

## **Consuming antinatalism in social media: A discourse historical analytic approach**

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### **Abstract**

Antinatalism, a relatively recent moral philosophical perspective and ideology that avows ‘it is better not to have ever existed’, has spawned a new social movement with an active presence in social media. This study draws on the discourse historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis for offering a firm understanding as to how the collective identity of the Facebook antinatalist NSM is formed. The findings from the analysis of the situated interaction among the NSM’s members demonstrate that collective identity is far from a knitty-gritty concept, but a dynamic schema that includes a plethora of micro-interactions. Individuals constantly negotiate its meaning in context, as they seek to streamline the antinatalist system of ideas with their lifeworld through a web of interlocking schemata, discursive and rhetorical strategies.

**KEYWORDS:** antinatalism, new social movements, ideology, netnography, critical discourse analysis.

## **Introduction**

The entrenchment of social media as a dominant mode of networking and as a participatory democracy platform has been coupled with the phenomenal emergence of new social movements (henceforth NSMs) and NGOs (Bob, 2005). NSMs in a Web 2.0 environment vary considerably as regards their ideological bend, as well as the extent to which ideology is market-based or rooted in more traditional political struggles. For example, some NSMs are more lifestyle oriented (Pichardo, 1997; e.g. the slow food movement), whereas other movements are tinged with short-lived political advocacy overtones (e.g. the San Francisco Bart Riot, Occupy Wall Street, anti-corruption; cf. Uitermark & Nicholls, 2012; Budi Sulistyo & Azmawati 2016).

NSMs are distinguished from their traditional counterparts primarily by dint of their post-political and cultural expressive orientation (Salman & Assies, 2010). In a web 2.0 environment NSMs are characterized by a proclivity for destabilizing existing organizational hierarchies, the effacement of boundaries between the public and the private domains (Berntzen, Rohde-Johannessen & Godbolt, 2014), their speed-to-market and short life-span, the rapid enlargement of networks, and real-time feedback. Additionally, phenomena such as clicktivism or the ability to become a movement's follower simply by clicking on a 'like' button have enabled a wholly new mode of social interaction.

Within this fast-moving context, ideologies as systems of ideas, beliefs, and social representations have been molded and propagated in an equally speedy manner. Within a few hours as of an initial post, an entire political epidemic may have erupted. Traditional ideologies, although not abandoned altogether, have been progressively replaced by more ephemeral, life-style oriented NSM's and market-based ideologies (Kozinets, 1997; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998, 2004; Benmecheddal & Özçaglar-Toulouse, 2015; Rosenthal & Cardoso, 2016) that resonate more with cultural interests, rather than with political advocacy.

The cultural turn in theorizing NSMs that took place in the 90's, especially in sociological circles (see Jasper, 2010), resulted in the consolidation of the relevant scholarship in terms of conceptualization and empirical research.

Moreover, this cultural terrain is marked by social media enabled NSMs whose members negotiate the meaning of ideologies in situated interaction as an ongoing social text. The offered analysis focuses on how the collective identity of the Facebook antinatalist NSM emerges through an ongoing negotiation of the meaning of this ideology in members' online interaction. The NSM's members display a penchant for negotiating the philosophical premises of Benatar's (2015) antinatalism manifesto, for contesting and appropriating them, but also for enriching them multimodally: "The movement's programme may appear quite specific; yet, its component items are, like symbols themselves, amenable to idiosyncratic interpretation by the members in the light of their own circumstances and experiences" (Cohen, 1985, 108).

In the light of the above considerations, this paper is structured as follows: Initially, a literature review of social movements' salient facets is undertaken by recourse to sociological, anthropological, cultural studies perspectives in both physical and Web 2.0 (social media) environments, in order to identify dominant and emergent modes of theorizing their construal as structure and process. In this context, the mode of formation of the antinatalist NSM's collective identity is posited as master frame for this study. Then, the main philosophical positions of antinatalism are displayed based on Benatar's (2012, 2015) manifesto. This is followed by a discussion of the highly contested meaning of ideology in order to clarify an allegedly foggy conceptual landscape. Pursuant to the completion of the literature review, the research questions that guide the empirical part of this study are identified. These are followed by an outline of the adopted netnographic methodological framework, as well as the DHA critical discourse analytic route. Then, the main findings

from the analysis of the antinatalist NSM's data are discussed in line with the posited research questions. The paper wraps up by highlighting the implications of this study for research in the consumption of ideologies.

### **NSMs in a Web 2.0 environment**

The advent of NSMs was coupled with the shift from industrialization towards post-industrialization, the emergence of the information society and globalization-from-below. These macro-societal trends conditioned the emergence and consolidation of social media as the dominant platform for NSMs' organization and propagation. The qualifying macro-societal dimension that accelerated the increasingly important role performed by social media in setting up NSMs and propagating their cause rests with the networking paradigm in social organization. Within this overarching paradigm NSMs have been progressively transformed into so-called network movements (Berntzen, Rohde-Johannessen & Godbolt, 2014) whose members engage in connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

In addition to the structural traits of NSMs that were identified in the introduction, the following constitute major differences between Web 2.0 NSM communications and their traditional counterpart: (i) independence from physical spatiotemporal constraints: in a social media environment a message has no definite temporal presence: it may be retweeted indefinitely or reposted in Facebook, it may be commented on indefinitely in multiple asynchronous settings (Pink *et al.* 2016), thus in principle its life-span is infinite (Van Dijk, 1997; Shumar & Renninger, 2004) (ii) it is not constrained by a spatial 'here': the same message may be seeded anywhere else in hyperspace at any time (iii) the interaction among group members is more direct and more extensive as everyone is exposed to everyone else's posts in real time (iv) the organizational structure is flat, rather than resting on a 'leader' to guide the rest of the group's members. Leaders and followers constitute roles that are

performed interchangeably by members who are in principle equal (v) membership even in closed groups (e.g. in Facebook) is not accompanied by stringent screening criteria while members may opt out of a group at a simple click without being obliged to leave feedback as to why they made the decision to leave. Hence, continuity, as stipulated by Van Dijk (1998), is no longer a major conditional for participating in a social group in a Web 2.0 environment.

