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## Rooted in White Identity Politics: Tracing the Genealogy of Critical Race Theory Discourse in Identity-Based Disinformation

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### ABSTRACT

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has recently garnered considerable political attention. This study examines how partisan news headlines discussed CRT, specifically analyzing how the incorporated language can resonate with white Americans' shared imaginaries to reframe CRT. We employ a critical disinformation approach to interpret the computationally analyzed partisan news headlines ( $N = 7320$ ) from January 1, 2016, to December 31, 2022. Right-leaning sources overwhelmingly discussed CRT, including language evocative of white Americans' racial consciousness and racial resentment. We discuss our findings considering the impact of identity-based disinformation amid increasing opposition to diversity. Discussion reflects upon the need for critical approaches to disinformation research that center historical and socio-political contexts.

### KEYWORDS

Critical race theory; disinformation; partisan news; racial resentment; white identity politics

## Introduction

*Critical Race Theory* (CRT) was developed by activist scholars during the mid-1970s in law scholarship to identify and combat the continued influence of race and racism in law (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Race-conscious advocacy work, as espoused in CRT, drew opposition from “colorblind” conservative actors during 1990s’ era debates of affirmative action (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). However, public discussion of social justice in social media discourse and its amplification in mainstream news media during the Movement for Black Lives in 2020 brought renewed, if misappropriated attention to CRT. A racial reckoning brought systemic racism to the forefront of public consciousness. It also paved the way for political discourse vehemently condemning CRT and inciting anger toward the theoretical framework (Jefferson & Ray, 2022).

Despite evidence of its absence in K-12 education, CRT has gained considerable political attention (Johnson et al., 2022). Since 2021, lawmakers have introduced over 300 bills limiting or banning CRT-related instruction, many of which contain ambiguous language

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labeling CRT a “divisive concept” (Johnson et al., 2022). Moreover, Republican politicians and conservative media alike have echoed these perspectives (Deshpande et al., 2023). Political attacks on CRT did not occur by happenstance, instead born out of a desire to brand and vilify burgeoning national discourse on racism (Benson, 2022). Conservative strategists publicly announced their intent to frame CRT as a convenient catch-all phrase to criticize any concept related to race. Christopher Rufo often credited for introducing CRT to public discourse, tweeted, “The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decoded the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans” (Rufo, 2021).

CRT was propelled to the forefront of partisan discourse with the goal of making it a representation of all uncongenial concepts, particularly those related to race (Benson, 2022; Clark, 2024). Disinformation literature sheds light on the deceptive tactics that would succeed in reframing Critical Race Theory into a negative political acronym, “CRT.” Disinformation, defined as the intentional dissemination of deceptive content for monetary or political gain (Hameleers, 2023), influences attitudes when it provokes audiences’ socio-political attitudes (Cabañas, 2020). Through Hall’s (2000) encoding/decoding model, we can understand how increased partisan attention to CRT represents intentionally deceptive, disinformation.

Hall’s (2000) encoding/decoding model emphasizes the technological, social, and political context through which a message is developed (encoding) for dissemination to public audiences who consume it via media (decoding). While the CRT was initially encoded by scholars to identify and describe the influence of race – and specifically, white supremacy – in American institutions, its objective has been subverted and abstractly *recoded* for the purpose of deluding the public on matters of race (Clark, 2024). The emerging effects of such *recoding* are seemingly present within public attitudes: White Americans who oppose CRT describe it as divisive, harmful, and racist to white people (Richmond et al., 2024). With the urging of political strategists, CRT was placed at the forefront of political debate (Meckler & Dawsey, 2021).

Disinformation which preserves existing racial hierarchies in the face of disruptions to racial dynamics is not a new phenomenon (Marwick et al., 2021). The incorporation of racial tropes in news has successfully impeded and often reversed racial progress (see Delmont, 2016). Similar dynamics may be at play in CRT discourse. Scholarship has called upon researchers to utilize a critical approach when analyzing disinformation (Marwick et al., 2021). This perspective recognizes and understands disinformation incorporating identity as a tool of deception. A critical disinformation approach considers the historical and sociopolitical context in which disinformation spreads and how racial dynamics shape both the narratives it incorporates and its ramifications for maintaining hegemonic structures (Kuo & Marwick, 2021).

This study applies a critical disinformation approach to interpret computationally analyzed partisan news headlines concerning CRT. First, we employ BERTopic modeling to detect narratives employed in the partisan news headlines. Next, we critically evaluate the representations of these latent topics, examining whether partisan headlines incorporate terms that would prove compelling in deceiving audiences. Interpretation of the computational results with a critical lens allows for an examination of disinformation that recognizes

the presence of race and power, even in narratives that are ostensibly colorblind. We discuss the societal implications of our findings, developing a conceptual framework to understand disinformation that leverages identity in response to disruptions to the status quo: identity-based disinformation.

### ***Contextualizing Disinformation***

Disinformation research has interrogated the impact of trolls, algorithms, and foreign information interferences in the form of bots or sock-puppetry (Freelon et al., 2020; Lukito, 2020). Much of this work uses computational methods, characterizing disinformation by assessing its veracity through fact-checking (e.g., Grinberg et al., 2019) or by analyzing content from known automated or human-run disinformation campaigns (e.g., Freelon et al., 2020; Lukito, 2020). While these approaches provide integral insight, they may unnecessarily dichotomize disinformation research in a “black-and-white” manner, limiting researchers’ ability to develop more nuanced interpretations of disinformation (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Rigid approaches to identifying disinformation, such as reliance on the computational detection of bots or coordinated patterns of known influence campaigns, also fail to capture its true scope, as such approaches might not classify certain content as disinformation (see Bauer et al., 2022).

