

ANTI-SEMITISM AND MISOGYNY IN THE ALT-RIGHT: AN ANALYSIS OF 4CHAN
POSTS IN THE DAYS BEFORE AND AFTER TWO MASS SHOOTINGS

by

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Anti-Semitism and Misogyny in the Alt-Right: An Analysis of 4chan Posts in the Days Before
and After Two Mass Shootings

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at
George Mason University, and the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Malta

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Abstract

ANTI-SEMITISM AND MISOGYNY IN THE ALT-RIGHT: AN ANALYSIS OF 4CHAN POSTS IN THE DAYS BEFORE AND AFTER TWO MASS SHOOTINGS

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George Mason University and University of Malta, 2022

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This thesis investigates how hate speech on social media platforms emboldens men radicalized by the alt-right to commit in-person and virtual violence through two case studies. Alt-right members on 4chan glorify Elliot Rodger as “King of the Incels” after he killed six (not including himself) and injured fourteen, citing sexual rejection as his trigger. Robert Bowers demonstrated his anti-Semitic motive by shouting “All Jews must die” before he killed eleven and injured six in a Pittsburgh synagogue. Alt-right members commit in-person violence through physical assault and mass shootings. Alternatively, they violently “troll” their victims through stalking, violent intimidation, and death and rape threats. I provide an in-depth analysis of the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between social media and violence by examining the literature on social media and the alt-right’s recruitment and radicalization cycle before turning to the alt-right’s self-proclaimed home, 4chan’s ‘Politically Incorrect’ board. I crawled four datasets from 4chan/pol/ to determine if misogynistic and anti-Semitic rhetoric increases following misogynistic and anti-Semitic terrorist attacks. The dataset results demonstrate a change in frequency of statistically significant words following Elliot Rodger and Robert Bowers’ mass shootings.

Keywords: alt-right, 4chan, social media, violence, misogyny, anti-Semitism, gendered e-bile

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Dedication

To my partner, Alex Rehman. His constant love, support, and encouragement ensured I graduate with my mental health intact.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADL – Anti-Defamation League

Anon – anonymous user

CofCC – Council of Conservative Citizens

KKK – Ku Klux Klan

MGTOW – Men Going Their Own Way

PC – Politically Correct

RINOs – Republicans in Name Only

SJW – Social Justice Warrior

SPLC – Southern Poverty Law Center

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On May 23, 2014, Elliot Rodger stabbed his three roommates, then drove to a sorority house at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he shot several women.¹ He then killed or injured several pedestrians with gunfire and his vehicle before exchanging fire with police and eventually taking his own life. In total, Rodger killed seven, including himself, and wounded fourteen.² Prior to his murderous rampage, Rodgers uploaded videos to YouTube where he described his attack and motivations. Additionally, he sent a sprawling manifesto to family members that detailed his feelings of injustice and hatred towards women who withheld sexual pleasure and happiness from him.³

Three years later, on October 27, 2018, Robert Bowers entered the Tree of Life Synagogue – or L'Simcha Congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, during Shabbat morning services and opened fire, killing eleven people and injuring six.⁴ While the media might quickly write Bowers off as another mass shooter in a long line of mass shooters that has plagued the United States in the past ten years, it is more accurate to label Bowers as a domestic terrorist motivated by anti-Semitism. Bowers often posted anti-Jewish messages on social media, spouting white supremacists and anti-Jewish conspiracy theories. He had a media presence on Gab, a fringe website favored by white nationalists, where he used John 8:44⁵ as his slogan:

¹ Keegan Hanks and Alex Amend, "The Alt-Right is Killing People," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 5, 2018, splcenter.org/20180205/alt-right-killing-people in Sarah Heiderstadt, "Meme Warfare: The Use of Memes by the Alt-Right Movement," April 13, 2022.

² Hanks and Amend, "The Alt-Right is Killing People," *Southern Poverty Law Center*.

³ "California shooting suspect Elliot Rodger's life of rage and resentment," *NBC News*, May 25, 2014, [nbcnews.com/storyline/isla-vista-rampage/California/shooting-suspect-elliott-rodgers-life-rage-resentment-n113996](https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isla-vista-rampage/California/shooting-suspect-elliott-rodgers-life-rage-resentment-n113996).

⁴ Alex Amend, "Analyzing a Terrorist's Social Media Manifesto: the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter's Posts on Gab," *Southern Poverty Law Center*. October 28, 2018. <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/28/analyzing-terrorists-social-media-manifesto-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooters-posts-gab>.

⁵ John 8:44 states, "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

“Jews are the children of Satan.” Bowers reportedly yelled, “All Jews must die,” as he opened fire in the synagogue if his motives were not clear enough.⁶

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) cataloged anti-Semitic online attacks, of which they found 2.6 million anti-Semitic messages posted on Twitter from August 2015 to July 2016, which correlates to Donald Trump’s presidential campaign announcement.⁷ Of these, 19,253 were directed at journalists. Users targeted more than 800 journalists, but ten received eighty-three percent of the attacks.⁸ Numerous books and articles have focused on the connection between Donald Trump’s presidential election and hate speech. However, I am interested in the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between acts of terror and increased misogynistic and anti-Semitic rhetoric online that leads to more acts of terror.⁹

1.1 The Alternative Right

The alt-right, short for “alternative right,” is an umbrella term that refers to a loose network of individuals and groups on the extreme political right. Richard Spencer coined the term “alternative right” in an article he wrote for Taki’s Magazine in 2008.¹⁰ There are multiple definitions of the alt-right, depending on the source. Alt-right refers to people on the right of the political spectrum “who distinguish themselves from traditional conservatives by opposing, among other things, egalitarianism, multiculturalism, and open immigration.”¹¹ According to a

⁶ “‘Jews are the children of Satan’ and the danger of taking biblical passages out of context,” *CBS News*, October 31, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jews-are-the-children-of-satan-john-8-44-danger-of-taking-biblical-passages-out-of-context/>.

⁷ Jonathan Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*: *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 11.

⁸ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 11.

⁹ Sarah Heiderstadt, “Anti-Semitism in the United States: An Analysis of the Alt-Right and the Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting,” March 1, 2022.

¹⁰ “From alt-right to alt-lite: naming the hate,” *Anti-Defamation League*, July 12, 2017, adl.org/resources/backgrounders/alt-right-alt-lite-naming-hate.

¹¹ “From alt-right to alt-lite,” *Anti-Defamation League*.

blog post by Andrew Anglin—operator of the neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* and self-identified leader of the hardcore faction of the alt-right¹²—the alt-right movement is: “anti-Semitic, anti-feminist, anti-multiculturalism, anti-post-modernism, anti-political correctness, anti-Afro centrism, pro-white, pro-Europe, pro-traditional families, pro-scientific racism, pro-free speech, and anti-SJW (social justice warrior).”¹³ Anglin provides an insider definition of the alt-right. He goes on to define the alt-right as “a confluence of various groups of white men who reached the same objective truth through different avenues.”¹⁴ The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) defines the alt-right as “a segment of the white supremacist movement consisting of a loose network of racists and anti-Semites who reject mainstream conservatism in favor of politics that embrace implicit or explicit racist, anti-Semitic, and white supremacist ideology.”¹⁵ I will refrain from choosing one definition to utilize in this paper. However, I will acknowledge that each accurately depicts the alt-right, respective of their perspective and agenda.

The alternative right has little in common with the Christian morality of the Republican party or the white supremacists of the 1990s. Academics more accurately classify the alt-right as anti-PC shitposters¹⁶ whose goal is to shock.¹⁷ They “reject mainstream conservatism in favor of forms of conservatism that embrace implicit or explicit racism or white supremacy.”¹⁸ Antonio Gramsci’s theories, adopted by the French New Right or *Nouvelle Droite*, influenced the alt-

¹² “From alt-right to alt-lite,” *Anti-Defamation League*.

¹³ Andrew Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*, August 31, 2016. stormer-daily.rw/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/ quoted in Edwin Hodge and Helga Hallgrimsdottir, “Networks of Hate: The Alt-Right, ‘Troll Culture,’ and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online,” *Journal of Borderlanes Studies* 35 no. 4 (2020), 567.

¹⁴ Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*.

¹⁵ “From alt-right to alt-lite,” *Anti-Defamation League*.

¹⁶ Shitposting: derailing an online conversation through irrelevant or offensive posting. Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (London and New York: Routledge: 2020), 108.

¹⁷ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumbler to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017): 12.

¹⁸ Viveca S. Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies,” *Studies in American Humor* 5 vol. 1 (2019): 33.

right's implicit goal that political change follows cultural and social change.¹⁹ The alt-right has succeeded as a movement based on influencing culture and shifting the Overton window through media and culture.²⁰ Based on research by Joseph Overton, the Overton window conceptualizes socially acceptable opinions and how this acceptability can shift according to the dominant discourses within the public sphere.²¹ Essentially, political viability is determined by a range where sensible and popular discourse is at the center of the spectrum of acceptability. As political views move towards either end of the spectrum, they move from radical to unthinkable. Politicians' extreme political views shift what is socially accepted, but the Overton window and what is politically acceptable shifts with it.²² Donald Trump's successful presidential campaign was a massive success for the alt-right, but more on that later.

The alt-right created the alt-lite to differentiate itself from those who would not publicly subscribe to its ideology or methods.²³ Milo Yiannopoulos, one of the most prominent figures to come out of the alt-right movement, described the genuine non-ironic alt-lite this way: "There's just not very many of them, no-one really likes them, and they're unlikely to achieve anything significant in the 'alt-right.'" ²⁴ The Anti-Defamation League spells out the difference between the alt-right and alt-lite by saying, "The alt-lite is defined by civic nationalism as opposed to radical nationalism, which is a defining characteristic of the alt-right."²⁵ One of the ways the alt-right labels people or tests authenticity is by judging how "in" they are on the joke by combining adopted theories from past culture wars and modern trolling internet culture.

¹⁹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 34.

²⁰ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 34.

²¹ Maxime Dafaure, "The 'Great Meme War:' the Alt-Right and its Multifarious Enemies," *Angles: New Perspectives on the Anglophone World* (2020): 2.

²² Dafaure, "The 'Great Meme War,'" 2.

²³ "From alt-right to alt-lite," *Anti-Defamation League*.

²⁴ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 42.

²⁵ "From alt-right to alt-lite," *Anti-Defamation League*.

The alt-right lacks a formal organizational structure, leader, and hierarchy. A loose structure has been both beneficial and detrimental to the movement. It is beneficial because there is no official membership process, members can hide behind encryption and anonymity, and internet users do not have to be members to participate in their harassment campaigns. It is detrimental because a lack of organization results in less efficient follow-through on political goals. Members who commit violence have a less thought-out plan and are typically killing people for the sake of killing them rather than to demand political or social change.²⁶ Operating on loose membership affiliations ensures that the movement will not collapse with the arrest of one or two individuals. As Andrew Anglin explains in “A Normie’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” “the mob is the movement.”²⁷ Prominent figures like Richard Spencer, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Andrew ‘weev’ Aurenheimer can quickly summon a reserve army of ironic meme-making adolescent shitposters when they need backup to swarm and harass their opposition. However, they cannot officially claim to be the leader of the alt-right and maintain the mob’s support.²⁸ It is too expansive, all-encompassing, and widespread to have a formal structure. Some of the most important figures of the alt-right are the members who “finally did something other than talk on the internet.”²⁹ Members like Robert Bowers and Elliot Rodger are memorialized as martyrs and given titles like “king of the incels” or “supreme gentleman.”³⁰

²⁶ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 123.

²⁷ Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*.

²⁸ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 42.

²⁹ Dylann Roof, “Dylann Roof’s manifesto,” (manifesto) June 20, 2015, pulled from lastrhodesian.com.

³⁰ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 84.

1.2 4chan

4chan has been part of the internet's dark underbelly since its inception in 2003.³¹ It has been a place where many hateful memes, disinformation, and coordinated harassment campaigns originate.³² Hate speech, white supremacy, and misogynistic rhetoric have flourished in the 'Politically Incorrect' board (/pol/) since its 2013 creation. Fringe movements like Anonymous and the alt-right have used 4chan as a place to discuss ideas, debate ideology, and recruit new members.³³ 4chan represents the unsavory parts of the internet, where hate is not only tolerated but encouraged.

1.3 Alt-Right Pushed into Public Domain

Two events were the catalyst for what would become what we now know as the “alt-right:” the killing of Trayvon Martin and the so-called “Gamergate” controversy.³⁴ As each controversy grew and expanded into modern discourse, they attracted larger audiences to 4chan and other sites like it. In his manifesto, alt-right shooter, Dylann Roof, cited the shooting of Trayvon Martin as his awakening to the racial and Jewish problems. After repeatedly hearing Martin’s name, he looked up the event, was “unable to understand what the big deal was,” and concluded that George Zimmerman was “in the right.”³⁵ Roof then searched “black on white crime,” which led him to the Council of Conservative Citizens webpage,³⁶ and he was never the

³¹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 84.

³² Antonis Papasavva, Savvas Zannettou, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, and Jeremy Blackburn, “Raiders of the Lost Kek: 3.5 Years of Augmented 4chan Posts from the Politically Incorrect Board, *Fourteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (ICWSM 2020), 1.

³³ Gabriel Emile Hine, Jeremiah Onalapo, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Nicolas Kourtellis, Ilias Leontiadis, Riginos Samaras, Gianluca Stringhini, and Jeremy Blackburn, “Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan’s Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web,” *ICWSM* (2017), 1.

³⁴ Hanks and Amend, “The alt-right is killing people,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*.

³⁵ Roof, “Manifesto.”

³⁶ The Council of Conservative Citizens (CofCC) is a white supremacist organization founded in 1985. We can see clear influence from CofCC’s website in Roof’s manifesto. The ideas presented in the “Statement of Principles” on

same.³⁷ His radicalization began with interracial violence but led him to identitarianism,³⁸ anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, and pseudo-scientific racism.³⁹ Real-life events spark curiosity, which leads to internet searches for answers, and if the person is susceptible, radicalization through extremist propaganda and ideology.⁴⁰ The cycle is fulfilled with an act of violence. On July 17, 2015, Dylann Roof killed nine people in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina.⁴¹ Roof is one example of white supremacy radicalization, but his case is not unique.

1.3.1 Gamergate

An online incident that had real-world consequences and brought 4chan into the light is popularly known as “Gamergate.” A computer game developer named Brianna Wu and her company, Giant Spacekat, released a female-friendly video game called Revolution 60 in 2013 that would spark an unprecedented level of online hate.⁴² Following the release of Revolution 60, Wu received thousands of online death and rape threats, which would come to be known as

their website are unique nor new but repeated frequently enough to radicalize vulnerable people who visit it. Samuel Francis, “Statement of Principles,” *Council of Conservative Citizens*, 2005, cofcc.us.

³⁷ Roof, “Manifesto.”

³⁸ American proponent, Joshua Bates (AKA Jossur Surtson), described an identitarian as one who works to “influence political and socio-economic activity in an effort to protect and preserve racial, ethnic, and cultural identity.” Jossur Surtson, “Identitarianism and the great replacement,” *AltRight.com*, May 12, 2017, <https://altright.com/2017/05/12/identitarianism-and-the-great-replacement/> quoted in Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 65.

³⁹ We saw a resurgence of pseudo-scientific racism in popular discourse with the rising popularity of the alt-right. “Scientific” racism has been prominent in white supremacist circles since the inception of the United States. In short, “scientific” racism is the idea that black and brown people are biologically inferior to white people and predisposed to violence. This belief typically accompanies “the right to difference” which is the belief that “every people, ethos, culture, nation, group or community has the right to live according to its own norms and traditions, irrespective of ideology or globalist homogenization.” Multiple white supremacist “doctors” have written books about the “scientific” phenomenon, most prominent being Jared Taylor. In them, they provide scientific “proof” and historical and modern examples to prove their points. These books are little more than thinly veiled racism. Faye Guillaume, *Why We Fight: Manifesto of the European Resistance* (Budapest: Arktos Media, 2011), 334 in Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 65-66.

⁴⁰ The alt-right is specifically geared towards young, white men. The internet culture of trolling and ironic memes is fun for participants. The product of gaming culture and white supremacy ideology is the alt-right.

⁴¹ Laura Burnip and David Boroff, “Who is Dylann Roof and what did he do?” *The Sun News*, December 11, 2020, <https://the-sun.com/news/1955593/dylann-roof-crimes-white-supremacist-south-carolina/>.

⁴² Weisman, *((Semitism))*, 65.

“trolling.” Wu described Gamergate as “a heated battle between feminists and other liberal programmers who argued for more inclusive video games against the predominantly white, male gaming culture.”⁴³ Wu was not alone in her experience. Hundreds of people have become victims of troll storms and extensive, targeted online harassment. Online users targeted the victims using racial, religious, and gendered attacks. If the victim is female, they were more likely to receive rape threats; if Jewish, then images of ovens and Nazis, et cetera.⁴⁴

Gamergate caught on like wildfire because the alt-right is inspired and defined by a “discourse of anxiety about traditional white masculinity, which is seen as being artificially but powerfully ‘degenerated,’ with catastrophic consequences for the nation.”⁴⁵ The trolling perpetrator claims to be the victim and is acting in self-defense. As the author of *(((Semitism)))*: *Being Jewish in the Age of Trump*, Jonathan Weisman, puts it, “somehow the victim of the trolling is actually the perpetrator, tormenting innocents with his or her insufferable liberalism/Judaism/blackness. He—or, more often, she—reaps what she sows.”⁴⁶ Misogyny plays a crucial role in the recruiting, radicalization, and push to violence of young men in the alt-right. So-called “Gamergate” provided ample opportunity for men to express their frustrations and lash out at women through the protection of an anonymous platform.

The hashtag “#Gamergate” was primarily used in 2014 and 2015 and played an influential role in creating and solidifying the alt-right and what it would represent. The Gamergate controversy guided the rise of the alt-right, which, as Weisman explains, is “a world dominated by digital trolls, insanely unbridled conspiracism, angry white-male-identity

⁴³ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 65.

⁴⁴ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 66.

⁴⁵ Annie Kelly, “The Alt-Right: Reactionary Rehabilitation for White Masculinity: US Alt-Right Extremism is a Logical Consequence of Mainstream Neo-Conservatism,” *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* no. 66 (2017), 69 in Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 57.

⁴⁶ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 67.

victimization culture, and ultimately, open racism, anti-Semitism, ethnic hatred, misogyny, and sexual/gender paranoia.⁴⁷ Participants of Gamergate became a formidable force that could use the collective power of “trolling” to scare, intimidate, and bully women who were trying to ruin video games with feminism and political correctness.⁴⁸

The importance of Gamergate cannot be underestimated, as future trolling campaigns or “troll storms” would replicate techniques learned and implemented during Gamergate. Since 2014, troll armies have become more powerful as they have gathered supporters and grown brazen since Trump’s presidential victory. While figures like Andrew Anglin can summon troll armies to swarm a target, his website, the Daily Stormer, is not where he would sound his war cry; 4chan is. Fifteen-year-old Christopher Poole created 4chan as an open forum to post anime images and manga for Japanese-art enthusiasts. Gamergate transformed it into a “trolling haven for sociopaths and sadists, neo-Nazis, racists, pornographers, and ‘queer bashers.’”⁴⁹

1.3.2 Donald Trump for President

Donald Trump’s presidential victory was a victory for white supremacists. As one author put it, “Those who seek to demonize diversity, anti-racism, affirmative action, and political correctness see themselves as having a powerful ally in the White House – an ally who retweets white supremacists on Twitter.”⁵⁰ Trump did not create the alt-right movement, but he has done more for the movement than any single person. He placed white supremacists in prominent positions of power within the government. He successfully shifted the Overton window to normalize hate speech and attacks against immigrants, people of color, and non-Christians.⁵¹ As

⁴⁷ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 67.

⁴⁸ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 58.

⁴⁹ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 68.

⁵⁰ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 57.

⁵¹ Sarah Heiderstadt, “Meme Warfare: The Use of Memes by the Alt-Right Movement,” April 13, 2022.

Representative Mark Sanford noted in a tweet, “people feel like if the president of the United States can say anything to anybody at any time, then I guess I can too, and that is a very, very dangerous phenomenon.”⁵² Trump plays a crucial role in the social media-violence relationship by emboldening alt-right members to commit violence in virtual and real spaces. He also demonstrates no consequences for hate speech, inciting violence, or sexual assault.

1.4 Thesis Statement

Through discourse analysis of posts on 4chan/pol/, I will demonstrate how the relationship between social media and violence is cyclical and reinforcing. In short, the first half of the relationship cycle is recruitment, radicalization, and the push to violence. The second half of the relationship is the support and fame the perpetrator receives after they have committed violence and the surge of event-specific rhetoric online. Misogynistic rhetoric increases after a man become a mass shooter, declaring women to be the cause of his pain. Anti-Semitic rhetoric rises after a terrorist publicly attacks a synagogue. The cycle restarts when the fame emboldens copycats, and the rhetoric radicalizes another to action. Robert Bowers and Elliot Rodger are two case studies demonstrating the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between social media and violence, which I will explore in this paper.