NSMs have been defined as informal or more formalized groups of people or small-scale organizations aimed at social change. Social movements construe and embody shared values, styles, conduct, vocabularies, and/or other forms of group definition (Salman & Assies, 2010). Defining characteristics of NSMs versus their industrial era predecessors, according to Salman & Assies (2010), consist of a post-political and post-material orientation in a civil society terrain where the main adversary as target of collective action is not primarily the state, but other social movements in a generalized state of war for social representations' mindshare. This shift in the socio-political orientation of NSMs has been coupled with a shift in theorizing the participating subjects from subscribers to sedimented left/right ideologies to loci of multiple affiliations (Schwarzmantel, 1998). In this context, the demarcation of a collective cultural identity constitutes an overarching objective.

The cultural turn in social movements' theorizing that took place in the 90s (Jasper, 2010) and that still constitutes the dominant perspective, then, informs the overview of NSMs that is undertaken in this section. From a cultural point of view, NSMs are still concerned with forging solidarity among members, the creation of a collective identity and the engagement in game-changing activism. However, NSMs are more lifestyle oriented, "encompassing people's everyday practices, tastes, consumption habits, leisure activities, modes of speech and dress" (Haenfler, Johnson & Jones, 2012, 2; also see Närvänen *et al.* 2013) while reflecting and being edified on lifestyle ideologies such as veganism, slow-food, green living. Although such lifestyle oriented NSMs do aim at challenging dominant cultural

values and ideologies, usually they do not feature aspects that are definitive of political struggles, such as protests and aggressive forms of political activism.

The employment of frame analysis (influenced by Goffman's frame theory) has been instrumental in charting the structural and operational facets of NSMs. Although for some scholars (Jasper, 2010) frame analysis has been abandoned as a dominant way of theorizing or has been substituted by related constructs of identity and culture (Johnston & Oliver, 2000; Roggeband & Klandermans, 2010), it is still used as analytical device in applied studies pertaining to the formation, objectives and workings of NSMs (Funk-Unrau, 2005). Frame analysis in NSMs shares the micro-sociological orientation of its originator while focusing on the spoken and written texts of social movement participants, and the mental schemata by which experience is interpreted (Johnston, 1995). It is both multimodally oriented and geared towards an understanding of how ideology is produced as social text through the ongoing interactions among NSMs' members, as well as at the interface between an NSM and prospective clients (or crowdsourcing in a Web 2.0 context). "The microanalysis of discourse employs a wide variety of interactional, biographical, and behavioral data to verify and broaden interpretations of text" (Johnston, 1995, 219) while searching for implicit meanings. The micro-discursive orientation of frame analysis in interpreting NSMs' ideological production coheres neatly with the critical discourse analytic (Van Dijk, 1998; Wodak, 2001) route that is adopted here with regard to the focal Facebook antinatalist group's corpus (see Methodology section).

Oliver & Johnston (2010) contend that bringing cognitive schemata and their subordinate representations to the limelight of attention constitutes a key task of frame analysis. Most importantly, they caution against conflating frames either with schemata or with ideologies. A telling example they employ in order to highlight that the same frame may be related to diametrically opposed ideologies concerns a legal case of abortion where

the contestants consisted of religious organizations, on the one hand, and a cohort of professional and secular organizations on the other. Whereas both groups subscribed to framing the issue as a church-state rivalry, each group endorsed a diametrically opposed ideology, namely the church supporting an anti-abortion (or pro-life) line, whereas the state a pro-abortion (or pro-choice) one.

The assumption of a collective identity by the members of a NSM through shared moral values and emotions has been a customary framing in the extant literature. Collective identity constitutes the master frame (Mc Adam, 1994) in this study. According to Polletta & Jasper (2001) collective identities are expressed in cultural materials, such as names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals. These types are responsible for transforming individual meanings into a collective or social identity (Jenkins, 2008) by means of what Lemke (2001) eloquently termed ‘traversals’. This term designates the temporal-experiential linkages of meaningful elements that cross genre boundaries and create an ephemeral or idiosyncratic meaning for its human participants. Through traversals, NSM members individuate the meaning of an ideology and express it in idiosyncratic ways. “Meanings do not simply ‘circulate’ unchanged between texts; movement of meanings involves both continuity and change” (Fairclough, 2006, 23). In our case, the antinatalist Facebook group members express consistently their appropriated meaning of the ideology through lexical means in their posts and comments, inasmuch as through poems, literary narratives, videos. These intertextual excursions constitute ways whereby the consumers of ideologies traverse boundaries and genres. Cultural artefacts, stories, symbols (Van Dijk, 1998) constitute salient structural components of a NSM culture.

Complementary to structural aspects, the processes whereby an NSM’s collective identity is formed are of equal gravitas. These processes, then, as discourse strategies (Van Dijk, 1998; Wodak, 2001; Reisigl, 2018) adopted by the interacting members of the

scrutinized Facebook antinatalist group, constitute the focal point of the empirical part of this paper.

