

# NEOLIBERAL VIOLENCE AND EXCESSIVE HEALTHCARE PRIVATISATION: A SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS OF SUPPORT REACTIONS TO THE UNITEDHEALTHCARE CEO'S ASSASSINATION

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper analyses the supportive online reactions to the assassination of the CEO of UnitedHealthCare, a health insurance company in the United States. By examining 60 social media posts (30 from Instagram and 30 from X), the study aims to explore how supporters of this action express their opinions about the healthcare system in online environments. The relevance of this study lies in the significant support expressed for the perpetrator, which extends beyond extremist groups and includes individuals from more moderate backgrounds. The results show that the assassination has exposed deeper societal frustrations, primarily reflected in the expression of negative emotions such as anger and resentment within the analysed posts.

**Keywords:** healthcare privatisation, neoliberalism, CEO, justified violence, social media analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Privatisation is defined as "the transfer of public service provision to private individuals or companies" (Goodair et al., 2024, p. 119). In healthcare, privatisation was embraced around the world to meet the rising demand for services, foster competition to reduce costs, expand healthcare options, and improve hospital efficiency and quality (Alayed, 2024, p. 126). Another key argument in favor of healthcare privatisation was its role in supporting the free market and generating profit (Potter, 2010, p. 80).

Although the impact of the privatisation of health systems is complex, contextual and therefore difficult to measure (Borras, 2024, p. 120), there is a growing inequality in the ability of citizens to access quality healthcare (Lynch, 2021, p. 3), both between and within countries (Berer, 2010, p. 5). In this sense, neoliberal ideas have played an active role in the reconfiguration of social systems that have a direct impact on the lives of citizens, while redefining the role of the state in the creation and management of the relationships between these systems (Baru et al., 2018, p. 3).

Therefore, within the framework of the neoliberalisation of healthcare systems, this paper aims to analyse, in a brief manner, the supportive online reactions to the violent assassination of the CEO of UnitedHealthCare (UHC) in the United States (US) by Luigi Mangione, a young man outraged by the cost of healthcare. The research method used is discourse analysis. The case study is based on an analysis of 60 posts, 30 from the X social network and 30 from the Instagram platform. At the same time, the theory that will be used for this purpose is neoliberal violence.

The aim of the study is to identify how supporters of this action express their views about the healthcare system online. The starting hypothesis is the statement "They were shocked to see that we see them the way they see us". The statement was extracted from the comments section of the Youtube video "Failure, Fear, And Frenzy around Luigi Mangione", the channel of Josh Johnson, an American comedian. I chose this comment because it encapsulates the essence of the perceptions of those who support this violent act. It points to a lack of empathy on the

part of insurance companies, a lack that has life and death consequences for a large number of citizens.

There are at least two reasons why studying this case through social media analysis is essential. First, the discursive analysis of the selected posts can identify and explain a number of reasons why there is support for a politically motivated assassination case. Second, the analysis highlights one of the possible consequences of excessive privatisation of healthcare when profit is aggressively placed over citizens' welfare, namely vigilante violence.

The paper is organised into several sections, as outlined below. Subsequent to the introduction, the section on theory and method offers additional framing. This is followed by the contextualisation of the case study. This section outlines the circumstances of the crime and provides details of the perpetrator, helping to clarify the relevance of analysing this case. Finally, the case study is conducted, followed by discussions and conclusion.

## THEORY & METHOD

As mentioned in the introductory section, this paper builds on the theory of neoliberal violence. Therefore, theoretically, neoliberalism is framed in the ideology of reducing government intervention in the economy (Willis, 2005, p. 47), reducing social safety nets, deregulating markets (Palley, 2005, p. 25) and removing barriers to the mobility of labour, capital, goods and services (Navarro, 2007, p. 9).

The practice of neoliberalisation of health systems can be seen in privatisation, marketization, corporatisation and outsourcing (Turner et al., 2021, p. 320). These are very often associated with the process of globalisation (Collyer et al., 2011, p. 239) and have a profound impact on access, equity and quality of health services (Anaf et al., 2024, p. 2), especially among low-status groups, where growing economic inequalities have generated resentment and frustration (Ignatow et al., 2024, p. 1749).