1.5 Paper Organization

I organize the paper as follows. The next chapter provides the methodology and a short discussion on case selection. Chapter three reviews the literature on the relationship between acts of terror and hate speech on social media. Chapter four reviews the literature on the alt-right’s recruitment cycle, paying particular attention to the first two steps of the social media-violence

⁵² Weisman, (*Semitism*)), 111.

relationship cycle. Chapter five discusses the research design, specifically the process of crawling datasets from 4chan's Politically Incorrect board. Chapter six presents the results from chapter five's work. Finally, I analyze the results and discuss the implications of the research in chapter seven, while the paper concludes in chapter eight. I interject information on the two case studies throughout the chapters.

1.6 Limitations

Two primary limitations while writing this dissertation were time and resources. The three-month time constraint was challenging. As for resource limitations, I will speak more about these challenges in the following chapters, but my research is dependent on a fellow University of Malta student working with me to complete the information retrieval process. Additionally, this student has her dissertation obligations, which contributed to the time constraints.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction to Methodology

This paper will utilize discourse analysis in an explanatory comparison of four datasets crawled⁵³ from 4chan's Politically Incorrect board for Elliot Rodger's shooting spree and the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting. The objective is to provide a creative desk-based study that contributes to the literature on the cyclical relationship between social media and alt-right acts of terror.

2.1.1 Terms

Memes refer to user-generated media that share recognizable characteristics in content or form through which their creators seek to guide viewers' interactions and interpretations.⁵⁴ Creators intend for memes to go viral and aid that purpose; users can easily remix memes while retaining explicit references to the original.⁵⁵ At face value, memes are a harmless product of "scroll culture," a communication form between Gen Z youth who pass an idea from one person to the next for entertainment purposes. While political cartoons died with paper routes, memes have taken their place online. They are snippets of an argument, boiled down to a picture and a few words.⁵⁶

Self-identified "incels"—short for involuntary celibate⁵⁷—play a prominent role in the makeup of the alt-right. A foundation of the alt-right and one of their largest recruitment bases is the horde of bitter young men angry at the world for not having what they feel they deserve.

⁵³ Technical term for retrieving data through coding; use interchangeably with scrape(ing)(ed).

⁵⁴ Viveca S. Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies," *Studies in American Humor* 5 vol. 1 (2019): 38.

⁵⁵ Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire." 38.

⁵⁶ Sarah Heiderstadt, "Meme Warfare: The Use of Memes by the Alt-Right Movement," April 13, 2022.

⁵⁷ For a full list of definitions and terms, see the Abbreviations and Definitions page above.

There are many avenues to the alt-right; a prominent one is the manosphere, but I will discuss that in the ‘Independent Variable’ section later in this chapter.

2.1.2 Research Impact

Analyzing case studies is fundamental because not only can we learn lessons from these two cases, but they allow us to understand better the cyclical nature of social media-induced acts of terror.

A comparative case study of the social media posts before and after the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting and Elliot Rodger’s shooting spree could influence policy decisions as it has with school shootings and media coverage of the attacks. Mass media platforms have moved away from disseminating photos of the shooters and focusing solely on the victims, but they have not applied the same approach to alt-right shooters. Two days after Elliot Rodger shot and killed six people (not including himself) and injured fourteen, The New York Times posted Elliot Rodger’s full manifesto with this statement: “Elliot Rodger, the 22-year-old whom the police said killed six people near the campus of the University of California, Santa Barbara, expressed his frustration in an autobiography.”⁵⁸ Most of the time, white supremacists self-publish or post their manifestos on the internet, where interested parties can widely share them without regulation. For a reputable news source to publish a bitterly misogynistic manifesto two days after the author killed six people (not including himself) is unprecedented.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ “The manifesto of Elliot Rodger,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/05/25/us/shooting-document.html>.

⁵⁹ The New York Times posting his manifesto with no warning, censorship, or further information reinforces Rodger’s ideas as legitimate and provides him a wider audience outside extremist alt-right platforms. I can only speculate that either the editing staff did not read the “autobiography” or did not realize the impact Rogers would have on future mass shooters. To add perspective, *The Turner Diaries*, which is widely considered the blueprint for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, has an FBI warning on all printed copies of the book.

Beyond mass media outlets disregarding alt-right members, there are other limitations to potential policy implications. First and foremost, alt-right members who go on shooting sprees are not playing to the general audience or “normies”—people who consume mass media. They post videos and manifestos on sites like 4chan or Gab days or hours before their attack. While fame might be a motivating factor, it is less important than the deeper anti-Semitic or misogynistic motivations. In his manifesto, Dylann Roof railed against people on the internet who were all talk and no action.⁶⁰ When SWAT arrested Robert Bowers, he declared that “he wanted all Jews to die” and that “[Jews] were committing genocide to his people.”⁶¹ His postings on the alt-right social media platform, Gab, demonstrated that he attacked the synagogue to bring attention to the Jewish conspiracy to destroy white people by bringing black and brown “invaders” into the United States.⁶² In the cases mentioned above, they hoped their acts of terror would bring awareness to an “obvious” social problem. For these reasons, there are limited policy implications because their intended audience is less controllable. After all, alt-right shooters are working towards unique goals, have an unregulated audience, and do not adhere to rules of decency.

2.2 Hypothesis

H1. Misogynistic rhetoric will increase on 4chan/pol/ in the days following Elliot Rodger’s shooting spree.

H2. Anti-Semitic rhetoric will increase on 4chan/pol/ in the days following Robert Bowers’ terror attack.

⁶⁰ Dylann Roof, “Dylann Roof’s manifesto,” (manifesto) June 20, 2015, pulled from lastrhodesian.com.

⁶¹ Amend, “Analyzing a terrorist’s social media manifesto,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*.

⁶² Amend, “Analyzing a terrorist’s social media manifesto,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*.

H3. There will be a higher volume of original posts and replies on 4chan/pol/ following the 2018 Pittsburgh shooting than Rodger's shooting due to the increased popularity of 4chan and the Politically Incorrect board after Donald Trump was elected president.

2.3 Research Question and Thesis Statement

How does social media influence alt-right acts of terror?

Through discourse analysis of posts on 4chan/pol/, I will demonstrate how the relationship between social media and reality is cyclical. The narrative of anti-Semitism and misogyny on social media reflects actual life events, like the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting and Elliot Rodger's shooting spree, which activates an increase of anti-Semitic and misogynistic rhetoric online.

2.4 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the increased anti-Semitic and misogynistic hate speech online following acts of terror and alt-right mass shootings.

Free speech is a nontrivial tool to communicate beliefs, ideas, and feelings to one another.⁶³ Free speech is required to maintain democratic rights and allows individuals to express their beliefs and communicate them with others freely.⁶⁴ The variant of free speech is hate speech. Naganna Chetty and Sreejith Alathur define hate speech as "any speech, which attacks an individual or a group with an intention to hurt or disrespect based on identity."⁶⁵ It violates the

⁶³ Naganna Chetty and Sreejith Alathur, "Hate Speech Review in the Context of Online Social Networks," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 40 (2018), 108.

⁶⁴ Chetty and Alathur, "Hate Speech Review," 108.

⁶⁵ Chetty and Alathur, "Hate Speech Review," 117.

fundamental rights of a human being and tests the limits of free speech and freedom of expression.⁶⁶ Hate speech can incite harassment, intimidation, and other forms of violence.⁶⁷

A terrorism definition is a contested topic. Chetty and Alathur define terrorism as “any intentional act directed against life or related entities causing a common danger.”⁶⁸ They claim that hate speech is a type of terrorism and follows an incident or trigger event of terrorism.⁶⁹ The Global Terrorism Database defines terrorism as “the threatening or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation.”⁷⁰ Bridgett Nacos, the author of *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, defines terrorism as “political violence or the threat of violence by groups or individuals who deliberately target civilians or non-combatants in order to influence the behavior and actions of targeted publics and governments.”⁷¹ The definitions mentioned above are adequate, but for this thesis, I use James A. Piazza’s definition of domestic terrorism. He defines it as “politically motivated acts of deliberate and premeditated violence perpetrated within one country by non-state actors against co-national targets aimed at influencing a wider audience.”⁷² Piazza’s research on the effects of social media disinformation on domestic terrorism, focusing on white supremacists, makes his definition of terrorism suitable.

⁶⁶ Chetty and Alathur, “Hate Speech Review,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 108.

⁶⁷ Chetty and Alathur, “Hate Speech Review,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 108.

⁶⁸ Chetty and Alathur, “Hate Speech Review,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 108.

⁶⁹ Chetty and Alathur, “Hate Speech Review,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 108.

⁷⁰ “Codebook: Inclusion criteria and variables,” *Global Terrorism Database* (2019) quoted in James A. Piazza, “Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 15 no. 1 (2022), 63.

⁷¹ Bridgett, Nacos. *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 5th edition (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁷² Piazza, “Fake News,” 56.

Chetty and Alathur define cyberterrorism as “a special type of terrorism with an intention to harm physically or create terror in the minds of the victim by means of electronic and internet tools.”⁷³

There is a lack of consensus on the definition of a mass shooting, but typically, the definition includes an incident in which four people, not including the shooter, are killed. Some definitions do not necessitate killing but can be labeled a mass shooting if the perpetrator shoots or injures four or more people.⁷⁴ What is telling is the crimes the gunman is charged with, if he does not commit suicide or die from suicide by cop. Rodger’s committed suicide before the police could arrest him, and Bowers was injured by SWAT yet survived and faces sixty-three counts, including hate crimes resulting in death.⁷⁵

2.5 Unit of Analysis

I am conducting a comparative case study between two well-known and well-documented acts of terror, one motivated by anti-Semitism and one by misogyny. The Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting and Elliot Rodger’s murderous rampage represent a trend within the alt-right movement where young, white, heterosexual men are recruited, radicalized, and pushed to violence on the internet. Radical recruitment motivates men to act out violently, spurring an increase of extremist rhetoric online, reinforcing propaganda, and emboldening copycats.

⁷³ Chetty and Alathur, “Hate Speech Review,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 116.

⁷⁴ Wyatt Grantham-Philips, “What is a mass shooting? There’s no consensus definition, but here’s what you should know,” *USA Today*, June 5, 2022, <https://www.eu.usatoday.com>. While mass shootings only result in five to six percent of gun fatalities, they are disproportionately covered in the media. At the time the article was written, and if using the Gun Violence Archive’s definition of mass shootings to include shootings where four or more were injured, a total of two-hundred and fifty-four mass shootings were reported this year. If you only count incidents where four or more people were killed, then there were nineteen mass shootings from January to June in 2022.

⁷⁵ “Additional charges filed in Tree of Life Synagogue shooting,” January 29, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/usao--wdpa/pr/additional-charges-filed-tree-life-synagogue-shooting-0>.

2.6 Independent Variable

Normalized hate speech, anti-Semitism encouraged by popularized white supremacist conspiracy theories and hateful interpretations of Christianity, and misogyny supported on Internet platforms.

I will use the term “anti-Semitism” throughout this paper. The difference between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism is classification. People subscribing to anti-Judaism view Jewish people as a religious group, while those who are anti-Semitic view Jewish people as an ethnic group. The most significant implication is when a Jewish person converts to a different religion. If Jews are only Jewish because of Judaism, then converting to a different religion results in a loss of Jewish identity; therefore, they are no longer Jewish. On the other hand, if a Jewish person is Jewish by ethnicity, then the person remains Jewish regardless of conversion.⁷⁶

Oxford dictionary defines white supremacy as “the belief that white people constitute a superior race and should therefore dominate society, typically to the exclusion or detriment of other racial and ethnic groups, in particular black or Jewish people.”⁷⁷ Each white supremacist organization interprets, adds on, and implements the belief differently, but racial superiority is a common theme across the alt-right movement.

Angela Nagle defines ‘the manosphere’ as “everything from progressive men’s issues activists dealing with real neglect of male health, suicide, and unequal social services to the nastier corners of the Internet, filled with involuntary celibacy-obsessed, hate-filled, resentment-fueled cultures of quite chilling levels of misogyny.”⁷⁸ Like the alt-right, the manosphere is not a

⁷⁶ The difference was important in Nazi Germany when the Nazi’s claimed that a small percentage of Jewish blood or heritage would be cause for discrimination.

⁷⁷ Oxford Dictionary definition of “white supremacy.”

⁷⁸ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 73.

formal organization, but rather “a loose collection of websites, forums, blogs, and vlogs concerned with men’s issues and masculinity, oriented around an opposition to feminism.”⁷⁹

Misogyny is a core value and practice of the alt-right. Oxford dictionary defines misogyny as “dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women.”⁸⁰

2.7 Method

According to Sage Publication’s Little Blue Book on Discourse Analysis, discourse analysis is a methodology rather than just a method because it is an epistemology that explains how we know the social world and a set of methods for studying it.⁸¹ Epistemology relates “to the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion.”⁸² Discourse analysts explore the relationship between discourse and reality. These case studies examine the governance, politics, culture, internet functions, and beliefs that motivate individuals to post on 4chan/pol/ following Elliot Rodger’s shooting spree and the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting.

Discourse analysis is the best option available to conceptualize the datasets. To understand the discourse, we must also understand the context in which they arise, including the historical and social context, particular actors, relationships, and practices.⁸³ In this paper, I will analyze the 4chan/pol/ datasets through a discourse lens, analyzing internet culture and the alt-

⁷⁹ Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (London and New York: Routledge: 2020), 163.

⁸⁰ Oxford dictionary definition of “misogyny.”

⁸¹ Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy, *Discourse Analysis: Investigating Processes of Social Construction* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), 3.

⁸² Oxford Dictionary definition of “epistemology.”

⁸³ Phillips and Hardy, *Discourse Analysis*, 4.

right to demonstrate how the relationship between social media and terror attacks is cyclical and reinforcing.

For a complete analysis of the datasets, I will draw upon theories of digital rhetoric. Oxford dictionary defines digital rhetoric as “communication in the digital sphere. As such, digital rhetoric can be expressed in many different forms – including but not limited to text, images, videos, and software.”⁸⁴ Digital rhetoric is crucial for this analysis but does not provide a complete analysis of the alt-right or how online rhetoric translates into real-life violence. For this reason, I will draw on discourse analysis and digital rhetoric to provide a complete analysis of the alt-right.

2.8 Case Selection and Comparability

Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) documents Elliot Rodger’s killing spree as the first in a series of alt-right killers.⁸⁵ Before killing six and injuring fourteen, Rodger uploaded a sprawling one-hundred-and-forty-one-page manifesto titled “My Twisted World: A Story of Elliot Rodger.” In it, he lamented his inability to find a girlfriend to have sex with, expressed extreme misogynistic and racist positions, and disgust for interracial couples.⁸⁶ Rodger represents much of the bitter misogyny in the manosphere, but his terror attack also created a ripple effect. Memes of Rodger as the “supreme gentleman” went viral after his attack, and many online have granted him the title of “king of the incels” or changed their headline to “ElliotRodgerisGod.”⁸⁷ He has inspired copycats like Alek Minassian, who posted, “The Incel

⁸⁴ Oxford dictionary definition of “digital rhetoric.”

⁸⁵ Keegan Hanks and Alex Amend, “The alt-right is killing people,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 5, 2018, splcenter.org/20180205/alt-right-killing-people.

⁸⁶ Elliot Rodger, “My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,” (manifesto) May 23, 2013.

⁸⁷ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumbler to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017), 84-85.

Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys!⁸⁸ All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” on Facebook before murdering ten in Toronto, Canada.⁸⁹ From Rodger’s murderous rampage in 2014 to the start of 2018, thirteen alt-right-related fatal episodes left forty-three dead and more than sixty injured.

Additionally, some fringe communities online have canonized Rodger by celebrating his actions, referencing his manifesto, and selling t-shirts of his infamous selfie in his BMW.⁹⁰ Alternatively, Robert Bowers’ attack demonstrates the various ideological beliefs of the alt-right. While Elliot Rodger killed to punish women for his years of misery and drew from the manosphere to support his beliefs, Robert Bowers killed worshipers in a synagogue because of a deep-seated belief that Jewish people were the cause of all society’s ailments and found support for these beliefs on many alt-right websites.

Robert Bowers’ attack on the Pittsburgh synagogue is the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in American history.⁹¹ His violent interpretation of the Gospel of John is a nonunique reading with dire consequences. While the Pittsburgh synagogue attack has not led to copycats of the same caliber as Bowers, many, including Jonathan Weisman, would argue that large-scale physical attacks are unnecessary to inspire fear in the Jewish community. In-person and online harassment and attacks have increased exponentially since Donald Trump was elected president and

⁸⁸ “Chads and Stacys” is a popular descriptor of sorority girls and fraternity boys. The phrase is an adaptation of “Ken and Barbie,” with the assumption that Chad and Stacy’s lives are perfect because they are beautiful, wealthy, and sexually desirable.

⁸⁹ “Elliot Rodger: how misogynist killer became ‘incel hero,’” *BBC News*, April 26, 2018, [bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189).

⁹⁰ “Elliot Rodger,” *BBC News*.

⁹¹ Alex Amend, “Analyzing a terrorist’s social media manifesto: the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooter’s posts on Gab,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, October 28, 2018. splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/28/analyzing-terrorists-social-media-manifesto-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooters-posts-gab. Bowers’ age makes him an anomaly for the alt-right, as he falls outside the average age for alt-right shooters, but he represents the anti-Jewish views of white supremacists.

continued to be at an all-time high during his presidency.⁹² The Anti-Defamation League reported 1,299 anti-Semitic incidents across the United States during the first nine months of 2017, including physical assaults, vandalism, and attacks on Jewish institutions.⁹³ In the year following the Pittsburgh synagogue attack, twelve white supremacists were arrested on allegations of plotting, threatening, or carrying out anti-Semitic attacks in the United States.⁹⁴ Bowers represents the anti-Semitic views within the alt-right and the dangers of an online echo chamber that feeds and reinforces hateful views.

While the two events differ in many ways, they contain similarities. For starters, the alt-right utilized a variety of sources and tapped into their frustration and feelings of powerlessness to recruit and radicalize Elliot Rodgers and Robert Bowers online. Misogyny motivated one shooter, while anti-Semitism motivated the other, but both motivations represent prominent ideologies in the alt-right. Misogynistic and anti-Semitic ideology are common among members. Additionally, both men have caused ripple effects in the alt-right as their attacks have emboldened copycats to commit acts of violence.

2.8.1 Literature Review

While researching academic papers on datasets, I stumbled into the world of computational linguistics, which is “the branch of linguistics in which the techniques of computer science are applied to the analysis and synthesis of language and speech.”⁹⁵ While many of the papers described the information retrieval process in-depth and focused less on the

⁹² Jonathan Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*: *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 5.

⁹³ Cristina Maza, “Jews in Trump's America are being attacked post-Charlottesville,” *Newsweek*, November 12, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/jews-racism-trump-antisemitism-charlottesville-attacks-jewish-77098>.

⁹⁴ “Synagogue massacre led to string of attack plots, Jewish group says,” *Politico*, October 20, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/20/jewish-attacks-pittsburgh-052868>.

⁹⁵ Oxford definition of computational linguistics.

implications of their work, they provided invaluable insight into the field. Most researchers compiled larger datasets from 4chan, scraping them directly from the website before they moved into archives and were deleted from 4chan's servers. This literature review is not an extensive analysis of the current research but a small sample of the existing literature.

The bulk of the emerging research on 4chan centers on the Politically Incorrect board (/pol/) as it rose in influence since Donald Trump was elected president. More than a free speech platform, 4chan's /pol/ board has experienced an influx of users and an increase in posts and comments. Unintentionally and intentionally, 4chan's language, jokes, memes, and ideas have spread into mainstream culture through other social media platforms, including Twitter and Reddit. Zulenkauskaite, Toivanen, Huhtamäki, and Valaskivi's goal is to demonstrate how the spread of hate to other websites, including more popular mass media sites, increases after mass shootings.⁹⁶ They use the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting and the Christchurch attack to conduct a comparative case study between the two shootings and the increase of specific terms on 4chan's Politically Incorrect board to demonstrate anti-Semitism.⁹⁷

Zannettou, Caulfield, De Cristofaro, Kourtellis, Leontiadis, Sirivianos, Stringhini, and Blackburn are leading researchers on 4chan and the spread of hate online. In their article, they analyze how social media sites and mainstream news sources interact to determine where false, misleading, or agenda-driven information spread online originated.⁹⁸ The datasets scrapped from Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan prove that 4chan's Politically Incorrect board directly influences the

⁹⁶ Asta Zulenkauskaite, Pihla Toivanen, Jukka Huhtamäki, and Katja Valaskivi, "Shades of Hatred Online: 4chan Memetic Duplicate Circulation Surge During Hybrid Media Events," *First Monday* 26 no. 1 (January 2021), <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/11075/10029>, 2.

⁹⁷ Zulenkauskaite, Toivanen, Huhtamäki, and Valaskivi, "Shades of Hatred Online," 9.