The Web 2.0 environment is uniquely amenable to the analysis of the social interaction among group members as a constantly woven social text, thus affording an understanding of “members’ engagement and relationship dynamics within consumer communities” (Alon & Brunel, 2007, 372). Most importantly, such analyses offer an evolutionary perspective on the formation of collective identity as an ongoing narrative or a hypertext, that is “a document edited continuously with others in collaboration” (Dalsgaard, 2016, 106) that reflects a “dynamically evolving movement culture” (McAdam, 1994, 46; also see Hunt, Benford & Snow, 1994). Thus, we are capable for the first time in the annals of social movements to examine not simply ideological content and cultural paraphernalia, but fundamental aspects of social interaction and discursive pragmatics in a real-life setting.

The final aspect of a NSM’s collective identity formation of focal interest for this study concerns its theoretical underpinning or its ideology. In the context of a constantly evolving social text that is brought about through the social interaction of the Facebook group’s members, we are concerned with ideological formation in action. However, especially in this context, we are also concerned with gauging how the philosophical premises of the antinatalism manifesto are transformed into cognitive schemata, that is abstract ideas as part of the antinatalism ideology. Understanding the relationship between cognitive schemata as abstract representational layers consisting of various individual representations (or ideological claims) and solidarity is of paramount importance. Although this is particularly prevalent in the case of social movements that do not draw on a specific theory, but on fuzzy premises as abstract schemata (e.g. the 60s peace movement), it is also a defining characteristic of the antinatalist NSM that rests in principle on Benatar’s (2015) philosophical treatise. Since ideology constitutes a massive and multifariously researched

topic, it is discussed in a bespoke section soon after displaying the philosophical tenets of antinatalism.

### **The main philosophical positions of antinatalism**

The principal objectives of this section consist in outlining the main philosophical positions of antinatalism as laid out in Benatar’s (2015) moral philosophical treatise that constitutes the NSM’s ideological manifesto and in briefly addressing their argumentative structure from a critical point of view.

The overarching moral philosophical tenet that permeates Benatar’s antinatalist perspective is that it is preferable not to have been born or that coming into existence is always a harm. The ramifications of this standpoint obviously spread towards multiple theoretical and practical dimensions. The most important ramifications that are scrutinized in greater detail by Benatar may be summarized in ten philosophical positions as per Table 1.

**Table 1. The main arguments of antinatalism (based on Benatar, 2015)**

<b>Argument</b>	<b>Formulation</b>
<b>1</b>	It is better not to have ever existed. Coming into existence is <i>always</i> a harm OR not coming into existence is always an advantage
<b>2</b>	Quality of life (general): even the best lives are not only much worse than people think but also very bad.
<b>3</b>	Quality of life (hedonistic view): a life goes well or badly depending on the extent to which it is characterized by positive or negative mental states—pleasure and pain.
<b>4</b>	Quality of life (desire-fulfilment view): There is a difference between fulfilling a desire and holding a mind-state about its positive fulfillment.

<b>5</b>	Quality of life (objective list view): the quality of a life is determined by the extent to which it is characterized by certain objective goods and bads.
<b>6</b>	Suffering is one of the costs of procreation.
<b>7</b>	It is preferable not to be born than to be born with disabilities
<b>8</b>	'Pro-death' view of abortion: Since coming into existence is always a harm, it would be better if we aborted fetuses in the earlier stages
<b>9</b>	The human population should be zero
<b>10</b>	Human extinction will not be regretted

In principle, I am refraining from approaching these positions critically, as in the broader context of the undertaken exploratory the main concern is to show how the philosophical text is transformed into an ideology and how the ideology sustains the collective identity of the antinatalist NSM. However, it merits stressing even in passing that Benatar's arguments that have been repeatedly exposed to relentless criticisms (see Heyd, 1983; McDermott, 2001; Patterson, 2003; Bradley, 2010; Smuts, 2013; Coates, 2014), are rooted in probabilistic reasoning, without any actual backing of the rhetorico-philosophical claims by factual data that might enhance their cogency. In instances where such data are presented (e.g. Benatar, 2015, 90), their interpretation is not enacted in context, but as raw data that can hardly be said to be suggestive by themselves (akin to the use of decontextualized market figures often used in public corporate financial reports).

Benatar often draws absurd generalizations from exceptional cases, while being constantly inclined to argue that even in cases marked by minimal suffering, the permeating argument that it is better not to have ever existed holds. In short, he constantly tends to make normative claims based on exceptions or to underplay the probative weight of an exception as such while emphasizing the contrary. In fact, the foundational premise that sets the canon for

antinatalism ('it is better not to have ever existed') is evoked regularly, albeit in a viciously circular manner, as key argument for the substantiation of the major premises of the various positions that are formulated throughout the work. It is worth noting that Benatar's (2015) foundational major premise is incumbent on the assumption that life is equal to suffering. However, no definition of suffering is provided to begin with. Suffering is employed as some sort of primordial state-of-Being that may be intuitively resonant with a theological discourse about the fall of Man due to transgressing divine orders. In order to understand how this assumption functions as a textual presupposition, we must examine whether the argument from suffering holds in concrete instances. Otherwise, suffering amounts merely to a metanarrative invention that bears little relevance to life, and hence its probative weight as conditioning assumption is slim.

A pivotal task of critical discourse analysis, and especially the discourse historical branch that is evoked in this study (see Methodology section for greater details), is to point out that these assumptions or rhetorical topoi constitute textual presuppositions whose givenness or self-evidence may be contested and negated. However, it should be cautioned that contestation never takes place by a *reductio* to a locus of absolute truth, but by recourse to 'different' sets of background assumptions that may as well be contested in turn: "There is no such thing as presuppositionless thought, and to this extent all of our thinking might be said to be ideological" (Eagleton, 1991, 3-4). This is even more so in the case of moral issues where fundamental premises rest with axiomatized empirical assertions, rather than with geometrical axioms.

