Compromised and Manipulative Information (CMI): Rhetoric and Social Justice in Advertising

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Digital advertising increasingly functions as a core infrastructure through which political and issue-based information is produced, circulated, and monetized. Yet advertising scholarship has paid limited attention to how persuasive rhetoric embedded in platform infrastructures normalizes misleading claims as socially legitimate knowledge. This study examines how anti-abortion advertising on social media deploys rhetorical strategies that distort reproductive-health information and constrain autonomy. Using a sequential mixed-method design, we analyze 1,849 advertisements from the Meta Ad Library. Following data cleaning (n = 612), we combine manual thematic coding based on Transformative Advertising Research (TAR) impact domains with computational TF–IDF vectorization, K-means clustering, and rhetorical analysis using Aristotle's appeals. Findings identify recurring patterns of Compromised and Manipulative Information (CMI) encompassing misinformation, disinformation, coercion, and conspiracy. We show how these rhetorical forms are amplified through platform incentives and generate layered social justice harms. The study contributes a transferable framework for diagnosing rhetorically manipulative issue-based advertising in digital environments.

Keywords: compromised and manipulative information (CMI); advertising rhetoric; issue-based advertising; misinformation and disinformation; social media advertising

Introduction

Digital advertising has become a core market infrastructure through which information is produced, amplified, and monetized (Diaz Ruiz, 2024). Within this system, commercial engagement logics incentivize emotionally charged, polarizing, or misleading content (Mills et al., 2019). For example, Meta reportedly generated an estimated €43,750 from 199 anti-abortion Facebook advertisements between May 2022 and June 2023 that

collectively produced 9.4 million impressions (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2024). Such cases illustrate how platform revenue models can materially benefit from the large-scale circulation of politically charged and potentially misleading issue-based content. At the same time, fragmented regulation and uneven enforcement enable such content to circulate with limited accountability (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Flynn & Seiders, 2025; Stewart, 2019). Consequently, digital advertising infrastructures may become structurally entangled with the dissemination and normalization of misleading messages within platform ecosystems (Johnson et al., 2023).

Transformative Advertising Research (TAR) highlights advertising's potential to generate positive social, environmental, and well-being outcomes (Gurrieri et al., 2022; Huh & Faber, 2022). Parallel research demonstrates that advertising rhetoric shapes interpretation and meaning-making processes (Fletcher-Brown et al., 2023; Middleton et al., 2021), while rhetorical institutionalism explains how discourse stabilizes and reshapes institutional orders over time (Cornelissen et al., 2015; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). Meanwhile, misinformation scholarship documents the proliferation of ideologically distorted communication in digital environments (Stafford, 2024; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Despite these insights, these streams remain insufficiently integrated. In particular, advertising research has not fully theorized how rhetorical strategies embedded within digital advertising infrastructures contribute to the normalization of misleading claims as socially legitimate knowledge. This omission is significant because advertising operates as an institutional actor that produces and circulates symbolic meanings capable of shaping both market and societal logics (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021; Raymond et al., 2024). To address this gap, we integrate TAR's multi-level framework (Gurrieri et al., 2022) with Aristotle's rhetorical appeals—ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos—to examine how issue-based advertising constructs and legitimizes informational distortion. We

conceptualize digital advertising as a rhetorical-institutional practice through which meanings, legitimacy, and perceived truth are negotiated and stabilized within platform infrastructures (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). In this sense, digital advertising operates simultaneously as market infrastructure, institutional actor, and rhetorical environment. Accordingly, we ask:

RQ1: How are rhetorical strategies deployed across different forms of misleading, manipulative, and harmful information in digital advertising?

RQ2: How do these forms constrain social justice outcomes for vulnerable groups?

RQ3: How does the infrastructural dissemination of such content amplify its capacity to influence policy, public discourse, and institutional norms?

