giving a total of 82,264 tokens from 99 blog posts. Table 1 summarises the data sources used in this investigation.

Subcorpora were then constructed using the anchor text XML tags and the linked source. To illustrate how anchor text is embedded into the extremists' blog posts investigated in this study, the following is given as

Table 2

Semiotic resources of anchor text.

Resource	Type	Features
Textual	Discourse fragment / phrase	• The writer consciously selects a piece of discourse to convert to anchor text. • The anchor text may or may not include an indication of the linked source.
Visual	Colour: contrast from surrounding text and/or underlined	• The anchor text is automatically highlighted in a contrasting colour to the surrounding text and/or underlined. • The anchor text usually changes colour when it has been clicked on, indicating the link has been accessed.
Hypertextual	Link to a non-linear source	• The URL may be visible when a cursor hovers over the anchor text (depending on the way the link was set up, the browser used, and/or whether the hover function is available on a handheld device).

an example. This piece of anchor text, highlighted in bold within its co-text, exemplifies its use as a citational device: "This is nothing new, though: in 2014, an extra 5,000 rape prosecutions were initiated, resulting in **only another 77 convictions**." (ROK). Clicking on the anchor text in the original blog post takes readers to the source of this statistical information; a story in the *Daily Telegraph*, which outlines failings by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). Whether the reader clicks on the link or not, the anchor text can be considered to be acting as a citational device and implies that the claim being made, i.e. that only 77 convictions resulted from 5000 prosecutions in 2014, can be substantiated by the linked source even though no indication of that source is given to the reader within the blog post itself. It may be possible for the reader to reveal the embedded URL if they 'hover' over the anchor text with a cursor. However, this function is not always available and deciphering the name of the site from the URL is often not straightforward (Althobaiti et al., 2021).

As a sentence fragment, the anchor text is visually salient and contains the key information in the statement which the blogger is relying upon to make the argument against the effectiveness of the CPS. Anchor text, therefore, seems to combine and mobilise a range of semiotic resources, which are summarised in Table 2.

Sketch Engine was used to create subcorpora of the tagged anchor text within its co-text. A total of 444 anchor text hyperlinks were recorded and there was a wide range of sources to which the anchor texts linked. However, to focus the analyses in this paper, the seven most frequently used source types were selected (referred to hereinafter as "key" categories). These are: 1) the bloggers' own blog; 2) an ideologically-affiliated extreme right-wing site or site connected to the manosphere (e.g. *Breitbart*); 3) a mainstream media outlet (e.g. *the Daily Mail Online*); 4) a social media platform (*X/Twitter* and *YouTube*), 5) an alternative news source (e.g. *Latin Times.com*); 6) a blog or site which is not ideologically-aligned with the extreme right-wing (e.g. *ADL.org*);

and 7) an online magazine (e.g. *Vanity Fair*).

Of the 444 incidences of anchor text, 77 were not used in the analyses. These included links to one-off or infrequently used types of sites, for example, retail outlets; the UK Parliament TV channel; independent publishing companies; and different types of sports channels. Links which no longer worked and could not be identified ('dead' links) were also included in this group of unused anchor text.

The anchor text hyperlinks were examined within their immediate discourse context to determine if they were being used to legitimise an assertion or were performing a different function (e.g. defining a term or providing background information). Legitimising anchor text in the data was indicated through explicit reference to other sources: in (1) the reference "Other research suggests" is followed by the anchor text, indicating strongly that the link takes the reader to that research (all anchor text in the examples are highlighted in bold).

(1) <u>Other research suggests</u> much **more alarming rates of British prison rape and sexual assault occur,** ones which cannot be accurately gauged due to a lack of research and funding. (ROK).

Other indicators of legitimising text were more opaque but were seen in the anchor text itself, often created through the inclusion of statistical data, implied research findings, and/or factual statements. Example (2) includes two instances of anchor text which indicate they may link to sources which legitimise the claims being made. In the first instance, "1,000 men described as Arab and North African", containing the reporting verb "described", indicates that someone, perhaps an eye-witness, has been interviewed to give an eyewitness account.

(2) On New Year's Eve, **1,000 men described as Arab and North African** sexually assaulted **90 women** in the German city of Cologne. (ROK).