Such unqualified claims rest on hazy common places in a *pars pro toto* fashion or even on invented common places that befit the argumentative occasion without any allusion to the moral and interpretive communities within whose contours they might be considered as being legitimate. Such spurious synecdochical correlations between the empirical ground of

premises and the extrapolation of canonical generalizations consist in catapulting individual and isolated examples to exemplars (*argumentum ad exemplum*). Most remarkably, Benatar (2015, 121) raises the self-defeating claim that he includes his own life in those lives that should not have started, simply by following sophistically the implications of the philosophy's foundational premise.

The above are not intended as criticisms against Benatar's arguments as such, but as a critically minded abridgement between the argumentative robustness of a philosophical manifesto and its endorsement as ideology by an NSM. They aim to highlight that although a set of claims are in principle highly refutable, nevertheless they attain to furnish an ideological platform for affirmative action. The refutable is transformed into positively actionable by the members of a NSM who espouse the perspective's arguments as ideas, that is as decontextualized schemata and as beliefs whose empirical articulation ultimately forms a collective identity. It should be noted in passing that Benatar (2015, 84) explicitly recognizes to be occasionally falling prey to decontextualization.

Moreover, the antinatalist community per se is more akin to an affective and imaginary (Anderson 1991) one. Philosophical arguments, once lifted from their initial argumentative contours, are transformed into emotionally laden ideas that resonate positively within abstract schemata. Then, they become legitimated through a process of secondary elaboration by recourse to the phenomenological reality of members' individual lifeworlds. Thus, the culturological rationale whereby the ideas of an ideology are legitimated differs markedly from the philosophical and the rhetorical principles of argumentation and fallacious reasoning that spawned the ideas in the first place. Ultimately, the objective of cultural change that inheres in the NSM's mission is the outcome of a re-imagining of the meaning of abstract and fuzzy (Van Dijk, 1998) ideas that sustain the collective identity of a NSM as imaginary community through effervescence. The implicit criteria whereupon this re-

imagining is enacted by the members of the antinatalist affective/imaginary community incite us to address how Benatar's moral philosophical system is transformed into an ideological discourse. This task is undertaken in the following section.

### **How the moral philosophical perspective of antinatalism is transformed into a NSM ideology**

A bewildering variety of definitions for ideology have been offered in the extant literature. Eagleton (1991, 1-2) summarizes this definitional spectrum as follows:

- (a)* the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life;
- (b)* a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class;
- (c)* ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;
- (d)* false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;
- (e)* systematically distorted communication;
- (f)* that which offers a position for a subject;
- (g)* forms of thought motivated by social interests;
- (h)* identity thinking;
- (i)* socially necessary illusion;
- (j)* the conjuncture of discourse and power;
- (k)* the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;
- (l)* action-oriented sets of beliefs;
- (m)* the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality;
- (n)* semiotic closure;
- (o)* the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure;
- (p)* the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality."

Potentially all of the above or at least some facets may be integrated in a synthetic definition of ideology. Eagleton's (1991, 4) pragmatic approach, at least to my understanding, effectively accommodates ideology's most fundamental functions: "On the one hand, ideologies are passionate, rhetorical, impelled by some benighted pseudo-religious faith [...] on the other hand, they are arid conceptual systems which seek to reconstruct society from the ground up in accordance with some bloodless blueprint." Eagleton's further argumentation with regard to the role performed by ideologies in legitimating power relations and in obfuscating the unequal distribution of power directs our attention towards the rhetorical tools whereby they are construed. As remarked by Wodak (2006, 9-10), "ideologies are defined as perceptions and opinions about the social and political realities of societies, which aim at truths and generalizations, although they might also contain untruths, half truths or unfinished systems of thoughts and beliefs."

As against philosophical systems that are premised on syllogisms and on argumentative rationales, ideologies constitute systems of ideas that hang together by dint of practical and moral reason while resting on belief and contingent habituation into aspects-of-seeing. "To study ideology is to focus on systems of ideas which couple understandings of how the world works with ethical, moral, and normative principles that guide personal and collective action" (Johnston & Oliver, 2000, 7). In the case of antinatalism we are not confronted simply with an ideology as a system of ideas, but with a philosophically formulated manifesto that gave rise to a NSM. Ideology constitutes here the third term between a philosophical system and its rendition into a system of ideas that are consumed as abstract schemata (Van Dijk, 1998, 56-58). This system of ideas as elliptical syllogisms is rooted in emotions and communicated largely through emotional appeals as will be shown in the Discussion of Findings. This mode of ideological consumption is incumbent on naturalized discourse (Rahimi & Riasati, 2011). Naturalized discourse involves the

effacement of a cultural topos (common place) or value judgment that sustains an utterance as hidden premise (enthymeme), that is as the content of a pragmatic implicature. Rather, topoi are presented as ‘givens’ by dint of the pragmatic effects newsfeeds or stories are likely to have on an audience. As remarked by Lassen (2006 a,b), echoing Van Dijk (1998), Fairclough (2006) and Wodak (2006), ideologies embedded in discursive practices are most effective when they become naturalized and achieve the status of common sense.

The distance between a philosophically formulated moral perspective and its ideological rendition, although quite novel as regards its emergence and consolidation in a Web 2.0 environment, has its precedents in Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* that furnished the philosophical groundwork for the communist state ideology. As remarked by Flacks (2004, 138; in Bevington & Dixon, 2015), “the Communist Manifesto is not only one of the earliest examples of social movement theory but also that it remains the only full-fledged theory about the conditions and powers of movements that we have.” Subsequently, the differences between ideologically formed schematic ideas about antinatalism and the original philosophical argumentation must be addressed as a bespoke area of investigation.