The negative effects of the neoliberalisation of healthcare systems are particularly visible in the US, where the increase of economic inequality has been accompanied by a widening of the gap in health outcomes (Dickman, 2017, p. 1431). As the cost of healthcare in the US has risen significantly more than in any other country, citizens of the US pay more than citizens of other developed countries for the same services (Hoffer, 2019, p. 675). Yet the services provided are fragmented,

inefficient, often unqualified, difficult to access, and do not take into account social determinants of health such as income and education (Jones et al., 2024, p. 1). As a result, healthcare is treated as a market commodity that can be bought and sold, rather than as a social good that should benefit all citizens (Barr, 2007, p. 2).

Despite its ideological focus on individual freedom as a means to well-being, neoliberalism perpetuates a distinct form of violence through the exacerbation of crises and the deepening of economic inequalities between and within nations (Springer, 2016, pp. 153-154). In this respect, neoliberal discourses play an important role in normalising institutional violence by prioritising pursuit of individual goals, even at expense of human lives, by facilitating "ideas and actions that are considered obscene outside the economic frame of reference" (Berdayes et al., 2016, p. 1). Thus, this study uses the concept of neoliberal violence as a framework for examining social media reactions to corporate healthcare decisions—such as increasing the cost of healthcare services—framed within the context of the CEO's assassination. These measures, often driven by profit, are implemented without consideration for their devastating impact on citizens of lower socio-economic status.

In terms of methodology, as mentioned in the introduction, the approach will be discourse analysis. The reactions within the echo chamber supporting this violent action are analysed on the basis of 60 posts: 30 from the X platform (using the acronym "UHC CEO") and 30 from Instagram (using the hashtag "#freeluigi"), published between 9 December 2024 (the date of the crime) and 15 January 2025 (the time of writing this paper). To ensure diversity, I selected 30 posts from each of the aforementioned social networks. The posts were collected using purposive sampling, based on their relevance to the objectives of this study. The hashtag and acronym were chosen based on their frequent mentions. Subsequently, the posts were grouped thematically to facilitate analysis. Therefore, on Instagram, the analysis focuses mostly, but not entirely, on public perceptions of Mangione, while the posts on X focus on the UHC, wealthy CEOs, and complaints about the health system.

The topics addressed on each platform will be analysed separately, starting with Instagram posts and ending with those from platform X. The analysis will consider both the textual content of the posts and the meanings conveyed by the attached images, which serve to reinforce the central ideas of the text.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE CRIME

Before moving on to the actual analysis, I will introduce the case study by contextualising the crime and outlining a portrait of Luigi Mangione, the perpetrator of Brian Thompson, who held the position of CEO of the health insurance company UHC.

Luigi Mangione is a 26-year-old from a wealthy Maryland family with Italian roots (Pigliucci et al., 2024). He is a computer science graduate from an Ivy League university (Kilgannon et al., 2024). Passionate about reading and civic activism, he is described by peers as an intelligent and empathetic young man (Yerton et al., 2024).

Mangione's frustration with the high cost of health insurance in the US stems both from personal experience – his chronic back pain has brought him into direct contact with the “parasitic” medical system (Halpert et al., 2024) – and from his belief in the need for a social system that guarantees healthcare as a right for all citizens (Tolan et al., 2024). He has written what the press calls a “manifesto” in which he condemns “greedy” health insurance companies for exploiting citizens with overpriced, but poor quality services. In this manifesto, he points out that despite having the most expensive healthcare system, the US ranks 42nd in the world when it comes to life expectancy (Burman, 2024).

This murder case is particularly significant because of the widespread support it has received in American society, which has been broadly expressed on social media. Jared Holt, a senior research analyst at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, highlighted that unlike similar events, this case drew support not only from vulnerable groups or extremist voices, but also from the moderate population, raising concerns that “so many people seem to think shooting someone dead in the street is a valid response to that anger” (ISD, 2024). Further evidence of this support can be seen in the decision of the coordinators of the UHC Instagram page to disable comments on the official post announcing the killing of the CEO, as the comments were overwhelmingly in favour of the act (Dailymail, 2024).