⁹⁸ Savvas Zannettou, Tristan Caulfield, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Nicolas Kourtellis, Ilias Leontiadis, Michael Sirivianos, Gianluca Stringhini, and Jeremy Blackburn, "The Web Centipede: Understanding Web Communities Influence Each Other Through the Lens of Mainstream and Alternative News Sources," *IMC* (2017), 1.

spread of mainstream and alternative media.⁹⁹ Many researchers collaborated to analyze the Politically Incorrect board's hate speech and online harassment. Hine, Emile, Onalapo, De Cristofaro, Kourtellis, Leontiadis, Samaras, Stringhini, and Blackburn's article overviews 4chan's user base, the content it generates, and how it affects other parts of the internet.¹⁰⁰ After running a content finding program, they determined that YouTube links and hate speech are prominent on 4chan's Politically Incorrect board, showing that 4chan influences other sites.¹⁰¹

Some of the authors of the last two articles collaborated again to compile another dataset over three-and-a-half years, consisting of over one-hundred-and-thirty-four million posts. Papasavva, Zannettou, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, and Blackburn's article focuses on hate speech, specifically on the frequency of topics and their impact on other social media sites. In addition to analyzing and listing the top ten named entities and most frequently mentioned topics on /pol/, they scored the content of the posts according to how toxic, inflammatory, profane, insulting, obscene, or spammy the text is.¹⁰² The authors concluded the impact of 4chan's Politically Incorrect board on other social media sites. However, they left the discussion section open for other researchers, preferring to offer numerous questions that other researchers could answer using their dataset.

The final category the research touches on is technical support for researchers unfamiliar with computer programming. Peeters and Hagen provide an article introducing the open-source

⁹⁹ Zannettou, Caulfield, De Cristofaro, Kourtellis, Leontiadis, Sirivianos, Stringhini, and Blackburn, "The Web Centipede," 13.

¹⁰⁰ Gabriel Emile Hine, Jeremiah Onalapo, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Nicolas Kourtellis, Ilias Leontiadis, Riginos Samaras, Gianluca Stringhini, and Jeremy Blackburn, "Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan's Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web," *ICWSM* (2017), 1.

¹⁰¹ Hine, Onalapo, De Cristofaro, Kourtellis, Leontiadis, Samaras, Stringhini, and Blackburn. "Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump," 9.

¹⁰² Antonis Papasavva, Savvas Zannettou, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, and Jeremy Blackburn, "Raiders of the Lost Kek: 3.5 Years of Augmented 4chan Posts from the Politically Incorrect Board," *Fourteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM 2020)*, 5-7.

Web-based research tool, 4CAT Capture and Analysis Toolkit (4CAT). Their article is a step-by-step guide to crawling data from various social media platforms using 4CAT. The open-source toolkit aims to assist students and researchers working in the humanities, where technical skills are less prioritized and rely on tools that automate those tasks.¹⁰³ Peeters and Hagen describe 4CAT as a valuable tool for beginners wishing to crawl data from various online sources, including Twitter, Telegram, Reddit, 4chan, 8kun, BitChute, Douban, and Parler.¹⁰⁴ This article is an essential contribution to researchers who want to crawl and compile datasets but do not have the technical skills to do so.

2.8.2 Limitations

The primary limitation of computational linguistics research is that their research, demonstrated in the papers, falls short of implications discussions. Many authors hope that other researchers will use their datasets to analyze different aspects and draw conclusions. However, they draw none of their conclusions or discuss how the content they gathered impacts social media and the real world. The authors describe how their datasets show the spread of hate but not how that hate materializes, leads to violence, or contributes to polarization in society. This limitation represents the difference between academic disciplines. Computational linguistics and other information retrieval fields like computer programming gather data, find results, and draw conclusions but largely leave the implications open for other researchers. In short, they provide a tool for other researchers to use and draw from, which is where my research comes in. Humanities disciplines, like conflict analysis and resolution, can utilize the data to enhance

¹⁰³ Stijn Peeters and Sal Hagen, "The 4CAT Capture and Analysis Toolkit: A Modular Tool for Transparent and Traceable Social Media Research," *Computational Communication Research*.
[Github.com/digitalmethodsinitiative/4cat](https://github.com/digitalmethodsinitiative/4cat).

¹⁰⁴ Peeters and Hagen, "The 4CAT Capture and Analysis Toolkit," 1.

conflict analysis and provide better solutions. We cannot undervalue the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration.

The following chapters will focus on Elliot Rodger's murderous rampage and Robert Bowers' synagogue attack instead of other violent acts because of the underlying motivations, the long-term repercussions, and how representative they are of the alt-right. While other mass shootings have had higher body counts—Virginia Tech, 32 deaths, Orlando Pulse nightclub, 49 deaths, and Las Vegas strip, 58 deaths¹⁰⁵—they have not had the same influence on the alt-right movement.

2.9 Data and Collection Challenges

While collecting data and researching this paper, there have been a few challenges. First, as a non-gamer, it was challenging to engage with internet culture because most references have multiple layers hidden behind varying degrees of humor. To understand the research, I am constantly looking up new terms, phrases, and insider jokes that are designed to leave outsiders confused. Another challenge was with the research and background material. In short, the content is unpleasant, vulgar, and unsettling. To obtain theory, background information, and datasets, I had to visit, download, and view sites that celebrate the bitter hatred of anyone that is not a cis white, heterosexual man.

I encountered a few practical data collection challenges, as I am unfamiliar with coding, digitizing data, and quantitative software tools. I acquired help from a colleague who is a computational linguist at the University of Malta to meet the research needs. She created the

¹⁰⁵ Adam Lankford and James Silver, "Why have public mass shootings become more deadly: assessing how perpetrators' motives and methods have changed over time," *Criminology and Public Policy* 19 (2020): 38.

code that scrapped datasets from 4chan/pol/. While I have learned some terminology and understand the coddling process better, I remain unable to code, and certainly not with the time limitations placed on this dissertation. While scrapping data, we ran into a challenge with 4chan. In short, 4chan's servers delete threads after a few days to keep relevant content visible, which poses a problem because I needed to crawl data from 2014 and 2018. We had to find a server that archives 4chan's posts and replies with all the necessary content, including time stamp, country of origin, et cetera. Additionally, I am scraping data from 4chan instead of Gab, despite Robert Bowers being an active poster on Gab, because 4chan better represents the alt-right movement and is a more prominent, more expansive hub of far-right ideology.

The last prominent challenge was with the types of sources I used. Some sources were more difficult to find, and I had to install a Tor browser onto my laptop to research alt-right websites and ideology comfortably. However, I did not engage with every source type available. Throughout this process, I have been willing to engage with written text, including white supremacist websites, academic articles and books, and manifestos written by alt-right shooters. However, I am unwilling to engage with audio sources. In this case, verbal content is primarily YouTube videos. Excluding audio sources is a crucial limitation because, as Daniel Byman puts it,

Over 90 percent of Americans ages 18 to 24 use YouTube, more than any other online platform, and a *New York Times* investigative report found that radicals cite YouTube as the most frequent source of their inspiration to turn to extremism.¹⁰⁶

The content can be challenging to engage with, and I am less affected by written text than audio sources. As a result, my analysis may be missing some nuance that I would have otherwise

¹⁰⁶ Kevin Roose, "The Making of a YouTube Radical," *New York Times*, June 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical> quoted in Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 97.

drawn from YouTube videos. Manifestos offer insight into shooters' minds, which is an invaluable source. Oxford dictionary defines a manifesto as “a published declaration of the intentions, motives, or views of the user, be it an individual, group, political party, or government...It promotes a new idea with prescriptive notions for carrying out changes the author believes should be made.”¹⁰⁷ Despite the audio source limitation, I have engaged various sources to present a comprehensive interdisciplinary research paper.

In this chapter, I have outlined the methodology I will be using in this research endeavor. After introducing the chapter, I clarified essential terms and how I will use them. Next, I laid out the research impact and the value I will add to the field. The following two sections focused on the hypothesis and the research question I seek to answer, demonstrated in the research statement. The following three sections displayed the dependent variable, unit of analysis, and independent variable. Succeeding these sections is an introduction to my methods, primarily discourse analysis and digital rhetoric. A commentary on case selection and comparability, including a short literature review, precedes the final section on research challenges. In the next chapter, I will explore the existing literature to present the shoulders my research stands on.

¹⁰⁷ Oxford dictionary definition of “manifesto.”

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) describes the alt-right as a “reactionary white male resentment movement.”¹⁰⁸ “For a recruit, the alt-right helps explain why they don’t have jobs or the sexual partners or the overall societal and cultural respect that they believe (and are told) to be rightfully theirs.”¹⁰⁹ SPLC is not the first to realize the importance of entitlement nor make the connection in recruitment tactics. Authors including Lankford and Silver, Piazza, and Schirch have written on the cyclical relationship between mass public shooters and terrorists.

In this chapter, I will explore some leading literature seeking to explain the relationship between violence and social media. The first theory I will explore will examine ingroup community dynamics as a precursor to domestic terrorism and some fundamental limitations when applied to this paper. Secondly, I will examine the fame-infamy dichotomy in the context of alt-right shooter motivations, then apply the value and limitations. Finally, I will explore the lawlessness of the internet and the slow official response in the context of trolling. I will argue that much of the current debate around alt-right shooters is disjointed, as the research on alt-right shooters has not separated from other mass shooters. The motives, like the members, are not taken seriously. Finally, I will delve into Robert Gurr’s theory of relative deprivation, as entitlement remains a rampant subconscious motive within the alt-right, an ominous shadow lurking over everything.

¹⁰⁸ Keegan Hanks and Alex Amend, “The alt-right is killing people,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 5, 2018, splcenter.org/20180205/alt-right-killing-people.

¹⁰⁹ Hanks and Amend, “The alt-right is killing people,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*.

3.1 Ingroup Community Dynamics

The alt-right utilizes multiple tactics to create and solidify an ingroup. First and foremost is creating a distinct “us” in opposition to a distinct “them.” In addition to being defined in opposition to liberal, politically correct culture, they use disinformation to destabilize mainstream media and recruit new members, contribute and benefit from polarization, and use inside jokes to signal insider status and push a grim message in a non-threatening medium. Hate speech is essential to the overall ingroup dynamic because a vital characteristic of the alt-right is shocking, anti-PC rhetoric—the more shocking, the better. Therefore, hate speech is a mechanism to distinguish loyalty to the group. This section will explore the literature that has touched on these ideas.

Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir analyze ingroup/outgroup dynamics within the context of online platforms. They argue that alt-right language and imagery are “claims-making exercises that constitute examples of bordering processes.”¹¹⁰ The virtual nature of the alt-right extends beyond physical borders but exists within virtual geography. The alt-right is a virtual community that lacks physical space, so it compensates online by creating and protecting *cultural* borders that signify their community from others (emphasis theirs).¹¹¹ Beyond the cultural borders they protect, the alt-right uses memes and slang to identify members of their ingroup and mock members of the outgroup. Social media contributes to disinformation and spreads violent extremist ideologies and political propaganda as information warfare.

¹¹⁰ Edwin Hodge and Helga Hallgrimsdottir, “Networks of Hate: The Alt-Right, ‘Troll Culture,’ and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online,” *Journal of Borderland Studies* 35 no. 4 (2020), 563.

¹¹¹ Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir, “Networks of Hate,” 564-565.

3.1.1 Disinformation

Redpilling is the alt-right slang term for getting a normie to “wake up” to the realities of the world, a world where the elite’s goal is to keep white men down. Part of redpilling is visiting conspiracy theory websites like InfoWars and accepting disinformation. When redpilling is complete, the individual’s concept of truth is faulty. To the individual, he knows the truth and has gained a community encouraging him that echoes his ideas. To the outside world, the alt-right has found its newest recruit.

James A. Piazza’s article on the link between disinformation and violence is essential to this paper. His research is timely and crucial with the increased fake news and distrust in the media following Donald Trump’s presidential election. He finds that “individuals who frequent websites and social media communities featuring disinformation have been found to exhibit higher levels of political extremism and radicalization.”¹¹² Piazza concludes that consuming disinformation “leads individuals to be more receptive to future disinformation and impairs their ability to distinguish bad from good information.”¹¹³ Buying into conspiracy theories is one way to create clear ingroup/outgroup distinctions. Accepting certain beliefs about the world is one way members of the ingroup can identify if someone has “taken the red pill.” Disinformation is crucial to the recruitment, radicalization, and push to violence stage of the cyclical relationship between social media and violence. Disinformation heightens political polarization or, as some scholars have called it, political tribalism.

¹¹² James A. Piazza, “Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 15 no. 1 (2022), 56.

¹¹³ Piazza, “Fake News,” 56-57.

3.1.2 Polarization

Polarization is a natural form of creating ingroups and outgroups, dividing “us” and “them.” James A. Piazza defines political polarization as “a condition where people living in the same society hold extremely differentiated and incompatible political opinions and adhere to mutually exclusive political or partisan identities.”¹¹⁴ Lisa Schirch and James A. Piazza are two researchers who write about polarization in the United States, concluding that polarization leads to the spread of disinformation, increased conflict in society, and heightened extremist ideology.

Lisa Schirch analyzes polarization relating to social media and democracy. While Schirch analyzes how information spread on social media impacts democracy and social cohesion in her chapter on *Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy*, she explores the impact of social media information on conflict and polarization.¹¹⁵ Schirch illustrates that “social media amplifies information disorders by making it easy for anyone to share false or misleading information, to find others with extremist views and to generate the viral spread of information.”¹¹⁶ Piazza, on the other hand, discusses polarization as the instrument to enhance conflict within society. Political leaders utilize polarization to maintain power.¹¹⁷ He concludes that “the impact of disinformation online on domestic terrorism is mediated through increased political polarization.”¹¹⁸ Piazza argues that online disinformation aids terrorists’ recruitment by radicalizing individuals.¹¹⁹ The alternative right is adept at spreading disinformation to increase political polarization through various forms of inside jokes.

¹¹⁴ Piazza, “Fake News,” 57.

¹¹⁵ Lisa Schirch, “Digital Information, Conflict, and Democracy” in *Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy* (New York: Routledge Press, 2021), 27.

¹¹⁶ Schirch, “Digital Information, Conflict, and Democracy,” 27.

¹¹⁷ Piazza, “Fake News,” 55.

¹¹⁸ Piazza, “Fake News,” 57.

¹¹⁹ Piazza, “Fake News,” 58.

3.1.3 Inside Jokes

Scholars have written extensively on the role of inside jokes, humor, irony, and memes in the last eight years since the alt-right broke into the mainstream. Maxime Dafaure, Viveca S. Greene, Lyndon C.S. Way, and Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir are a few scholars who have contributed to the literature on the relationship between humor and hate in the alt-right. Due to its prevalence, scholars researching the alt-right must write about the role of memes and the use of satire.

In her article, Maxime Dafaure discusses the societal and digital environment that evoked outrage and “meme’d into office” the Republican candidate, Donald Trump.¹²⁰ Dafaure focuses on the real-life repercussions of memetic-style humor, drawing links between the increase in post-truth, fake news, alternative facts, and blatant racism to domestic terrorism in the United States.¹²¹ Dafaure completes a visual content analysis of memes, analyzing how racist and xenophobic memes have led to attacks against Hispanic and Muslim people. Lyndon C.S. Way is another author who writes about the relationship between the alt-right and Donald Trump. Way contributes an analysis stating that memes elicit an emotive response rather than a logical one, which explains why memes are an effective medium to subject dangerous propaganda to unsuspecting audiences.¹²² He demonstrates the Trump-alt-right relationship using examples of Trump and his staff retweeting alt-right videos and images created on 4chan.¹²³

¹²⁰ Maxime Dafaure, “The ‘Great Meme War:’ the Alt-Right and its Multifarious Enemies,” *Angles: New Perspectives on the Anglophone World* (2020), 1.

¹²¹ Dafaure, “The Great Meme War,” 1.

¹²² Lyndon C.S. Way, “Trump, Memes and the Alt-Right: Emotive and Affective Criticism and Praise,” *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25 no. 3 (2021), 789.

¹²³ Way, “Trump, Memes and the Alt-Right,” 794.

Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir are two authors who contribute to the literature on memes generally and alt-right memes specifically. They recognize that a meme's simplicity is its strength rather than its weakness. Its effectiveness lies in disseminating ideology to unsuspecting audiences. Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir point out that "in the time it might take a person to write a cogent rebuttal to the image's claims, users can share the image across dozens of pages and platforms, where it can be deployed as a counter to pro-immigration discussions or claims with little effort."¹²⁴ Viveca Greene's article on alt-right memes supports this analysis. Greene draws our attention to the use of irony and satire to advance a white supremacist, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic agenda.¹²⁵ Unlike other authors, Greene illustrates how people with different political commitments employ a similar style of humor, describing how the alt-right's humor is remarkably similar to that found on shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *Key and Peele*.¹²⁶

Authors investigate the darker side of humor, irony, and memes. Satire and parody are weapons in the alt-right's recruitment arsenal and indicate the self-deprecating humor riddled within the alt-right. George Hawley, the author of *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, asked Jazzhands McFeels, the host of the podcast "Fash the Nation," about the role of humor in the alt-right. McFeels said, "Humor is one of the most effective tools we have at our disposal. Properly executed, it can be utilized to disarm our opposition, unravel their narratives, and pierce their arguments with elements of taboo truths we use to tactically nuke their agenda."¹²⁷ Similarly, Vicky Osterweil writes in *Real Time Magazine*, "The fundamental mundanity of the alt-right aesthetic is a crucial part of its power," in part because it is intended to "produce conditions of

¹²⁴ Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir, "Networks of Hate," 570.

¹²⁵ Viveca S. Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies," *Studies in American Humor* 5 vol. 1 (2019), 31.

¹²⁶ Greene, "Deplorable Satire," 32.

¹²⁷ Jazzhands McFeels, quoted in George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 76.

sufficient confusion, apathy, irony, or symbolic distance about what they are trying to do.”¹²⁸

Humor, through memes, remains an effective tool to distinguish ingroup members from outsiders, disperse disinformation, increase polarization, and implant propaganda in a fun, user-friendly way.

3.1.4 Model Limitations

From a policy standpoint, ingroup dynamics are complicated to analyze when dealing with the alt-right because there is no formal membership or organizational structure. As Andrew Anglin put it, “the mob is the movement.”¹²⁹ The internet is vast, and the support systems are scattered and wide, making de-platforming difficult. Additionally, scholars form theories of ingroup dynamics with specific groups in mind, groups with official organizational structures. Applying those theories to the alt-right can risk assuming continuity and loyalty between members. While there is less infighting amongst alt-right members, it would be a mistake to believe one person speaks for the whole or that they would not turn on each other given the opportunity. Milo Yiannopoulos is a prime example. He appeared to be the alt-right golden boy, going on talk shows, and signing book deals, until he defended pedophilia and his employer, Breitbart News, and the alt-right turned on him. The “in” group is less official, less organized, and more turbulent. There is little loyalty, and what marks someone as “in” constantly changes.

One limitation when working with hate speech in the United States is that authorities cannot control speech on the internet. Murat Mengü and Seda Mengü, and Naganna Chetty and

¹²⁸ Vicky Osterweil, “Mass Appeal: How contemporary fascist aesthetics ask, excuse, and normalize violence,” *Real Life Magazine*, June 15, 2017. <http://reallifemag.com/2017/07/18/why-white-nationalism-1-0-failed/>, quoted in Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (London and New York: Routledge: 2020), 108.

¹²⁹ Andrew Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*, August 31, 2016. [Stormer-daily.rw/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/](http://stormer-daily.rw/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/).

Sreejith Alathur are authors who have analyzed the media coverage on the intersection between social media and violence. However, their conclusions do not offer much hope. Mengü and Mengü conclude that social media networks are controlled and surveyed by government or private companies, so they are not open forums to discuss and debate ideas.¹³⁰ In contrast, they argue that a controlled social media

may lead to the spread of hate speech, infringement of personal rights, psychological attacks, symbolic violence, broadcasting private visions without the consent of the interested parties, deceiving people with fake accounts, spreading negative discourses intending to abuse, in addition to mobbing, harassment and insult along with the circulation of malevolent views and information on the internet.¹³¹

While their argument lacks depth, it is unrealistic to believe that an online platform can be fully controlled in our modern digital age while maintaining democratic rights.¹³² Alternatively, Chetty and Alathur's work on hate speech focuses on the legal frameworks, reminding their readers that most democracies have laws protecting freedom of speech.¹³³ Consequently, international and state laws on hate speech run the gambit, with various court cases dedicated to protecting people's right to life and safety over freedom of speech. Next, I will explore the complex dynamics of the fame/infamy dichotomy.

3.2 Fame-Infamy Dichotomy

Lankford and Silver, Langman, and Kissner explore how the desire for fame, attention, and celebrity status is overwhelming, regardless of the cost to themselves or others. As Lankford and Silver argue, the willingness to engage in morally questionable behavior to achieve celebrity

¹³⁰ Murat Mengü and Seda Mengü. "Violence and Social Media," *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications* 3 vol. 1 (July 2015), 225.

¹³¹ Mengü and Mengü. "Violence and Social Media," 225.

¹³² A prime example of this is the silk road. The silk road marketplace is on their fourth version after the United States federal authorities shut down the first three.

¹³³ Naganna Chetty and Sreejith Alathur, "Hate Speech Review in the Context of Online Social Networks," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 40 (2018), 117.

status results in the disappearance of the distinction between fame and infamy. Magazine covers broadcast pictures of child abusers and murders, while social media is a competitive battlefield of people who will say anything to get noticed.¹³⁴ Donald Trump played a vital role in the fame-infamy dichotomy during his presidential campaign. As Trump behaved increasingly erratically, made vulgar and inappropriate comments, mocked his opponents, or boasted about sexual assault, he was rewarded with increased support and eventually the presidency. Many people have become so desperate for attention that they would rather get negative attention than be ignored.¹³⁵ The young man who attacked the FedEx building where he worked in 2014 is one example of someone who connected his desire for fame and violence, stating, “A life lived in infamy is better than just another nobody.”¹³⁶ Mass shootings with high body counts become a desirable path to achieve that goal for those desperate enough to become somebody through killing.