The second instance, "90 women", also uses an appeal to numbers to create an assumption of facticity through the specificity of the anchor text. Clicking on both these instances of anchor text takes the blog reader to an article published by the Daily Mail Online.

An inter-rater reliability assessment was carried out at this stage of the categorisation process to ensure only legitimising anchor text was being analysed. A dataset consisting of 93 examples of anchor text situated in its co-text was given to a second coder to categorise. This inter-rater reliability dataset represents 25 % of the full dataset and all the examples were randomly selected. On the first round of coding, the level of inter-rater agreement was 73 %. Following further discussions, clarifications, and refinements in the identification criteria, a second round of coding was carried out. This resulted in a level of agreement of 91 %, which is well within an acceptable range for reliability (Stemler, 2004) and the first coder's results were then used. This process allowed for valuable reflection and clarification of the categorisation process, all of which strengthened the analyses.

The following sections detail the analyses and discuss the findings in line with the three research questions: the frequency of anchor text performing a legitimising function for claims being made in extremists' blog posts discussing sexual violence (RQ1); the extent to which a source

Table 3

Overview of incidence of legitimising anchor text in key categories.

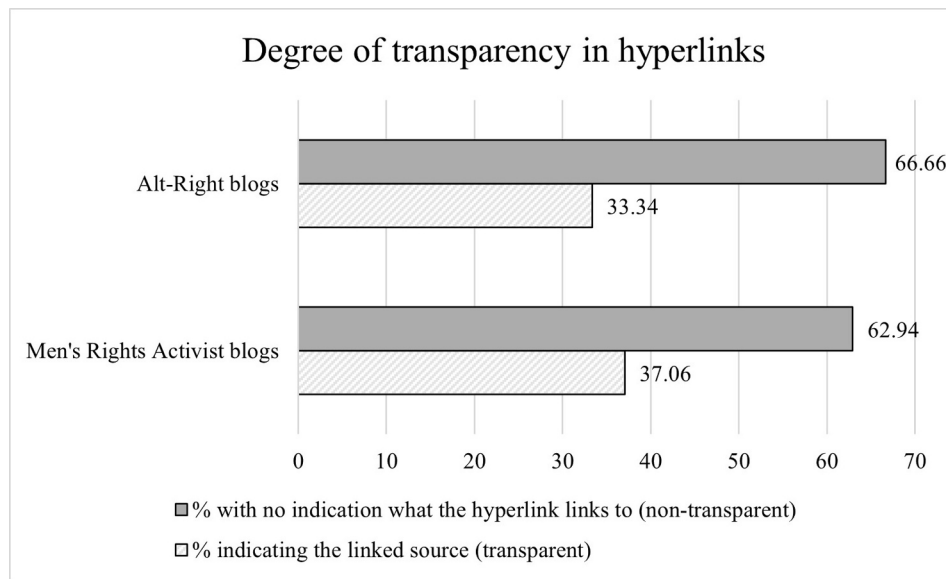|	Total number of hyperlinks (for all categories, including 'dead links')	Total number of hyperlinks in the seven key categories	Total number of links used to legitimise an assertion in the key categories
Alt-Right corpus	169	147	120 (81.63 %)
MRA corpus	275	226	197 (87.17 %)
Total	**444**	**373**	**317 (84.99 %)**

Fig. 1. Degree of transparency in anchor text in the extremists' blog posts dataset.

is acknowledged and how this relates to the sources used in the links (RQ2); and how the anchor text under investigation fits into subjectification and objectification categories of analysis (RQ3).

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. Anchor text performing a legitimising role

The results of the classification process showed that 317 out of 373 instances of anchor text (84.99 %) were used as citational devices to legitimise claims, as shown in Table 3. This simultaneously indicates that other uses of anchor text (i.e. for navigational, social media and commercial purposes) were relatively unimportant for the bloggers.

With respect to RQ1, anchor text is used most frequently (84.99 %) as a tool to legitimise assertions made in the blog posts rather than to promote the blog or to monetise it. Borah (2014: 578) argues that the presence of these legitimising links in news discourses increases the writers' credibility if the focus of the news story resonates with the readers' pre-existing schema and reflects their values. This is evident in example (3), where the blogger has selected the information on the mother of Democratic former US President Clinton as the anchor text (in bold). Previous studies on extreme right-wing and manosphere discourses have shown that single mothers are frequently portrayed as being solely responsible for sexual violence committed by their sons (Boyd, 2004; Barber, 2022). The linked source (a post from a far-right blog) actually focuses on Clinton's isolation growing up but embedding the anchor text to highlight the information about Clinton's mother, which follows an accusation of him being a rapist, is likely to appeal to the ideological stance and misogyny of the readership, simultaneously denigrating Clinton and blaming his mother for what is expressed as sexual deviancy.