### “WHO'S NEXT?": NARRATIVES OF JUSTIFIED VIOLENCE ON INSTAGRAM

Having completed the context and case presentation, I will now proceed to the analysis of the Instagram posts. The “#freeluigi” hashtag, which includes images and short meme-style

videos, has been used in more than 11,000 posts in less than two months. These memes offer different perspectives on the event and highlight its social impact. In this case, they serve as a critique of capitalism by portraying the violent incident in a positive and ironic way.

The analysis of the Instagram posts highlights three main themes: criticism of health insurance companies, the portrayal of Mangione as a saint, and his representation as a symbol of the working class through Marxist lens. These posts use irony to challenge the most aggressive aspects of neoliberalism.

Regarding health insurance corporations, the posts emphasise the lack of humanity in the way they operate. For instance, several posts feature side-by-side images – one of the UHC CEO and another of a well-known perceived enemy of the American nation, such as Osama bin Laden – accompanied by the question, “Who has killed the most Americans?” (letsfreeluigi, 2024). This rhetorical question challenges the common perception of external threats, suggesting instead that the true “enemy” is at home – posing a greater and more immediate danger than foreign attacks. Another significant image, presented as a drawing, contrasts the terms “murder” and “legal murder”. The act committed by Mangione is labeled as “murder”, a punishable offense, whereas “legal murder” refers to health insurance companies denying claims for life-saving medications. The illustration depicts the UHC CEO counting money at his desk, where a sign reading “Denied” is visible, alongside a group of people shown dying while holding their rejected claims (equality4flatbush, 2024).

The focus of journalists on the death of the CEO is also ironized through posts where people share edited images of themselves with Mangione. These images are deliberately photoshopped in an exaggerated and unrealistic manner to emphasize the perceived idea that media attention surrounding the CEO's death suggests it is of great importance, while the deaths of individuals who cannot afford health insurance are largely ignored and receive little public debate. For example, one post claims that during the time of the murder, Mangione was in a tattoo parlor getting a tattoo, with the caption stating that “[Luigi] Didn't move from my chair the whole time”. In the comments, users jokingly assert that they were witnesses, by writing statements such as “I saw him sitting there the whole time” (vanhooktattoos, 2024). The large number of similar posts highlights the sarcasm, irony, and deep frustration felt by those within this online

community, reflecting their disappointment with the healthcare system.

The anger expressed in these posts is not just directed at the UHC CEO but at corporate executives in general. Slogans such as “Eat the CEOs” (anons.madriz, 2024), “Eat the rich” (lulumangione\_, 2024), “CEO season” (i\_quit\_this, 2024), and “Who’s next?” (away.television, 2024) reflect a broader frustration with the systemic inequalities. The movement emerging on Instagram is, therefore, an anti-establishment one, driven by a segment of the population that feels unrepresented by state institutions. Supporters see Mangione as a symbol of their own struggles, identifying with his desperation and viewing him as part of the same marginalized group that continues to suffer under the current US healthcare system.

A significant number of posts depict Mangione as a hero, savior, saint, or idol. Real photos captured by journalists have been heavily photoshopped to portray him as a powerful and almost divine figure. These edited images often emphasize a piercing gaze that conveys confidence, authority, self-sacrifice, and inner peace, while his upright posture suggests control and determination (luigisbookclub, 2024), reinforcing the idea that his actions were driven by deep personal convictions. In many of these portraits, Mangione is depicted in garments that resemble those of Christian saints, often with a glowing aura drawn around him to symbolise holiness (tne031, 2024). A recurring visual motif is a drawing of a heart with a sword embedded in it, positioned at the center of his upper part of the body, with captions referring to him as “The patron saint of healthcare justice” (gedogfx, 2024). In other images, the heart is replaced with a chain holding three bullets (gedogfx, 2024), emphasizing the idea of a weapon wielded in the pursuit of justice. The devotion to this imagery has even extended to physical objects, such as candles featuring Mangione’s image as a saint (Ray, 2024). In another widely shared image, he is depicted smiling, with the hand of Jesus resting on his shoulder and the American flag in the background, further blending themes of faith, patriotism, and justice. This image is accompanied by the text, “It’s ok, they called me guilty too” (secretsofgoths, 2024), further reinforcing the parallel between Mangione and religious figures, particularly Christian martyrs. Therefore, it can be observed that various groups are leveraging this crisis — which has gained significant attention in the American media — to promote their own interpretations of the event, shaped by their core values and beliefs. In this particular case, Chris-

tian-identifying individuals perceive Mangione’s actions as an act of martyrdom. They view him as a man who had the courage to seek justice for the perceived crimes of the healthcare system, positioning him as a figure who sacrificed himself for a greater cause.