Harsin (2024) argues this stems from epistemological approaches derived from scholars’ interpretation of disinformation. Hameleers (2023) defines disinformation as “all practices of intentionally creating or disseminating deceptive content to cause harm, sow discord, or create financial and/or political gain” (Hameleers, 2023, p. 2). Similarly, Freelon and Wells (2020) adopt the definition that disinformation is deceptive information with the potential for or intent to cause harm. While these definitions accurately describe disinformation, scholarship tends to operationalize it in a manner that pigeonholes researchers into proving or disproving veracity, prescribing communicative practices as harmful based on truth-false binaries without interrogating the historical and culturally specific power dynamics that render the content harmful (Harsin, 2024). Additionally, approaches often attempt to prove intent to harm or “lie” without consideration of related fields such as political consulting, the underlying driver of strategic decisions, especially in high-choice media systems (Harsin, 2024; Serazio, 2014).

Consequently, to recognize identity-based disinformation, we consider the complex processes of deception within contemporary media systems. Deception is key in identifying disinformation, particularly in distinguishing disinformation from misinformation, unintentional or inadvertently misleading information (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022). Chadwick and Stanyer (2022) argue that by focusing on deceptive intent, disinformation research can move beyond merely articulating intent or identifying false information – neither of which alone constitute deception, and instead discern the tactics disinformation actors incorporate that would succeed in fostering false beliefs. Through focusing on deception, particularly connecting deceptive strategies to its ability to influence, scholars can build an explanatory bridge linking intentionality, the cognitive processes involved in information processing, and its ensuing behavioral and attitudinal impacts, ultimately providing a more comprehensive understanding of the broader societal impact of disinformation (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022, p. 3).

Deceptive tactics are empirically observable and include reframing (“spinning”), strategic ambiguity, the weaponization of emotions, deflection, and obfuscation (Ross & Rivers, 2018; Samoilenco, 2017; Schneider & Ingram, 2019). However, the evaluation of these tools must interrogate whether deceptive strategies can successfully impact public perception (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022). Audiences’ susceptibility to the deceptive attributes of disinformation is context dependent. First, disinformation exists within a hybrid media system where curated content from various actors possessing varying levels of influential power – journalists, bots, alternative media, fellow media users – participate in its spread (Chadwick, 2011; Hau et al., 2024; Starbird et al., 2023; Thorson & Wells, 2015). It is the audience’s place within this media system that dictates the level of trust or credibility placed in the disinformation, as well as the curated content they might encounter from various entities vying for influence (Hameleers et al., 2022; Thorson & Wells, 2015). Second, for deceptive strategies to succeed, disinformation must evoke the identity and cognitive biases audiences bring to information processing (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022; Serazio, 2014), both of which ultimately determine how they will interact with the information within the larger media system (Zhang et al., 2018).

These assertions follow prevailing logics about the function of cultural resonance in media messages. In Schudson’s view, examinations of news and information must consider the cultural frameworks that are used to both develop and decode content – that the “unspoken presuppositions” of culture are transmitted to and by individuals and groups in media messages (Schudson, 1989, p. 155). Any examination of a message’s efficacy, he argues, must consider its deployment using rhetorical strategies, its ability to be recalled/retrieved, and its ability to evoke existing cultural schema – to resonate with its intended target (Schudson, 1989, pp. 160–170). Schudson (1989) goes on to describe resonance as “a public and cultural relation among object, tradition, and audience” (p. 170). At a macro level, culturally resonant language is effective in uniting individual and networked actors to coalesce around a shared identity. In this sense, the CRT signifier becomes a cultural object deployed at an organizational level – such as news organizations – to shape a common agenda and motivate otherwise disempowered actors into collective action (McDonnell et al., 2017).

Consequently, we ask: What forms of deception would render disinformation concerning CRT capable of successfully influencing audiences’ attitudes? Compelling disinformation must utilize deceptive strategies that engage with or provoke reflection upon imaginaries entrenched within those who might encounter it (Cabañas, 2020; Lelo, 2024). Imaginaries are narratives people hold about their shared understandings of society’s sociopolitical context, deeply felt stories (or “deep stories”) people constantly tell themselves about who they are, what their moral values are, and their relative position within society (Cabañas, 2020, p. 437; Hochschild, 2016). Imaginaries are especially influential in the processing of political messages, as these stories are reinforced through both interpersonal interactions and the broader media system (Hochschild, 2016; Kreiss et al., 2017). With this conceptual framework, we recognize that disinformation is compelling not just for presenting falsehoods but also for resonating with entrenched imaginaries held among audiences (Cabañas, 2020). By intentionally using deceptive techniques that engage these imaginaries, disinformation can activate prejudices and anxieties, ultimately influencing audiences’ sentiments and empowering disinformation actors (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022).

Imaginaries within contemporary American politics are “deep stories” of loss and mourning among white Americans (Hochschild, 2016; see Kreiss et al., 2017). White Americans feel left behind or ignored due to changing sociopolitical dynamics while perceiving other racial groups as receiving undue privileges and “cutting the line” to the American dream (Hochschild, 2016; Wells & Friedland, 2023). These imaginaries are so deeply ingrained as to be true among white Americans that research empirically links growing racial diversity and increased attention to social justice to anxiety about status loss (Isom et al., 2021), fear of anti-white discrimination (Isom et al., 2022; Knowles et al., 2022), and racial resentment (Newman et al., 2023).

### ***The Role of White Identity and Racial Resentment***

CRT was created by legal scholars as a theoretical lens to acknowledge the continued presence of racial hierarchies within American institutions – an enduring byproduct of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and other government-sanctioned discriminatory practices, despite the absence of *de jure* segregation (Crenshaw et al., 1995). The primary goal of CRT is to confront and dismantle racial hierarchies. This is achieved through equity-based policies which deliberately center the experiences of Black individuals and other minoritized groups and recognize the unique challenges they face in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Although these practices aim to promote equity rather than provide preferential treatment to Black Americans, redirecting focus from white individuals in any societal capacity directly threatens existing social hierarchies and power structures.