### **Research objectives and questions**

#### ***The three interlocking layers of antinatalism’s discursive articulation***

In the conceptual exploration of the formation of the antinatalist ideology in a Web 2.0 environment different interlocking layers of discursive articulation (cf. Altman, 1990) were identified, as follows:

- i) The initial discursive articulation of the antinatalist philosophy in verbal mode consisting of philosophical-cum-rhetorical argumentation.
- ii) The transformation of the philosophical text into an ideology, that is a system of ideas, beliefs and social representations formed by individual Facebook group

members that become shared through effervescence and solidarity as the ideological text is constantly negotiated in their interaction. The form of these ideas is still largely verbal and propositional.

- iii) The manifestation of the ideology in intertextual traversals, largely evinced in multimodal terms that span images, videos, literary and poetic narratives, ordinary consumer narratives (stories) related either directly or indirectly to members' individual lifeworlds.

Thus, we are concerned with three orders of discourse, a philosophical, an ideological and an empirical one. All three orders are interconnected via interdiscursive relations whereby they transmute into each other: ideology transmutes the philosophical discourse into a system of ideas, while the empirical discourse transmutes the elliptical ideas that make up the ideological fabric into individual and ultimately collective experiences that coalesce in a collective identity. Therefore, in order to demonstrate how our master frame of collective identity morphs in the context of the antinatalist NSM we must address the interactions amongst these discursive orders with a view to formulating how the ideological discourse becomes alive as social text through the ongoing interaction of the NSM's members and their individual discursive formations.

### ***Research questions***

In the context of the overarching objective to identify how the collective identity and solidarity among the antinatalist NSM's members is effected as process, against the background of a philosophical manifesto that has been transformed into an ideology comprising a schema or system of ideas, the following research questions guide the analysis of the respective Facebook group data:

*(RQ1) (a) In what ways the members of the Facebook antinatalism NSM align themselves with the main philosophical positions of antinatalism and in what ways do they deviate from these positions? (b) Do they affirm them? Negate them? Interpret them differently? Expand their premises and arguments?*

*(RQ2) Insofar as ideology is a discursive phenomenon, what discourse strategies are employed by the NSM's members in their active negotiation of the ideology?*

*(RQ3) Ultimately, how is the collective identity of this NSM formed based on the most often recurrent (i) ideas (ii) discursive strategies?*

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research design was adopted for the empirical prong of this study, encompassing a netnographic methodology for data collection, the employment of discourse analytic CAQDAS (atlas.ti) for data analysis and the discourse historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis for the synthesis and interpretation of the netnographically procured data.

The research field consists of the largest and most active antinatalist Facebook group (nearing 5000 members). The corpus consists of 1128 posts (164) and comments (964) exchanged between the group's members in 2017, also comprising 18 videos, 132 photographs, extracts from literary artefacts and quotes from popular personas. The corpus was compiled with the aid of specialized software on offer by the company personalgroupware.com. "The body of the entire text was read through several times. A priori ideas and emergent conceptualizations were altered on successive readings in the familiar iterative process of qualitative analysis" (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998, 6; also see Kozinets & Handelman, 2004).

The data were coded with the aid of the CAQDAS program atlas.ti by drawing on a coding scheme, coding categories and individual codes (Lewins & Silver, 2007) in line with the three research questions. Each post/comment was posited as a unit of analysis (Harlow, 2012). Each analytical unit was multiply coded (i) by idea, based on whether group posts affirm, negate, extend the philosophical theses put forward by Benatar or introduce a wholly new topic (ii) by discourse strategy (iii) by lexicalization/rhetorical tactic in support of the employed discursive strategies. Both deductive and inductive routes (Hofmann *et al.* 2013) were followed, that is both a priori and in vivo coding in line with qualitative thematic coding principles (Dicks *et al.* 2005; Kurtz *et al.* 2017). Memos as reflective fieldnotes (Kozinets, 2002) concerning the lexicalization avenues and the multimodal archival material (Kozinets, 1997; Dalsgaard, 2016) that accompanied the posts were regularly appended. They were synthetically addressed in the final step of the process, that is in the interpretation of the results (Platanou *et al.* 2017) which involved going repeatedly back and forth between the findings and the extant literature (Hofmann *et al.* 2013).

### ***The discourse historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis (CDA)***

DHA “pays attention to multi-modal macro- as well as micro-phenomena, to intertextual and interdiscursive relationships, as well as to social, historical, political, economic, psychological and other factors relating to the verbal and non-verbal phenomena of communication” (Reisigl, 2018, 49). It emphasizes micro-level interactional and textual practices (Khosravini, 2018), thus being in perfect alignment both with the framing cultural perspective in NSM analysis that is adopted in this study, as well as with the overarching objective of demonstrating how collective identity is produced as process through the online interaction among the antinatalist group’s members. Its unique focus on the socio-historical situatedness of discourses constitutes a defining characteristic that sets it apart from other

CDA approaches. Additionally, as per Wodak's (2001) procedural stipulations, DHA takes particular note of the intertextual, interdiscursive and hypertextual formation of discourse which aligns with the multimodal orientation of the corpus at hand. Furthermore, rhetorical topoi and argumentation schemes are emphasized in the analysis process which resonates quite positively both with a fundamental aspect of antinatalism's structuration, as well as with the way whereby the philosophical argumentation is transformed into an ideology. Last, but not least, the identification of discourse strategies whereby social actors approach a social situation lies at the heart of the DHA approach. Again, the identification of the discourse strategies whereby the antinatalist group members approach the schematic ideas of the respective ideology coheres with the research objective of charting social identity formation as process.