Another dominant perspective in this case presents Mangione through Marxist lens, framing his actions as a strong anti-capitalist statement aimed at a figure representing the wealthy, powerful, and influential elite. In this context, one widely shared photo reimagines the character Mario as Mangione, staring determinedly into the future with the sun shining in the distance. The accompanying text, “A world without billionaires is possible” (anarcomemes.transhumanistas, 2024), reinforces the belief that his actions symbolize a step toward dismantling corporations and oppressive power structures that negatively impact the working class in the US.

Although Mangione himself comes from a wealthy background and is not traditionally part of the working class, some Marxist-inspired posts argue that class is not defined by one’s origins, but rather by “the class you are willing to fight for” (snitch\_watcher, 2024). To illustrate this idea, another popular image features three men in suits — two holding glasses of champagne and one holding a flaming bottle. Mangione is presented in a positive light in this image, labeled as “a traitor to his class” (snitch\_watcher, 2024), suggesting that his defection from the upper class in support of the working class aligns him with their struggle for justice.

Therefore, the analysis of the 30 selected Instagram posts reveals how a politically motivated murder, rooted in vigilante violence, has sparked supportive reactions, particularly from groups who feel adversely affected by the US healthcare system. Unlike other similar events, however, it is concerning that this case has also garnered support from the more moderate population, not just those on the extremes (Rai, 2024). This trend underscores the potential normalisation of the idea that social change can be driven by acts of violence. Concerns are further amplified by the fact that Anthem Blue Cross, another major health insurer, backed away from implementing restrictions on the amount of time that anaesthesia could be covered during hospitalisation for its insured patients after the murder of the UHC CEO (Fattah et al., 2024). Thus, the actions taken by insurance companies in relation to this crime may unintentionally reinforce the perception that violence can effectively challenge corporate power and force systemic change.

## EMPATHY BUT NOT FOR “THEM”: AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC SENTIMENT ON X

Although different keywords were used to identify the data on the two social networks, the themes of the selected text images do not differ significantly. However, the main difference in approach is that on platform X, the debates focus more on the role of insurance companies and the health system in shaping such violent actions, a point implied by the acronym used. The arguments presented by users are more clearly defined, and the emotions most often expressed are anger, injustice, and frustration, accompanied by sarcasm and irony.

Similar to the data analyzed from Instagram, there are also posts on X that highlight the influence and power held by corporate leaders in the US. However, unlike Instagram, the arguments used in posts on X convey more anger and tension than humor. In these posts, users attempt to explain why they feel no empathy for the death of the CEO. Some of these arguments mention that “millions in the U.S. lost someone who could not afford treatment” (Savannah, 2024) because the insurance company “constantly denies care to patients” (UFHealth Whistleblower Kathleen Maynard, 2024), with a denial rate of 32%, the highest in the US (Maynard, 2024). Another example is a post by a user who mentions that the CEO “was being investigated for insider trading” (Briahna Joy Gray, 2024), pointing out that his illegal activities have not been covered by the media as extensively as his portrayal as a father and husband, which serves to evoke empathy through victimization (@HlthWlthAbndnc, 2024). This form of victimization particularly outrages those who believe that these companies create a form of genocide due to the large number of people who die each year because they cannot afford healthcare insurance, as noted by a commenter in the post’s discussion section.

In some posts, the discussion of empathy shifts from the UHC CEO to Mangione, for whom empathy is found among the segment of the social network being analyzed. For example, in one video, images of Mangione from the time of the crime are shown, while in the background plays a song. The lyrics frame the act of killing as a heroic deed (“you were the one with all the strength”, “did you know that you’re my hero?”) (Matt Kresling, 2024). The comments on this post are divided between those who support Mangione and those who state that “crime should never be condoned” (Laurence Boorstein, 2024), regar-

dless of the reason for the killing.