The consequence of a confused and muddled distinction between fame and infamy is an increase in illicit, illegal, and violent behavior for attention. Mass shooters inspire subsequent attackers, partially due to the media granting fame but also because aspiring mass shooters participate in a competition for the “high score.”¹³⁷ A higher body count means increased attention from more media sources for extended periods. Lankford and Silver empirically demonstrate the relationship between high death tolls and high levels of media attention. For mass shooters, “more victims killed equals more front-page photos of you in the newspaper, more days that you stay on the front pages, more likelihood of you appearing in *The New York*

¹³⁴ Lankford and Silver, “Why have public mass shootings become more deadly,” 41

¹³⁵ Lankford and Silver, “Why have public mass shootings become more deadly,” 42.

¹³⁶ S. Visser, “FedEx gunman’s suicide note still leaves many wondering,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 9, 2014 quoted in Langman, “Different Types of Role Model Influence and Fame Seeking Among Mass Killers and Copycat Offenders,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 14.

¹³⁷ Lankford and Silver, “Why have public mass shootings become more deadly,” 44.

Times, and more articles and longer articles (based on word count).”¹³⁸ The media attention demonstrates that aspiring mass shooters will kill more people to be famous.

Lankford and Silver’s article on why public mass shootings have become more deadly since 1966 is a critical analysis of the online and societal impacts and ramifications that lead to an increase in deadlier mass shootings. Their results find that mass shootings are more deadly because perpetrators “often engage in extended planning periods, develop more extensive attack strategies, and seem more driven to acquire weapons that will increase their lethality.”¹³⁹ Jason Kissner’s research on the contagiousness of active shootings¹⁴⁰ is vital to identifying past shooters’ impact on current and future shooters. “Media-related modeling” or copycat phenomena is created by “technology, the media’s salient role in contemporary life, the elevation of the criminal to star status, and the value placed on public recognition.”¹⁴¹ Kissner incorporates Black’s notion of “mimetic mechanisms” of violence into his analysis to explain a theory motivated by relative deprivation. In essence, mimetic mechanisms of violence explain active shooter motivations, separating them into two categories: reconstitute identities that have been “torn away” or fulfill a fantasized identity encouraged by mass media presentation.¹⁴² Peter Langman’s article on different types of role model influence and fame-seeking is an appropriate addition to the literature on mass killers. Langman focuses his research on the perpetrators who explicitly acknowledge past shooters’ influence on them. Although Langman touches on fame-seeking motivations, his findings suggest that most killers are drawn to their role models for

¹³⁸ Lankford and Silver, “Why have public mass shootings become more deadly,” 44.

¹³⁹ Lankford and Silver, “Why have public mass shootings become more deadly,” 41.

¹⁴⁰ The United States Department of Homeland Security defines an active shooter as, “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area; in most cases active shooters use firearm(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims.” Jason Kissner, “Are Active Shootings Temporarily Contagious? An Empirical Assessment,” *Society for Police and Criminal Psychology* (2015), 1.

¹⁴¹ Kissner, “Are Active Shootings Temporarily Contagious?” *Society for Police and Criminal Psychology*, 2-3.

¹⁴² Kissner, “Are Active Shootings Temporarily Contagious?” *Society for Police and Criminal Psychology*, 3.

personal reasons.¹⁴³ While Langman's research is from 1966 to 2017, he pays special attention to the copycat murders inspired by the Columbine shooting due to the number of shooters who make casual references, honor dates, imitates language, and imitate appearance and behavior.¹⁴⁴

Capellan, Johnson, Porter, and Martin's article on different types of public mass shootings disaggregate employee, school, ideologically motivated, and rampage shooters. Their results show that ideologically motivated shooters are the most patient and methodical of the four categories of mass shooters, resulting in the highest body counts.¹⁴⁵ Capellan, Johnson, Porter, and Martin point out that although rampage and disgruntled employee offenders are responsible for approximately sixty-five percent of all public mass shootings in the United States between 1966 and 2017, they only receive fifteen-to-twenty percent of total media coverage.¹⁴⁶ Conversely, school and terrorist (ideologically motivated) public mass shooters receive seventy-five-to-eighty percent of media coverage, resulting in increased law enforcement policy attention.¹⁴⁷ Media coverage disparity plays a leading role in fame-motivated copycat killers.

3.2.1 Ideological Awareness

Lankford and Silver draw attention to the public mass shooters who use media attention to bring awareness to an ideological cause. Violence for ideological awareness is prevalent amongst alt-right shooters who leave manifestos, make public statements when arrested, or use their trials as a final way to remind their audiences and the public of their cause. Elliot Rodger

¹⁴³ Peter Langman, "Different Types of Role Model Influence and Fame Seeking Among Mass Killers and Copycat Offenders," *American Behavioral Scientist* (2017), 1.

¹⁴⁴ Langman, "Different Types of Role Model Influence and Fame Seeking Among Mass Killers and Copycat Offenders," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 8-11.

¹⁴⁵ Joel A. Capellan, Joseph Johnson, Jeremy R. Porter, and Christine Martin, "Disaggregating Mass Public Shootings: A Comparative Analysis of Disgruntled Employee, School, Ideologically Motivated, and Rampage Shooters," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* (2018), 1.

¹⁴⁶ Capellan, Johnson, Porter, and Martin, "Disaggregating Mass Public Shootings," 7.

¹⁴⁷ Capellan, Johnson, Porter, and Martin, "Disaggregating Mass Public Shootings," 7.

uploaded video messages and a written manifesto to the internet to air his grievances about how his life was miserable because women sexually rejected him. Robert Bowers told the police that he wanted “all Jews to die.”¹⁴⁸ Dylann Roof used his trial to reiterate the race war he tried to start while also showcasing his lack of empathy for his crimes.¹⁴⁹ Timothy McVeigh—perpetrator of the Oklahoma City bombing—thought his actions would kick-start the revolution by inspiring the masses to rise up.¹⁵⁰ Anders Brevik’s 2011 attack in Norway, Roof’s 2015 mass shooting at a black church in Charleston, the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, Brenton Tarrant’s 2019 Christchurch killings, and Patrick Crusius’s 2019 attack on “invaders” from Mexico at the El Paso Walmart illustrate the deadliness behind ideologically driven shootings, as well as less publicized attacks against Jewish people, racial minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community.¹⁵¹

Piazza uses the “Pizzagate” controversy to demonstrate the deadly effects of disinformation and how it can motivate individuals to act violently to bring attention to their cause. In the case of Edgar Maddison Welch, he was not seeking fame for himself but for what white supremacists on the internet had led him to believe. Welch walked into the Comet Pizza Pong pizzeria in Washington, D.C., on December 14, 2016, with an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle. He searched the restaurant, produced no results, and surrendered to the police without any casualties. Welch stated that his objectives were to “rescue children he had read had been abducted and were being held at the pizzeria and to expose to the wider public a nefarious ploy

¹⁴⁸ “‘Jews are the children of Satan’ and the danger of taking biblical passages out of context,” *CBS News*, October 31, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jews-are-the-children-of-satan-john-8-44-danger-of-taking-biblical-passages-out-of-context/>.

¹⁴⁹ Laura Burnip and Dylan Boroff, “Who is Dylann Roof and what did he do?” *The Sun News*, December 11, 2020. <https://the-sun.com/news/1955593/dylann-roof-crimes-white-supremacist-south-carolina>.

¹⁵⁰ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 55. And Langman, “Different Types of Role Model Influence and Fame Seeking Among Mass Killers and Copycat Offenders,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 15.

¹⁵¹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 5.

by Democratic party members.”¹⁵² Beyond rescuing children he believed were held captive, he sought attention for an ideological cause he believed was factual. Many referenced the so-called “Pizzagate” controversy on alt-right and right-wing extremist websites, including InfoWars, Planet Free Will, The Vigilant Citizen, SubjectPolitics.com, and Your News Wire.¹⁵³ Alt-right figures, including Mike Cernovich, a prolific blogger, YouTube personality, and conspiracy theorist, promoted “Pizzagate.”¹⁵⁴

During the recruitment process, terrorist organizations market the opportunity to be a “martyr” as a way for people who struggled in life to leave a powerful legacy.¹⁵⁵ Some alt-right shooters differ from suicide terrorists, namely in their medium, but there are overlapping motivations between alt-right shooters and suicide terrorists. While some suicide terrorists have altruistic reasons for becoming suicide bombers, like resistance to foreign occupation or money and support for one’s family, many are motivated by personal significance and social status.¹⁵⁶ Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, and Orehek’s article explores suicide bombers’ quest for personal significance. They draw on Crenshaw’s summary of suicidal acts by acknowledging that sacrifice is a way to “become a hero and part of an exalted elite.”¹⁵⁷

Additionally, Mia Bloom describes sacrifice and risk as opportunities to impress a wider audience and leave a legacy.¹⁵⁸ The higher the risk the individual takes on behalf of the group,

¹⁵² Piazza, “Fake News,” 56.

¹⁵³ Piazza, “Fake News,” 56.

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*: *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 76.

¹⁵⁵ Lankford and Silver, “Why have public mass shootings become more deadly,” 42.

¹⁵⁶ Arie W. Kruglanski, Xiaoyan Chen, Mark Dechesne, Shira Fishman, and Edward Orehek, “Fully Committed: Suicide Bombers’ Motivation and the Quest for Personal Significance,” *Political Psychology* 30 no. 3 (2009), 332.

¹⁵⁷ Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, and Orehek, “Fully Committed,” 332.

¹⁵⁸ Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 87.

the greater reward and higher social status.¹⁵⁹ A powerful legacy, hero status, and personal significance are compelling reasons to become a suicide terrorist or alt-right shooter.

Jonathan Weisman is one journalist who has analyzed attention concerning the anti-Semitic alt-right trolls. Beyond pointing out that trolls like Andrew Anglin enjoy and thrive on attention, Weisman ponders his part in shining a light on the attention he has afforded anti-Semites and racists. When someone like Weisman retweets a fascist post to publicize anti-Semitism, the repercussions are noticeable but not severe. When someone like Donald Trump likes, shares, or retweets white supremacist tweets, he instantaneously gives the ideas legitimacy and the tweeter fame. If the president of the United States can say whatever he wants with no punishment and massive rewards, then others will follow his lead.

Angela Nagle's book *Kill All Normies* offers a brilliant overview of the history, influence, and danger of the alt-right. One theory she presents falls short of the mark. She describes the alt-right as a reactionary movement against the online economy of virtue, cancel culture, and increased politically correct rhetoric. While many authors agree that the pendulum swings to both extremes,¹⁶⁰ it is irresponsible to label the alt-right as a purely reactionary movement because that places responsibility on those they are reacting to instead of acknowledging the freely chosen path alt-right members follow. Nagle describes the online economy of virtue as a mentality that materialized from the liberal left on Tumblr. Youth disgusted by the "preachy, performative 'woke' Tumblr-style identity politics" of the liberal left found an audience equally disenchanted by this new form of identity politics in the alt-right.¹⁶¹ In

¹⁵⁹ Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, 87-88

¹⁶⁰ White supremacist movements are prevalent in the United States and Europe where migration, racial equality, and social and economic change are challenging traditional power structures. Racial equality often generates backlash among extremists. Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 2-3.

¹⁶¹ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumbler to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017), 63.

the wake of campus wars over trigger warnings and safe spaces rose a mentality where politically incorrect rhetoric was not only praised but a ticket to fame.¹⁶²

3.2.2 Model Limitations

The primary limitation of the fame-infamy dichotomy concerning the alt-right is that it undercuts the real and dangerous ideology and people who make up the movement. Treating all mass shooters, trolls, and white supremacists as individuals seeking attention because they want to be famous is a blatant disregard for their beliefs and minimizes their commitment to their cause. Milo Yiannopoulos introduced a narrative that no one in the alt-right believes what they are saying; claiming they say it as part of an obscure joke.¹⁶³ Before the alt-right ostracized him for defending pedophilia, alt-right members on chatrooms, 4chan, and alt-right sites were enraged that he was publicly lying about the movement.¹⁶⁴ Andrew Anglin even went so far as speak against him in his article “A Normie’s Guide to the Alt-Right” on the white supremacist site, *The Daily Stormer*, emphasizing how bizarre Milo’s narrative is.¹⁶⁵ Just because they gift wrap their extremist ideology in ironic humor and memes does not mean it or the members are less dangerous than the Islamic State or the Ku Klux Klan.

Lankford and Silver perfectly connect deadly mass shootings and the desire for fame. However, the scope of their research does not fully extend to incorporate a social media analysis. They describe social media sites where the body count is discussed and demonstrate which mass shooters implicitly or explicitly aim to kill more people to get a “high score.” However, their policy recommendations do not extend to address these internet platforms. Their primary

¹⁶² Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 75-77.

¹⁶³ Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*.

¹⁶⁴ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 19.

¹⁶⁵ Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*.

recommendation is to change media coverage of public mass shootings. Granted, Lankford and Silver are not alone in this policy recommendation. However, every scholar, policy maker, and law enforcement professional who voices this solution draws us one step closer to an America with no mass shootings. Lankford and Silver's message is clear: "stop pushing the names and photos of public mass killers (except during ongoing searches for escaped suspects) but continue reporting the other details of those crimes in a responsible manner."¹⁶⁶ Namely, the policy recommendations address the issues they presented: fame and attention, but alt-right shooters play to a different audience. Their profile is similar to public mass shooters. However, their motivations are closer to terrorists, as they seek attention for an ideological cause, whether that be white genocide, a Jewish cabal, or the destructive nature of feminism.

3.3 Lawlessness of the Internet

Gamergate made the public aware of the severity and seriousness of online trolling and the reality women working in gaming and technology industries experience. Few researchers have devoted work to what Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell call "technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment" (TFSV). TFSV describes collectively the "range of criminal, civil, and otherwise harmful sexually aggressive behaviors perpetrated against women with the aid or use of new technologies."¹⁶⁷ Henry and Powell explore TFSV as a non-unique phenomenon that is an extension of the spectrum of violence perpetrated against women daily. The complexity of online platforms, namely disinhibition, impunity, and anonymity, fuse to blame victims, diffuse responsibility, and de-individualize the problem.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Lankford and Silver, "Why have public mass shootings become more deadly," 51.

¹⁶⁷ Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell. "Embodied Harms: Gender, Shame, and Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence," *Violence Against Women* 21 no. 6 (2015), 759.

¹⁶⁸ Henry and Powell. "Embodied Harms," 760.

Female victims of online harassment or “trolling” engage in digilantism as a remedy for the lawlessness of the internet and the inadequate response of law enforcement. As one feminist theorist, Emma Jane, puts it, there is a “more general trend for female e-bile targets to engage in do-it-yourself (DIY) ‘digilante’ tactics such as ‘calling out’ or attempting to ‘name and shame’ their antagonists.”¹⁶⁹ E-bile is a term Jane uses to describe cyber-harassment, such as rape threats and sexualized vitriol.¹⁷⁰ The lack of adequate response from law enforcement or social media companies normalizes hate speech, which has disastrous consequences for society, as hate speech is often a precursor to hate crimes.¹⁷¹ Beyond the unwillingness to take legal or punitive action is the inability to do so with the current criminal and civil justice responses. Henry and Powell argue that current legal frameworks do not adequately capture the harms perpetrated against women in the virtual space.¹⁷²

The consequences can be severe for those who take matters into their own hands, either by engaging in digilantism or trolling the trolls. As Zoe Quinn explains, when she trolled the trolls sending her death and rape threats, they used these responses to claim victimization and repost only her reactions, triggering more online harassment and turning public perception against her.¹⁷³ Exposing, taunting, and retweeting the harassment can also play to the alt-right’s advantage. As Jonathan Weisman pointed out, when someone like him, with fifty-eight thousand Twitter followers, retweets a fascist with 400 followers, the fascist and the overall alt-right movement wins. As one of his tormentors highlighted, “Thanks to @jonathanweisman for redpilling at least 1.5k normies today by retweeting premium content. Epitome of useful

¹⁶⁹ Emma A. Jane, “Online misogyny and Feminist Digilantism,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* (2016), 2.

¹⁷⁰ Jane, “Online misogyny and feminist digilantism,” 2.

¹⁷¹ Chetty and Alathur, “Hate Speech Review in the Context of Online Social Networks,” 108.

¹⁷² Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 769.

¹⁷³ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 47.

idiot.”¹⁷⁴ Diligantism can have serious consequences, but remaining silent is not an option for some.

3.3.1 Model Limitations

As Jane points out, diligitante tactics fail to adequately address the problem of gendered e-bile because it “shifts the burden of responsibility from male perpetrators to female targets, and from the public to the private sphere.”¹⁷⁵ Online harassment is representative of society, as is the law enforcement response. Too often, authorities dismiss or minimize female victims of gendered online harassment. Similar to the second-wave feminist movement fighting against workplace harassment and domestic violence, current feminists need to raise awareness of the seriousness of the situation and, like the second-wave feminists, make the public and law enforcement see these issues as public societal problems, not private, women-only problems. First, influential decision-makers will have to take online harassment seriously.

It will be many years before legal systems catch up with the quickly changing online world. Even if the legal systems were capable and willing to act, the battle to restrict free speech would only drive more people to alt-right websites and blogs. The internet is ungovernable, but that lawlessness will only change if free speech is limited.¹⁷⁶ The ramifications of limiting free speech on the internet are daunting and unrealistic in a world of anonymity. However, victims can pursue legal justice when harassment extends into the “real” world.

¹⁷⁴ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 88.

¹⁷⁵ Jane, “Online misogyny and feminist diligitantism,” 2.

¹⁷⁶ Chetty and Alathur, “Hate Speech Review in the Context of Online Social Networks,” 117.

3.4 Relative Deprivation

This section will analyze the culture of normative violence through Robert Gurr's relative deprivation. I will put Gurr in conversation with Vamik Volkan's theories of chosen traumas through social identity theory and Karina Korostelina's "Four C Model" to address what led Robert Bowers and Elliot Rodger to embrace violence.

3.4.1 Relative Deprivation and the First Two Steps of the "Four C Model"

Relative deprivation is crucial to analyzing the alt-right and its motivations. The three forms of relative deprivation—temporal, expectation, and fraternal—have their place in this analysis. The key to relative deprivation is perception. Gurr defines relative deprivation as

actors' perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and value capabilities. Value expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled. Value capabilities are the goods and conditions they think they are capable of getting and keeping.¹⁷⁷

The reference point determines whether an individual considers himself deprived, regardless of whether an outside party would consider the individual deprived. The reference can be his past condition (temporal deprivation), a more well-off group (fraternal deprivation), or an abstract ideal (expectation deprivation).¹⁷⁸ If the individual feels his legitimate expectations¹⁷⁹ are being hindered and thwarted, it can lead to frustration and political discontent.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Ted Robert Gurr, "Relative Deprivation and the Impetus to Violence" in *Why Men Rebel 4th edition*. (Boulder, London: Paradigm Publishers, 2011), 24.

¹⁷⁸ Gurr, "Relative Deprivation," 25.

¹⁷⁹ Expectations are the legitimate entitlement set by the prevailing norms of the immediate social and cultural environment, while aspirations are what one hopes to have, but not necessarily considered one's due.

¹⁸⁰ Gurr, "Relative Deprivation," 38 quoted in Sarah Heiderstadt, "Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement," May 16, 2022.

Temporal deprivation is often referred to as “Golden Age” deprivation because people experiencing it compare their common state to a time in history when life was better.¹⁸¹ White supremacists typically refer to the “good ol’ days” where women accepted their rightful place in the home, people of color were subjugated and segregated, and leaders ran the United States on Christian values.¹⁸² While past years in history may have been beneficial for some groups, those inciting temporal deprivation are the same ones fighting for the “‘protection’ of a shared, mythologized, white, Christian, European heritage from the inherent ‘threats’ of immigration from those that fall out of this category.”¹⁸³

Deep within the American alt-right movement is the celebration of Europe as the homeland of a pure white identity they must protect from increased immigration. Richard Spencer has described himself as an identitarian, even attempting to start an identitarian activist organization in 2017.¹⁸⁴ An identitarian works to “influence political and socio-economic activity in an effort to protect and preserve racial, ethnic, and cultural identity.”¹⁸⁵ A fundamental belief in identitarianism is the “right to difference,” which is the right of every people, ethnos, culture, nation, group, or community to live according to its norms and traditions, irrespective of ideology or globalist homogenization.”¹⁸⁶ The “right to difference” belief precedes the discussion of forcible deportation of non-white people from the United States and Europe, regardless of citizenship or birthplace.¹⁸⁷ The “right to difference” is one example of the alt-right adopting an

¹⁸¹ Karina V. Korostelina, “Theories of Social Identity” (lecture, University of Malta, Malta, April 26, 2022).

¹⁸² Heiderstadt, “Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement.”

¹⁸³ Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 68.

¹⁸⁴ Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 65.

¹⁸⁵ Jossur Surtson, “Identitarianism and the great replacement,” *AltRight.com*, May 12, 2017, <https://altright.com/2017/05/12/identitarianism-and-the-great-replacement/> in Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 65.

¹⁸⁶ Faye Guillaume, *Why We Fight: Manifesto of the European Resistance* (Budapest: Arktos Media, 2011), 334 quoted in Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 65-66.