Challenges to existing social dynamics disrupt *whiteness*—racial invisibility in which proximity to white, Western identity is compensated with sociopolitical protections over African Americans and other nonwhite groups – and destabilize perceptions of the dominant group’s sociopolitical standing (Du Bois, 2017; see Isom et al., 2021). For these reasons, disinformation concerning CRT lends itself to successful deceptive strategies, as it can evoke imaginaries of status loss, anti-white discrimination, or resentment felt by white Americans (Benson, 2022; Carbone et al., 2024). Discourse concerning CRT, especially if it misrepresents its core tenets by signifying white Americans’ sociopolitical imaginaries, may reinforce the growing belief that American systems are in flux, evolving in ways that prioritize minoritized groups (Jardina, 2019). Such strategies can effectively recode CRT among white audiences because it proves capable of cultural resonance, aligning with feelings of white racial consciousness and racial resentment.

### ***White Racial Consciousness***

Historically, white Americans have not developed a sense of racial identity, largely due to racial invisibility, which reinforces the notion that race primarily pertains to minoritized groups (Lewis, 2004). However, recent societal shifts have disrupted the invisibility of white identity and increased its centrality among white Americans. When racial identity motivates political decision-making, it manifests as racial consciousness – wherein political decisions are motivated by a desire to protect the in-group and its societal position (Jardina, 2019; Miller et al., 1981). Racially conscious white Americans believe their group is disadvantaged, particularly that white Americans are increasingly subjected to discrimination (Knowles et al., 2022; Schildkraut, 2017). As such, white racial consciousness promotes decisions in which white Americans identify proponents and anticipate

adversaries to white prerogatives (Lane et al., 2023), which benefits politicians or policies that appeal to white Americans' grievances (Jardina, 2020) or politicians who successfully "own" white identity (Kreiss et al., 2020). Research underscores the political relevance of white racial consciousness. White racial consciousness propels political and protest participation (Berry et al., 2021). Additionally, racially conscious white Americans voted for Republican candidates in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, as well as the 2018 midterm election (Cepuran & Berry, 2022; Knuckey & Kim, 2020).

### ***Racial Resentment***

Disruptions to the racial status quo also evoke racial resentment (Davis & Wilson, 2021). *Racial resentment* or *symbolic racism* is a psychological disposition that blends anti-Black sentiment and endorsements of American traditionalism promoted within the Protestant Ethic (Henry & Sears, 2002; Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416). Racial resentment grows from feelings of moral transgression, the belief that African Americans violate traditional American values of individualism and hard work (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416). From this perspective, inequality is attributed to African Americans' unwillingness to work hard, grievances are considered unfounded, and any form of government support is characterized as underserved (Henry & Sears, 2002, p. 256). Racial resentment proves impactful in politics not only because it influences voting behavior (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019) but also because it can catalyze opposition toward initiatives for racial restitution (see Tuch & Hughes, 2011). Like white racial consciousness, racial resentment benefits the Republican Party. During the 2016 and 2020 presidential election, feelings of racial resentment worked in tandem with perceptions of anti-white discrimination to motivate support for Donald Trump (Cepuran & Berry, 2022).

### ***White Racial Consciousness and Racial Resentment as Strategy***

Disinformation leveraging white identity and racial animus incorporates readily accessible perspectives capable of resonating with white audiences' imaginaries of the sociopolitical landscape. The incorporation of such deceptive strategies may be especially salient in right-leaning media, as these tactics assist in achieving the expressed intent to recode CRT (Clark, 2024; Meckler & Dawsey, 2021), and echo identity-related sentiments used to garner support for Republican politicians (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019; Kreiss et al., 2020). Research linking white racial consciousness, particularly fear of anti-white discrimination, and racial resentment to political attitudes support contentions for the persuasive impact disinformation that strategically incorporates white Americans' shared imaginaries (Cepuran & Berry, 2022; Isom et al., 2021; Knowles et al., 2022).

Moreover, these messages would effectively garner the attention of target audiences within a high-choice media system (see Wojcieszak, 2019): white conservatives, as the narrative echoes Republican perspectives that increasingly emphasize concerns for anti-white discrimination (Bartels, 2018) or align with feelings of racial resentment (Enders & Scott, 2019); and white Americans more generally, as it reinforces concern for white victimization (Knowles et al., 2022; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). Together, the use of such deceptive strategies when discussing CRT would not only be compelling to audiences but would also be indicative of the underlying intent behind introducing CRT into political discourse – recoding the theoretical concept with nefarious meaning (Benson, 2022; Clark, 2024). The identification of

intentionally deceptive attributes that reinforce audiences’ “deep stories” – perceptions specific to the sociopolitical context – cannot be fully examined by computational means alone (Camargo & Simon, 2022). A critical lens to interpret computational findings helps recognize and identify the language capable of successfully recoding CRT in a manner that resonates with audiences’ imaginaries.

### ***A Critical Disinformation Approach***

Disinformation research that neglects the sociopolitical contexts in which disinformation spreads is built on the false assumptions that disinformation is inherently new, despite the long history of distorted media representations of African Americans (Dixon & Linz, 2000) and that America is just now experiencing a “posttrust era,” even though divergent perceptions have always existed among the electorate (Mejia et al., 2018). Disinformation does not exist in a vacuum; instead, it strategically incorporates narratives congruent with relevant historical, social, and political contexts in order to achieve ideological goals (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). While this study is situated within the U.S. political system, similar epistemic challenges are unfolding around the globe (Bagg, 2018). In India, disinformation aligned with Hindutva leverages historical Islamophobia and caste hierarchies to portray Muslims and Dalits as threats, reinforcing perspectives of Hindu nationalism (Dutta, 2024). Similarly, in Western European countries, far-right media networks utilize conspiracy theories claiming that white Europeans are being replaced by nonEuropean immigrants (Ekman, 2022) to foster anti-immigrant sentiment and mobilize protests against immigration (Klinger et al., 2023; Rone, 2022).

