

Politics, Jokes, and Banter Amid Tragedy: The Use of Sarcasm and Mocking on Social Media in Response to the Uvalde School Shooting

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The mass shooting in May 2022 at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, served to reinforce the serious impact of gun violence in the United States of America. As typically occurs in the aftermath of these events, the Uvalde shooting prompted robust public discourse around not just the incident itself, but the causes and potential solutions to gun violence. In this article, we conduct a novel examination of an aspect of the post-mass shooting discourse: the use of sarcasm and mocking to convey partisan arguments on social media. Using a dataset of 2,182 Twitter replies to mainstream media posts

about the case (n=14), this research isolates sarcastic and mocking tweets to assess prevalence, as well as the specific characteristics of the dark humor observed. The relationship between political ideology and sarcastic and/or mocking rhetoric is discussed, as is the connection between pre-established 'disaster scripts' and sarcastic responses to the same on social media.

Keywords: mass shootings, school shootings, social media, sarcasm, dark humor, Twitter, X, disaster scripts, police, gun control, gun violence

The 2022 mass shooting carried out at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, is an event that has reignited public discourse and debate around gun control in the United States of America. On the morning of 24 May, an 18-year-old carrying an AR-15 gun fatally shot 19 fourth-grade students at the school (aged 9- to 11-years-old), as well as two teachers (Chappell, 2022). While tragic, this incident is not an anomaly in the United States: Uvalde is at the time of writing just the third deadliest school shooting in American history behind Virginia Tech (2007) and Sandy Hook (2012). Uvalde was one of 51 school shootings that resulted in injury and/or death in 2022 (Maxwell et al., 2023). Though these events remain rare from a statistical standpoint, school shootings have garnered considerable public attention because of their extremely high relative frequency in the United States compared to other countries, as

well as the strong emotional reactions when young lives are taken, as happened in Uvalde. The public attention has facilitated the creation of ‘disaster scripts’ around these events, wherein there is a standardized sociocultural response that is enacted whenever a mass shooting takes place (Lee et al., 2022; Schildkraut et al., 2016). These scripts serve a purpose in the sense they provide structure to events that allow individuals to process tragedy — however, Schildkraut and colleagues (2016) also assert that adoption of such scripts prevents meaningful critiques of mass shootings which go beyond superficial and unproductive tropes.

Humor is one device used to disrupt the scripts that have formed regarding mass shootings. Use of sarcasm and mocking as a vehicle to communicate perspectives on issues such as gun control and/or the right to bear arms is often built on a subversion of anticipated responses to mass shootings, based on observation of how scripts have been operationalized after mass shootings in the past. Rhetoric like ‘thoughts and prayers’ and the ‘good guy with a gun’ are common enough to have entered the zeitgeist as conservative responses to gun violence and have in turn come to be a focal point for sarcastic responses to mass shootings on social media. While adoption of conservative tropes and talking points are common when it comes to this topic, research suggests adherence to rhetorical scripts is not limited to any one side of the debate around guns and can be observed in responses from those expressing views that are both pro-gun and, conversely, pro-gun control (Zhang et al., 2022). The Uvalde mass shooting added an additional layer to this discourse due to the specific details of the event, notably the perceived police failures to engage the shooter for over an hour, resulting in severe (and increasing, over time) criticism of police as details continued to emerge in the days that followed (Chappell, 2022). Criticism of police provided an additional source for sarcastic and mocking commentary from the public, allowing for not just the disruption of scripts pertaining to mass shootings but also sociocultural scripts regarding the role of police in American society.

This article aims to explore the nature of sarcasm and mocking exhibited by Twitter users in the aftermath of the Uvalde school shooting, tracing how these devices were used across seven events that constituted major developments in the story. Replies were collected from tweets from two mainstream American news sources (CNN and Fox News)

for each of the events included in this research. This resulted in a total of 2,182 Twitter¹ responses being analyzed. Of this total, 383 replies were coded for *sarcasm and mocking* through the application of 16 subcodes. This presented the opportunity to assess partisan sentiment (e.g., Republican and Democratic political views) and references to common disaster scripts. The role that sarcasm and mocking has in the wake of mass shootings is essential, as it offers insight on the pervasiveness of sociocultural scripts dealing with mass shootings — and the way these scripts can be weaponized on social media in service of a sociopolitical agenda. Further, it also allows for better understanding of which people are more likely to utilize sarcasm and mocking to convey serious sociopolitical messages in a public forum, even in the morbid context of a school shooting like that which occurred in Uvalde.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The steady rate of mass shootings in the United States has led to a breadth of research being produced which explores how the public responds to these incidents. In a longitudinal media analysis of events taking place between 2000 and 2012, Schildkraut and colleagues (2018) determined that not all mass shootings were ‘created equal.’ Notably, they found that school shootings like Uvalde had a higher emotional value ascribed to them when compared to shootings that took place in different settings, or with different sets of victims. This was supported in a similar longitudinal analysis of mass shootings between 1966 and 2016 undertaken by Silva and Capellan (2019), which highlighted that school shootings were more likely to receive media attention than any other subtype of mass shooting event.