Anti-abortion advertising provides a salient empirical context for examining these dynamics. Prior research shows that such campaigns frequently deploy selective evidence, emotionally charged narratives, and ideological framing that distort reproductive-health information and intensify public polarization (Allcott et al., 2019; Pagoto et al., 2023). These rhetorical strategies can influence public opinion and shape market outcomes when misleading claims alter expectations and perceptions (Yannopoulou et al., 2024). In addition, “false-flag” websites and testimonial narratives blur the boundary between advocacy and misinformation, enabling harmful claims to appear credible (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2024; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In contexts characterized by heightened emotional and situational vulnerability, such rhetorical forms may constrain informed deliberation and reproductive autonomy.

Methodology

Sequential Research Design and Data Sample

This study employs a sequential mixed-method research design to examine how rhetorical strategies embedded in digital advertising infrastructures normalize misleading claims as legitimate knowledge. The design combines qualitative thematic coding with computational text analysis and rhetorical interpretation to capture both the structural distribution of messaging patterns and their persuasive mechanisms. The dataset comprises advertisements retrieved from the Meta Ad Library, a public archive of political and issue-based advertising on Facebook and Instagram. Ads were collected between April and September 2024, a period of intensified debate in the United Kingdom surrounding reproductive rights, including parliamentary attempts to decriminalize abortion in England and Wales. This context generated heightened political and public attention, creating conditions in which anti-abortion advertising activity increased. Advertisements were retrieved using a structured keyword search strategy designed to capture issue-based messaging related to abortion and reproductive policy debates (Appendix 1). The initial dataset included 1,849 advertisements. Many adverts represented duplicate campaign placements or variations within the archive. After removing duplicates, the final dataset comprised 612 unique advertisements.

Data Analysis

Stage 1: Manual Thematic Coding

In the first stage, the 612 advertisements were manually coded using two sets of a priori categories: the six Transformative Advertising Research (TAR) impact domains and four typologies of information disorder—misinformation, disinformation, coercion, and conspiracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fletcher-Brown et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2021). The first author conducted initial coding, after which co-authors independently reviewed the

dataset to enhance interpretive rigor. (See Figure 1.) Differences in coding were resolved through reflexive discussion and consensus, consistent with interpretive research standards (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). **[Figure 1 near here]**

Stage 2: Computational Text Analysis

The second stage employed machine-assisted text analysis to identify patterns of lexical similarity across advertisements. Each advert was vectorized using Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF), a widely used technique in computational text analysis that highlights distinctive vocabulary while suppressing common words (Humphreys & Wang, 2018; Sharma & Singh, 2024). The analysis was conducted using Scikit-Learn, a Python machine-learning library (Pedregosa et al., 2011). Following vectorization, K-means clustering was applied to group advertisements based on shared vocabulary patterns. Similar approaches are frequently used in misinformation detection and media frame analysis (Barve & Saini, 2022; Burscher et al., 2016; Tianda et al., 2024). A light rule-based cleaning step removed encoding errors and irrelevant tokens to ensure cluster interpretability. This analysis produced twelve lexical clusters, distributed across the four typologies of information disorder, disinformation, misinformation clusters, coercion clusters, and conspiracy clusters. (See Figure 2.)

[Figure 2 near here]

Stage 3: Rhetorical Interpretation

In the final stage, the twelve clusters were manually interpreted using Aristotle's rhetorical appeals—ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos. This stage enabled analysis of how linguistic patterns identified through clustering correspond to persuasive strategies embedded within advertising messages.

Findings

Stage 1: Thematic Mapping Across TAR Impact Domains

The initial thematic analysis mapped advertisements across the six impact domains. The political impact domain contained the largest volume of advertisements (424), typically framing abortion policy or telemedical provision as evidence of governmental failure or moral decline. The social and community impact domain (407 adverts) included narratives depicting abortion as socially destructive, frequently relying on regret-based testimonies or portrayals of fetal suffering. The legal and human rights domain (330 adverts) framed abortion law as discriminatory, particularly in relation to Down syndrome, thereby questioning reproductive autonomy. The community health domain (117 adverts) circulated sensationalized claims about medical risks, including "DIY abortion" narratives portraying providers as negligent. The educational domain (112 adverts) presented ideologically selective information as neutral public education, such as events framed as informational campaigns. The economic domain contained the fewest examples (19 adverts), typically depicting abortion services as financially exploitative or misaligned with humanitarian priorities. Advertisements were also categorized according to information disorder typologies. Coercion was the largest category (441 adverts), characterized by emotional pressure, moral urgency, and guilt-inducing appeals. Conspiracy narratives appeared in 208 adverts and typically suggested hidden agendas or ideological plots behind abortion policy. Misinformation (118 adverts) involved inaccurate claims without clear evidence of intentional deception, while disinformation (112 adverts) contained deliberately misleading or strategically distorted claims.