¹⁸⁷ Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 68.

old school of thought, revamping it in a modern context to stop “white genocide.” White genocide is the belief that the white race is “dying” due to growing non-white populations and “forced assimilation,” deliberately engineered and controlled by the Jewish elite to destroy the white race.¹⁸⁸

Much of the bitter misogyny within the alt-right is due to sexual frustration. Misogynistic men want the benefits of sexual liberation while simultaneously condemning women’s sexual freedom.¹⁸⁹ Accompanying sexual liberation is the widening understanding of gender and sexuality, resulting in men in the manosphere railing against women because modern times are not like “the good ol’ days” where a woman was faithful or did not “trap” men with a child.¹⁹⁰ In more extreme cases, alt-right members offer solutions to female sexual liberation, one being “white sharia.” According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, “white sharia” is a “misogynistic anti-feminist vision of extreme patriarchy, where women are subjugated to the extent they’re nothing more than white baby factories, preferably in headscarves.”¹⁹¹ The “good ol’ days” white supremacists attempt to return to puts women “back in their rightful place” and return society to what it was in a mythicized era before feminism. White genocide and white sharia intersect with the obsession with white women and fertility. As Sacco Vandal puts it,

Our people will be virtually nonexistent within a century if the West does not find a way to A) end immigration into the West, B) end the growing trend of White women mating with and bearing offspring for nonwhites, and C) drastically raise the White birth rate.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Alex Amend, “Analyzing a Terrorist’s Social Media Manifesto: the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter’s Posts on Gab,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/28/analyzing-terrorists-social-media-manifesto-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooters-posts-gab>.

¹⁸⁹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 84.

¹⁹⁰ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 85.

¹⁹¹ Brandon Joel Kelley, “‘White sharia’ and militant white nationalism,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, November 27, 2017, [splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism).

¹⁹² Brandon Joel Kelley, “‘White Sharia’ and Militant White Nationalism,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, November 27, 2017, [Splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism).

Vandal lays out what he calls “the blueprint for salvation,” which includes stripping women of suffrage and most, if not all, political, legal, and economic power because,

A.) women are prone to vote for liberal politicians and policies, such as open immigration, B) women, in general, have no genetically predisposed loyalty to the tribe but will instead seek the perceived strongest men of any radical or ethnic group, and C) women, in general, have exercised their political, economic, social, and legal rights and powers primarily to curtail the number of children that they would otherwise have in a traditional society.¹⁹³

Elliot Rodger rambled about these exact causes, even writing that if he had the power, he would put women in concentration camps and starve the vast majority while watching from an elevated position. Those he did not starve; he would breed to produce beautiful white children.¹⁹⁴

Rodgers did not have the vocabulary to name white sharia. However, he expressed the same desire to strip women of their sexual liberation and choice of breeding partners because women rejected him.¹⁹⁵ Although Rogers did not have the vocabulary to name his beliefs, nor did he cite Vandal in his writings, the same sources influenced him.

Social identity theory introduces relationships within groups and between groups. Favorable comparison is a crucial aspect of understanding the psychology of identity conflict. Tajfel and Turner define social identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.”¹⁹⁶ Ingroup favoritism results in positive distinctiveness and the need for positive self-esteem leads to discrimination against other groups.¹⁹⁷ White Americans who perceive they have lost their “rightful” position of power in the

¹⁹³ Sacco Vandal and Vanzetti Vandal, *The American Militant Nationalist Manifesto* (Bath, Ohio: Vandal Brothers, LLC, 2015), 118.

¹⁹⁴ Elliot Rodger, “My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,” (manifesto) May 23, 2013.

¹⁹⁵ Rodger, “My Twisted World.”

¹⁹⁶ H. Tajfel and J.C. Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior,” *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (1986) quoted in Karina V. Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict* (Palgrave, 2007), 24.

¹⁹⁷ Korostelina, “Theories of Social Identity,” April 27, 2022.

United States find solitude with online communities who identify, reinforce, and enhance group identity by victimizing outsiders to raise their self-esteem.¹⁹⁸ Essentially, the bullied become bullies. Self-published manifestos of alt-right mass shooters describe childhoods where they were small, non-athletic, and easy prey for bullies.¹⁹⁹ In time, these boys found a community of like-minded individuals on online platforms. Many young men attracted to the alt-right ideology have no other way to raise their self-esteem, so they diminish, dehumanize, and victimize others to feel superior.²⁰⁰

Vamik Volkan's concept of chosen traumas and chosen glories is an essential psychological dynamic when analyzing the religious motivations of the alt-right. Volkan's analogy of identity as a tent is vital to understanding what impact ethnic identity has on an individual's psyche, group identification, and group satisfaction of needs.²⁰¹ Projection is a fundamental aspect of Volkan's group identity theory, but I will discuss that later. The alt-right uses the Crusades as a former glory and language of fighting a holy war to mobilize "warriors" and strengthen the moral component of their anti-Semitic beliefs. The Crusades are a perfect option for a chosen glory because the history of the Crusades is not well known nor accurately portrayed in popular culture. Fighting a war against Jews and Muslims to retake or preserve a

¹⁹⁸ James A. Piazza, "Fake news: the effects of social media disinformation on domestic terrorism," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 15 no. 1 (2022), 58.

¹⁹⁹ This is not the case for all mass shooters, nor all people who are attracted to extremist ideology, but it is the case for Elliot Rodger, a young man in California who killed his roommates before opening fire in a sorority. Rodger's manifesto explicitly blames women for his feelings of humiliation, worthlessness, and despair. He cites women as the cause of all his suffering, which lead him to kill six people and injure fourteen before committing suicide. Rodger found community in chatrooms where misogyny was celebrated. Rodger is now known as the "supreme gentleman" or "king of the incels." Hankes and Amend, "The Alt-Right is Killing People," *Southern Poverty Law Center*. Rodger, "My Twisted World."

²⁰⁰ Heiderstadt, "Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement."

²⁰¹ Volkan, Vamik, "Ethnic Tents: Descriptions of Large-Group Identities" quoted in *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 27.

holy land is an easily adopted narrative for war in the Middle East and promoting anti-immigration legislation.²⁰²

Volkan's theory of chosen traumas and chosen glories align with conceptions of weaponizing history and Gurr's temporal relative deprivation. It is no coincidence that nationalists utilize the Middle Ages to describe something as "medieval," meaning backward, or to praise an imagined version of history that was white, Christian, and male-dominated. Neither version of the Middle Ages is historically correct, but truth rarely matters in nationalistic narratives. Weaponizing an understanding of history can feed prejudices about people they deem inferior while also holding a romanticized time on a pedestal.²⁰³

Expectation deprivation is a fundamental aspect of relative deprivation and contributes to the psychological condition of white supremacists. Perception plays a large part in expectation deprivation. For example, many in the United States would not perceive young white men as an oppressed or deprived group, especially with the normalization of terms like "white privilege."²⁰⁴ However, many middle-class and lower-middle-class white people feel deprived of what society has legitimately led them to expect. In short, expectation deprivation compares reality to what people believe they are entitled to.²⁰⁵ American patriarchal society has taught young white, heterosexual men that they are entitled to power, women, and a better lifestyle than others.²⁰⁶ When deprived of these entitlements, they search for answers to explain why they do not have them, find like-minded individuals who experience similar deprivation, and join communities

²⁰² Heiderstadt, "Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement."

²⁰³ Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2020) quoted in Heiderstadt, "Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement."

²⁰⁴ Nagel, *Kill All Normies*, 63. Oxford dictionary defines "white privilege" as, "inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice."

²⁰⁵ Korostelina, "Theories of Social Identity," April 26, 2022.

²⁰⁶ Heiderstadt, "Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement."

where they are further radicalized.²⁰⁷ For Elliot Rodger, he concluded that his life was worthless because women deprived him of what he believed he was due, namely, a beautiful white girlfriend to have sex with.²⁰⁸

The “Four C Model” illustrates the four changes in identity-based conflict. They are Comparison, Competition, Confrontation, and Counteraction. The first step—Comparison—is where an ingroup implements a “positive we vs. negative them” perception and favorable intergroup comparison.²⁰⁹ They create comparisons from various identity factors, including unfavorable perceptions of an outgroup, meta contrast, and relative deprivation. Attributing negative characteristics to an outgroup is an essential psychological distinction as the conflict progresses. Meta contrast—overemphasizing similarities within “our” group while overemphasizing differences in other groups—becomes a function of categorization for a prototype to strengthen ingroup loyalty. In the case of the alt-right, leaders emphasize white Christian men as a homogenous identity group they mobilize against other identity groups.²¹⁰

Compared to other groups, we can tie fraternal deprivation to the second step of the “Four C Model” and Volkan’s concept of projection. The second step of the “Four C Model” — Competition—introduces instrumental conflicts of interest between counterpoised interactive communities.²¹¹ Although white men dominate and hold positions of power in most sectors, they perceive women and people of color are “encroaching” on “their” domain. Perceiving outgroups as a threat makes it easier for ingroups to declare a self-defense narrative, and competition turns into a fight for ingroup survival.²¹² The most prominent example is that seen in Gamergate. As

²⁰⁷ Piazza, “Fake news,” 58

²⁰⁸ Rodger, “My Twisted World.”

²⁰⁹ Korostelina, *Social Identity and Conflict*, 6.

²¹⁰ Heiderstadt, “Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement.”

²¹¹ Karina V. Korostelina, “Social Identity and Conflict” (lecture, University of Malta, Malta, April 27, 2022).

²¹² Heiderstadt, “Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement.”

described in chapter one, Gamergate started when a female developer released a feminist video game, which received an unhinged level of backlash from men who believed women were invading the last male-dominated space.²¹³

Comparison, competition, and ingroup favoritism led to negative outgroup stereotypes. For Christian white supremacists, stereotypes depict Jewish people as greedy, sneaky, and manipulative, which they support through disinformation and conspiracy theories. As mentioned above, conspiracy theories are simplistic explanations of complex issues. Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG) is a theory held by white nationalists and far-right groups. They believe Jews have infiltrated the world's banking systems and use that influence to control governments.²¹⁴ Zionist Occupied Government is a small sample of how some populations in the United States stereotype outgroups and rationalize their projection. Projection is the belief that "they" are making "us" do something, like act violently, but "we" are never at fault; "we" are acting in self-defense.²¹⁵ Alt-right shooters internalize and vocalize projection when murdering women, Jewish people, and racial minorities.

The reason for projection is that white supremacists believe they are the self-proclaimed protectors of the white race, which is an obligation best demonstrated in the most famous mantra adopted by white supremacists worldwide. The famous 14 Word mantra states, "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children."²¹⁶ The combination of relative

²¹³ Weisman, (((Semitism))), 65.

²¹⁴ Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2001). ZOG was a foundational belief and motive for the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh.

²¹⁵ Vamik Volkan, *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) quoted in Karina V. Korostelina, "Theories of Social Identity" (lecture, University of Malta, Malta, April 26, 2022).

²¹⁶ "David Lane 14 Words 88 Precepts," *Silent Nationalist Majority*, silentnationalistmajority.com/David-lane-14-words-88-precepts.html.

deprivation, projection, and chosen glory is a dangerous combination that has led multiple alt-right members to engage in conflict against women and racial and religious minorities.²¹⁷

3.4.2 Theory of Group Identity and the Last Two Steps of the “Four C Model”

One of the most influential concepts Volkan has introduced to the conflict analysis and resolution world is the concept of chosen traumas and chosen glories. One side of the concept is viewing how trauma survivors transmit that trauma to future generations. While this can help psychologists and practitioners understand conflict and break cycles of violence, it does not address power dynamics in conflict. Leaders looking to weaponize history or mobilize populations can choose traumas or glories depending on power preservation or mobilization.²¹⁸ Volkan defines chosen trauma as “the collective memory of a calamity that once befell a group's ancestors...it is more than a recollection. It is a shared mental representation of the event, which includes realistic information and fantasized expectations, intense feelings, and defense against unacceptable thoughts.”²¹⁹ Anti-Semitic nationalists choose the classic “Jews killed Jesus” narrative as their chosen trauma, while misogynists choose women’s sexual rejection.

Some individuals, like Robert Bowers, draw upon the Gospel of John for anti-Semitic language like “Jews are the children of Satan” to justify killing Jewish people.²²⁰ According to alt-right shooters like Rodgers and those he inspires, Jewish responsibility for killing the savior of humanity paired with all-encompassing translations of “*hoi Ioudaioi*” is a grievous crime that

²¹⁷ Heiderstadt, “Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement.”

²¹⁸ Korostelina, “Theories of Social Identity,” April 26, 2022.

²¹⁹ Volkan, *Blood Lines*, 48.

²²⁰ John 8:44 states: “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

surpasses time and warrants the killing of Jewish people in all places and times.²²¹ For violent misogynists, women's sexual rejection is enough to label all women as sluts, whores, and, as Rodger put it, "beasts incapable of choosing intelligent men to gift sexual pleasure with," therefore, he must punish all women.²²²

The third step of the "Four C Model" is Confrontation, which is the idealization of social identities or the transformation of conflicts of interest into confrontations between "us" and "them."²²³ The shift from a conflict of interest and resources to Us vs. Them combines the moral obligations of defending themselves, their families, and their way of life against an outside threat and defeating evil. Suppose someone believes a Jewish elite is responsible for bringing in large numbers of Southern black and brown people to eradicate the Western white race. In that case, the logical step for this person is to confront immigrants, people of color, and Jews in self-defense. This twisted logic extends to women. Suppose brown people are replacing the white race because white women have children with non-white men or fewer children. In that case, the logical solution is that men must control women's choice of mating partners and reproduction frequency.²²⁴ Unsurprisingly, this mentality devolves into online harassment, where members threaten to rape and kill, normalizing physical assaults, and in extreme cases, this mentality can embolden men to commit violence.²²⁵

²²¹ To clarify, the Hebrew word for Jews is "*hoi Ioudaioi*" and is frequently used in the Gospel of John. It is understood among Biblical scholars that "*hoi Ioudaioi*" means "the Jews over there that are different from us Jews over here" but the nuance gets lost in translation and what lay people read is "the Jews." Unfortunately, this translation and interpretation is enough to warrant some to think all Jews throughout time are responsible for killing Jesus. Heiderstadt, "Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement."

²²² Rodger, "My Twisted World," (manifesto).

²²³ Korostelina, "Social Identity and Conflict," April 27, 2022.

²²⁴ Brandon Joel Kelley "'White Sharia' and Militant White Nationalism," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, November 27, 2017, [Splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism](https://splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism).

²²⁵ Heiderstadt, "Anti-Semitism in the Alt-Right Movement."

The fourth step of the “Four C Model” is Counteraction, which introduces moral duality and collective axiology, dehumanization, and devaluation of the Other. The counteraction step justifies discrimination, violence, and in extreme cases, genocide.²²⁶ Moral axiology is the idea that our values are sacred, and others are evil or immoral, and this becomes a foundation for projecting negative stereotypes on the outgroup, whether they be Jewish people or women. The normalization of violence has an aspect of collective axiology.²²⁷ There is a moral component between good and evil; “we” are always good and must eradicate the evil “other.”²²⁸ Many conspiracy theories blame Jewish people for everything evil in society, historically and in the present. Labeling women as beasts and stripping their fundamental human rights is a prime example of dehumanization and devaluation of the Other.

3.4.3 Model Limitations

Relative deprivation and chosen trauma alone are not enough to analyze the alt-right, its motives, and what leads young men to commit acts of domestic terrorism. Relative deprivation is the underlying feeling shared across the alt-right movement. However, ingroup community dynamics creating a support system, the overwhelming desire for fame, and the lawlessness of the internet allowing harassment and violence with no repercussions all factor into making a domestic terrorist.

3.5 Inform Research Objectives

While many scholars have written about the cyclical relationship between violence and social media, and others have researched trends on alt-right social media sites, including 4chan,

²²⁶ Korostelina, “Social Identity and Conflict,” April 27, 2022.

²²⁷ Korostelina, “Social Identity and Conflict,” April 27, 2022.

²²⁸ Korostelina, “Social Identity and Conflict,” April 27, 2022.

few have combined the two perspectives in one scholarly work. This dissertation will incorporate empirical and analytical research to provide insight into the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between social media and violence. The alt-right's motives and recruitment tactics are vital in the cyclical relationship. I will fuse the theories above with datasets scraped from 4chan's Politically incorrect board to demonstrate how the alternative right emboldens men to commit violence.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the main themes covered in the literature on the alt-right, specifically regarding the relationship between violence and social media. The first section I explored examined ingroup community dynamics as a precursor to domestic terrorism. Disinformation, polarization, and inside jokes all play essential roles in distinguishing ingroup from outgroup members and act as recruitment and radicalization tactics. Next, I examined the fame-infamy dichotomy in the context of alt-right shooter motivations, giving special attention to media-encouraged copycats and shooters who bring awareness to their ideological cause through mass killing. Thirdly, I explored the lawlessness of the internet and the slow official response in the context of trolling. In this section, I pay special attention to “technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment” (TFSV) and how women turn to do-it-yourself vigilantism in response to an official inability and unwillingness to act. Finally, I delved into Robert Gurr's theory of relative deprivation, as entitlement remains a rampant motive within the alt-right. I put Gurr's theory of relative deprivation in conversation with Vamik Volkan's theory of chosen trauma and Karina Korostelina's “4C Model” and theories of group identity to establish how ingroup community dynamics interact with feelings of relative deprivation. In the next chapter, I will outline the research design, explaining the information retrieval process, datasets, and results.

CHAPTER 4: LITERATURE REVIEW ON RECRUITMENT CYCLE

The lightest form of the alt-right is nastier than what could have been imagined ten years ago. As Angela Nagle rightly puts it,

Wherever you find even the lightest version of the online right, in forums, in YouTube comments, on Twitter, you will now also find a deluge of the worst racial slurs imaginable, vicious commentary about women and ethnic minorities, and fantasies of violence against them. Inevitably, the Jewish conspiracies and dehumanizing invective against ‘rapefugees’ also follows.²²⁹

Alongside the vitriol spewed at anyone who critiques or stands against the alt-right, far-right websites and forums are rife with hate-filled disinformation and toxic rhetoric. We cannot separate white superiority, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and conspiracy theories from each other; they entwine to create a dangerous ideology that makes up the alt-right.

This chapter aims to explain the first two steps of the cyclical relationship between social media and violence. The first section exposes how the alt-right recruits, radicalizes and pushes a member from online harassment to in-person violence. Next, I will explore the two-part violence—virtual violence and real-life violence. Shooters like Elliot Rodger and Robert Bowers are two examples of successful contributors to the cycle. Both men are success stories for the alternative right because they utilized violence to bring awareness to their cause, were granted online and real-life fame, and inspired copycats.

The figure below illustrates the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between social media and violence.

²²⁹ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumbler to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017), 100. I will provide commentary on “rapefugees” in a later section in this chapter.

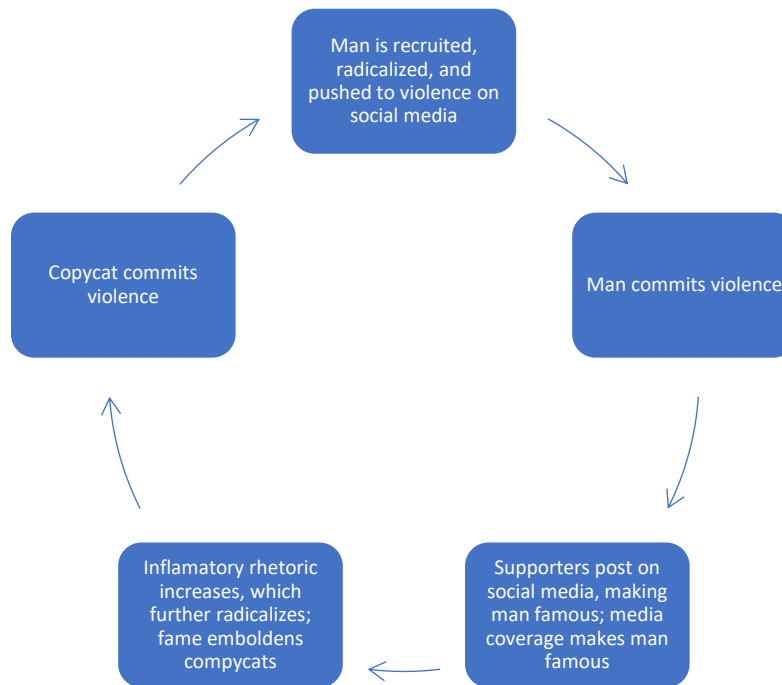


Figure 4.1: Social Media-Violence Relationship Cycle

4.1 Man is Recruited, Radicalized, and Pushed to Violence on Social Media

The alt-right is a newer form of white supremacy, primarily organized and spread through online platforms, demonstrating the shift from online radicalization to real-world violence. Donald Trump’s campaign emboldened white supremacists across the United States to begin meeting in person.²³⁰ They met at rallies, conferences, protests, and counterprotests, where they could share ideas and support each other. The 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville was the largest and most widely publicized by the alt-right online, with organizers using services like Telegram and Discord to coordinate.²³¹ The Unite the Right rally resulted in a white supremacist driving his car into a crowd of anti-racist counter-protesters, killing Heather Heyer. Memes, gifs, and conspiracy theories about the attack started circulating immediately after the media reported on the story. Reporter mistakes fueled far-right conspiracy theories that the crash was an accident

²³⁰ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 104-105.