Even so, research suggests that even those mass shootings with the greatest emotional impact do not capture public attention for long periods of time; Croitoru and colleagues (2020, p. 354) assert that public interest in a mass shooting ‘peaks during the first 24 to 48 hours after an event’ with total media coverage of an event continuing for around one month on average. Lack of public responsiveness to some media frames has been attributed by Guggenheim and colleagues (2015) to social media diffusion and the subsequent failure to produce a consistent narrative. Although users of social media

¹ This research was conducted when the platform X was called Twitter.

platforms like Twitter were found to be less likely to respond when traditional media attempted to establish a discourse around gun control in the wake of a mass shooting, Guggenheim and colleagues did not believe that this was because of an inherent lack of interest in gun control within the ‘Twittersphere’ (Guggenheim et al., 2015, p. 221).

While Guggenheim and colleagues did not find a causal relationship between traditional media framing and social media responses, social media users are still *aware* of the typical ways that mass shootings are framed in the sociocultural zeitgeist. Schildkraut and colleagues (2016) argue that most public discourse around mass shootings conforms to ‘disaster narratives’ — predefined cultural scripts that adhere to a repetitive pattern and are activated when news of a new mass shooting breaks and, ultimately, prevents further incisive critique of these events. While invoking disaster scripts provides individuals with some level of comfort and commentary, Schildkraut and colleagues argue they also provide ‘little resolution, as the real heart of the issues rarely is addressed’ (2016, p. 233). The existence of disaster scripts in the context of mass shootings is supported by Croitoru and colleagues (2020), who found that the public typically conceptualizes mass shootings as part of a *sequence* rather than as individual *events*. The activation of mass shooting scripts, to some extent, speaks to the potential normalization of such violence in American culture — while mass shootings are more infrequent than the discourse may suggest, the fact that the public consumes these events in the context of a long-term pattern reflects a reasonable level of familiarity, and an expectation of the way that events will ‘play out’ post-shooting (Schildkraut, 2016).

It is this expectation of (or, perhaps, resignation to) how events will unfold that may be disrupted by the kind of satirical and/or sarcastic coverage of mass shootings that has been popularized by publications like *The Onion* (Schildkraut et al., 2016). Disaster scripts essentially provide pre-established ‘explanations’ when mass shootings occur, and Schildkraut and colleagues assert that the public are usually willing to accept simplistic and familiar responses to these events (e.g., the shooter was ‘evil’ or ‘mentally ill’), rather than seeking out answers that are more complex, or may challenge their existing views, values and/or beliefs. For example, in a study of 155,000 Twitter users’ responses to mass shootings, Lin and Chung (2020) were able to identify distinctions between liberal and conservative users — while mass shootings understandably prompted a negative

emotional response from both groups, conservatives were more likely to demonstrate sadness or anxiety, whereas liberals displayed greater levels of anger. Zhang and colleagues (2022) observed similar divisions in their own research, determining that conservative Twitter users were more likely to politicize events and attack their perceived ‘adversaries’ on the left, while progressives were more prone to staying focused on the event and its implications (e.g., gun control policy). While they did not adopt a political binary of liberal/progressive and conservative/traditional, Lee and colleagues (2022) were also able to identify common characteristics that predicted which scripts individuals adopted in response to a mass shooting: they found that levels of racial resentment, seeing the world as a ‘dangerous place’ and existing ideological beliefs all served as attributional frames that determined whether they conformed to scripts that perceived access to guns as a problem or not.

The ubiquity of these competing scripts is such that they have become easily identifiable and targeted for satire and/or sarcastic treatment in the public discourse. This is especially the case on social media platforms like Twitter, where individuals who adhere to polarized scripts come into contact. Mueller (2016) claims that the use of sarcasm online has a legitimate role to play as a type of *pseudo-argument*, in the sense that it is often dispatched with no direct ‘target’ but rather to attack an *idea* in a humorous way designed to appeal to others who already agree with their perspective. Mueller’s explanation of sarcasm as pseudo-argument reflects a state of partisan tribalism that exists in online spaces, in which argument is presented to combat the *expected* responses of ‘the other side’ — informed largely by the sociocultural scripts that have over time become a recognizable pattern within mass shooting discourse (Lin & Chung, 2020; Schildkraut et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2022).