(3) A possible serial rapist and habitual liar, his horndog ways were the result of his dweeby childhood. **As a fat nerd raised by a slutty single mom in rural Arkansas**, Clinton spent his formative years as a social pariah, stewing in misery and isolation. (MF).

The anchor text in the assertion in (4) also appeals to ideologies widely spread in the dataset regarding false rape accusations and male students being accused on higher education campuses. The saliency of the anchor text creates an emphasis which, it is assumed, appeals to the

readership's scepticism.

(4) Across the Atlantic, men learning to become accountants, teachers, doctors, and lawyers at American colleges are supposedly the people **most likely to rape girls**. (ROK).

This example also demonstrates how the blogger has created a semblance of information veracity through the embedding of the linked source. The "most likely to rape girls" anchor text appeals to statistical information, albeit vaguely. Its clickability implies that the reader will be able to access the source of this information, perhaps a report or piece of research, if they click on it. The anchor text, instead, links to a previously published blog post by the same blogger. The suggestion created by incorporating the anchor text in this way is that there is data underpinning the assertion highlighted by the automatic anchor text formatting and that the blogger has disclosed his source, thereby giving an impression of integrity and accountability for the claim. This function of anchor text is discussed further in section 4.3.2.

4.2. Anchor text transparency and type of linked source

The 317 instances of *legitimising* anchor text from the key categories were further analysed to ascertain whether they explicitly referenced a source to which the anchor text directs the reader. If the linked source is indicated in anchor text, the bloggers' means of knowing is therefore made explicit and could be argued to fall into the epistemic positioning strategy of objectification (Hart, 2011: 759). As Coddington & Molyneux argue (2023: 665), explicit attribution to the source enhances the *transparency* of the text and the relevant sources.

4.2.1. Degree of transparency in anchor text

The anchor text examples were categorised again by subdividing them into two groups: *transparent* and *non-transparent*. The former included all instances where it is clear from the anchor text or co-text to which source the anchor text links, as shown in example (5).

(5) The Guardian reports that **a second woman has come forward,** claiming that Forbes made comments about her breasts at a function earlier in the year. (ROK).

In contrast, anchor text was categorised as *non-transparent* if there was no attribution to the destination source within the anchor text itself

Table 4

Number, proportion and degree of non-transparency of each linked source category.

		Anchor text linked source						
		Own blog	Extreme right-wing site	Main-stream media	Social media platform	Alternative news source	Non-extremist blog/site	Online magazine
Alt-Right corpus	*Number of links (n)*	20	35	28	19	6	10	2
	Proportion of total (%)	16.67	29.17	23.33	15.83	5.00	8.33	1.67
	Degree of non-transparency per source (%)	70.00	85.71	64.29	21.05	100	60.00	100
MRA corpus	*Number of links (n)*	64	15	68	19	11	10	10
	Proportion of total (%)	32.49	7.61	34.52	9.50	9.64	5.08	5.08
	Degree of non-transparency per source (%)	79.69	40.00	72.06	10.53	54.55	50.00	50.00

or surrounding co-text. Effectively, the reader is unable to know, without taking further action, what type of source is being used to support the assertion, as shown here:

(6) To make matters worse, feminists have been trying to train men to rape girls for years. Their constant claim that the West has a "rape culture" is just wishful thinking: in actuality, **rape has been on the decline for decades.** (MF).

The results of this stage of analysis showed that there were 80 non-transparent pieces of anchor text in the Alt-Right corpus and 124 in the MRA corpus. This gave a final dataset of 204 pieces of anchor text from the initial 317 (64.35 %), all of which performed a legitimising function in a non-transparent manner. As evident in Fig. 1, two-thirds of anchor text in both corpora were non-transparent (66.66 % and 62.94 %) for the Alt-Right and MRA corpora respectively), suggesting that the majority of sources were opaque for the readers of the blog posts.