Their specific geo-political contexts aside, each of these narratives leverages falsehoods within the framework of relevant sociopolitical realities to influence and sustain social dynamics; thus, they are best understood through a critical disinformation approach. A critical disinformation approach situates analysis within the historical, societal, cultural, and political context in which disinformation spreads. It interrogates the meaning of language disinformation used to achieve political objectives, identifies the social hierarchies it exploits, considers who benefits from this exploitation, and examines how this process maintains existing power structures (Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Reddi et al., 2023).

Here, we use a critical disinformation approach to make sense of the key terms in emerging topics from partisan news headlines concerning CRT. This approach considers the historical, social, and political context of contemporary American politics to interrogate whether the emerging features function as a compelling form of deceit. This includes interrogating historical components, such as the propagation of historical disinformation narratives which followed previous disruptions to the racial status quo (see Nguyễn et al., 2023), and sociopolitical components, such as the incorporation of racial tropes (see Reddi et al. 2023). To analyze partisan headlines about CRT, we ask the following: *RQ1*: What topics did partisan news headlines discuss? *RQ2*: How were these topics discussed during early and peak moments of discourse? *RQ3*: Are there partisan differences in the prevalence of these topics? *RQ4*: How might these topics resonate with white Americans’ imaginaries to recode CRT?

## Methods

Our corpus consists of online news headlines published from January 1, 2016, to December 31, 2022 ( $N = 7320$ ). Headlines were collected using Media Cloud with a keyword search for “critical race theory.” Through analyzing news headlines, this study identifies key attributes prevalent in CRT headlines and examines whether these narratives encourage or evoke reflection upon entrenched imaginaries. Keywords included within headlines represent intentional editorial decisions designed to effectively influence audiences by leveraging cultural perspectives aligned with what audiences believe to be real (Ettema, 2005, p. 132). This is especially true within a hybrid media environment, where partisan sources compete for audience attention (Serazio, 2014). To attract audiences, disinformation in digital environments employs sensationalism and clickbait tactics (Mourão & Robertson, 2019), editorial strategies vital to gaining attention amidst competition for user engagement (Jung et al., 2022). The incorporation of certain words can activate white grievances, evoke emotions, or activate with audiences’ biases or salient identities, all of which contribute to audiences’ susceptibility to disinformation (Freelon et al., 2020; Schaewitz et al., 2020; Weeks, 2015). Previous research has utilized headlines in examining partisan news (see Brown & Mourão, 2022).

Hybrid media ecosystems have made way for audiences to reconceptualize news, developing news repertoires that intermingle traditional online news sources, with other information sources, such as blogs and digitally native news (Edgerly, 2015; Edgerly & Vraga, 2020). This is most represented among the political right, wherein they have successfully constructed interconnected alternative news sources (Heft et al., 2021), that includes mainstream, partisan sources like Fox News, as well as more far-right, hyper-conservative information sources (e.g., *Breitbart News*), all of which influence audiences (Shaughnessy et al., 2024). Consequently, 10 news sources were purposefully selected to exemplify audiences’ experiences within this hybrid media ecosystem, including popular sources of left- and right-leaning ideologies and various modes of information delivery (i.e., broadcast/print, digital native, and blog) (see Table A1).<sup>1</sup> Sources representative of liberal media included mainstream outlets with a center-to-left lean (*Washington Post*, CNN), and liberal news sources (*Daily Kos*, *HuffPost*, and *MSNBC*) (see Entman & Usher, 2018). Right-leaning media included the *New York Post*, *Daily Caller*, the *Epoch Times*, Fox News, and *Free Republic*.

## BERTTopic Modeling

This analysis employs Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) topic modeling. BERTTopic modeling is a neural topic modeling approach which utilizes clustering techniques and a class-based variation of term frequency-inverse document frequency (TF-IDF) for topic generation (i.e., c-TF-IDF) (Grootendorst, 2022, p. 2). BERTTopic proves useful in addressing our research questions for several reasons. First, BERTTopic modeling utilizes word embeddings, which creates topic representations from semantically relevant vector representations of the text, providing contextualized representations of key terms (Abuzayed & Al-Khalifa, 2021). Second, BERTTopic modeling can create a dynamic representation of the topic model – a model representing how the

important words within each topic change over time (Grootendorst, 2022). For this analysis, we created two BERTopic models from the corpus of partisan headlines: a global BERTopic model and a dynamic BERTopic model. The global BERTopic model is a static representation of the important terms (measured by c-TF-IDF). Each latent topic is represented by 10 key terms that indicate the *most* prominent semantic structures within the headlines. The dynamic model adds the dimension of time to the global BERTopic model, representing changes in the important terms in each topic between 2016 and 2022.