Davis and colleagues (2018) further support the position that sarcastic tweets serve a purpose as legitimate forms of political communication: they found that 70% of humorous and/or sarcastic posts did some kind of ‘political work’ such as providing opposition or galvanizing collective action. Sarcasm has long been used in internet and specifically social media discourse both in general and to antagonize others politically (Laaksonen et al., 2022). However, Davis and colleagues (2018) also found that its overuse risks fostering apathy and cynicism about the political process, potentially contributing to

pessimism about the government's ability to take meaningful action. This caution about the utility of sarcasm is also expressed by Laaksonen and colleagues (2022, p. 1912), who argue that although this communicative form serves as 'a compelling way for citizens to discursively engage with political issues ... the polysemic nature of parody paradoxically works to amplify and *support* existing polarized positions in online discussions.' Though the extent to which sarcasm is a useful rhetorical device in the discourse around mass shootings may yet be undetermined, satirical humor plays a major role in shaping public responses to these events, which in turn has consequential implications for the wider debates around gun violence in the United States. Sarcastic and/or negative social media posts and commentary are also more likely to be shared more widely (Fine & Hunt, 2021), increasing their potential impact.

METHODS

Data Collection

Data were collected as one component of a broader study examining the response to the May 2022 Uvalde school shooting on social media platform Twitter. The aim of this parent research was not just to capture initial reactions to this event, but to explore (1) how the nature of the public response changed over time, and; (2) if there were notable differences in response based on the media source consumed. To achieve this, a purposeful sample of tweets was collected that were posted by two prominent American media outlets, CNN and Fox News.

These specific news sources were chosen not just because of their high profile – and, thus, presumed high rate of Twitter replies – but also because each news source can provide a greater diversity of followers, particularly given the current polarization of the American media landscape. Fox News was selected to reflect more conservative agenda-setting and social media followers, whilst CNN was chosen based on its characterization in popular culture as a liberal news source (Stroud & Lee, 2013). Source selection predicated on perceived ideological lines was important when assessing use of sarcasm and humor in the present research, given the noted distinctions in how these rhetorical devices are used across partisan groups (Davis et al., 2018). Twitter was chosen as the site for data collection because it provided several benefits, such as its role as a primary site for rapid news dissemination and public response elicitation (Nazir et al., 2019) as well as to ensure

comparability with previous research on this topic which has also used Twitter as a resource (see Lin & Chung, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022).

To select relevant tweets from CNN and Fox News, Twitter's advanced search function was used to filter all posts featuring the search term 'Uvalde' from the date of the shooting (May 24, 2022) until the date the data collection commenced (July 14, 2022). Initial searches yielded a total of 35 tweets across both news sources (CNN = 14, Fox News = 21). All tweets were categorized into individual 'events' that formed part of the developing Uvalde narrative, for example *initial announcement* or *first reports police waited to engage the shooter*. These events were then filtered again: first to ensure that all Fox News tweets about an 'event' was paired with a CNN tweet about the same topic, and then to ensure there was no replication in the tweets (e.g., where individual tweets were too much like previous posts and/or covered the same general subject matter). The final sample consisted of seven events related to the Uvalde shooting which were each made up of a tweet from CNN and Fox News, resulting in a total of 14 tweets that were the subject of further data collection. All individual responses to each of these 14 tweets were then gathered, with 2,182 Twitter replies included in the overall data collection phase of this research (CNN = 1,142, Fox News = 1,040).

Data Analysis

After data collection, all replies were coded as part of an inductive thematic content analysis designed to capture the 'core consistencies and meanings' observable in Twitter replies to the Uvalde shooting (Patton, 2002, p. 264). All tweets were coded as part of this process, including text-only, visual-only, and hybrid replies (e.g., memes and/or GIFs). Initial coding was shared between both authors: the first author conducted first-round coding for the first three events in the sequence while the second author conducted first-round inductive coding for the remaining four events. A master codebook was produced from this initial phase, with a total of 106 unique codes. This codebook was used to guide the secondary coding phase, where each author performed deductive coding of the events previously coded by the other; all changes or queries were addressed through a peer debriefing process, until a final application of codes was agreed upon (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). The coded data was then cleaned using both Excel and R and grouped into broader thematic groups allowing for greater clarity on emergent patterns and trends.

One such thematic grouping identified through this process incorporated tweets coded as *sarcasm and mocking*. Sixteen individual codes were included in this umbrella category. To assist with this categorization, a definition of sarcasm was adopted which was linked to the medium being analyzed. Sarcasm can be expressed in a range of contexts, the context where it is deployed often informs the specific rhetorical style it takes. For example, Anderson and Huntington (2017, p. 602) assert that, on Twitter, sarcasm ‘often takes the form of expressing a negative sentiment in positive terms, or occasionally vice versa.’ In addition, Riloff and colleagues (2013, p. 704) characterize sarcasm on Twitter as a type of humor that is ‘intended to insult, mock, or amuse.’ These descriptions, in part, informed our decision to combine sarcasm and mocking under a single thematic grouping when analyzing this dataset, to best capture the style of sarcasm that is typically observed in online spaces.