Another point of debate emerged from a comment made by a person of color on the X platform. Before the criminal was identified, US news channels described Mangione by focusing on the color of his skin, referring to him as a “light skinned man” rather than a “white man”. The post highlights that African Americans are often identified as “light skinned”, and the use of this description for the criminal “echoes fragility” (The Trending Trailblazer, 2024), given the general perceptions about people of color and criminality in the US. This observation brought attention to the racial dynamics involved in how the media framed the case, especially in relation to societal stereotypes about crime.

Similar to Instagram, the possibility of other CEOs in the US being targeted is also being discussed, but in a much more vocal way. For example, Elon Musk, an American oligarch, is mentioned as being in a situation similar to that of the UHC CEO. He intervenes in US politics in order to secure advantages for the development of his companies, thereby increasing his profits without taking into account the public good (@HlthWlthAbndnc, 2024). In this context, a video of Elon Musk with his younger child on his shoulders is accompanied by the text “This child is literally a human shield for Elon” (tramp., 2024). The caption points out that Musk only began bringing his child to public events after the murder of the UHC CEO, suggesting that he is using his child to avoid becoming the next target of anti-capitalist fury.

As for the possibility of assassinating other CEOs, an X user posted a photo of a flyer taped to a pole in Austin, Texas. The flyer was an invitation to an open discussion entitled “One CEO down: what can we do about the rest?” (Louniki, 2024). The picture on the flyer shows Mangione being escorted to a hearing by a large number of police officers. In the comments section, the official UHC page is tagged alongside an ironic question asking whether the insurance company’s executives will attend. These discussions, and especially the highlighting of such meetings, suggest that certain extremist groups have been encouraged by the “success” of this murder to carry out terrorist actions with possible social repercussions.

In this respect, the results have already been seen. In Manhattan, for example, posters have been put up with the names of several health insurance company CEOs on them (Eyal Yakoby, 2024). These posters serve as an anti-capitalist manifesto, accusing the CEOs of “denying

medical care for corporate profit" and stating that they should not feel safe (Eyal Yakoby, 2024). Among the posters is one showing the murdered CEO, but his image is crossed out with a red "X" to emphasise that one has already been eliminated and the rest will follow (Eyal Yakoby, 2024). The display of such images with terrorist messages creates fear among observers and has no support, with the consensus being that it has gone too far.

Thus, the analysis of the 30 selected posts from the X platform, using the abbreviation "UHC CEO", reveals that the messages have a much more political component, focusing on issues related to the health system by highlighting the power and influence of large companies in general. Even more than the Instagram posts, this analysis shows a certain level of active hostility towards the CEOs of large companies, as evidenced by the posters with aggressive and terrorist messages that are put up in cities to provoke fear and uncertainty. This highlights that Mangione's act has encouraged extremist groups to carry out visible actions to express their ideological views. However, it is likely that such manifestations will cease as the assassination shock fades over time.

## DISCUSSION

As the hashtag "#freelugi" was employed on the Instagram platform, the majority of the generated posts focused on public perceptions of the assassin. Upon analyzing the 30 selected posts for their relevance to the study, three recurring discursive framings emerged: Mangione was portrayed as a hero or saint, as a fighter against capitalism, and as a representative of the working class. The dominant narrative centered on corporations, portrayed as lacking empathy and strongly focused on maximising profits. In this context, sympathising with Mangione is a form of anti-systemic rebellion, with the assassination of the UHC CEO acting as a catalyst for pre-existing frustrations among certain societal groups.

As far as the images analysed from the X platform are concerned, the themes are similar to those present in the Instagram posts, but in this case the arguments are more strongly articulated and more focused on the health insurance companies. To argue why there is no empathy for the murdered CEO, the posts highlight the weaknesses of the American healthcare system. The posts underline the suffering of the people who can not afford or are denied access to healthcare. These denials are perceived to be caused by the insurance companies' need to maximise profits.