### *Discourse analytic strategies*

The extant literature thrives with interaction strategies customized by discipline, thematic orientation and research field. Most aptly for the purposes at hand, Van Dijk (1998) outlines three critical discourse analytic strategies that are regularly encountered in the formation of ideological discourses, namely interaction, topical selection and rhetorical. Interaction strategies concern the impact of turn-taking and sequencing on the ways recipients construe models of events. "Similarly, interactional strategies of displaying agreement and disagreement play an important role in the management of event models and their opinions" (Van Dijk, 1998, 274). Topical selection strategies concern the typical qualitative thematic discovery process, where topics are viewed as macro-propositions or macro-structures. "Ideologically based stereotypes and prejudices may thus be highlighted twice: by their important semantic function of a topic that organizes the semantic microstructures of a discourse" (Van Dijk, 1998, 266). A topic, for this study, is equivalent to an empirical theme

other than an explicitly formulated idea, that is posted as an occasion for making a claim alongside an antinatalist idea. Finally, rhetorical strategies concern “rhetorical structures that are studied as means to emphasize or de-emphasize meanings as a function of ideological opinions” (Van Dijk, 1998, 208). “Given that discursive strategies such as these are almost always implicit, however, their identification necessitates a systematic linguistic and interpretive analysis of both contextual information and the linguistic devices through which these strategies are realized” (Kwon *et al.* 2013, 6). Therefore, the coding scheme that was adopted in this study also includes an open category about rhetorical strategies. Pursuant to a comparative reading between the corpus data and relevant research that featured the delineation of discourse strategies in a DHA vein, the following typology of strategies (Table 2) was endorsed. The strategies were borrowed from studies that operationalized them in exactly the same fashion as intended in this study. Thus, while replicating a standard procedure in quantitative research regarding scales adoption, I am drawing on the following strategies from the extant literature.

**Table 2. Discourse strategies employed by the Facebook antinatalist group members in their posts and comments.**

<b>Discourse Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>Appropriation</b>	Individual attempts to own the ideology, that is to appropriate it within the phenomenological reality of one’s own lifeworld by appealing to individual life experiences.	Fairclough 1995
<b>Changing the subject</b>	Realised mainly in two ways: via topic control, which may involve violations of the maxim of relation, for instance, providing distracting information which is irrelevant to the	Hansson 2015

	accusations, or by a manipulative strategy of making use of recipients' vulnerabilities – choosing such a time for communicating when the potential critics are most likely distracted by other actions, thus 'burying' information	
<b>Legitimizing</b>	It involves team members attempting to establish control by justifying underlying assumptions and building up the credibility of particular views.	Kwon et al. 2013
<b>Re/defining</b>	Involves participants developing and expressing relevant new information and viewpoints on the issue (defining) for others to react to, and refining and adjusting existing viewpoints (redefining) so as to provide a platform for sensemaking.	Kwon et al. 2013
<b>Social exclusion</b>	The construction of an imaginary 'we' on the inverse through the exclusion of alterity, exemplified through what are presented as morally reprehensible behaviors or social practices.	Marzorati 2013

### **Discussion of findings**

*(RQ1) (a) In what ways the members of the Facebook antinatalism NSM align themselves with the main philosophical positions of antinatalism and in what ways do they deviate from these positions? (b) Do they affirm them? Negate them? Interpret them differently? Expand their premises and arguments?*

In line with RQ1, each idea was coded as a trichotomous variable with three sub-codes, based on whether its formulation affirms, negates or extends the original idea as extrapolated from

Benatar's (2015) main philosophical positions (Table I).

The vast majority of ideas were encountered in the NSM's posts, with the exception of the three out of four ideas pertaining to quality of life (Table I, ideas 2-4). Almost half of the posts in the corpus revolved around ideas 6 and 8, that is procreation equals suffering and a pro-death stance towards abortion, followed by ideas 9 and 10 (the human population should be zero and a pro-extinction stance) and the foundational premise of antinatalism (idea 1) at equal intervals. As an offshoot and intensifier of the generalized abhorrence towards procreation, births with disabilities were often cited in posts. The bulk of the posts, from an ideas point of view, is affirmative of antinatalist tenets, while some extend them by allusion to empirical cases (for example, extending the argument from disabilities to encompass deformities). Some members appear to be more well-read than others with regard to the antinatalist literature, while others are driven to engage in the posted subjects in a more leisurely manner.

The antinatalist ideology does not impact contingently and situationally on aspects of members' lives, but constitutes a dominant ideology through which they filter all aspects of their personal lives and wider social phenomena. The fact that antinatalism constitutes a master frame for the NSM's members surfaces most eminently in the posted empirical topics (apart from the explicitly formulated ideas).

Topics are presented usually in an interrogative mode, although in essence these questions are rhetorical, that is they imply their answer rather than genuinely calling for answers. More aptly, they constitute occasions for construing solidarity among members by affirming the rhetorical topoi on which antinatalism is edified. For example, a newsfeed about Kardashian's being pregnant with her first child gives rise to emotionally loaded comments about anti-birth, abortion and all sorts of ways whereby this pregnancy should be avoided. Complementary to the dominant form of the rhetorical question whereby topics are

presented for discussion, topics featuring popular personae as supporters of antinatalist ideas are regularly employed as appeals to authority. Robert Smith, lead singer of The Cure, is quoted for his strong anti-procreative tendencies and Thomas Szasz, father of anti-psychiatry, for his support of the right to suicide.