²³¹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 104.

rather than an intentional attack on counter protesters, and the media falsely represented the event.²³² The belief that the media is intentionally reporting false information to paint pro-white demonstrators in a negative light leads to frustration, anger, and further radicalization, often funneling doubters to alternative news sources where the “truth” is accurately reported. These alternative news sources are rife with disinformation and misinformation, typically perpetuating racial and misogynistic stereotypes.

Recruitment and radicalization are deeply intertwined. A crucial step in the recruitment, or redpilling, process occurs when the recruit starts believing the theories white supremacists are feeding them. 4chan can be an entrance point to the alt-right for sexually frustrated young men. However, more advanced stages of redpilling includes slowly introducing recruits to government lies or scandals of the wealthy they attempted to cover up. Once the recruit shows susceptibility, they are introduced to more socially unacceptable—or harder to swallow—beliefs and theories.²³³ Members utilize sources like pseudo-scientific racism and anti-Semitism, conspiracy theories, and Biblical hermeneutics late in the redpilling stage to complete the recruitment process. Radicalization interweaves with the later stages of recruitment, so the next step is to convince the recruit that the current social and political situation cannot be repaired through traditional avenues, making dramatic, violent action the only alternative to “get the country back on track.”

In this section, I will explore the first step of the cyclical relationship between social media and violence. As the title of this section suggests, the first step is: Man is recruited,

²³² Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 103.

²³³“Red pilling – a general guide to enlightening people by Centipede Nation,” *Centipede Nation*, March 2, 2018, <https://centipedenation.com/library/red-pilling-a-general-guide-to-enlightening-people-by-centipede-nation/>.

radicalized, and pushed to violence on social media. I will explain these three steps in the following subsections to provide an in-depth analysis.

4.1.1 Recruit

Alt-right and white supremacists have a variety of sources to pull from when recruiting, or redpilling, new members. Because the alt-right is not a formal movement with an organizational hierarchy, redpilling is a more accurate description of recruiting because the alt-right has many disjointed allies with their agendas, motivations, and political goals. Each organization recruits and publishes propaganda, but as Andrew Anglin reiterates, the alt-right comprises “various groups of white men who reached the same objective truth through different avenues.”²³⁴ Anti-Semitism connects the White Power Movement of the 70s and 80s, the culture wars of the 90s, and the alt-right trolls of the 21st century. There is an older generation of white supremacists who pre-date the alt-right but the alt-right reads and draws influence from like Kevin B. MacDonald, whom the Anti-Defamation League describes as a primary voice of anti-Semitism for far-right intellectuals.²³⁵ In the same regard, many revere Ku Klux Klan “High Wizard” David Duke’s book *My Awakening: A Path to Racial Understanding* as cannon for an introductory guide to a wide range of pro-white arguments. Finally, William Pierce’s 1978 book, *The Turner Diaries*, is one of the most influential works of fiction created that captures white

²³⁴ Andrew Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*, August 31, 2016. [Stormer-daily.com/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/](https://www.stormer-daily.com/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/).

²³⁵ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 11.

supremacist ideology.²³⁶ Beyond the impact it had on Timothy McVeigh, Pierce's book has done more to create bombers than any other work of neo-Nazi fiction.²³⁷

4.1.1.1 Self-Radicalization with Algorithm Assistance

Social media provides a unique opportunity for self-radicalization, which inspires lone actors. With access to the Internet, it is not necessary to meet another person, attend a meeting, or pay a membership fee, as was the case with traditional white supremacist organizations. Nowadays, a person can be completely indoctrinated and plan an attack without leaving home. Traditional white supremacist organizations—Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, and others like it—that cannot adapt to internet forums or the style of memes are left behind as young men are drawn to the fun and provocative alt-right.

Apart from the initial internet search recruits must make, algorithms take over to provide similarly focused material. As a result, social media companies inadvertently help spread hate. Daniel Byman highlights an internal Facebook study from 2016 demonstrating how their algorithms help white supremacists. The report found that “64% of all extremist group joins are due to our recommendation tools.”²³⁸ Facebook is not alone in this phenomenon. Dylann Roof's radicalization started when he searched “black on white crime” on Google, which led him to a hate group's webpage, which is one of the top results.²³⁹ A similar study on YouTube found that

²³⁶ According to *The Turner Diaries*, neo-Nazi ideology upholds that racial differences are innate and cannot be removed and races are unequal and incompatible, so they should be segregated into racially pure countries. Jews promote social and political chaos by preaching “equality” and brainwashing white people to believe they have no sense of “white” identity. The 1978 book is still relevant, as many of these same beliefs are found in alt-right and alt-light writings and propaganda. Terence Ball and Richard Dagger, “Inside *The Turner Diaries*: Neo-Nazi Scripture,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30 no. 4 (Dec. 1997), 717.

²³⁷ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 59.

²³⁸ Jeff Horowitz and Deepa Seetharaman, “Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499> quoted in Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 107-108.

²³⁹ Dylann Roof, “Dylann Roof's manifesto,” (manifesto) June 20, 2015, pulled from lastrhodesian.com.

viewers seeing white supremacist content were likely to be recommended similar content, resulting in immersion into an ideological bubble.²⁴⁰ Social media recommendation algorithms produce extremist search results and suggest similar content, creating an echo chamber for vulnerable viewers. While YouTube has made efforts to solve this problem, its algorithm continues to produce the same results, primarily due to YouTube's business model, which is reliant on viewers clicking on new videos so they can sell advertisements.²⁴¹ Content-generating social media sites exist to make money, regardless of the messaging it spreads or the polarization it contributes to.

4.1.1.2 Polarization

Lisa Schirch brings social media “filter bubbles” to her audience’s attention in her article, “Digital Information, Conflict, and Democracy.” She recognizes the harm computer algorithms cause by restricting access to various views, inadvertently deepening polarization. Schirch points out, “platform algorithms operate to maximize homophily, the human desire to connect and bond with people who are similar to ourselves.”²⁴² Filter bubbles ensure that people with similar opinions and experiences see the same types of information, resulting in “echo chambers” and increasing polarization.²⁴³ While the algorithms can lead lonely people to a community of like-minded individuals online, it is detrimental in a political sphere where anything different is labeled “bad” or “evil.” The inability to see another’s viewpoint or empathize with their story is a crucial part of collective axiology, which I described in chapter three. In short, collective axiology is the belief that “our” values are sacred, while “their” values are evil and immoral.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 108.

²⁴¹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 108.

²⁴² Lisa Schirch, “Digital Information, Conflict, and Democracy” in *Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy* (New York: Routledge Press, 2021), 29.

²⁴³ Schirch, “Digital Information, Conflict, and Democracy,” 29.

²⁴⁴ Karina V. Korostelina, “Social Identity and Conflict” (lecture, University of Malta, Malta, April 27, 2022).

Values are an extension of the person; therefore, “they” are evil and immoral. This belief is the foundation for projecting stereotypes on “them,” which can lead to the normalization of violence against this group. Disinformation contributes to polarization by perpetuating stereotypes through “factual” information, muddles the conception of “fact,” and impacts people’s ability to distinguish between truth and propaganda.

4.1.1.3 Disinformation

Historically, white supremacist propaganda has been an expensive, time-consuming process that did little to protect the anonymity of recipients, as organizations would distribute flyers or newsletters through the postal service or email. Social media has provided an inexpensive and efficient avenue for extremists to spread their message. Additionally, terrorists enjoy social media because it allows them to create their narratives instead of having their stories told by traditional media networks.²⁴⁵ Social media provides opportunities for extremists to counteract the negative publicity of national newspapers and network news reports. Control of the narrative serves as a tool to spread disinformation, deepening polarization, and pass conspiracy theories off as truth. As Daniel Byman points out,

white supremacists can take individual incidents of real Black-on-white violence, crime by Latinos, financial fraud by Jews, and so on to ‘prove’ their broader arguments. Isolated examples are presented as broader trends, and as this mindset takes hold, further examples reinforce it.²⁴⁶

White supremacist sites, like Stormfront, and “scientific” research, like Dr. Kevin MacDonald’s trilogy, *The Culture of Critique*, are sources that utilize this method of “proof” to recruit and radicalize.

²⁴⁵ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 101-102.

²⁴⁶ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 102.

I discussed conspiracy theories and disinformation in depth in the literature review, so I will briefly touch on the topic now, focusing on how alt-right members use conspiracy theories to redpill recruits and wake them up to the harsh reality of the world; a world where a Jewish cabal controls the government and uses that power to eliminate the white race. White supremacists have a long history of using government cover-ups to breed distrust among the general population and further prove that a group of elites is actively working against the interests of “true” (white) Americans. The alt-right has continued the tradition of breeding government distrust.

Lack of trust in the federal government rose after the Vietnam War and President Nixon’s impeachment but accelerated to new heights after the disastrous events at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, and the stand-off with Randy Weaver and his family at Ruby Ridge in the early 1990s. Both events contributed to the various conspiracy theories circulating about the federal government but also confirmed suspicions that the federal government would try to take their guns by force.²⁴⁷ Distrust has continued through the 2000s, with new organizations and movements incorporating animosity towards the government in their ideologies. In line with the “when in doubt, blame the Jews” mentality is the combined anti-government, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. A “when in doubt, blame the Jews” mentality is prevalent within the alt-right and demonstrated through various anti-government, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

One prominent anti-government, anti-Semitic conspiracy theory is the Zionist Occupational Government (ZOG). ZOG is the belief that Jews were involved in every central world government, controlling the World Bank and the United Nations, and will soon take over

²⁴⁷ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 47.

the world. According to the ZOG conspiracy theory, Jewish people in high positions are using their positions of power to eradicate the white race through immigration policy, feminism, pro-abortion legislation, and other devious methods.²⁴⁸ White supremacists' primary fear is incorporated into ZOG, claiming that a Jewish elite "wanted to admit immigrants to dilute the white population, use welfare to encourage Black people to have more children, support interracial marriage and abortion as demographic weapons, and otherwise constantly plot to put whites down."²⁴⁹ The list of white supremacist grievances against Jewish people is not limited to those previously mentioned. In line with the "when in doubt, blame the Jews" mentality is a variety of anti-government, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Before attacking the Tree of Life synagogue, Robert Bowers reiterated his belief in white supremacist theories, including Zionist Occupational Government and white genocide, through memes and written posts on his Gab account. Below are a few examples of the anti-Semitic memes circulated on the internet.



Figure 4.2

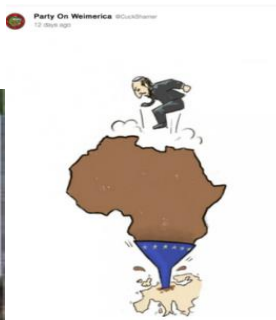


Figure 4.3



Figure 4.4

"White genocide," or "white replacement," conspiracy theory, is a white supremacist belief that there is a deliberate plot to promote mass non-white immigration, racial integration, low fertility rates, land-confiscation from whites, and elimination of supposedly white-founded

²⁴⁸ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018), 15 quoted in Sarah Heiderstadt, "Literature Review," December 16, 2021.

²⁴⁹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 54.

countries to cause the extinction of whites through forced assimilation and violent genocide. White supremacists blame Jews for masterminding this secret plot while they characterize blacks, Hispanics, and Muslims as fertile immigrants, invaders, or violent aggressors.²⁵⁰ The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville brought white genocide and other conspiracy theories into the public eye as rally members chanted, “You will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us” intermixed with the Sieg Heil—Hitler— salute.

Centipede Nation published a tutorial for redpilling titled “Red Pilling – A General Guide to Enlightening People,” in which they provide techniques and tips to redpilling family members and friends. The most critical step in the redpilling process is “Open Minds Gradually.” This step instructs them not to bombard the recipient with too much information and to avoid topics that would scare them off, including aliens, Hollow Earth, and crop circles.²⁵¹ The foundational piece of advice is to ease the recipient into the truth using messages that are harder to dismiss by posing questions and giving irrefutable answers about elites. An example of an easy pill to swallow is, “Elites have the best medical technology. They think that harvesting young blood can help extend their lifespan and improve their health.”²⁵² Once the recipient has accepted the easy pills, the redpiller can introduce specifics like who those elites are and how deeply entrenched they are in society. Researchers have proved that consuming disinformation “leads individuals to be more receptive to future disinformation and impairs their ability to distinguish bad from good information.”²⁵³ Centipede Nation offers instruction on how to ease someone into the truth using

²⁵⁰ Alex Amend, “Analyzing a Terrorist’s Social Media Manifesto: the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter’s Posts on Gab,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, October 28, 2018, splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/28/analyzing-terrorists-social-media-manifesto-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooters-posts-gab.

²⁵¹ “Red Pilling,” *Centipede Nation*.

²⁵² “Red Pilling,” *Centipede Nation*.

²⁵³ James A. Piazza, “Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 15 no. 1 (2022), 56-57.

memes and provides guidelines on how to redpill women, primarily using examples of human trafficking and sex cults.²⁵⁴ An interactive guide is helpful for alt-right members looking to radicalize normies and explain the corruption and scandals in the news.

This section explored how the alt-right recruits new members through three significant avenues. I examined how self-radicalization is a popular tactic with the alt-right and how internet algorithms help spread hate by polarizing audiences and normalizing disinformation. Algorithms create echo chambers where viewers cannot access competing viewpoints. Alongside alt-right extreme and harmful propaganda is the political narrative that anyone with different opinions is evil. This perception contributes to the radicalization of members, keeping them ideologically loyal to the alt-right. Disinformation is a crucial tool for recruitment and radicalization, as it impacts a person's ability to distinguish between true and false. Social media sites are efficient and cheap ways to distribute propaganda with little effort. Propaganda breeds government distrust, which adds to the anti-government, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. To aid alt-right members, Centipede Nation produced a free guide to redpilling normies, which offers step-by-step instructions to spread disinformation and recruit friends and family members through the Socratic method, memes, and various heavily biased sources. Violence becomes likely when a recruit wholeheartedly believes the conspiracy theories. The following subsection of step one of the social media-violence cycle is radicalization. The previous paragraphs briefly introduced radicalization as an overlapping step. The following section will further explore the radicalization process.

²⁵⁴ "Red Pilling," *Centipede Nation*.

4.1.2 Radicalize

The alt-right is exceptional at creating an atmosphere that is fun for young men; an atmosphere where engaging and sharing shocking content gains them entrance into a community of like-minded individuals where inside jokes symbolize an ingroup, and mocking outgroup members is encouraged. Repetition of shocking content is a primary radicalization tool. Zoë Quinn speaks about what she calls the “radicalization effect” regarding white supremacists' move from Stormfront’s private platforms to 4chan, YouTube, and Reddit public chat rooms. Quinn describes the threat of propaganda and spreading hate by emphasizing that

the more you hear these completely ass-backwards ridiculous notions, the more you believe them. It’s repetition. Young people start out on these sites trying to be shocking. But if you joke about something, like ironically being racist, first, it doesn’t minimize the harm. Second, it’s like that saying, ‘fake it till you make it.’ That doesn’t just apply to the good stuff.²⁵⁵

Quinn’s statement indicates the alternative right's shocking and fun nature. Constant exposure to racist and misogynistic ideas will eventually take hold, even if the user’s initial intent is “harmless.” Regardless of the supposed intent, the impact is harmful as hate speech is not a victimless activity.

Researchers have verified that repetition, shocking content, and collectively mocking the liberal politically correct is an effective tool for the alternative right. Within the “fun” delivery methods are sinister ideas effortlessly implanted into recruit’s minds while they ironically make racist jokes and mock liberals for taking their jokes seriously.

²⁵⁵ Jonathan Weisman, (((Semitism))) *: Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 82.

In this section, I will investigate various alternative right tools to radicalize new recruits and keep current members radicalized. This stage is vital to the overall social media-violence cycle because it provides all the ideological “proof” needed to justify their beliefs and avenues to violence. “Proof” comes through various sources, making the “truth” harder to dispute. First, I will begin with an analysis of the alt-right’s primary delivery mechanisms: using inside jokes, humor, and memes to supplant hateful messaging into unsuspecting audiences. Next, I will analyze the variety of sources the alt-right uses to justify their anti-Semitic, racist, and misogynistic beliefs are authoritative. Pseudo-science and Biblical hermeneutics are two types of sources I will delve into in this section. I chose these two sources because multiple alt-right shooters have cited them in their manifestos or social media accounts.

4.1.2.1 Delivery

Alt-right ideology is nothing new. Their beliefs are as old as the Ku Klux Klan, if not older, but their delivery system is modern, enticing, and fun. The alt-right focuses on young, disgruntled men and has created a movement they thrive in. Front and center are the use of inside jokes, irony, humor, satire, and memes. Prominent alt-right member Andrew Anglin has admitted that “‘naughty humor’ is a means to normalize extreme anti-Semitism and ‘the acceptance of violence’ by readers whilst avoiding the legal repercussions of actually promoting violence.”²⁵⁶ The alt-right utilizes irony, satire, and parody as forms of communication to establish in-group verses out-group dynamics, disseminate radical right-wing ideas, and widen the “Overton window.” Verbal irony is “a statement whose literal meaning differs from its

²⁵⁶ Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (London and New York: Routledge: 2020), 49.

intended or implied meaning.”²⁵⁷ Amber Day describes satire as a tool that “exploits the ability of irony to expose, undercut, ridicule or otherwise attack indirectly, playfully, wittily, profoundly, artfully.”²⁵⁸ Naughty humor” or “deplorable satire” barely hides the alt-right’s sinister beliefs.

The alt-right’s favorite medium of ironic humor is memes. Memes refer to user-generated media that share recognizable characteristics in content or form through which their creators seek to guide viewers’ interactions and interpretations. Memes are designed to go viral and aid that purpose; memes are structured so users can easily remix them while retaining explicit references to the original.²⁵⁹ 4chan became famous as a forum known for pranks, memes, and images that ‘cannot be unseen.’ As a meme factory, it has created countless memes that have made their way into mainstream Internet-culture.²⁶⁰ At face value, memes are a harmless product of “scroll culture,” a communication form between Gen Z youth who pass an idea from one person to the next for entertainment purposes. While political cartoons died with paper routes, memes have taken place online. They are snippets of an argument, boiled down to a picture and a few words.²⁶¹ The memes below are a small sample of thousands of memes circulating the web daily.

²⁵⁷ Viveca S. Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies,” *Studies in American Humor* 5 vol. 1 (2019), 34.

²⁵⁸ Amber Day, “Welcome to Clickhole: The Economics of Internet Parody and Critique,” in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018): 120 in Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 34.

²⁵⁹ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 38.

²⁶⁰ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 13 quoted in Sarah Heiderstadt, “Meme Warfare: The Use of Memes by the Alt-Right Movement,” April 13, 2022.

²⁶¹ Heiderstadt, “Meme Warfare,” 4.

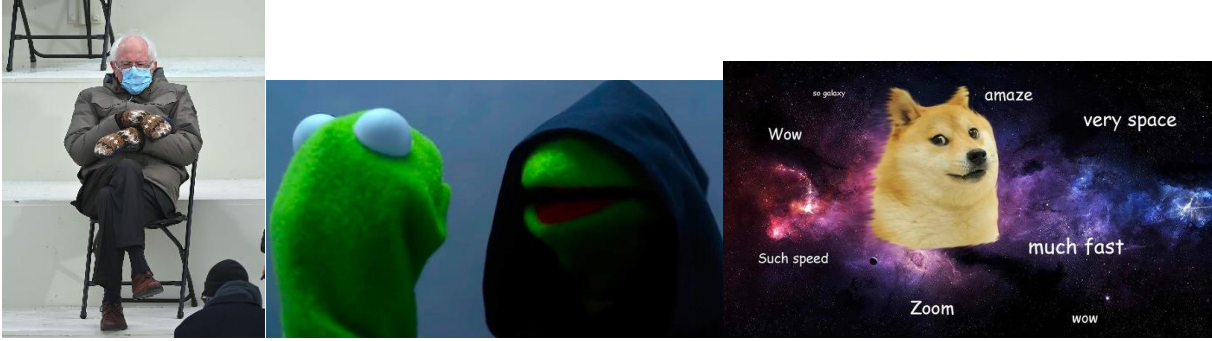


Figure 4.5: Series of Popular Memes

Pepe the Frog (pictured below) is one of the most recognizable memes associated with the alt-right movement. Pepe became the mascot of the alt-right and whom many (ironically) consider the modern avatar of the deity, Kek, who is a figure known by 4Channers to use “ancient Egyptian meme magic to influence the world, often by fulfilling the wishes of posts that end in repeating numbers.”²⁶² Kek is the god of chaos and darkness, with the head of a frog, the source of their memetic “magic,” to whom the alt-right and Donald Trump owe their success. This inside joke is a perfect example of the pervasive humor that makes up much of the alt-right. It represents a symbol for those who “get it” because a “lack of Internet-culture knowledge is a license on 4chan for any level of cruelty.”²⁶³ As Andrew Anglin writes,

Pepe became the mascot because he embodies the goal of couching idealism within irony. A movement which meets all the SPLC’s definitions of Neo-Nazi White Supremacism using a cartoon frog to represent itself takes on a subversive power to bypass historical stereotypes of such movements, and thus present the ideas themselves in a fun way without the baggage of Schindler’s List and American History X.²⁶⁴

Anglin’s description of Pepe illuminates how the alt-right recruits and radicalizes young men by tapping into video game culture to create an environment they thrive in. His statement also

²⁶² Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 46. Kek is the equivalent to “lol;” it is common to see “kek kek kek” in place of “lol, lol, lol.”