### **Interpretation of BERTopic Model**

BERTopic modeling provides metrics to assist in its interpretation: Emerging key terms are representative of the most prominent words co-occurring within each latent topic, and these terms require human interpretation (see Chong, 2023). BERTopic modeling procedures also assign each headline to one of the topics and provide a probability score for assigned headlines. These metrics guided the interpretation of the topics. Four authors, including the first author, independently reviewed each of the 29 topics of the global BERTopic model. Topic labels were created in consideration of the keywords and the

**Table 1.** Bertopic model results.

Topic	Terms	Label	n
0	white, racist, racism, black, people, americans, history	Racism	632
1	ban, teach, school, bill, public, schools, education	Critical Race Theory Ban	556
2	anticrt, school, teach, parent, ban, teacher, news	Anti-CRT	404
3	book, gender, library, child, school, transgender, lgbtq	Book Bans: Sexual Orientation + Gender	289
4	education, schools, kid, school, public, parent, indoctrination	Indoctrination	385
5	democrats, election, republicans, 2022, party, midterm, republican	2022 Midterm Elections	431
6	youngkin, glenn, mcauliffe, virginia, terry, governor, victory	Youngkin Election	244
7	virginia, governor, primary, gop, senate, candidate, election	Gubernatorial and Senate Elections	307
8	america, left, american, power, political, destroy, democracy	America and Democracy	513
9	biden, joe, president, plan, admin, administration, trump	Biden	294
10	desantis, florida, ron, act, stop, woke, gov	DeSantis Stop WOKE Act	249
11	jackson, brown, ketanji, court, supreme, hearing, confirmation	Justice Ketanji Jackson	181
12	white, racism, antiracist, student, antiracism, supremacy, privilege	Anti-Racism	379
13	garland, doj, ag, fbi, memo, merrick, parent	FBI	163
14	China, revolution, levin, cultural, chinese, communist, marxism	Communism	166
15	parent, video, fight, parents, father, black, school	Parents	238
16	board, county, loudoun, school, member, parent, meeting	Loudoun County School Board	280
17	military, milley, general, space, force, gen, woke	Military	232
18	woke, wokeness, medicine, corporate, wokism, culture, reveal	Woke	222
19	covid, covid19, vaccine, relief, pandemic, fund, mandate	Coronavirus	124
20	training, trump, federal, employee, order, diversity, racial	Diversity Training for Federal Employees	175
21	gop, republicans, big, tech, republican, lawmaker, culture	GOP	137
22	church, justice, christian, faith, evangelical, social, baptist	Religion	124
23	texas, abbott, gop, voting, bill, special, election	Texas Special Session	133
24	union, teachers, teacher, unions, ad, head, preferred	Teachers' Unions	127
25	domestic, letter, terrorism, national, boards, association, nsba	NSBA Letter	93
26	medical, health, care, report, top, racism, guide	Health Care	88
27	1619, project, hannahjones, nikole, history, unc, tenure	1619 Project	76
28	reid, joy, rufo, msnbc, chris, christopher, debate	MSNBC Debate	75

*Note.* Table reports seven terms per model. Full table available in Appendix C.

representative headlines. BERTopic modeling procedures are further outlined in Appendix B.

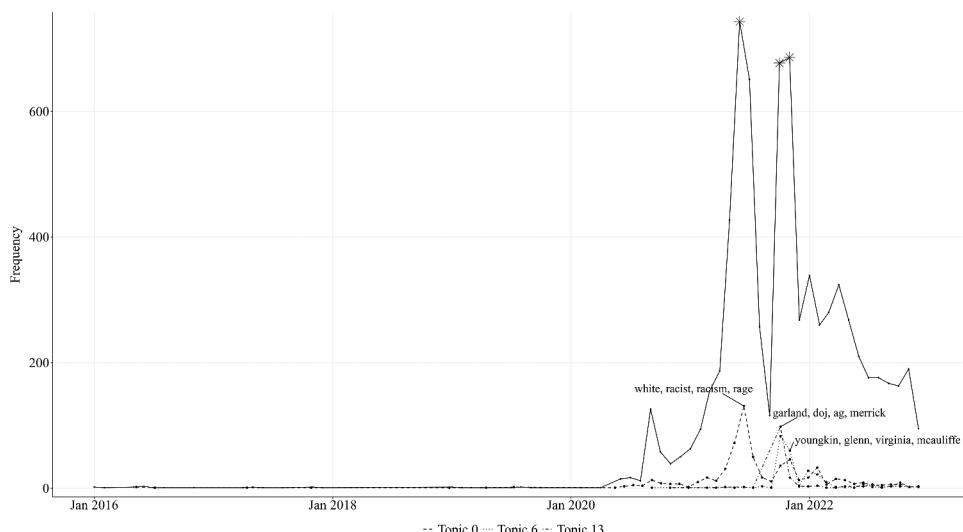
## Results

### What Topics Did Partisan News Headlines Discuss?

Table 1 presents the terms for each of the 29 topics, as well as topic frequency and a representative headline. Emerging topics included racism (T0), America and democracy (T8), anti-racism (T12), communism (T14), woke (T18), and religion (T22). Topics referencing education, schools, or parents included critical race theory ban (T1), anti-CRT (T2), book bans: sexual orientation + gender (T3), indoctrination (T4), FBI (T13), parents (T15), Loudoun County school board (T16), teachers' unions (T24), and NSBA letter (T25). Additional topics mentioned politics or politicians: 2022 midterm elections (T5), Younkin Election (T6), gubernatorial and senate elections (T7) Biden (T9), DeSantis' stop WOKE act (T10), and the GOP (T21), Texas Special Session (T23), as well as government or organizations: military (T17), woke (T18), coronavirus (T19), diversity training for federal employees (T20), health care (T26). Lastly, additional topics mentioned Black women: Justice Ketanji Jackson (T11), 1619 project and Nikole Hannah Jones (T27), and MSNBC's Joy Reid (T28).