4.2.2. Linked source and degree of transparency

Table 4 gives a more detailed view of the degree of transparency in the anchor text across the seven key categories of linked sources. The most frequent source linked to by Alt-Right bloggers was another extreme right-wing site (29.17 %). These links are also the least transparent, with 85.71 % of anchor text categorised as non-transparent, demonstrating that readers are not being informed that the assertions being legitimised are substantiated by an ideologically-affiliated source. The second most frequently linked site by Alt-Right bloggers are mainstream media sites (23.33 %). As Heft et al also argue, far-right and extreme right-wing groups are increasingly relying on these channels, possibly because of their transnationality: "communication crossing and transcending the borders of nation-states (2021: 491). This is contrary to previously observed trends in these groups, which traditionally shun mainstream media sites (ibid: 499). Of the anchor text linking to mainstream media sites, 64.29 % was non-transparent, indicating that the majority of these sources were also hidden from readers (albeit less so than in anchor text linking to extreme right-wing sites). In contrast, the most transparent linked sources were related to social media platforms (Twitter/X and YouTube), with only 21.05 % of anchor text being opaque. This is likely to relate to the affordances of the platforms rather than the conscious choice of the blogger. For example, hyperlinking to a specific tweet automatically involves the identification of a Twitter/X account, together with the tweet's date and time stamp.

Regarding the MRA corpus, the most frequently-linked sources were mainstream media sites and the bloggers' own blog posts (34.52 % and 32.49 % respectively). The anchor text in this corpus was slightly less frequently transparent when linking to mainstream media posts, compared to the Alt-Right corpus, with 72.06 % not indicating the source. However, the least transparent anchor text linked to the bloggers' own posts (79.69 %), suggesting a consistent strategy to conceal the lack of independent verification of the information being used. This also problematises the categorisation of these citational links for information provision as *external* (Heft et al., 2021: 488). In contrast, as with

the Alt-Right corpus, social media links (Twitter/X and YouTube) were highly transparent, with only 10.53 % in the MRA corpus failing to credit a source. The MRA corpus contained very few links to other extreme right-wing sites, including other manosphere sites (7.61 % of all links compared to 29.17 % in the Alt-Right corpus). This suggests that, despite an overlap in ideological affiliation, the MRA bloggers seem to position themselves separately in terms of relying on the extreme right-wing to substantiate their claims. As Coddington & Molyneux posit, evidence for claims is gauged according to a "hierarchy of evidential weight" (2023: 666) by writers; in this case, the MRA bloggers are considering their own voices the greatest authority while obscuring this fact to their readership.

4.3. Anchor text and the legitimisation of assertions

The anchor text in the dataset was frequently used to legitimise assertions about sexual violence (84.99 %) but was predominantly categorised as *non-transparent* (64.35 %) as neither the anchor text nor its co-text reference the source to which the anchor text links. But how does anchor text, together with its function in extremist discourses, fit into existing frameworks of epistemic legitimisation (Hart 2011)?

As noted in Section 2.2, *subjectification* strategies manifest through expressions of epistemic certainty with assertions consisting of evaluations or assessments made by the writer; a reliance on the writer's reputation as a trustworthy source of knowledge; and an assumption of personal responsibility for the assertion. At the other end of the cline, *objectification* strategies are exemplified by evidentiality, whereby writers make their means of knowledge accessible to readers when their assertion is read; and responsibility for the claim being attributed wholly or partially to a third-party source, rather than the writer (Hart 2011). This final section discusses the non-transparent anchor text in the dataset in relation to these key variables in epistemic legitimisation: 1) the bases of knowledge, or degree of evidentiality; 2) the extent to which the writers' means of knowing is made available; and 3) how responsibility for the assertions is expressed. While these variables overlap and are interconnected to a degree, they are considered separately for the purposes of considering these aspects in relation to the range of semiotic resources that are mobilised in anchor text (textual, visual and hypertextual; see Table 2).