Stage 2: Lexical Clusters of Information Disorder

The computational analysis identified distinct rhetorical patterns within each typology.

Disinformation.

Disinformation clusters (D0, D1, D2) frequently employed legalistic and biomedical framing to produce misleading interpretations of abortion law. D0 cluster emphasized gestational limits, portraying the UK's 24-week legal threshold as "extreme" while implying that viable fetuses are routinely aborted. These adverts often conflated premature births with abortion procedures, exploiting public uncertainty about medical terminology and fetal viability. D1 disinformation cluster framed abortion reforms—particularly in Northern Ireland—as authoritarian political impositions. Messaging frequently invoked terms such as "regime," "unborn," and "campaign," portraying legislative change as a betrayal of democratic values while omitting the legal context of international human rights obligations. D2 cluster relied on emotionally charged narratives depicting abortion as "killing babies" and portraying telemedical abortion as dangerous. These adverts anthropomorphized the fetus and used domestic imagery to intensify emotional resonance while encouraging readers to engage with additional campaign materials.

Misinformation

Misinformation clusters (M0, M1, M2) relied heavily on emotional storytelling and anecdotal evidence. M0 cluster centered on disability narratives, particularly Down syndrome, framing abortion as discriminatory violence against disabled children while ignoring the medical and legal context of selective termination. M1 cluster focused on political misinformation, claiming that legislators planned to introduce abortion "up to birth" or remove all legal protections for fetuses. These messages used urgent calls to action, encouraging users to contact political representatives to oppose proposed reforms. M2 cluster combined personal testimonies with medical misinformation. Advertisements described traumatic experiences with abortion pills, promoted medically unsupported treatments such as "abortion pill reversal," or used isolated anecdotes to imply systemic

medical risk.

Coercion

Coercive clusters (CN0, CN1, CN2) were characterized by urgent calls to political or collective action. CN0 cluster encouraged petition signing or legislative campaigning through imperative language such as “act now” or “sign the petition.” These adverts frequently combined references to fetal life with policy proposals to create a sense of moral obligation. CN1 focused on collective mobilization through events such as marches or rallies. Messaging emphasized ideological identity and solidarity, encouraging participation in advocacy movements as a form of civic responsibility. CN2 cluster framed telemedical abortion as a threat, using emotionally charged language and exaggerated timelines to encourage audiences to support restrictive policies.

Conspiracy

Conspiracy clusters (CP0, CP1, CP2) framed abortion rights as evidence of broader cultural or ideological conflict. CP0 depicted anti-abortion activism as moral resistance against social decline, often using religious or moral language to elevate group identity. CP1 invoked disability rights narratives to suggest that medical professionals systematically pressure parents to terminate pregnancies involving fetal anomalies, implying covert eugenic agendas within healthcare systems. CP2 framed abortion policy as part of a wider effort to undermine religious freedom, free speech, and traditional social values. These adverts frequently positioned reproductive rights as a threat to cultural identity and social order.

Stage 3: Rhetorical Strategies

Mapping clusters onto Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals revealed distinct persuasive patterns.