### How Were These Topics Discussed During Early and Peak Moments of Discourse?

To examine dynamic changes in partisan discussions pertaining to CRT, we focus on the topic representations associated with the earliest headlines in the corpus, as well as topic representations when publication frequency peaked. Remaining dynamic changes in each topic are depicted in Appendix F. The earliest headlines were published in January 2016,



**Figure 1.** Frequency of partisan CRT News. *Note.* Dynamic topic models are based on time-bins.

“Oregon Community College Plans ‘Whiteness History Month’” (T12) and “Lifetime Appointment of a Liberal Judge” (T11). During this time, key terms in each topic reflected the headlines published at the time: T12: *community, Oregon, month*; Topic 11: *appointment, lifetime, judge*. Publication frequency peaked in June 2021 at 743, and again in October 2021 and November 2021 with 677 and 686, respectively (see Figure 1). In June 2021, the most prominent topic was T0 ( $n = 129$ ; 17.36%), represented by the terms *white, racist*, and *racism* (e.g., “The Racist Rhetoric of ‘Anti-Racism’ – Interview With Kevin Roberts on the Deception of CRT”). In October 2021, T13 was the most prevalent ( $n = 96$ ; 14.18%), with important terms including *garland, doj*, and *ag* (e.g., “Hawley tears into Garland for FBI crackdown on alleged harassment of school officials”). November 2021 was marked by the prominence of T6 ( $n = 79$ ; 11.52%), key terms including *youngkin, glenn*, and *virginia* (e.g., “Glenn Youngkin Vows to Ban Critical Race Theory ‘On Day One’ If Elected Governor of Virginia”).

### ***Are There Partisan Differences in the Prevalence of These Topics?***

Partisan differences were examined using a series of Poisson regressions (see Appendix E). The majority of topics were more prevalent among sources on the right, including racism (T0), America and democracy (T8), anti-racism (T12), communism (T14), woke (T18), and religion (T22); topics discussing education or parents (T1, T2, T3, T4, T13, T15, T16, T24, and T25), political topics (T5, T6, T7, T9, T10, T23), government or organizations (T17, T18, T19, T20, T26), and the 1619 project (T27). No topics were statistically more prevalent within left-leaning headlines.

### ***How Might Emerging Topics Resonate with White Americans’ Imaginaries to Recode CRT?***

Lastly, we use a critical lens to examine the terms incorporated in headlines concerning CRT. In consideration of our conceptualization of disinformation, we evaluate how the terms within the latent topics – especially when mentioned in conjunction with CRT – can deceptively recode its meaning, evoking extant schema about threats to racial identity. We interrogate whether the prominent terms co-occurring in the semantic structures detected through topic modeling might resonate with audiences, specifically in their potential to appeal to or reinforce white audiences’ imaginaries concerning white racial consciousness and racial resentment, ultimately recoding CRT. When reviewing these terms, we consider historical, social, and political contexts to evaluate the deceptive potential of the prominent terms used in partisan headlines. Additionally, we focus on topics where we identified partisan differences in topic prevalence, as the statistically higher presence of emerging topics further suggests deceptive intent via high volume production of such content for the hybrid, high-choice news ecosystem (see Shultziner & Stukalin, 2021). We discuss topics frequent among right-leaning headlines, as there were no topics more prevalent in left-leaning headlines.

T0 and T12 discussed CRT with the terms *white, racist, racism*, and *anti-racism*. The incorporation of the terms *racist, racism*, and *white* while simultaneously discussing CRT may prove especially impactful in resonating with white audiences’ feelings of white racial consciousness and racial resentment. White Americans increasingly report

a fear of anti-white discrimination, feelings particularly accompanied with perceptions of status threat, a belief that changing sociopolitical dynamics would afford African Americans or other minoritized groups an advantage at the expense of white Americans (Isom et al., 2021; Knowles et al., 2022). These perceptions also include the belief in a “zero-sum” game, where efforts to reduce anti-Black racism, such as through anti-racism policies, are believed to result in increased discrimination against whites (Rasmussen et al., 2022) or undeserved benefits for African Americans (Davis & Wilson, 2022; Hochschild, 2016). Consequently, the prominent co-occurrence of the words *white*, *racist*, and *racism* in T0 when discussing CRT could deceive by reinforcing the perspective that white people are experiencing racism or racist ideologies due to CRT. Moreover, the use of terms like *white*, *racism*, *antiracist*, *supremacy*, and *privilege* in T12 may not only signal that anti-racism is associated with racism toward white people but also evoke sentiments – through a focus on *white privilege* and *white supremacy*—that deny the existence of white privilege (St Louis, 2021).

Emerging topics prevalent on the right also incorporated implicit terms for identity that may resonate with prevalent imaginaries, particularly the prominent use of the words *american*, *democracy*, *hate*, *destroy*, *communist*, *marxist*, and *revolution* in T8 and T14. White Americans’ “deep stories” reflect their longing for a bygone America—one with a racial hierarchy where whiteness reigned. Through the use of these terms, CRT can become a symbol of the perceived loss of this ideal America, and fuel feelings of betrayal and anger at becoming “strangers” in their own country (Hochschild, 2016). Headlines mentioned CRT with verbiage concerning the destruction or hate of America—*american*, *hate*, *destroy*, *democracy*—language which may resonate with these shared imaginaries, substantiating resonance theory about the use of rhetorical strategies and recall as essential tools for effective media messaging (Schudson, 1989; McDonnell et al., 2017). Moreover, the use of the terms *communist*, *marxist*, and *revolution* in T14 harkens to the Red Scare language of the Civil Rights movement, which discredited it as a “communist conspiracy” to muster opposition to integration (Woods, 2003). As such, this language may similarly resonate with concerns regarding changing American ideals, ultimately connecting CRT to these sentiments among affected audiences, and giving those audiences a common adversary.

T22 mentioned *church*, *christian*, *faith*, and *social justice* in conjunction with CRT. Research suggests that these terms might resonate with white Americans’ imaginaries, as they can serve as anti-Black, religious dog whistles: racially *and* religiously coded language. Similar to white Americans more broadly, white Christians who endorse Christian nationalism maintain shared imaginaries of anti-Christian discrimination and a desire to preserve social hierarchies (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). As such, mentions of religious terms in conjunction with CRT may resonate with white Christian audiences maintaining these perspectives. The prominence of religious terms *church*, *christian*, *faith*, *evangelical*, and *social justice* underscores its persuasive capability. Research demonstrates that religious dog whistles coalesce social justice with atheism and “radical” minority politics, both viewed as a threat to white conservative values and capable of stoking racial resentment (Perry, 2023, p. 58). For instance, religious narratives of the past, such as those used by evangelical leaders like Billy Graham who amalgamated Christianity, Americanism, and anti-communism, depict Civil Rights protests and legislation as communist and thus antithetical to American Christian values (Stephens, 2016).