Procreation appears to be the most emotively laden topic that generates maximum effervescence among members. Dissidence, when it comes to procreation, is at an all times low, while collective repudiation awaits anyone who dares to challenge the fundamental idea that bringing new lives into existence should be avoided. Other topics include abandoned babies, marriage, suicide, the existence of god, dating. Usual comments that surface in the face of procreation related posts accuse parents of being selfish for bringing new humans into a world that is not worth living, and uneducated with regard to the threats of overpopulation. On less frequent occasions, topics are presented as invitations to ritualistically engage in celebrating empirical phenomena as instantiations of the antinatalist ideology (regardless of whether the actual social actors are even aware of the ideology), such as mothers abandoning babies after birth, especially when such births are characterized by disabilities and deformities. "Rejoice, friends, for today is a good day; just today, our planet was saved from three human lives..." is a typical example of incitement to ritualistic effervescence. "This shared responsiveness to gestures and signals permits emotional contagion to be stimulated and manipulated in solidarity rituals" (Gordon, 1986, 138). The more formally oriented a post in argumentation terms (e.g. posts that suggest a discussion topic based on an academic article, even mentioning Benatar), the less comments they attract.

A schematically perceived dominant ideology as popular common places (topoi) is challenged openly, such as religion's actively encouraging procreation or ordinary values such as 'life is for living'. The group is constantly looking for opportunities for parsing the entire social field into the ideational compartments of the antinatalist ideology by re-defining

and negotiating the dominant meanings attached to social phenomena. In line with the NSM literature, activism undertaken among the antinatalist group members is more lifestyle and culturally oriented, such as persuading family and friends about the cogency and superiority of the ideology, writing an entry on antinatalism for the Oxford dictionary of English, issuing an online magazine.

*(RQ2) Insofar as ideology is a discursive phenomenon, what discourse strategies are employed by the NSM's members in their active negotiation of the ideology?*

The bulk of the group's posts, in terms of discursive strategy, aim at re/defining, legitimating and appropriating antinatalism either by affirming its premises or by extending them in the light of empirically concrete personal and social situations, such as procreation, parenthood, dating, religion. The discourse strategies, although in principle clear and distinct, are employed in a non-mutually exclusive manner. More often than not, they co-occur in the context of posts and comments. For example, posts whose contents members seek to legitimate by posing (rhetorical) questions to their peers often feature an appropriation strategy whereby ideas are empirically inscribed in their lifeworld (e.g. 'what are your views on marriage?'). Thus, these strategies should be viewed as forming a matrixial discursive structure, whereby their inherent interdependencies contribute to the formation of the ideology as an ongoing, dynamic social text rooted in multiple individual realities.

By and large, the antinatalism NSM members employ the ideology for construing a sense of 'we' by means of an evoked alterity. Legitimation in this context surfaces on the inverse by challenging a dominant social ideology. They appeal to community peers to recognize certain behaviors and social practices as meriting reprimand (e.g. the repulsiveness of procreation). This mode of appropriating antinatalism is in alignment with the earlier discussion on how a philosophical treatise is appropriated as a system of ideas, as part and

parcel of an ideology that bears a hazy and occasionally only vague and vacuous resemblance to the original philosophical theses. Thus, in many instances antinatalism community members seek to legitimate extreme moral judgments as regards various behaviors and beliefs by leveraging the extreme premises of antinatalism, even though such judgments in principle have little relevance to the philosophical principles. The legitimation of empirical cases is enabled by the rhetorical questioning scheme whereby the ideological presuppositions (Machin & Mayr, 2012) of each case are implicitly affirmed. Such questions are often introduced in a naturalized manner (Van Leeuwen, 2008): “how can pro-life people not see the value of abortions?”

Among the popular linguistic devices that buttress the realization of discursive strategies in members’ posts and comments we encounter the employment of mass, rather than count nouns (e.g. “life is equal to suffering”, rather than “some lives are equal to suffering”). The former lexicalization forecloses the interpretive nuances that are called for in the latter while making a stronger claim that is tinged with deeper emotive overtones. “In other words, they argue by example, and imply that one story about X stands metonymically for all experiences about X (*argumentum ad exemplum*)” (Kwon et al., 2013, 8).

Also, the employment of an impersonal tone of voice is often encountered, rather than personifying an utterance with a definite pronoun (e.g. ‘I’), especially in the incidence of modal utterances (e.g. could, should) that are usually prescriptive with regard to their semantic content and hence capable of realizing the legitimating strategy: “another baby that should never have been born.”

The social exclusion discursive strategy, although scarcely pursued, when it does surface it tends to be related strictly to immigrants, the disabled and the mentally ill. In fact, all three social groups are referred to invariably as equal *inter pares*, but also as empirical ground for re/defining ever more strongly the suffering that awaits those who are brought into

life. The strategy of social exclusion is employed synecdochically as *pars pro toto*, that is as an instance of leveraging particular and marginal social phenomena for legitimating ideas concerning society as a whole. Such abstracted actions (Machin & Mayr, 2012) and states-of-affairs abound in instances of employing the social exclusion strategy. This fallacious form of reasoning that was shown earlier to be underpinning Benatar's rhetorico-philosophical argumentation is carried over to the level of ideology and its inscription by the members of the NSM in empirical particulars.

Finally, as a note on multimodality, photos as social memes occasionally evince a change of subject strategy. For example, although the verbal content of a post explicitly refers to the pro-abortion idea, the accompanying picture thematizes the depopulation strand of antinatalism. This strategy confirms the schematic character whereby ideologies take root among NSM members.