(See Table 1.) Disinformation clusters relied primarily on logos, mimicking empirical reasoning through distorted scientific or legal claims. These arguments were reinforced through ethos, which invoked expert authority or moral legitimacy, and kairos, which emphasized urgency around legislative developments. Misinformation clusters were dominated by pathos, relying on emotionally charged testimonies, grief narratives, and moral appeals. Kairos amplified these messages by linking them to political events or policy debates. Coercion clusters combined pathos, ethos, and kairos to generate moral pressure and collective responsibility. Calls to sign petitions, attend rallies, or oppose legislative reforms framed participation as both urgent and ethically necessary. Conspiracy clusters emphasized ethos and pathos, portraying anti-abortion activism as morally virtuous resistance against institutional corruption. Appeals to freedom, religion, and cultural identity were used to discredit institutional knowledge and reinforce group solidarity. **[Table 1 near here]**

Discussion

Digital infrastructures are widely recognized as reproducing social and reproductive injustice through ideologically coded communicative norms (Hein et al., 2016; Peñaloza et al., 2023). Yet disinformation is often treated primarily as an epistemic problem—an issue of truth and error—rather than as a form of structural coercion embedded in platform governance (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). This study reframes the problem by situating Compromised and Manipulative Information (CMI) within reproductive governance, showing how platformed advertising rhetoric distorts facts, reshapes agency, and constrains participation (Morgan & Roberts, 2012; Pagoto et al., 2023; Rowlands, 2011). The analysis addresses two gaps. First, prominent frameworks of information disorder classify content largely by intent and veracity (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), but often under-theorize how persuasive design—

particularly in advertising—limits agency and distorts democratic participation even when claims are partially 'true' (Atkin, 2023; Ruiz, 2023). Second, while feminist scholarship has theorized how platforms reproduce gendered inequality and precarity (Lokot, 2021; Peñaloza et al., 2023), fewer studies systematically connect rhetorical form to material harm through a justice lens (Hein et al., 2016). By integrating rhetorical analysis with TAR's impact domains, we show how harms can be diagnosed beyond factual falsity: disinformation leverages pseudo-authority and urgency to erode recognition; misinformation distorts medical knowledge and undermines capabilities; coercion compresses choice through binary moral framing and kairotic pressure; conspiracy polarizes discourse and undermines distributive justice by delegitimizing institutions. The study contributes by (1) introducing CMI as a rhetorically grounded typology (misinformation, disinformation, coercion, conspiracy); (2) mapping rhetorical appeals (ethos/pathos/logos/kairos) onto TAR impact domains to identify predictable justice harms; and (3) extending TAR by theorizing digital advertising as an institutional force that reproduces harmful sociocultural logics around autonomy and social justice. Crucially, CMI is not an anomaly circulating despite platform systems; it is enabled and rewarded by them. Commercial engagement logics amplify affective, polarizing narratives, and advertising affordances make kairotic timing, emotional ethos, and identity cues especially effective (Diaz Ruiz & Nilsson, 2022; Ruiz, 2023). Conceptualizing disinformation as infrastructure aligns with recent calls to move beyond a true/false binary and examine how platform governance monetizes rhetorical harm (Dholakia et al., 2023). Practically, the CMI framework offers a diagnostic tool for advertisers, regulators, and platforms to evaluate not only accuracy but also manipulative rhetorical design in issue advertising.