RESULTS

Hand-coding each of the 2,182 replies resulted in the creation of 106 unique codes, which were then grouped into 11 broader thematic groups. For the purposes of this analysis, we will focus on the 383 tweets coded with at least one *sarcasm and mocking* themed code. The *sarcasm and mocking* thematic group contained 16 codes, with the 383 tweets that were coded in this category account for 17.6% of the total sample, a high number given the tragic nature of the topic. Nearly all of the *sarcasm general* coded tweets were also coded with other codes that were not included in the sarcasm or mocking thematic group. The other thematic groups that these tweets were coded with (total mentions in brackets) are *Blaming police* (1448); *Blaming guns* (929); *Democratic party political points* (897); *Blaming politics and politicians* (713); *Other blame* (474); *Critical of media* (223); *Republican party political points* (144); *Sadness* (79), and; *Pro-police points* (55). Intersections between the *sarcasm and mocking* theme and other thematic groups are shown in Figure 1:

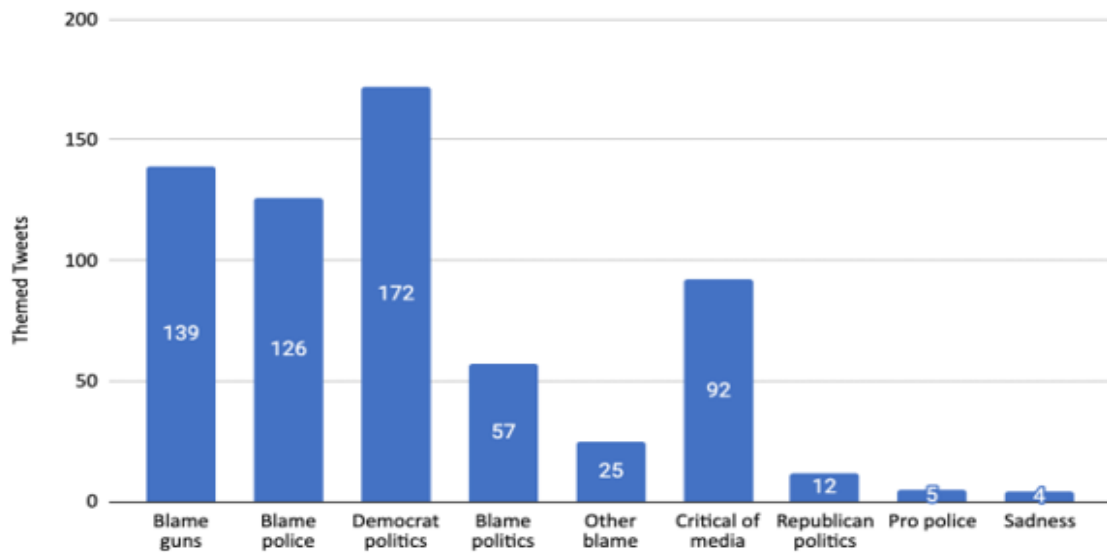


Figure 1. Frequency of sarcasm and mocking tweets intersecting with other thematic groups (n = 384).

While the distribution of intersecting themes with sarcasm and mocking tweets mostly resembles the distribution of themes across all tweets 2,182 in our sample (Figure 2), some key differences stand out. The first and most obvious is that the *Democrat politics* theme is the most common intersecting theme among sarcastic and mocking tweets, even more so than the *Blame guns* theme, which is most common in the full sample (Figure 2).