Several topics mentioned CRT in the context of education and schools (e.g., T3, T4), as well as parents (e.g., T2, T15, T16). Prominent terms within these topics included *ban*, *teach*, *school*, *anticrt*, *book*, *gender*, *education*, *parents*, and *indoctrination*. While these terms reference education, a key discussion point for CRT (Johnson et al., 2022), they may also resonate with white Americans' shared imaginaries. First, T3 mentioned *gender*, *transgender*, and *lgbtq*—groups and perspectives viewed with growing concern among white conservatives (Bartels, 2018). Specifically, white Americans include gay individuals in their "deep stories" of "line cutters" benefiting from privileges granted by liberal policies and contributing to what they recognize as a decline in America's morality (Hochschild, 2016). Second, white Americans who endorse Christian nationalist perspectives believe that public school education should promote patriotism (Perry, 2023).

Considering the historical context of white parents and education, these terms, while ostensibly neutral or colorblind, can evoke imaginaries around white identity. Historically, parents' rights have signified *white* parental rights (Baldwin Clark, 2023, p. 218). The racialization of parents' rights in education has roots in political responses to *Brown v. Board of Education*, with the Supreme Court decision being framed as an "unconstitutional" deprivation of parents' rights to direct the lives and education of their children (Aucoin, 1996). Furthermore, the concept of parents' rights connects to narratives used to oppose busing (Delmont, 2016). Mentions of *parents* alongside terms that could activate these perspectives (e.g., *transgender*, *indoctrination*) in the context of CRT may sway white Americans' perspectives, particularly suggesting that CRT could impede parents' desires for their children's education.

This term *woke* was prominent in T10, T17, and T18, discussed in reference to the *military*, *medicine*, and *corporations*. The phrase "stay woke," originated in Black culture to encourage Black Americans to remain conscious of racism. However, this Black-centered rallying cry has been recoded by conservative media for the purposes of discrediting the reality of racism in American society (Clark, 2024). The term now serves as a political pejorative capable of evoking anti-woke attitudes which view "woke ideology" or "woke mobs" as problematic, overly engaging in political correctness via cancel culture (Cammaerts, 2022). Through mentioning CRT with *woke*, narratives can resonate with these negative perceptions and evoke similar disdain for CRT.

## Discussion

We examined partisan headlines about CRT to examine its capacity to successfully recode the meaning of CRT among white audiences. We find that partisan news articles concerning CRT were most prevalent among the right, incorporating terms such as *white*, *racist*, *indoctrination*, *woke*, *communist*, and *christian*. Considering the historical, social, and political relevance of these words, we argue that their use as culturally resonant messages are capable of evoking white Americans' shared imaginaries, particularly feelings of white racial consciousness and racial resentment. Below, we outline how white identity and racial resentment are used as tools for intentional deception in disinformation, highlighting the need for critical disinformation approaches to provide an epistemological framework for its recognition. Additionally, we define and discuss identity-based disinformation, and its potential societal effects.

### **Rooted in White Identity Politics**

This study suggests that conservative media engaged in intentional deceptive practices capable of recoding the meaning of CRT among audiences. Headlines from predominantly conservative sources weaved in terms capable of resonating with audiences' racial perspectives (Cabañas, 2020; see Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Partisan headlines discussed CRT with prominently co-occurring terms like *white* and *racist* or *schools* and *indoctrination*, language capable of resonating with white Americans' feelings of misrecognition and affirming their feelings of loss (Hochschild, 2016; Wells & Friedland, 2023) or fear of discrimination (Isom et al., 2021). The strategic nature of this recoding is further underscored by the volume bias exhibited in the asymmetric production of CRT news (see Shultziner & Stukalin, 2021)—82.24% of headlines in our corpus originated from sources on the right.

In a hybrid media ecosystem, where audiences can opt into congenial media (Wojcieszak, 2019) and actors from both traditional and new media platforms contribute to the spread of certain narratives (Chadwick, 2011; Hau et al., 2024), deceptive strategies are the key to garnering interactions (Zhang et al., 2018) and activating desired emotional responses among target audiences (Serazio, 2014). Here, right-leaning media disseminated disinformation that catered to both hybrid media ecosystems and the audiences' perspectives within them by using the language of white Americans' entrenched imaginaries (Lelo, 2024; Serazio, 2014).

This analysis stresses the need for critical approaches that consider the historical and sociopolitical aspects of society (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Disinformation has real-world implications, with its ability to resonate with the shared imaginaries of audiences epitomizing its impact. Language reinforcing white racial consciousness or racial resentment can foster negative opinions of diversity efforts, as it supports resentful sentiments that undeserving African Americans receive special privileges (Davis & Wilson, 2021). Moreover, such language may also invigorate attitudes of cultural conservatism, a perspective which prioritizes "cultural" issues, including concern for anti-white discrimination, respect for the American flag, and opposition to LGBTQ individuals (Bartels, 2018). Despite this, the field of political communication lacks research centering race (Freelon et al., 2023) and historical contexts (Kreiss et al., 2024), a shortcoming even more pronounced in disinformation studies (Coles & Lane, 2023).