²⁶³ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 13.

²⁶⁴ Andrew Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*, 23-24.

illustrates how the alt-right is ideologically similar to traditional white supremacist organizations but deviates in their delivery methods.



Figure 4.6: Pepe the Frog (original)

The echo meme is an impactful representation of the mixture between old-school white supremacist beliefs and new alt-right techniques.²⁶⁵ “Echoes”—or better recognized as the triple parenthesis: ((()))—is an online tool trolls wrap around Jewish-sounding names on social media as a signal to other trolls. As Jonathan Weisman describes it, “Once a target was “belled” [like a cat], the alt-right anti-Semitic mob would download the innocuous-sounding Coincidence Detector plug-in from the Google Chrome store, track down targets like heat-seeking missiles, then swarm.”²⁶⁶ The anti-Semitic alt-right created a Google plug-in they could use to search double or triple parenthesis. However, search engines do not pick up the punctuation, so the person who was “belled” could not back trace those who put an echo around their name or track those who search it.²⁶⁷ The alt-right created the echo meme as a visual representation of a booming voice, announcing Jewish surnames as evil.²⁶⁸ Each parenthetical swoosh has its obscure symbolism: “the inner parenthesis stands for the Jewish subversion of the home and

²⁶⁵ Weisman, (((Semitism))), 5.

²⁶⁶ Weisman, (((Semitism))), 11.

²⁶⁷ Weisman, (((Semitism))), 89. Google removed the app from their store in 2016.

²⁶⁸ Weisman, (((Semitism))), 89.

destruction of the family through ‘mass-media degeneracy;’ the middle parenthesis represents the destruction of the nation through mass migration, and the outer parentheses stand for international Jewry and world Zionism.”²⁶⁹ Once a target has been acquired, the alt-right trolls swarm them with thousands of memes, texts, tweets, voice messages, and emails over weeks and sometimes months. Most messaging incorporates anti-Semitic Nazi iconography, including pictures of Auschwitz, Holocaust taunts, and Jewish troupes.²⁷⁰

Memes are one way to identify ingroup members, but the alt-right also uses linguistic indicators. The indicators include distinct phrases, jargon, or idiosyncratic spelling of words that have group-established meaning.²⁷¹ Words like “snowflake” or “cuckservative” are two such examples. By creating or reappropriating words, they draw distinctions between “us” and “them” or those who “get it” and everyone else. Vernacular is constantly changing and evolving, keeping outsiders in the dark. Additionally, while memes can be entertaining forms of communication, they have the potential to communicate sinister beliefs to an unsuspecting audience.

Memes double as a strategy for trolling liberals and “cuckervatives”²⁷²—conservative “race traitors” who have surrendered their masculinity—or RINOs—Republicans in Name Only, conservatives who are not sufficiently committed to defending the white “race.”²⁷³ Memetic irony is a powerful tool for alt-right recruitment. Irony allows users to cloak their intentions behind the expression “it is just a joke” or “just trolling” if met with hostility. If an audience is receptive to the image’s intent, they show themselves amenable to recruitment.²⁷⁴ Centipede

²⁶⁹ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 90.

²⁷⁰ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 12.

²⁷¹ Edwin Hodge and Helga Hallgrimsdottir, “Networks of Hate: The Alt-Right, ‘Troll Culture,’ and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online,” *Journal of Borderlanes Studies* 35 no. 4 (2020), 568.

²⁷² “Cuckservatives” is a play on the word “cuckold,” which is a man who gets off on his wife having sex with other men, typically black men.

²⁷³ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 47.

²⁷⁴ Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir, “Networks of Hate,” 570.

Nation's guide to redpilling has a section on how to redpill using memes in which they describe the process in three simple steps: 1) humor – people browse social media to laugh at funny memes; 2) mystery – question the reader, make them feel they found an obscure piece of knowledge on their own; and 3) shock – does not need to be gory, but a shocking meme can plant the seed of doubt.²⁷⁵ The article emphasizes that subtlety is the key to redpilling through memes and reposting when in doubt.²⁷⁶

Inside jokes act as an avenue to reinforce ingroup dynamics, while memes are an essential part of the process. Alongside memes are linguistic indicators that bind ingroup members. Reappropriating, creating, and reassigning meanings of words reinforce who is “us” and who is “them.” Additionally, alt-right members use memes to attract recruits and supplant radical notions of societal and political systems. Memes are a subtle, non-threatening medium to radicalize recruits and keep current members engaged. Another radicalization tactic is the various sources the alternative right can draw upon to defend their ideology. The two primary authoritative sources are science and the Bible.

4.1.2.2 Pseudo-Scientific Anti-Semitism

Pseudo-scientific racism is an integral part of white supremacists' ideology. It has been for hundreds of years, especially in the United States, where there is a long history of defending slavery, segregation, and structural racism. As Anglin writes in “A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right,” “The Alt-Right does not accept the pseudo-scientific claims that ‘all races are equal,’ and instead looks to the real science which shows that they have vastly different abilities, drives and

²⁷⁵ “Red pilling – a general guide to enlightening people by Centipede Nation,” *Centipede Nation*, March 2, 2018, <https://centipedenation.com/library/red-pilling-a-general-guide-to-enlightening-people-by-centipede-nation/>.

²⁷⁶ “Red pilling,” *Centipede Nation*.

intelligence levels.”²⁷⁷ This claim that the “true” science is what is produced by white supremacists and any research done by those in mainstream society is “pseudo-science” is a direct representation of the alt-right and white supremacists’ tradition as a whole. Research that contradicts their ideas is automatically labeled fake or falsified to serve Jewish interests.²⁷⁸ In this regard, pseudo-scientific racism is closely tied to pseudo-scientific anti-Semitism.

Dr. Kevin MacDonald is the forefather of scientific anti-Semitism, writing a trilogy of books that have recruited and radicalized many.²⁷⁹ MacDonald is an anti-Semitic conspiracy theorist, a white supremacist, and a retired professor of evolutionary psychology. David Duke, a prominent neo-Nazi and Klan leader, credits his understanding of the Jewish question to MacDonald’s writings. In his book, *My Awakening: A Path to Racial Understanding*, Duke extensively devotes six chapters to the Jewish question, citing MacDonald’s research. In short, MacDonald argues that Jewish people have biologically evolved to be highly ethnocentric and hostile to the interests of white people.²⁸⁰ He argues that Jewish people’s nature is to infect and leech off every white society they live in to ensure survival.²⁸¹ According to MacDonald, Jewish people are not white, are their own race, and should be treated as such. They are not entitled to the same protections afforded to white people as their own racial group.²⁸² Additionally, as their own race, they are inferior to white people, as (they claim) all races are.

²⁷⁷ Andrew Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*, August 31, 2016. Stormer-daily.rw/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

²⁷⁸ Due to word count and time limitations, I will not explore this point further. But if time permitted, an analysis on cognitive dissonance would be an invaluable addition to this chapter.

²⁷⁹ *A People That Shall Dwell Alone* (1994) is the first of the three-part series, followed by *Separation and Its Discontents* (1998), and *The Culture of Critique* (1998). The series has been widely critiqued by researchers and academics who describe the series as anti-Semitic and scientifically unsupportable.

²⁸⁰ Kevin MacDonald, *A People That Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy, with Diaspora Peoples* (Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press, 1994), 84.

²⁸¹ David Duke, *My Awakening: A Path to Racial Understanding* (Covington, LA: Free Speech Press, 1998).

²⁸² MacDonald, *A People That Shall Dwell Alone*, 93.

Although MacDonald is the most prolific writer on the topic, he is not alone. His writings have inspired many white supremacists to expand on his ideas and conduct research to “prove” that Jewish people are detriments to society and must be removed to protect the white race.²⁸³ These writers are motivated by prior anti-Semitic bias rather than an attempt to produce honest academic research. The “research” tool verifies conspiracy theories they have subscribed to. Most prominent of these is the belief that there is a Jewish elite that is actively working to destroy the white race by encouraging immigration from the global south into white Europe and America, supporting the liberal agenda through feminism and homosexuality, and creating a narrative of guilt so white people are ashamed of their heritage.²⁸⁴

Pseudo-scientific anti-Semitism is a foundational source white supremacists and neo-Nazis draw upon to justify and explain their ideology. While researchers have discarded pseudo-scientific anti-Semitic “research” has heavily biased material, one source that is harder to dispute is the Bible. Not impossible, but more difficult because the anti-Semitic interpretation of the four canonical Gospels—specifically the Gospel of John—white supremacists’ use is very similar to the mainstream interpretation. We cannot wholly discard this interpretation as a racist, niche understanding. However, we must address Christianity’s relationship to the Gospels and analyze why white supremacists feel comfortable utilizing the mainstream interpretation rather than creating their own.

²⁸³ This is a common narrative with white supremacists who write about the Jewish Question, including David Duke, William Pierce, Andrew Hamilton, Herewald Lindsay, and Theodor Herzl. This is not an extensive list.

²⁸⁴ This is more commonly known as “white genocide,” and is believed to be orchestrated by Jewish people. Alex Amend, “Analyzing a Terrorist’s Social Media Manifesto: the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter’s Posts on Gab,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/10/28/analyzing-terrorists-social-media-manifesto-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooters-posts-gab>.

4.1.2.3 Biblical Hermeneutics

I include Biblical hermeneutics in this section because Christianity plays a crucial role in American white supremacy as one of the primary sources to explain and justify Jewish evilness and white superiority. Many anti-Semitic white supremacists utilize scriptural “evidence” to show that Jews are the children of Satan and, therefore, worthy of oppression and subjugation. This interpretation manifests in mainstream Christian theology and fringe denominations like Christian Identity. More importantly, Robert Bowers employed Biblical hermeneutics—the science of interpreting the Bible and the methods of that interpretation—in his rhetoric, both online and in person. Before Gab’s administrators deactivated his account, Bowers’ profile headline read: “Jews are the children of Satan,” which he took from John 8:44.²⁸⁵ Bowers is representative of the larger movement, with real-world violence separating him from other believers.

In this section, I will explore how Robert Bowers’ blatant anti-Semitism and white supremacist-stoked conspiracy theories shaped his worldview, leading him to enter a synagogue and begin firing. I will analyze one passage from the Gospel of John from the alt-right perspective. In contrast to the anti-Semitic interpretation, I will offer an alternative textual analysis of the Hebrew word for “the Jews.”²⁸⁶ Next, I will address how pastors inject anti-Semitic hermeneutics into their denominations’ theology.

The Gospel of John is riddled with what the author²⁸⁷ calls “the Jews” (*hoi Ioudaioi*), referencing groups of Jews, unbelieving Jews, Pharisees, and Jews in general. I could point to

²⁸⁵ “‘Jews are the children of Satan’ and the danger of taking biblical passages out of context,” CBS News October 31, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jews-are-the-children-of-satan-john-8-44-danger-of-taking-biblical-passages-out-of-context/>.

²⁸⁶ I feel it would be irresponsible of me to only offer the anti-Semitic reading without an alternative understanding.

²⁸⁷ The author’s identity remains unknown.

multiple passages that have fueled anti-Jewish hatred or historically justified violence against Jews. However, for this paper, I will focus on John 8:44. John 8:44 states: “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Without going too far into contextual analysis, I will point out that Jesus says this to a group of Jews when they declare they are the descendants of Abraham and the children of God.²⁸⁸ Jesus remarks that if they were the children of God, they would love him and accept him as sent by the Father. While the short contextual analysis does not do much to rescue this passage, it is essential to note that much of the Bible has been taken out of context to justify horrific acts.²⁸⁹

A reoccurring explanation white supremacists give to justify anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic violence is that the Jews killed Jesus. While we could argue that the Romans killed Jesus or that a small portion of Jewish people was partially responsible for the death of Jesus, the argument would fall on deaf ears. The “Christ-killer” label has followed Jewish people through the last two millennia, hanging over them in Christian-controlled territories. Unfortunately, there is scriptural and historical support for the anti-Jewish rhetoric.²⁹⁰ Robert Bowers is by no means the first to violently harm Jewish people or hold them responsible for a larger conspiracy. Many pastors and priests within the mainstream tradition preached anti-Jewish readings to their congregations. However, it was not until the Holocaust that Biblical scholars and theologians re-evaluated

²⁸⁸ The Jews point in claiming they are the descendants of Abraham, and the children of God was more than a claim about their lineage. It was a declaration of their monotheism. When Jesus entered the scene, he claimed he was the Son of God and on equal footing with the Father. For Jews, this was the true crime Jesus committed and what they initially persecuted him for. Reminding Jesus that they are descendants of Abraham spells out the covenant God made with them as God’s chosen people. Jesus comes in and takes the title of chosen people away and claims that the only way to God is through him.

²⁸⁹ Heiderstadt, “Rescuing John 8:44 from Tree of Life Synagogue Shooter, Robert Bowers.”

²⁹⁰ Heiderstadt, “Rescuing John 8:44 from Tree of Life Synagogue Shooter, Robert Bowers.”

scripture and inspired ministers to teach their congregations a more nuanced reading of the Gospel of John and other anti-Jewish passages.

While Nazi interpretations derive from Christianity, it is essential to note that there is a fundamental difference between Nazi racial anti-Semitism and the traditional anti-Judaism of Christianity.²⁹¹ In the decades preceding the Holocaust, Christian clergy often stressed the same themes as the Nazis, claiming Jews were parasitic capitalists exploiting Christians and communists seeking to overthrow European governments and traditional Christian values.²⁹² Similarly, Nazis often exploited traditional Christian themes depicting Jews as diabolical, “Christ-killers,” and materialistic, contrasting with spiritual Christianity. The Nazis effectively exploited two millennia of Christian demonization of Jews to pursue their agenda of power and world domination.²⁹³ Traditional Christian hostility towards Jewish people may not have made the Holocaust inevitable, but it helped make it possible. Nazis and anti-Semitic Christian clerics quoted or alluded to passages from the New Testament, including Matthew 21:12-13,²⁹⁴ 23:29-33,²⁹⁵ 27:24-25,²⁹⁶ John 5:18²⁹⁷ and 8:44. Christian and Jewish scholars have tried to reclaim

²⁹¹ Unfortunately, the most notable difference is that Christians believe that when a Jew converts, the Jew is no longer a Jew, but Nazis believed that a Jew is a Jew regardless of conversion. This difference harkens back to the basic difference between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Anti-Judaism views Jews as a religious group while anti-Semitism views Jews as an ethnic group.

²⁹² Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suchecky, translated by Steven Rendall, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997), 123-136, quoted in Munson, “Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust,” 1.

²⁹³ Munson, “Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust,” 1.

²⁹⁴ Matthew 21:12-13: Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.’”

²⁹⁵ Matthew 23:29-33: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you blind the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in the shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus, you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. You snake, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?”

²⁹⁶ Matthew 27:24-25: So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves.” Then the people as a whole answered, “His blood be on us and our children!”

²⁹⁷ John 5:18: For this reason, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

these passages with various degrees of success. However, the indisputable fact is that anti-Jewish rhetoric exists in a text Christians consider sacred and authoritative.²⁹⁸

John 8:44 stands at the center of the anti-Jewish debate. The text's reception history demonstrates that John 8:44 is commonly understood as a judgment made by Jesus regarding the Jewish people and the Jewish religion. In rejecting Jesus, the Jews have forfeited their status as God's elect people.²⁹⁹ The alternative to descent from God is descent from the devil. The dominant reading of the text is dangerous if not engaged carefully.³⁰⁰

A standard tool used to reclaim the Fourth Gospel from anti-Jewish rhetoric is to translate *hoi Ioudaioi* as "the Pharisees," "Judeans," or "the Jewish people." However, the most accurate translation is "the Jews." To suggest otherwise does a disservice to the author's intent. It is worth pointing out that almost everyone in John's gospel is Jewish. Jesus and his disciples are Jewish, John the Baptist is Jewish, and the blind man healed in John 9 is Jewish.³⁰¹ The reminder that almost everyone in the story is Jewish emphasizes that when Jesus or the narrator of the Fourth Gospel says "*hoi Ioudaioi*," they mean "those Jews over there that are different from us Jews over here."³⁰²

The Gospel of John represents an intense intra-Jewish debate. However, the gospel has been taken out of historical context to justify the persecution of Jews. The Fourth Gospel provides evidence of the tension between religious groups in the first and second centuries.

²⁹⁸ Heiderstadt, "Rescuing John 8:44 from Tree of Life Synagogue Shooter, Robert Bowers."

²⁹⁹ Johannes Beutler, SJ, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, translated by Michael Tait (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 242.

³⁰⁰ Heiderstadt, "Rescuing John 8:44 from Tree of Life Synagogue Shooter, Robert Bowers."

³⁰¹ I mention the blind man here because it directly follows the John 8:44 passage.

³⁰² *Hoi Ioudaioi* believes God comes through Moses and the Torah, while Jesus-following Jews believe God also comes through Jesus. Jesus is theologically like the Pharisees or whomever the author has labeled "*Ioudaioi*," which is why scholars remark on familial disagreements. Jesus and "the Jews" are very similar theologically but go to great lengths to prove how different they are. Heiderstadt, "Rescuing John 8:44 from Tree of Life Synagogue Shooter, Robert Bowers."

Ioudaioi is used seventy times in the gospel, but none of the instances are explicitly hostile. Sixteen are neutral, and approximately forty are unambiguously negative.³⁰³ Adele Reinhartz points out that the Gospel of John is not merely anti-Jewish but also seeped into Jewish tradition. Jesus and his followers attend Jewish festivals, enter Jewish temples, and cite Jewish scripture. There is no question that Jesus and his disciples are Jewish, despite never being called *Ioudaioi*.³⁰⁴

Klaus Wengst comments on how firmly rooted the Fourth Gospel is in Judaism. Wengst takes on the harshest expression of *Ioudaioi*, John 8:44, and connects it to the rabbinic tradition for ancient and contemporary uses by illustrating how Johannine theology is anchored in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism.³⁰⁵ Many scholars, including Johannes Beutler, Reimund Bieringer, and Didier Pollefeyt, look to John 4:22³⁰⁶ as an alternative verse in the Gospel of John to hold against 8:44. Despite the positive nature of 4:22, scholars remain cautious of using it to exculpate John's anti-Jewish stance. It would be irresponsible for Christian and Jewish theologians to use John 4:22 as a counterargument to blatantly anti-Jewish statements. Positive verses within the Gospel of John cannot make 8:44 go away, but they can offer depth to the larger conversation.³⁰⁷

Now that I have explored the mainstream anti-Jewish interpretation of the Gospel of John and provided Biblical analysis and historical context as alternative ways to read the Fourth Gospel, I will move on to Christian Identity. Christian Identity is a fringe Christian denomination

³⁰³ Adele Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Maryland: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2018), 68-73.

³⁰⁴ Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant*, intro.

³⁰⁵ Beutler, SJ, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 27-28.

³⁰⁶ John 4:22: "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."

³⁰⁷ Reinhartz, *Cast Out of the Covenant*, 72 quoted in Heiderstadt, "Rescuing John 8:44 from Tree of Life Synagogue Shooter, Robert Bowers."

that has injected anti-Semitism directly into its theology. It is the preferred denomination for white supremacist organizations, including Aryan Nations and neo-Nazis. Christian Identity is an explicit example of Christian-supported anti-Semitism that rose in popularity in the 1970s and 80s following the Vietnam War and the rise of the White Power Movement.³⁰⁸

Most white nationalists and neo-Nazi groups identify as Christian, although they disdain the organized church. Christian Identity is a fringe offshoot of an obscure nineteenth-century British ideological movement.³⁰⁹ It is responsible for dozens of splinter groups that are highly militarized, anti-government, racist, homophobic, sexist, and anti-Jewish.³¹⁰ Christian Identity has been in the background of American extremist movements, including the Posse Comitatus, the Order, the Aryan Nations, the supporters of Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge, Herbert Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God, the Freeman Compound, and the World Church of the Creator.³¹¹ Unfortunately, that is not an extensive list but offers a brief account of the organizations that resonate with the hateful theology.

Christian Identity theology is based on racial supremacy and biblical law. White supremacy is a foundational tenet for Christian Identity, as demonstrated in the theory of British Israelism. British Israelism is the belief that Englishmen were the genuine chosen people of God, as Jesus was an Aryan.³¹² During American settlement, those from the lost tribes of Israel came from England to the New World. Therefore, present-day Jewish people are imposters, while

³⁰⁸ The primary groups that formed the White Power Movement coalition were neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, and various militias. This list is not exhaustive, but they are the largest and most established white supremacy organizations that subscribe to Christian Identity theology.

³⁰⁹ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 46.

³¹⁰ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 46.

³¹¹ Mark Juergensemeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 2000), 30-33 quoted in Heiderstadt, "Rescuing John 8:44 from Tree of Life Synagogue Shooter, Robert Bowers."

³¹² Tanya Telfair Sharpe, "The Identity Christian Movement: Ideology of Domestic Terrorism" *Journal of Black Studies* 30 no. 4 (March 2000): 606.

white descendants of Europeans are God's chosen people. Some Christian Identity pastors preached that white Europeans are the true lost tribe of Israel, and nonwhites and Jewish people are descended from Satan or animals.³¹³ Some extend this thinking by regarding Jews as descendants of an illicit sexual act between Eve and Satan.³¹⁴ Essentially, they believe the people known as Jews pretend to be Jews to assert their superiority in a scheme to control the world.³¹⁵ What is telling about institutionalizing a belief that Jewish people descend from Satan is that it incorporates a clear moral directive for believers. Suppose they believe that Jewish people are descended from Satan and have remained his instruments on Earth, intending to decay and destroy all things good and holy. Then by this logic, they must destroy the Jewish people. In this case, anyone fighting to lessen Jewish influence is a soldier in the good versus evil holy war.