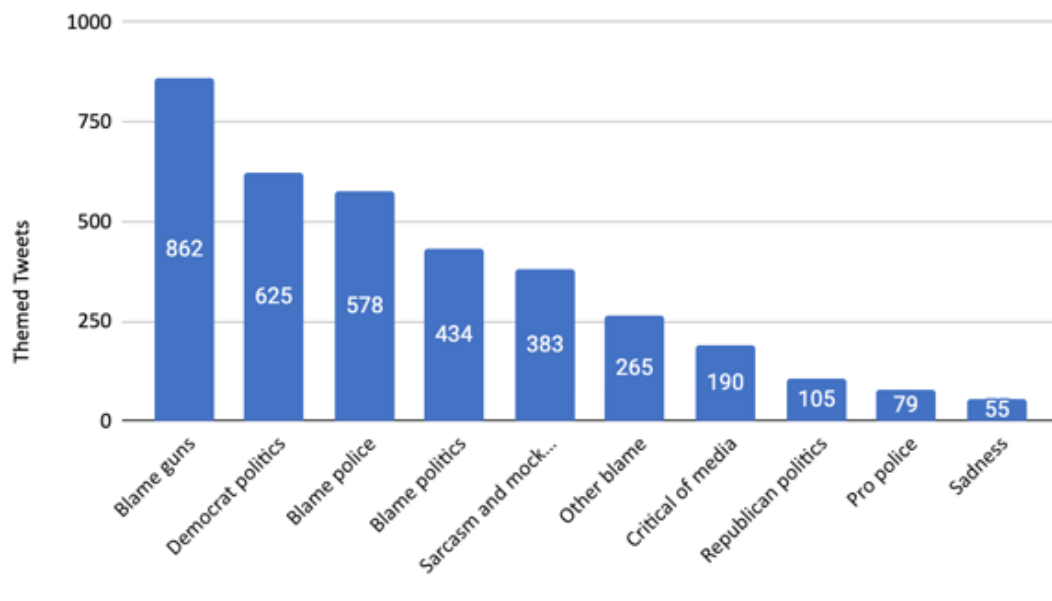


Figure 2. Frequency of tweets coded to thematic groups across the full sample (n = 2,182).

The second (and related) point is that the disparity between *Democrat politics* themed tweets and *Republican politics* themed tweets is much greater in the sarcastic and mocking tweets. While 28.6% of the tweets in the full sample were coded with the *Democrat politics* theme, 44.8% of sarcastic and mocking tweets were coded under this theme. Conversely, while 4.81% of the tweets in the full sample were coded with the *Republican politics* theme, only 3.13% of sarcastic and mocking tweets were coded under this theme. Put another way, in the full sample of tweets, there were 5.95 tweets coded with *Democrat politics* for every 1 tweet coded with *Republican politics* (625 *Democratic party political points*, 109 *Republican party political points*), while in the sample of tweets containing sarcasm or mocking, there were 14.3 tweets coded with *Democrat politics* codes for every *Republican politics* tweet (172 *Democratic party political points*, 12 *Republican party political points*).

There is also a disparity in the percentage of sarcastic and mocking themed tweets that are critical of the media, compared to the full dataset. In the overall sample of tweets, only 8.7% of tweets were coded as being *critical of media*, while in the sarcastic and mocking subset, this proportion jumps to 24%. It is important to note that much of this disparity stems from one code: *mocking Fox News*. This code appears 79 times in sarcastic and mocking tweets and falls under both the *sarcastic and mocking* theme as well as the *critical of media* theme. Moreover, the *mocking Fox News* code was extremely concentrated on one specific tweet, as 71 of the 79 mentions of this code were on the second event Fox News tweet. This heavy concentration was likely due to this tweet mentioning Tucker Carlson and his on-air vow to ‘keep questioning’ what happened in the shooting. Examples of these *mocking Fox News* tweets include ‘ignoring FACTS is your thing @FoxNews!’ and ‘Holy fuck!!!! Fox News does the right thing for first time in 25 years. I guess the body count finally got high enough.’ Some examples of tweets specifically referencing Carlson include ‘Wow. Tuckems actually doing something positive’; ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if he cared about the dead children?’ and ‘yap yap yap, hypocrite.’

Twitter responders commonly used sarcasm, dark humor, and mocking as a medium to blame either guns or police for the Uvalde shooting. This can be seen in replies like ‘The good guys with guns failed again, maybe let’s make it harder for bad guys to get guns? Let’s just try it for a year and see how it goes? No?’; ‘American cops must be some of

the worst trained in the world. I suppose their training only kicks in when chasing unarmed black men’, and; ‘What, law enforcement isn’t infallible? Holy shit.’ These tweets also commonly incorporated pictures and GIFs as a stylistic choice designed to enhance the comedic impact of their comments or, on occasion, in lieu of direct textual responses. For example, several users posted a photoshopped version of the pro-police Blue Lives Matter flag, which often includes text stating ‘These colors don’t run.’ In these sarcastic and/or mocking responses, however, this text was changed to ‘These colors don’t run... into schools to save dying children.’

These replies were one example of many in which even the mention of dying children did not dissuade users from using sarcasm and mocking language to convey their opinion on the Uvalde shooting, and mass shootings in general. For example, one text-only reply stated ‘It’s Texas!! Why aren’t your children expert marksmen and carrying at all times? SMH [shaking my head].’ Using rhetorical techniques associated with sarcasm like this, Twitter respondents were able to directly address a highly emotive element of the Uvalde shooting (i.e., the murder of children) in a tongue-in-cheek manner which serves to critique both existing and anticipated sociocultural scripts related to mass shootings.