4.3.1. Bases of knowledge: Evidentiality

At a textual level, the non-transparent anchor text contains discursive features which indicate that either a source had been accessed by the blogger, albeit indicated very vaguely (e.g. example 1), or there is no indication that a source had been used to verify the claim (see example 8). In her work on bases of knowledge found in news texts, Bednarek highlights the complex connection between sourcing, i.e. identifying attribution (2006: 638), evidentiality, and epistemic positioning. In doing so, she contrasts *attributions* (e.g. information expressed as explicitly originating from external sources) and *averrals* (information expressed as an interpretation of a source by the writer) (ibid.: 642). According to Bednarek (2006) and Breeze (2017), while having no

explicit source mentioned, an averral can be either *based* or *non-based* depending on any reliance expressed on external evidence. A based averral draws support from external sources like statistics or research findings to validate the claim, for example through evidentials such as "the report concludes" or "tests found" (Bednarek, 2006: 647; Hart and Fuoli, 2020:21). A non-based averral lacks any external support, relying instead on subjective factors like personal opinion (Breeze, 2017: 298). Although the demarcation of these positions may be nuanced, for the purposes of analysing *non-transparent* anchor text, the concept is useful to determine the degree of subjectification in the anchor text discourse and the bases of knowledge used for evidentiality.

The following examples illustrate how based and non-based averrals relate to three types of evidentiality on Hart's sliding scale of subjectivity: *public knowledge*, *expert knowledge*, and *epistemic commitment* (Hart, 2011: 760), with each representing a more subjectified position respectively. Example (7), taken from an Alt-Right blog post and which contains a particularly extreme and unsettling view, contains two pieces of anchor text introduced by the intersubjective phrase "It's well known that" (Marín-Arrese, 2011: 793):

(7) It's well-known that **a great many girls have rape fantasies**, and **a significant number of rape victims claim to have orgasmed during their assaults**. (MF).

This appeal to the readership's collective understanding suggests this form of evidence can be regarded as *public knowledge* (Hart, 2011: 762), or *general knowledge* (Bednarek, 2006: 640), which represents an intersubjective degree of subjectivity (Hart, 2011: 760). The appeal to numbers and statistics in the anchor text implies the evidence is supposedly well-known and that the link takes the reader to robust research.[2] Examples of *public knowledge* as a base of knowledge in the dataset also seem to set the parameter of "public" as the readership itself. In example (8), the blogger appeals to the shared knowledge of the blog readership by appealing to them directly with second-person pronouns (underlined) to make his assertion about the supposed questionable character of Polanski:

(8) <u>We</u> all wanna forgive the "good guys" like Roman Polanski an occasional faux paus. <u>You</u> know **how erratic the creative people can get**. (AM).

Regarding evidence linked to a more subjective position, example (9) contains a based-averral which indicates that the assertion, while not fully based on the blogger's opinion, relies on a degree of expertise:

(9) With <u>authorities</u> already "teaching" mollycoddled migrants **how not to rape**, a demand for personal responsibility and an acknowledgment of statistical realities are clearly not going to characterize official responses to soaring foreign crime rates in Germany. (ROK).

At a textual level, the reference to "authorities" in the co-text indicates third-party evidence is available for the assertion. However, this sourcing is vague and non-committal. The link, in fact, takes the reader to a misinterpreted article published by the *Daily Telegraph*. Applying Hart's adaptation of Bednarek's (2006) bases of knowledge hierarchy, the reference to "authorities" in this based-averral signifies *expert knowledge* evidentiality (Hart, 2011, 760) as the attribution refers to an organisation assumed to be authoritative and which, according to Hart, is representative of a high degree of subjectivity (ibid). A higher degree of subjectivity through a non-based averral and which can be classified as *epistemic commitment,* i.e. evidence expressed solely through the blogger's belief or opinion (Hart, 2011: 760), is shown in line (10). Here,

there is no indication in the sentence that the blogger is using a report, newspaper article, or other site but, instead, he formulates his assertion as declarative, with three pieces of anchor text separated by square brackets):

(10) In his eight years as president, Clinton dismantled the military, [**murdered women and children in the Waco siege by burning them alive**], [**ethnically cleansed Serbs from Kosovo**], and [**tried to strip Americans of their right to own firearms**]. (MF).

Throughout the dataset, the lack of external attribution in the anchor text or co-text, and the proliferation of based and non-based averrals indicate a high degree of subjectification at the textual level. This maintains the bloggers' personal authority and generates a need to trust their interpretation of the source they have supposedly reviewed.