Centering historical contexts of identity, racial hierarchies, and power structures in political communication scholarship is integral, as identity is especially mobilizing and renders audiences susceptible to disinformation (Cabañas, 2020; see; Kreiss et al., 2024). Critical evaluations of political narratives, such as the consideration of "deep stories," offer a mechanism for interrogating how racial hierarchies shape disinformation, not only impacting the narratives that are strategically incorporated but also determining who ultimately benefits (Kreiss et al., 2017; Kuo & Marwick, 2021). With a critical approach, we were able to identify how certain terms might resonate with audiences' white identity, even when ostensibly colorblind, such as mentions of parental rights or religion. A critical lens ultimately provides contextual understanding of the racial history that undergirds disinformation, providing insight into its true scope and how it can reify existing power structures (Kuo & Marwick, 2021).

### ***Role of White Racial Consciousness and Racial Resentment***

These findings pave the way for comprehending the role of partisan disinformation in influencing white racial consciousness and racial resentment. Recoding CRT with terms like *racism* may generate perpetual feelings of anger or anxiety among white Americans concerning their group's status (Jardina, 2019). Furthermore, recoding CRT with the use of terms like *woke* and *antiracism* may delegitimize the existence of racism, fueling racial resentment (Henry & Sears, 2002). Feelings of racial resentment are especially deleterious, as feelings that Black Americans receive undue privileges are often used to justify racial backlash as a legitimate or even necessary patriotic fight (Davis & Wilson, 2021, 2023). To truly interrogate the strategic use of disinformation to recode CRT, future work should empirically investigate whether exposure fosters white racial consciousness or racial resentment and examine whether these go on to impact perceptions of CRT and diversity, more generally.

Emerging evidence suggests that the strategic recoding of CRT in partisan disinformation has impacted white Americans' perspectives. Carbone et al. (2024) found that white Republicans with greater racial resentment reported opposition when presented with a message mentioning CRT instruction. Research also finds that opposition to CRT is due to inaccurate perceptions of its true meaning: white Americans opposed to CRT described it as divisive, judgmental, harmful, and racist to white people (Richmond et al., 2024, p. 11) – perspectives consistent with the findings outlined in this manuscript.

### ***Identity-Based Disinformation***

Disinformation leveraging audiences' shared imaginaries represents identity-based disinformation. We define identity-based disinformation as disinformation that weaponizes shared imaginaries, "deep stories" about a groups' relative position in society to deceptively frame policies, entities, concepts, or organizations associated with equity or progress as inherently threatening to the dominant group's prerogatives. Through this conceptualization, we recognize that the politicization of identity is not unique to the United States (Kreiss et al., 2024). When the invisibility of whiteness is challenged in any context, it can motivate efforts – such as flooding media ecosystems with disinformation – to undermine perceived disruptive forces and restore or maintain the dominant group's privileged position (St Louis, 2021).

Identifying identity-based disinformation requires the recognition of societal-level hierarchical structures and identities through which power is distributed (see Kreiss et al., 2024; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; Reddi et al., 2023). These factors will determine the identity-based sentiments, and the disinformation campaigns will strategize to appeal to the groups that will ultimately benefit and those that will be disadvantaged (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). By resonating with dominant group sentiments, identity-based disinformation motivates identity-protective political decisions aimed at restoring the group's privileged status by undermining, hindering, or retaliating against equity efforts. As such, identity-based disinformation could lead to significant reversals in racial or

societal progress toward equity, further marginalizing nondominant groups and upholding existing societal structures.

In the case of the United States, identity-based disinformation would incorporate narratives capable of cultivating a psychological mind-set wherein white Americans experience anxiety concerning their group's status (Isom et al., 2021) or feel resentment regarding "undeserved" privileges African Americans receive (see Henry & Sears, 2002). CRT exemplifies this. By strategically using terms capable of resonating with white audiences' "deep stories" to recode CRT, disinformation can suppress support or, in some cases, foster outright visceral, anti-Black responses to both CRT and diversity (Richmond et al., 2024). This is achieved by evoking racial resentment, which motivates a desire for retribution against African Americans and other minoritized groups for "unearned" privileges (Davis & Wilson, 2021), or affirming white racial consciousness, which drives support authoritarian policies (Jardina & Mickey, 2022).

## Conclusion

Disinformation recoding CRT is part of a larger phenomenon of widespread opposition to diversity (Quilantan, 2023). Race-based policies in education, employment, and beyond play a pivotal role in achieving the necessary level of racial reconciliation required to rectify America's racial hierarchies. Ironically, by recoding CRT, the theory that helps understand these impacts, disinformation contributes to the dismantling of systems that ensure equal treatment for African Americans. The repercussions of this are already evident by increasing legislation regulating the instruction of race in K-12 classrooms, despite no evidence of its instruction in school (Johnson et al., 2022), the banning of books containing themes related to race and racism, and legislation dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion programs (Quilantan, 2023).

Opposition to CRT may stem from the prevalence of racial progress narratives, which suggests that society has already achieved or is inevitably progressing toward racial equality (Kraus et al., 2022). These narratives hinder diversity efforts because, in the absence of perceived inequality, such policies are widely viewed as unnecessary (Kraus et al., 2022). However, increasing political attention to CRT has coincided with a rise in opposition to and reversals of equity initiatives, culminating in the Supreme Court's repeal of affirmative action and legislation banning DEI programs. Examining CRT narratives provides a lens to understand how the recoding of CRT in partisan news contributed to these outcomes. However, CRT is merely an example of a broader political phenomenon in which anything counter to the status quo is often delegitimized and discredited (see Smith & Haenschen, 2024). CRT provided a convenient shortcut for political weaponization (Benson, 2022), but future work should examine other mechanisms within the broader phenomenon of identity-based disinformation.

## Note

1. CNN, Fox News, the *New York Post*, and the *Washington Post* are among the top 20 visited English-language news websites (Watson, 2024). Additionally, Fox News, *Epoch Times*, and the *Daily Caller* are among the most popular conservative and far-right websites (Statista Research Department, 2023).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Open scholarship



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