The preemptive use of scripts in sarcastic and mocking tweets is also important to note. These codes were applied when replies engaged in sarcasm or otherwise mocked a line of argument that the user anticipated others would make about the cause of the Uvalde shooting. For the most part, the ‘original’ arguments were more common than the preemptive scripts mocking them. However, there are some exceptions. For instance, there were more cases of Twitter users mocking the *good guy with a gun* solution for gun violence and mass shootings than there were users actually making this argument. The same goes for the proposal by some gun advocates to arm teachers as a solution to mass shootings, as those mocking this idea (17) were slightly more common than those suggesting its potential implementation (14). There were also a relatively similar number of users mocking those who sent *thoughts and prayers* to those suffering from this shooting (18) as those who genuinely expressed this sentiment (20). Other examples saw significantly more mentions of the ‘original’ argument compared to those mocking or making sarcastic reference to that anticipated script. These include the suggestion that

improving school security infrastructure will reduce gun violence and the mention of potential conspiracy.

DISCUSSION

You got jokes? Dark humor as a response to the murder of children

It goes without saying that a mass murder of elementary school children does not provide natural fodder for satirical or sarcastic humor, and yet these rhetorical techniques were frequently observed in Twitter responses to the Uvalde mass shooting. The use of sarcasm and mocking in the tweets categorized into this thematic cluster was nuanced in the sense that users rarely referenced the shooting's victims — instead, humorous responses were targeted either at (a) individuals and/or groups perceived to have contributed to the Uvalde shooting (e.g., police, politicians, the media, lobbyists), and; (b) other social media users, and their predicted responses to the event (e.g., scripts). However, out of 384 replies categorized in the *sarcasm and mocking* cluster, 23 tweets were also coded as referring directly to the children who were victimized (5.9%).

Not all of these replies referenced the Uvalde victims in a direct sense when sarcasm or mockery occurred, and only mentioned the 'children-as-victims' in a more incidental capacity (e.g., 'Can we get to the usual this is terrible. How sad children died. Where's the good guy. Blah blah blah. And just wait for the next shooting.'). In several, though, the fact that children had been killed was an essential component of the sarcastic rhetoric used: for example, one user 'joked' that 'There must be sacrifices. Our choices are either dead kids or government tyranny. There is no in-between' while another user responded that 'Yeah letting 18 kids die was a real oopsie.' This use of sarcasm and mocking is especially notable when considering anticipated reactions to the murder of children, which is usually characterized as a trigger for widespread public concern and moral panic, rather than a source for humor or sarcasm (Zhang et al., 2019).

The use of sarcasm and mocking language referring to the children killed at Robb Elementary School should not be perceived as demonstrating a lack of empathy. Conversely, it could actually be perceived as a strategic choice to reinforce the need for reform by underscoring the absurdity of *not* acting when children are murdered. Dark humor like this derives from a surrealist position where the impact of rhetoric is

predicated on a deliberate violation of social norms, or anticipated responses (Dyrel, 2014; Webber et al., 2020). Most people would not respond with humor to an event like Uvalde, and it is precisely this norm violation that makes dark humor and sarcasm effective: the dissonance it creates produces emotional responses that facilitate a reaffirmation of the real seriousness of school shootings. The more unexpected a surrealist violation is, the greater the emotional reaction that may be produced; the stronger this emotional reaction is, the more disruptive it could be to the normalization process that often diminishes the impact that mass shootings have on the public and, thus, frustrates reform efforts (Schildkraut et al., 2016). In this sense, what might be at first be considered disrespectful use of humor could also, at the same time, be seen as a strategic decision to bring attention to the tragedy of the situation and galvanize public sentiment in opposition to mass shootings.

Sarcastic and/or mocking interactions with established ‘mass shooting scripts’

Part of the normalization process that sarcastic and mocking rhetoric can disrupt comes from the established mass shooting scripts that are adopted whenever such events take place. Sarcastic and mocking references to concepts like the ‘good guy with a gun’ and ‘thoughts and prayers’ began with the initial breaking news announcement of the Uvalde shooting, prior to further information about this specific case being released. These references were also preemptive in the sense that users were not utilizing this humor in direct response to another person using the scripts: instead, sarcastic and mocking references to scripts were made in isolation, in *anticipation* of a script being used rather than in *response* to it. This is reflective of Mueller’s (2016) conceptualization of sarcasm online as a *pseudo-argument* that is dispatched with no specific target, but rather as a means of constructing a strawman-style attack against an intangible idea, with the goal to attain support or praise from others who share their position. Of the ten most referenced subcodes in the sarcasm and mocking thematic group, seven (70%) consisted of the use of sarcastic or mocking rhetoric in direct opposition to a script of some kind. Some of these scripts were more generalized to mass shootings (e.g., ‘thoughts and prayers’; ‘good guy with a gun’), while others were more specific in that they related to *school* shootings in particular (e.g., ‘mocking arming of teachers’; ‘mocking school infrastructure securitization’).