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Figures and Tables

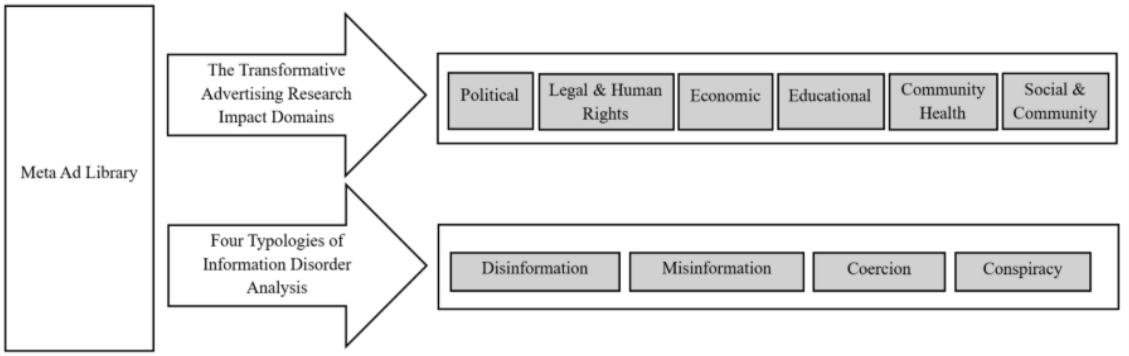

Figure 1: Pictorial representation of Stage 1 data coding analysis

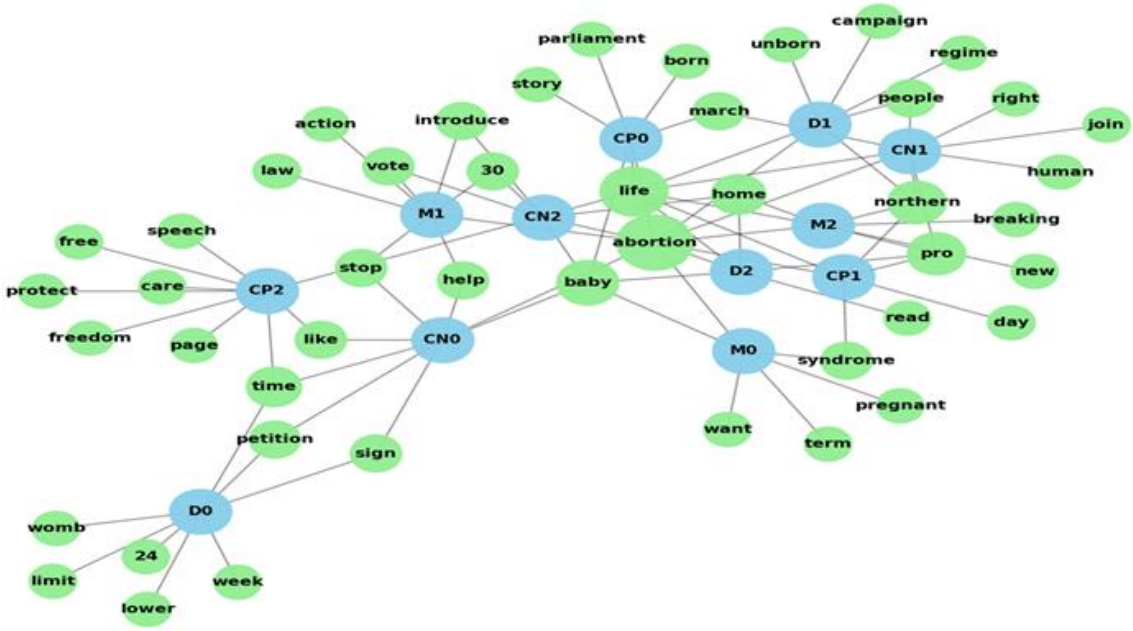

Figure 2: The resulting cluster network from Stage 1 and Stage 2 data analysis.