4.3.2. Writers' means of knowing

While overlapping to a certain extent to the discussion in the previous section, non-transparent anchor text also does not provide to the reader the writers' means of knowing the information contained in the assertion (at least, at a purely textual level). This can be contrasted with transparent anchor text, whereby the linked source is attributed clearly and the reader knows to which site they will be directed if they click on the anchor text. Perhaps more significantly, with transparent anchor text, the reader is able to formulate an opinion on the veracity of the assertion while that assertion is being processed; a reader who respects the journalistic integrity of the *Guardian* is likely to believe the claims put forward in example 5 without needing to click on the link. With non-transparent anchor text, however, the reader must rely on the bloggers' personal authority (van Leeuwen, 2007) and "reputation as a reliable source of information with perhaps privileged access to certain states of affairs or means of knowing." (Hart, 2011: 759). Considering that the bloggers' reputation as a trusted source of knowledge is significant here, textually, anchor text appears as a subjectification strategy in the wider framework of epistemic legitimisation.

In contrast, the visual and hypertextual resources of anchor text imply to the reader that the bloggers' means of knowing is just one click away, which suggests that these resources can be considered objectification strategies. Visually, the colour (or underlining) of the anchor text creates an *impression* that a verifiable source is likely to be accessed. Hypertextually, if the function is available to the reader, they may be able to hover their mouse over the anchor text, enabling the URL to be displayed at the bottom of their screen. However, previous research may challenge this interpretation. First, research has found that URLs are inspected only 14 % of the time by those who have access to this function (Butavicius et al., 2022) and, for URLs that are exposed in this way, identifying the site from the URL can be particularly difficult (Althobaiti et al., 2021). Second, the writer's means of knowing is made available only if the reader reads beyond the assertion made. Although these resources of anchor text give the *potential* for the reader to find the attribution and suggest a clear objectification strategy, they require proactivity and the readers' "assumed epistemological literacy" (Coddington and Molyneux, 2023: 680) for the source to be known.

4.3.3. Responsibility for the assertion

Drawing on Marín-Arrese (2011), Hart & Fuoli acknowledge the role that responsibility for a claim plays in epistemic legitimisation (2020: 19). Within a fully subjectified assertion, personal responsibility remains with the speaker/writer, while in a fully objectified assertion, the attribution places the responsibility for the claim onto a third-party (Marín-Arrese 2011, Hart and Fuoli 2020). To a certain extent, this relates to the discussion in Section 4.3.1 and, as was argued there, an intermediate position of intersubjectivity, incorporating a shared/collective responsibility, also exists.

Although at the textual level, the anchor text in the dataset indicates

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[2] The anchor text, instead, links to the manosphere site Chateau Heartiste.

Table 5

Non-transparent anchor text resources and their relevance to elements in epistemic legitimisation in the blog dataset.

Variable in Assertion	Anchor text resource		
	Textual *Discourse fragment / phrase*	**Visual** *Colour contrast from surrounding text and/or underline*	**Hypertextual** *Link to non-linear source*
Bases of knowledge: Evidentiality	Includes forms of evidence related to: *Public/general knowledge, Expert knowledge* and *Epistemic commitment* (Bednarek 2006, Hart 2006)	x	x
Writers' means of knowing	Made unavailable to the reader within the assertion or co-text	Creates an implication that the means of knowing is embedded in the text	Only made available *when / if* the link is accessed and after the assertion has been processed by the reader.
Responsibility for the assertion	Incorporates personal responsibility and accountability, as well as intersubjective (shared) responsibility for the assertion (Marín-Arrese 2011: 794)	Creates an impression of 'epistemic responsibility' (Heffer 2022: 58)	Lies within an external / third-party source
Relevance to epistemic legitimisation	**Subjective /intersubjective**	**Implied objectification**	**Potential objectification if proactively sought**

personal or intersubjective/shared responsibility for the claim, at the visual level there is a clear semblance of *epistemic responsibility* (i.e. both knowing what is being said and being able to justify what is being said (Heffer 2020: 58). Example (10), which discussed President Clinton's alleged actions through epistemic commitment, shows three separate pieces of anchor text, separated by square brackets. Their visual saliency not only highlights key parts of the argument (here, emotive language related to violence and removing constitutional rights) but also creates the impression that thorough research has taken place.[3]

At the hypertextual level of the anchor text, responsibility for the assertion lies within an external webpage, blog or other third-party source. However, as argued in Section 4.2.2, this apparent objectification strategy is also problematic within this dataset as a significant proportion of anchor text links to an internal source, i.e. another post written by the blogger.