This reveals that scripts are layered when it comes to mass shooting scenarios, and that both the general and specific responses anticipated depend on the basic context of the event (Schildkraut et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2022). It also demonstrates that the use of scripts to inform sarcastic and mocking responses is not purely reactive but is tied to the details of the events taking place. In the Uvalde shooting, the third most applied code in this thematic group (after *sarcasm general* and *mocking Fox News*, the latter of which was mostly in response to a single tweet) was *questioning the ‘good guy with a gun’ narrative* (54). This is a more common script used in response to all shootings (and pro-gun rhetoric) and would be expected to recur in most responses to mass shootings. However, the next most common code was *mocking ‘Blue Lives Matter’ or pro-police points* (24), which is a code that is far less likely to appear without the specific context of police failures in the Uvalde shooting being considered. When intersections are compared, replies categorized in the *blame police* thematic group overlapped with sarcastic and mocking tweets on 126 occasions, the second-highest intersection with the sarcastic and mocking group, and accounting for 32.8% of this total group.

The high frequency of sarcastic and mocking references to police also casts the *‘good guy with a gun’* replies in this thematic group in a different light. Many of these tweets also referred to police and to the failure of the archetypal ‘good guy with a gun’ — the police officer — to take more proactive steps to protect the Uvalde victims. While like most sarcastic and mocking references to scripts, most of the mocking of the ‘good guy with a gun’ narrative occurred in the first several tweets and thus at the beginning of the news coverage, this code nevertheless appeared throughout the tweets, even in the final three. In contrast, tweets defending the ‘good guy with a gun’ narrative dwindled as time went on, and it became more and more clear that their archetypal heroes — the ‘good’ police officers with guns — did not do nearly enough to prevent the mass casualties that occurred. Tweets mocking Blue Lives Matter and pro-police discourse stayed consistent throughout, with small upticks as more news about the poor response of the police came to light. In a paradoxical way, this type of sarcastic and mocking tweet may not have been as common due to the lack of public response defending the police, given the evidently poor job they did in this case. Because the police’s response was so poor here as to be indefensible, there was no need for anti-police discourse to mock those who defended the

police, given there were not all that many of them. Again, this responsiveness to an event's specific details is important in that it suggests a greater level of engagement with mass shootings when devising sarcastic or mocking responses, supporting the idea that this rhetoric is less about the humor itself, and is more about adding to the discourse in service of an ideological agenda, whether it be pro-gun or pro-gun control (Davis et al., 2018; Laaksonen et al., 2022).

Partisanship and the use of sarcasm and mocking as rhetorical techniques

As noted, the proportion of replies coded as offering supportive mention of *Democrat politics* was significantly higher in the sarcasm and mocking thematic group (44.8%) than it was in the full dataset (28.6%). In contrast, the proportion of *Republican politics* replies dropped (albeit marginally) in the sarcasm and mocking group, down from 4.81% in the overall sample to 3.13%. This breakdown supports assertions that political liberals are more likely than conservatives to use humor to perform 'political work' on social media, regardless of the topic (Davis et al., 2018). However, it is important to note that the specific context and facts of the Uvalde shooting also help explain the higher rate of *Democrat politics* replies overall: the incident involved a mass shooting and poor police response, which lends itself to critiques of both gun control and the police, two typically liberal political talking points. Moreover, Lin and Chung (2020) suggest liberals and conservatives respond differently to mass shootings, with liberals more prone to respond with anger and conservatives more likely to express sadness. After the initial breaking news of the Uvalde shooting (i.e., event 1), all additional developments (or 'events') referred in some capacity to the police's failure to respond to the incident in a timely and/or effective manner. This framing of the police as being in violation of public expectations and, thus, blameworthy in the Uvalde case is more aligned with a response demonstrating anger than sadness, and perhaps accounts to some extent for a higher liberal engagement rate.

Reflection on the content of sarcasm and mocking in replies about the Uvalde shooting also underscores that anger and blame were central components of the social media response. Several codes in this category made explicit reference to sarcasm and/or mocking in relation to an anticipated source of blame such as *mocking those blaming video games* (4), *sarcasm about 'blaming the left'* (8) and *mocking those only blaming mental*

health (14). Although this humor was designed to undermine sources of blame that others were expected to focus on, the implication of this sarcasm and mocking was that apportioning blame to these sources was effectively misdirecting the discussion away from the perceived *real* causes of gun violence. Based on the total codes applied in the sarcasm and mocking group, these sources included (1) *blame guns*, with 139 intersections with sarcasm and mocking tweets (36.2%); (2) *blame police*, intersecting on 126 occasions (32.8%), and; (3) *blame politics*, with 57 intersections (14.8%).