Cluster Code		Typical Contents	Cluster Keywords	Prevalent TAR Impact Domain	Prevalent Rhetorical Strategy	Rhetorical Arguments Limiting Reproductive Rights	Compromised and Manipulative Information Impacts on Reproductive Rights
Disinformation	D0	**Legal Distortion**	*time, sign, petition, lower, 24, week, limit, womb*	Legal & Human Rights Impact; Social & Community Impact	**Logos, Kairos**	Appeals to reason through distorted evidence about weeks, limits, viability (Logos); urgency to act before it's too late (Kairos).	Falsifies gestational science and abortion thresholds to restrict bodily autonomy and frame care as legally extreme
Disinformation	D1	**Fabricated Threats of Political Overreach**	*northern, people, abortion, life, regime, unborn, campaign*	Political Impact	**Logos, Pathos, Ethos**	Pseudo-medical logic (Logos); fear, guilt, and health panic (Pathos); moral elevation of the fetus (Ethos)	Constructs abortion law as authoritarian imposition, distorting democratic reform and eroding trust in governance.
Disinformation	D2	**False Information Generating Fearmongering**	*abortion, home, baby, life, read, pro*	Community Health Impact; Educational Impact	**Logos, Pathos, Ethos**	Pseudo-medical logic (Logos); emotionally manipulative, focusing on fear, guilt, and safety anxieties (Pathos); moral elevation of the fetus (Ethos)	Misrepresents medical abortion as unsafe and unethical, undermining access to trusted, science-backed reproductive care.
Misinformation	M0	**Emotive Appeals to Stimulate Moral Panic**	*baby, syndrome, abortion, want, term, pregnant*	Social & Community Impact; Educational Impact	**Pathos**	Grief, moral panic, and victimhood narratives (Pathos).	Co-opts disability rights to stigmatise reproductive choice, distorting autonomy through grief and faux inclusion rhetoric.
Misinformation	M1	**Alarmist Narratives About Legislative Collapse**	*abortion, vote, introduce, stop, 30, law, help, action*	Political Impact; Legal & Human Rights Impact	**Pathos, Logos**	Urgency and outrage (Pathos); false legal detail and distorted parliamentary timelines (Logos).	Misconstrual of lawmaking timelines to incite moral panic and political urgency, narrowing the space for informed democratic participation.
Misinformation	M2	**Misrepresenting Personal Testimonies**	*abortion, life, home, pro, breaking, new, northern*	Community Health Impact	**Pathos, Ethos**	Personal testimonies used to create moral authority (Ethos); panic and emotional suffering (Pathos).	Leverages unverified personal stories to falsely characterise abortion as medically traumatic and culturally unsafe.
Coercion	CN0	**Civic Mobilisation Through Guilt and Urgency**	*sign, petition, time, help, abortion, baby, like, stop*	Social & Community Impact	**Kairos, Pathos, Ethos**	Act-now messaging (Kairos); shame and moral pressure (Pathos); moral duty + credibility of civic participation (Ethos).	Uses moralised appeals and pseudo-democratic tools (petitions) to pressure individuals, suppress dissent, and shape civic norms.
Coercion	CN1	**Nationalism Framed as Collective Duty**	*life, pro, abortion, northern, people, human, join, march, right*	Social & Community Impact	**Kairos, Pathos, Ethos**	Urgency to defend national identity (Kairos); shared cultural/religious identity + moral outrage (Ethos).	Fuses nationalist rhetoric with moral panic to frame abortion as a cultural threat, reinforcing exclusionary identity politics.
Coercion	CN2	**Inciting Political Action Through Distorting Legal Framework**	*abortion, home, vote, baby, introduce, 30*	Political Impact; Legal & Human Rights Impact	**Kairos, Logos, Pathos**	Time-limited parliamentary threat (Kairos); distorted legal framing (Logos); urgency (Pathos).	Distorts legislative action as emergency moral collapse, narrowing deliberation windows through pathos and false legality.
Conspiracy	CP0	**Staged Activism as Moral Spectacle**	*abortion, march, life, baby, born, parliament, story*	Social & Community Impact	**Ethos, Pathos, Kairos,**	Community participation (Ethos); spectacle and emotional display (Pathos); scheduled events (Kairos).	Conceals political mobilisation under moral theatre, pressuring social cohesion through performance and sanctimony.
Conspiracy	CP1	**Weaponizing Vulnerability**	*abortion, life, pro, day, syndrome, northern*	Social & Community Impact; Educational Impact	**Pathos**	Emotion, grief, and injustice (Pathos).	Constructs cultural victimhood through emotional exploitation of disability, reinforcing systemic moral binaries.
Conspiracy	CP2	**Free Speech as a Trojan Horse for Ideology**	*speech, like, freedom, protect, time, free, care, page, life*	Political Impact; Legal & Human Rights Impact	**Kairos, Ethos, Logos**	Prioritizing freedom (Kairos); authority of democratic values and institutional trust (Ethos); rational defence of free speech (Logos).	Uses freedom-of-speech rhetoric to legitimise coercive agendas, reframing reproductive rights as threats to democratic ideals.

Table 1: Compromised and Manipulative Information (CMI) clusters mapped to social justice impact domains and rhetorical strategy