*(RQ3) Ultimately, how is the collective identity of this NSM formed based on the most often recurrent (i) ideas (ii) discursive strategies?*

Collective identity is the outcome of group solidarity. "Within the social movement literature, solidarity refers to the social processes whereby group members identify with each other and enhance a collective commitment to the group as a whole through affirmation of common grievances, interests and goals for action" (Funk-Unrau, 2005, 243). "Collective identity carries with it positive feelings for other members of the group" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, 285). The emotional dimension of collective identity is instrumental and occasionally overrides any strictly ideologically related components as a driver for participating in a NSM. "As we know from many studies on the impact of ideologies through persuasive rhetoric, ideologies are also connected to and make use of emotions" (Wodak, 2006, 11). The emotional side of collective identity has been identified with what Durkheim (the forerunner

of solidarity theory) tagged as collective effervescence (see Crossley, 2002). As stated in the beginning of this paper, collective identity is our master frame. However, collective identity is an abstraction, sheltering various processes and individual meanings. Hence, in order to demonstrate how collective identity is formed in a concrete fashion, I am drawing here on the interaction among members as they comment on a post.

The post concerns an extension of idea (5) (Table I), namely that life is meaningless *sub specie universalis*. Here, the posting subject is redefining the idea by extending it to include philanthropy towards refugees, without recourse to the actual philosophical argumentation. As aforementioned, antinatalist ideas spring up in an elliptical fashion not quite as topics for discussion, but as rhetorical questions that surface in an interrogative, rather than assertoric mode, while being intended at generating solidarity among the group members. The latent assertoric proposition beneath the manifest rhetorical question structure brings forth the idea as macroproposition, in Van Dijk's (1998) terms. At the same time, the incomplete nature of the macroproposition vis-a-vis the original philosophical argumentative context confirms the often made assumption in the NSMs literature that ideologies survive schematically among their members, as fuzzy ideas.

The concerned post follows a social exclusion discursive strategy as it explicitly demarcates the collective identity of antinatalists on the inverse by contrasting it with specific groups, such as refugees. Interestingly, though, the posting subject does not seem to be sharing Benatar's self-defeating claim that everyone should not have been born or should become extinct, including the antinatalist group members. Rather, by means of a strategy of exclusion the posting subject implicitly makes the assumption that antinatalists constitute an elite group who do not suffer in the same way as refugees do, given that, at

least in theory, they are in a position to make a charity. What is reprimanded is the charitable cause, not the capacity of antinatalists to make a charity.

The schematic propagation of the idea is precisely responsible for the generation of collective effervescence between the posting subject and the commentators whose responses are tinged with emotional overtones, rather than evincing a penchant for rational argumentation: "We aren't degenerate animals who want to see suffering..", a comment that pursues a change of subject discursive strategy as it draws on a different idea of the antinatalist ideology, namely "Suffering is one of the costs of procreation" (6). Some commentators appear to be effecting a 'schism' in the seamless fabric of the ideology by adopting not only a milder antinatalist stance, but also by negating the underlying idea altogether: "Depends on the antinatalist branch. Misanthropic, sure I guess but most antinatalists assign a negative value to birth due to compassion so they want to help others." This commenting subject pursues at the same time a redefining discourse strategy and an appropriation one. The appropriation avenue in this instance suggests a diametrically opposed semantization of the foundational premise of antinatalism while confirming once more that ideologies are malleable and offer ample scope for customization according to differing individual worldviews. This comment also confirms the aforementioned transmutations as we move from the philosophy to the ideology and finally to individual empirical appropriations.

The discursive articulation of antinatalism at the final stage of these transmutations bears little resemblance to the absolutist standpoints of the original theory. For Benatar, there cannot be segments of antinatalists, ranging from hardcore to mild supporters, something that is obviously not shared by the commentator who even calls hardcore supporters misanthropists, as against his imaginary segment that is tagged as philanthropist. This is also a remarkable instance of the commentator's partaking of an imaginary community whose members, based on his terms, ultimately co-belong nominally under a fuzzy schema that

shelters diametrically opposed meanings, rather than being strictly aligned under clearly defined and agreed upon ideas.

This polyvocal appropriation of antinatalist ideas demonstrates that collective identity is far from a knitty-gritty concept, but a dynamic schema that includes a plethora of micro-interactions in context, as individuals seek to streamline their lifeworld with the ideology that animates it through a web of interlocking schematic ideas, discursive and rhetorical strategies.

### **Conclusions**

This paper sought to furnish an understanding of how the ideology of antinatalism is consumed by the members of the respective NSM in a Web 2.0 environment. By adopting collective identity as the master frame it was shown that this regularly evoked concept constitutes an abstraction that shelters a plethora of individual processes and strategies whereby ideas are appropriated, resemiotized and inserted in an inter-subjective forum in quest for re/defining, legitimation and the construal of solidarity. The ongoing ideological meaning negotiation is far from a rational process, based on argumentation principles such as those that buttress Benatar's philosophical manifesto. Rather, it is tinged with emotional overtones and facilitated by effervescence whereby ideas are transmuted into signs of collective identity through a multimodal, multimedial and interdiscursive interplay. Among the findings from the DHA oriented analysis of the selected corpus, it is particularly interesting that the NSM's members scarcely (if ever) resort to an elaboration of the argumentation strategies employed in the manifesto. Rather, they employ discursive strategies whereby the ideas distilled from its fundamental philosophical positions are rendered empirically concrete through topical selection and resemiotization.

The social implications of the undertaken analysis are potentially far-reaching with regard to the formation of NSM related ideologies, their informing individual and collective identities and the molding of axiological frameworks, as for the first time in the history of social movements we have at our disposal readily accessible ethnographic data across different modalities that are amenable to a diachronic analysis. The netnographically sourced data may be enriched through triangulation by phenomenological interviews and the adoption of a laddering elicitation technique for gauging how deeply such ideologies inform other consumption and non-consumption related choices. Antinatalism was found to be particularly exceptional in this respect, as it informs and influences radically all aspects of members' personal and social lives in ways that run counter to intuitive ideas embedded in a dominant cultural ideology. It would be interesting to investigate in a similar fashion other ideologies with a view to gauging the extent to which their ideas shape their respective consumers' lifeworlds.

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