Based on this data, it seems that one of the chief purposes of using sarcastic or mocking humor in Twitter replies was to criticize anticipated conservative scripts around who to blame for the Uvalde shooting, but more so to make claims as to where that blame truly should be placed. Once again, this aligns with Davis and colleagues' (2018) characterization of liberal anger fueling sarcasm on social media, but also their position that this type of humor performs 'political work' in that it constitutes meaningful political participation that is geared toward providing opposition, identifying key issues, and stimulating civic action. Rather than simply using sarcasm and mocking to criticize conservatives, as the data may superficially suggest, the reality is that the sarcasm and mocking employed in response to the Uvalde shooting actively worked to frame the discourse and redirect the debate away from pre-established scripts toward what (mostly liberal) Twitter users perceived to be the more critical issues that contributed to the Uvalde shooting.

CONCLUSION

For many, the use of dark humor and sarcasm on a social media platform like Twitter – even responding to something as tragic as a mass school shooting at an elementary school – will come as no surprise. However, the fact that this type of rhetoric is so common, as well as the way that this commentary is dispatched in service of an ideological agenda, is indicative of both severe divisions in American political discourse and the normalization of mass shootings in American society.

As new snippets of information came to light in the days and weeks after the Uvalde shooting, Twitter users can be observed rhetorically 'digging in' to their respective partisan camps, latching onto new developments in the narrative to either push for more

gun control and police accountability, or stress the need for better security of schools, more ‘good guys with guns’, and to move focus away from restrictions to gun access. Given the sheer number of mass shootings in the United States, these types of comments, explanations, and justifications for mass violence have become so common that those trying to ‘do political work’ on social media following these events have begun to preemptively mock what they perceive to be the ‘other side’s’ likely response. In this particular case, we saw considerably more ‘liberal’ coded sarcastic messages mocking what are generally perceived to be ‘conservative’ viewpoints and arguments.

While this tracks with research that has shown that liberals are more likely than conservatives to use sarcasm and mocking in political commentary (Davis et al., 2018), the disparity between liberal and conservative sarcastic tweets may also be simply a matter of the specific facts of this shooting. Given the death toll, the location of the shooting in a state that has minimal gun control measures in place, and the bungled police response, there were more areas for liberals to attack conservative logic and talking points using sarcasm and mocking rhetoric. If the facts of this shooting (or of another politically charged news event) were different, perhaps we would have seen more commentary mocking what are perceived to be ‘liberal’ arguments and talking points. Given increased levels of polarization, political echo chambers, and the concretizing and homogenizing of ‘typical’ political positions and arguments across a variety of hot-button issues, we will likely continue to see political argumentation evolve into this sort of meta-commentary that is as much about one’s own viewpoint as it is about point-scoring against an opponent.

The ease with which Twitter users deployed sarcasm also demonstrates just how normalized mass gun violence has become in the United States (and for others observing the United States), as these events have become so common that they have seemingly lost their ‘shock factor’ (Schildkraut et al., 2016). Mass shootings and even school shootings may still understandably provoke sad or angry reactions for many, but they are unlikely to shock anyone who pays attention to American news. People may be responding with sarcasm because (among other reasons) they consider mass shootings common enough to be ‘fair game’ for any kind of tone, because they are tired of having the same conversations

and arguments about why these shootings continue to happen, or because this is how they cope with their sadness, anger, and pain.

The use of sarcasm in these Twitter replies may also be reflective of an increasing nihilism, and defeatism, under late capitalism. While we did not have the necessary space to delve deeper into these questions in this paper, future research might look to examine the pervasiveness of sarcasm and dark humor in response to mass tragedy and its relationship to the 24-hour news cycle, as well as worsening environmental, political, and social conditions. Given the near-constant news about existential threats like climate change and disease, as well as worsening social problems related to poverty, widening inequality, and political violence and upheaval, many – and especially Twitter users, who are likely more plugged in to the news, politics, and world events than others – may feel overwhelmed and powerless, and thus turn to sarcasm and mocking as a coping mechanism. While we cannot ascribe motivation to the individual sarcastic and mocking responses to the Uvalde case, the use of dark humor as a coping strategy is a worrying trend to monitor, particularly given observations in the literature that use of sarcasm and mocking rhetoric may undermine the severity of tragic events like gun violence and frustrate efforts toward reform.

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