Table 5 summarises the points above to highlight the interplay between aspects of epistemic legitimisation and the various semiotic resources of non-transparent anchor text.

Based on the above, the use of non-transparent anchor text in assertions does not fit comfortably on the cline of subjectification in epistemic legitimisation. Instead, these assertions in the blog posts appear to represent what I would tentatively call a *quasi-objectification* strategy in epistemic legitimisation. This compound term indicates that the epistemic legitimisation of assertions through non-transparent anchor text in this study includes some, but not all of the strategies linked to objectification. The anchor text gives the semblance of objectification but, when analysed in terms of its meaning potential across different modes (textual, visual and hypertextual), it does not fully fulfil this categorisation. It is argued here that this benefits the bloggers, who are legitimising rape culture and propagating rape myths, as they are able to maintain the authority and voice of expertise to legitimise their assertions while presenting an impression of epistemic responsibility and, therefore, credibility. Although the linked source has not been attributed at the textual level, either in the anchor text itself or the co-text, the claim has been given the *potential* to be verified. By not explicitly stating what link is being used for this verification, the blogger can attempt to persuade readers as to the facticity of the claim without acknowledging the provenance of the information; instead, they rely on the blog readers' "assumed epistemological literacy" (Coddington and Molyneux 2023: 680) and effectively pass responsibility for verification onto them.

5. Conclusion

This paper critically examined whether, and how, anchor text acts to legitimise assertions about sexual violence in a corpus of blog posts written by Alt-Right and Men's Rights Activist bloggers. It was evident that the majority of anchor text instances (84.99 %) performed a legitimising function within these blog posts, perpetuating rape culture among the readership. With respect to the transparency of anchor text and its relation to the linked source, two thirds of the legitimising anchor text were found to be non-transparent. In line with previous research that identified an increasing reliance on readers' assumed epistemological literacy (Coddington and Molyneux, 2023), this finding represents a possible move away from epistemic responsibility and the need for 'epistemic vigilance', as posited by Hart (2011:765). This need is compounded by the finding that between 70.00 % and 79.69 % of anchor text which linked to another post within the bloggers' own blog site was non-transparent and, as a result, what may appear to be responsibility for an assertion being placed on a third-party source is not, in fact, the case.

With respect to existing frameworks to analyse the legitimisation of assertions, the analysis points to the need to introduce a possible quasi-objectification strategy of epistemic legitimisation for online extremist discourses, like the those examined in this study. While the anchor text in the blog posts under investigation contain discursive features associated with subjectification, the additional features of anchor text, that draw on the mobilisation of visual and hypertextual resources, can be considered as creating the semblance of objectified epistemic legitimisation. Although both subjectification and objectification strategies can increase the epistemic status of an assertion (Hart and Fuoli, 2020), it has been found that objectification strategies are more effective in achieving this (ibid). Non-transparent anchor text takes advantage of this benefit by increasing the apparent credibility of a claim. At the same time, it allows the bloggers' expertise to predominate and make opaque the actual provenance of the information, which may be the bloggers' own work.

As Tebaldi (2021: 208) points out, post-truth discourse destabilises understandings of fact. This study has shown how this can occur within the perpetuation of rape culture and rape myths, with seemingly objective evidence presented while promoting bloggers' personal beliefs. Digital literacy education is essential to enhance epistemological vigilance, for example, by incorporating strategies of *pre-bunking* — "making people aware of potential misinformation before it is presented" (Lewandowsky and van der Linden, 2021: 356). Digital platforms could facilitate this by making the hyperlinked sources, hidden by anchor text, more explicit.

This study highlights the importance of considering technological affordances in studies of evidentiality, particularly regarding claims by those propagating extremist rhetoric online. However, the sample size of anchor text here and the generalisability of findings across other platforms and media are limited. Further investigations on anchor text's role in legitimisation could focus on granular analyses. For example, identifying prevalent discursive strategies in anchor text could provide

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[3] The linked sources do not support the claims being made in the assertion.

further links to existing frameworks on legitimisation. Examining how anchor text in extremist discourses differs from that in mainstream media may reveal how this resource is used to connect discourse-level legitimisation to other online contexts. Following Deschrijver's (2021) point that individuals scrutinise claims they doubt while accepting others unquestioningly offers another avenue for investigating anchor text and the analysis of evidential sources.

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