Irony and sarcasm convey people's resignation to the possibility of changing a system that is perceived as dehumanising, and reactions in support of vigilante violence are justified as a reversal of the situation. In this sense, the argument from which this study was initiated, namely "they were shocked to see that we see them the way they see us", remains highly relevant. This is because the people in this echo chamber reacted in the same way that they perceive these companies react to their own tragedies, namely with lack of empathy, selfishness and ignorance. These reactions reflect a desire to punish a system they feel has betrayed them, as well as hostility towards elites.

In addition, it was observed that alongside the outrage in mainstream posts, there were posts that appeared to come from extremist circles. This suggests that these fringe groups use this exceptional act to propagandise their own perceptions and views of the social changes they believe are necessary, while at the same time promoting violence as a means to achieve them.

Although such violent incidents are rare, they have a strong impact on the public's perception of certain issues of general social importance. The visibility of the posts supporting this act of violence reinforces negative perceptions of companies and highlights dissatisfaction with deeper societal problems that remain unsolved. Thus, the failure to address causes of frustration in society, such as the deepening of economic inequalities due to existing power structures, can lead to increased tolerance for acts of violence when they are committed against elites, those perceived as belonging to "the other".

Similar to other social media-based protests, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, the online reactions on platforms like Instagram and X in the Mangione case were marked by decentralisation. In the absence of a central leadership, these digital protests were primarily fuelled by the collective emotional response of individuals who identified with the attacker's situation. As is frequently observed in such cases, once the initial shock of the event had passed, the number of posts began to decline, and the visibility of the protest gradually diminished. Consequently, the movement dissolved without having a significant impact on broader societal change. Unlike other protests, this particular form of protest remained online and did not result in physical demonstrations in public spaces. Furthermore, in this particular case, as opposed to the aforementioned protest movements, the attacker is perceived as the victim, while the actual victim is viewed as the abuser.

The findings of this paper align with broader literature on digital activism. This literature describes such activism as being decentralised and short-lived, and as failing to achieve meaningful change due to institutional rigidity (George et al., 2019; Mindel et al., 2024). Additionally, as can be observed in the case study and in other examples from the literature, emotions play a significant role in shaping collective identities, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging to a representative online community (Shahi et al., 2021, p. 534). The social media posts analysed have become a form of protest against the health system and health insurance companies. Supporters of this action express their opinions about the healthcare system through posts that reveal emotions such as anger, frustration, despair and disappointment. These emotions are conveyed through words and images that express irony, sarcasm and amusement, thus answering the research question: How do supporters of this action express their opinions about the healthcare system in online environments?

Based on the theory of neoliberal violence, the study started from the literature's premise that the privatisation of healthcare systems has not increased accessibility, quality or efficiency, but has instead deepened inequalities among citizens (Berer, 2011, p. 7). The intention to improve the quality and accessibility of health services through the privatisation of medical systems does not seem to have the desired effects, given the widespread support for Mangione and the crime he committed. On the contrary, it seems that the neoliberalisation of the medical system in the US does not meet the needs of citizens and deepens social and economic inequalities among them.

However, the limitations of this study prevent a generalisation of the previous results, as the research only analyses a sample of 60 posts from a single echo chamber, that of internet users supporting this act of violence. In addition, the need to limit the study to a pre-defined number of pages reduced the possibility of providing a clearer picture of how health insurance systems work in the US, as well as a deeper analysis of the implications of this violent act of assassination.

## CONCLUSION

Starting from the perspective of neoliberal violence, this paper focused on conducting a case study that analyzed reactions of support and sympathy on social media for the homicide perpetrator of the CEO of UnitedHealthCare.

The purpose of this study was to observe how this echo chamber expresses its opinions about the privatized healthcare system. The results highlighted the existence of hostile perceptions regarding the activity of healthcare insurance companies, perceptions that were significantly expressed through the use of sarcasm and irony. These two discourse elements reflect anger, frustration, fear, and resignation in the face of a system based on profit maximization at the expense of social good. This topic becomes relevant through the results obtained, as the supportive reactions to this act reveal deep-rooted systemic social problems that have been slightly brought to the surface by the violent act.

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