The Bible continues to be a popular source for white supremacists to draw on. In this subsection, I have examined the relationship between the alt-right and Biblical hermeneutics of the Gospel of John, targeting the use of "the Jews" (*hoi Ioudaioi*) and John 8:44 to combat a mainstream reading by offering context analysis and more nuanced reading. Next, I supported hermeneutics with historical context, describing how pastors took on a more nuanced reading following World War II and the Holocaust. Despite mainstream denominations of Christianity moving away from anti-Semitic readings of the Gospel of John, some denominations like Christian Identity infuse blatant anti-Semitism into their theology. In doing so, they became popular among white supremacist organizations, like Aryan Nations and neo-Nazis.

³¹³ Christian Identity is one group that has institutionalized racism into their foundational beliefs, but racists have used the "black and brown people are descendent from animals" argument for hundreds of years.

³¹⁴ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018), 12.

³¹⁵ Juergensemeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 30-33 quoted in Heiderstadt, "Rescuing John 8:44 from Tree of Life Synagogue Shooter, Robert Bowers."

The recruitment and radicalization processes overlap to create an ingroup where memes hide sinister beliefs, inside jokes and linguistic reappropriation solidify boundaries, and the alt-right uses the Socratic method to redpill normies. The alt-right is ideologically similar to the white supremacists of the past two centuries in the United States, but they have found a way to stand out, make an impact, and have fun. Like the White Power movement, the alt-right draws on various sources to justify and explain their ideology. Beyond justification, these sources act as radicalization tools, providing authority and moral superiority to their claims. This section delved into two such sources, pseudo-scientific anti-Semitism and Biblical hermeneutics of the Gospel of John. Now that I have thoroughly investigated the radicalization portion of step one of the social media-violence cycle, I will move on to the third part: the push to violence.

4.1.3 Push to Violence

The third component of step 1: man is recruited, radicalized, and pushed to violence, is man is pushed to violence. This section will explore this component further to explain the move from radicalization to real-world or virtual violence. Due to time and word restraints, I cannot explore all the motivating factors that lead a man to commit violence. However, I will probe one influential factor in the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between social media and violence: Donald Trump's presidential campaign and victory. In previous chapters, I briefly explained how 4chan and the alternative right supported Trump, claiming that Trump owes his presidential success to the alt-right and their memes. Whether this is true is not the focus of my research, although I will briefly explore the relationship between 4chan and Donald Trump. However, Trump emboldens men to act by demonstrating that there are no negative consequences for hate speech or sexual violence.

While some political organizations and individuals turn to violence and terrorism to achieve their goals, many take advantage of legitimate mainstream opinions to attain power through politics. Politics can normalize extreme ideas and can mobilize potentially violent communities.³¹⁶ As mentioned in an earlier chapter, politics plays a vital role in shifting the Overton window—what society considers an appropriate political belief—and demonstrates how Donald Trump’s presidential election and victory shifted the course of American politics. Therefore, Donald Trump’s relationship with the alt-right and white supremacy is complex.

Many white supremacists saw Trump’s election victory as the beginning of a new era, where his administration would restrict immigration from non-white countries, increase deportation of non-white immigrants, and overturn policies that they deem unfriendly to white people. Additionally, many white supremacists saw Trump as like-minded and supported his initiatives and policies that separated Latin American migrant families, ended protections for children of illegal immigrants brought to the United States, and increased deportations.³¹⁷ Along with increased support for Donald Trump and his administration’s policies, many within the alt-right movement saw Trump’s election as an opportunity to “redpill” mainstream conservatives.³¹⁸ Trump reciprocated white supremacists’ support through his words and actions, at least initially. Under continuous public pressure, President Trump eventually released statements condemning white supremacist violence.³¹⁹ Trump often drew on the internet underbelly for support as a presidential candidate.

³¹⁶ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 125.

³¹⁷ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 127.

³¹⁸ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 128.

³¹⁹ This is a tricky topic because Trump repeatedly supported white supremacists and spoke highly of neo-Nazis and alt-right members, but under public pressure, he released press statements that condemned white supremacist violence. But under further questioning, he would make comments that evaporated all prior statements. His comments following the Unite the Right rally and death of Heather Heyer is an excellent example. Forty-eight hours after the rally—which is a long time to wait to speak out—Trump released a statement condemning the white

The links between 4Chan and Trump are more than shared political views. Lyndon Way writes, “Trump and his staff retweeted alt-right videos and images created on 4chan, and 4chan’s memes were part of Trump’s campaign to tilt sentiment on social media in his favor.”³²⁰ As I explained in the short literature review in chapter two, researchers have proven that 4chan influences other social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. 4chan anons create Trump-friendly content and then disseminate it to more popular social media sites, which increases idea exposure and spreads disinformation.

Trump’s presidential victory was a victory for white supremacists. Viveca Greene writes, “Those who seek to demonize diversity, anti-racism, affirmative action, and political correctness see themselves as having a powerful ally in the White House—an ally who retweets white supremacists on Twitter.”³²¹ Trump has done more for the alt-right movement than any single person by appointing individuals with anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant views in his administration, retweeting white supremacist conspiracy theories, and providing overall legitimacy to white supremacist beliefs. He successfully shifted the Overton window to normalize hate speech and attacks against immigrants, people of color, and non-Christians.³²²

supremacists who were at the rally and the man who drove his truck through the crowd, killing Heyer. In a press conference in the following days, Trump, in a fashion we’ve become accustomed to, walked back most of his condemnation. Initially, he reiterated that the driver is a murder who did a “horrible, horrible, inexcusable thing.” In the next answer, Trump defended Steve Bannon, saying he’s not a racist and a good person. Even though Trump spends most of the time berating the reporters and calling them fake news, they persisted in their attempt to get Trump to take a stance against the alt-right. By the end of the interview, Trump had deflected all semblance of condemnation and was insisting that there was blame on both sides. In fact, he said “you had some very bad people in that [neo-Nazi] group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.” Angie Drobnic Holan, “In Context: Donald Trump’s ‘very fine people on both sides’ remarks (transcript),” *PolitiFact*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2019/apr/26/context-trumps-very-fine-people-on-both-sides-remarks/>.

³²⁰ Lyndon C.S. Way, “Trump, Memes and the Alt-Right: Emotive and Affective Criticism and Praise,” *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25 no. 3 (2021): 794 quoted in Heiderstadt, “Meme Warfare,” 5.

³²¹ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 57.

³²² Heiderstadt, “Meme Warfare,” 5.

Attacks against minorities surged after Trump assumed office, perhaps because white supremacists assumed his election would bear tolerance and support for their beliefs.³²³



Figure 4.7



Figure 6. Trump as the Hulk from *The Avengers* film (2012)

Figure 4.8



Figure 4.9

A series of memes and rhetoric emerged on 4chan following Donald Trump's presidential candidate announcement. Trump remained a topic of conversation and inspiration for content during his campaign and presidential term. The three memes above are a small sample of the political memes circulated between his presidential bid on January 16, 2015, and the day he left office on January 20, 2021. I will restrain from providing an in-depth analysis of each meme due to time restraints, but I will offer a few comments on each. The left image is a variation from the original sign that initially said, "Refugees Welcome," but was changed after a series of sexual assaults in Germany on New Year's Eve in 2016.³²⁴ The subversive messaging of refugees being rapists was prominent following the European refugee crisis, where an influx of Muslims fled from the Middle East.³²⁵ American alt-right members adopted the "Rapefugees Not Welcome" meme during the 2018 primary elections after Trump and other Republicans claimed the caravan coming from South America was full of criminals and rapists.³²⁶

³²³ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 127.

³²⁴ Maxime Dafaure, "The 'Great Meme War:' the Alt-Right and its Multifarious Enemies," *Angles: New Perspectives on the Anglophone World* (2020), 3-4.

³²⁵ Dafaure, "The 'Great Meme War,'" 3.

³²⁶ Dafaure, "The 'Great Meme War,'" 4 quoted in Heiderstadt, "Meme Warfare," 6.

The middle image is perhaps the most recognizable, adapted from Marvel's famous movie, *The Avengers*. In the depicted scene, the Hulk grabbed Loki—the villain—and smashed him on the ground until he was incapacitated. Trump is doing the same in the meme, but CNN is the villain, not Loki. An interesting detail is that Loki came to enslave humanity, and if one was to believe Trump's ramblings about fake news, the CNN depiction is accurate.³²⁷ The meme symbolizes the relationship between Trump and the media. Throughout Trump's campaign and presidency, he constantly attacked the media and reporters, disparaged the free-press institution, and disregarded traditional media sources by claiming they were fake news. 4chan created hundreds of images like this one, always representing Trump as a heroic warrior defeating a media villain.

The third and final image is most telling of the alt-right sentiment around Donald Trump. The meme represents the alt-right critique that Trump is "too tolerant towards minorities such as the gay community, asylum seekers, Jewish people, and Israel."³²⁸ The left half of the meme depicts Trump during his presidential campaign as a vital American candidate, fighting for America. However, the right half of the meme demonstrates how Trump became a pawn of Israel once he became president.³²⁹ One of Trump's primary defenses against anti-Semitic accusations is the numerous Jewish people in his administration, including his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. That same argument is why some in the alt-right, including Robert Bowers, saw Trump as controlled by Jewish people.³³⁰ There are a few exciting details to point out. One is the crusader

³²⁷ Heiderstadt, "Meme Warfare," 6.

³²⁸ Way, "Trump, Memes and the Alt-Right," 804 quoted in Heiderstadt, "Meme Warfare," 6.

³²⁹ Heiderstadt, "Meme Warfare," 6.

³³⁰ Amend, "Analyzing a Terrorist's Social Media Manifesto," *Southern Poverty Law Center*.

imagery that permeates many alt-right and white supremacist memes.³³¹ Next is Trump's physical features, which change from his regular features on the left to mimic Jewish caricature depictions on the right side. A common theme on 4chan is anti-Semitic rhetoric, feeding into the conspiracy theory that the media is Jewish-controlled. Accompanying images like the second and third memes are media renames. For example, members change YouTube to "JewTube" and Facebook to "Faceberg."³³² These examples further demonstrate how anti-Semitism is an underlying belief within the alt-right and reinforces ingroup support by renaming and reappropriating names for their use.

Trump emboldens men to act in two conflicting ways. First, white supremacists from various organizations mobilized at Trump rallies, protests, and counterprotests, which provided opportunities to meet like-minded individuals, organize, and create support systems. His language invigorated supporters, leading them to follow his example through online harassment, vandalizing synagogues and mosques, and assaulting people of color. Trump set an example for all types of devious and illicit behavior. He normalized hate speech, mocked people with disabilities, praised known white supremacists and bragged about sexual assault. If the world's (alleged) most powerful man publicly displays this behavior, many of his supporters will follow suit.

The other way Trump emboldens alt-right members are when they expect him to be more radical, yet are disappointed when he does not fulfill campaign promises to "clean the swamp" (clean up corruption and implant non-politicians into prominent positions) and "lock her up"

³³¹ Much could be said about this topic alone, but for now, I shall leave a reference for your viewing because the topic is fascinating and should be explored further. Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

³³² Heiderstadt, "Meme Warfare," 6-7.

(referring to Hillary Clinton). Inaction, or action counter to their agenda, led alt-right members to take matters into their own hands, which they did through various attacks on counter-protesters and places of worship. When Trump started critiquing white supremacists and alt-right terrorists, more extreme members lost faith in him, as seen in the third meme. Although Trump often used his rallies to incite violence, as he did leading up to the January 6th Capital insurrection, he was not extreme enough for some on the alternative right.

This section explored how Donald Trump's presidential campaign and four-year term emboldened many to violence. More extreme members of the alt-right were pushed to violence through Trump's failed campaign promises, support for Israel, and tolerance towards minority groups. If politics fails, then violent action is the solution. Trump's hate speech will motivate less extreme members to pursue virtual violence, namely online harassment, trolling, and shitposting. I analyzed these two reactions by looking at white supremacist and 4chan support. 4chan anons support Trump through viral memes and subliminal messaging on social media platforms, while established white supremacist organizations support Trump by attending his presidential rallies. Both types of supporters have a common interest that binds them together beyond support for Trump: a deeply misogynistic perspective of women. The alt-right incel community has memorialized Elliot Roger because he acted on his frustrations and sexual deprivation by killing numerous women. Misogyny is an always present, lurking motivation for men in the alt-right.

4.1.4 Lurking Motives

Misogyny is not a byproduct or side effect of the alt-right; it is the glue that brings and holds the movement together. A broader trend within male-dominated geeky online subcultures

views women as a threat to the edginess of the subculture.³³³ At best, online users will use messages like “tits or GTFO”³³⁴ to announce and reinforce the space as male-dominated and male-controlled. Accordingly, this subtle and low-level harassment is an important peek into the “cathedral of misogyny”³³⁵ that is 4chan. Many female gamers, game designers, game writers, and others in the industry experienced the worst-case scenario with thousands of online and in-person attacks. Transgression, pornography, and depictions of violence are employed as the counterforce in online hate campaigns against women who encroach upon men’s sacred space.³³⁶ The Gamergate controversy exposed the alt-right for what it is: a loose connection of young, sexually frustrated men looking for someone to blame for their lack of success. Unfortunately, Gamergate also illuminated the power of trolling.

Even if men like Elliot Rodger do not formally subscribe to a men’s rights group or use the established terminology, they share similar perspectives of women. Rodger did not use terms like “white sharia” in his manifesto. However, he advocated for a utopian society where women were kept in concentration camps and used solely for reproductive purposes, which is a definitive part of white sharia.³³⁷ Notorious hacker and troll Andrew “Weev” Auernheimer at the Daily Stormer³³⁸ wrote an article titled “Just What Are Traditional Gender Roles?” In this article, “Weev” writes,

Man up, put women under your heel, throw away their birth control, and make them bear your children and take care of your house. If they resist, discipline them...All we are pushing for is a return to the status of women we had in the early 19th century before Jews and their feminism ruined our civilization. This should not be controversial. If you are opposing WHITE SHARIA because you disagree with women being reduced to the

³³³ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 98.

³³⁴ “Tits or GTFO” is shorthand for “send pictures of your naked breasts or Get the Fuck Out.”

³³⁵ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 20.

³³⁶ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 98.

³³⁷ Elliot Rodger, “My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,” (manifesto) May 23, 2013.

³³⁸ The Daily Stormer is an infamous, successful propaganda machine that pumps out white supremacist hate speech.

status of property to be beaten and fucked at the whims of her husband, you are a faggot and a cuckold and have no place in any right-wing site, and instead belong at the bottom of festering bogs like Reddit and Voat.³³⁹

Weev's language is not abnormal, or the exception on alt-right websites, and the quote illuminates the type of beliefs alt-right members share. What is telling is that even while Weev is spewing misogynistic rhetoric, he cannot help but incorporate anti-Semitic views into his overall statement. White sharia is a commonly held belief among white supremacists, as expressed in the chants from the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. The play on words started as a humorous twist on Islamic religious law, and it rapidly became a battle cry as the belief resonated with the racist far-right elements.³⁴⁰ Weev's statement illustrates the seriousness of the reality alt-right members aspire to impose on society.

Groups including Proud Boys³⁴¹ and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)³⁴² share many extreme anti-women sentiments. However, each group that makes up the manosphere subscribes to varying degrees of extreme hatred of women. While each group has its history, outlook on the world, and overall goal, they represent a formalized sentiment shared by many in the anti-feminist alt-right.

³³⁹ Hanks and Amend, "The Alt-Right is Killing People," *Southern Poverty Law Center*.

³⁴⁰ Brandon Joel Kelley, "'White Sharia' and Militant White Nationalism," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, November 27, 2017, splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism quoted in Heiderstadt, "Meme Warfare," 9.

³⁴¹ According to the Proud Boys' founder, Gavin McInnes, the tenets include "minimal government, maximum freedom, anti-political correctness, anti-racial guild, pro-gun rights, anti-Drug War, closed borders, anti-masturbation, venerating entrepreneurs, and venerating housewives." The Proud Boys have a skinhead punk aesthetic and want to spread the 'No Wanks' doctrine, meaning members limit pornography and masturbation to once a month until they can completely wean themselves off. Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 81.

³⁴² Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) movement is a "straight male separatist group whose members have chosen...to avoid romantic relationships with women in protest against a culture destroyed by feminism, and to focus instead on individual achievement and independence from women." Their motivations and rhetoric are rife with references to a 'bitch' who will "cheat, leave, use you for your money and so on." Punishment and revenge are at the heart of their motivations, and like the alt-right, they believe feminism has destroyed Western civilization. YouTube is riddled with comments "depicting women as worthless and mindlessly led by biological impulses and saying that marriage should be boycotted." Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 79-80.

Men created anti-feminist, pro-men movements as a reaction to second-wave feminism, which described men's role in women's oppression in generalized terms. Men's groups rose to popularity as socially deemed "unworthy" men's sexual frustration grew.³⁴³ Groups that make up the manosphere engage in contradictory sentiments regarding women. On the one hand, they admonish women for being sexually driven and hooking up, using language like "riding the cock carousel." On the other hand, they constantly complain about their inability to attract women and join pick-up artist (PUA) forums to "rise from a 'nice guy' beta to a sexually successful alpha."³⁴⁴ The constant contradiction illuminates the rhetoric, which Nagle describes as an "unconvincing voice of ultra-rationality to conceal what seems like a great deal of bitterness and hurt at rejection."³⁴⁵ This hurt and rejection often manifest through hateful, misogynistic rhetoric on social media platforms.

Nagle presents an interesting argument that deserves mentioning and further evaluation. After analyzing F. Roger Devlin's—an alt-right writer, a white nationalist, a Men's Rights Advocate, and anti-feminist—writings, Nagle asserts that the sexual revolution and breakdown of monogamy is a central motivation behind young men's turn to the far right.³⁴⁶ Devlin's essay "Sexual Utopia in Power" argues that "the breakdown of monogamy results in promiscuity for the few, loneliness for the majority."³⁴⁷ The contradiction above stems from anxiety and anger about their low-ranking status in the sexual hierarchy.³⁴⁸ Nagle argues that while the sexual revolution freed both men and women from the confines of loveless marriages, it has brought a rise in adult childlessness and "a greater level of sexual choice for an elite of men and a growing

³⁴³ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 82.

³⁴⁴ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 75.

³⁴⁵ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 80.

³⁴⁶ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 82.

³⁴⁷ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 82.

³⁴⁸ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 82.

celibacy among a large male population at the bottom of the pecking order.”³⁴⁹ The cycle of relentless rejection leads men to pick up artists where they attempt to learn how to trick women into sex. When the ‘game’ does not work, they use misogynistic rhetoric to describe women’s nature as narcissistic and evil.³⁵⁰ This cycle is evident in Elliot Rodger’s writings, as he constantly struggles to change his physical appearance to attract women. Nevertheless, when it fails, he reverts to misogynistic rhetoric, describing women as worthless, animalistic, driven by lust, irrational, and emotionally stunted for choosing intellectually inferior men instead of him.³⁵¹

While anti-feminist, anti-women misogyny is an underlying view held by alt-right members, it also acts as a recruitment tool, radicalization method, and catalyst for violence. Sexual rejection leads many young men to anti-woman forums where they find others experiencing the same hardships and are exposed to alt-right ideas. Constant misogynistic exposure in an echo chamber further radicalizes those prone to extremist ideas. The encouraging support system for dangerous misogynistic behaviors “can consolidate and radicalize sexist, racist, and homophobic views, and even incite physical violence in the ‘off-line’ world.”³⁵² The push to violence can be the abundance of sexual rejection or the overwhelming mob mentality in alt-right echo chambers. Regardless of the trigger, hatred of women pushes depraved young men to virtual and real-world violence.

4.2 Man Commits Violence

Social media has changed white supremacists’ relationship with women, specifically white women. White supremacists from the 1980s White Power movement often saw themselves

³⁴⁹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 82.

³⁵⁰ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 83.

³⁵¹ Rodger, “My Twisted World.”

³⁵² Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell. “Embodied Harms: Gender, Shame, and Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence,” *Violence Against Women* 21 no. 6 (2015), 769.

as knights fighting to defend white women's womanhood, often regarding their sexual purity as a high priority. Now, the internet is rife with toxic anti-feminists that call for rape or glorify violence against women.³⁵³ This section will discuss the second step: man commits violence. Two types of violence are at play within the alternative right: first, "real-world" violence, namely vandalism, physical assault, and murder. In the United States, real-world violence is often a mass shooting. As I have analyzed "real-world" violence through the two case studies in this paper, I will refrain from doing so in this section. I place quotations around real-world because I draw distinctions between mass shootings and trolling, but using the phrase "real-world" does not negate the actual harm virtual violence inflicts. Virtual violence is the second type of violence I will analyze in this section. Virtual violence is more common in the alt-right as members can hide behind anonymous accounts. Virtual violence poses little to no threat to anonymous users, or anons, making it the preferred method for the alt-right. However, it rarely fulfills the need for fame members seek, as only a few internet trolls have reached celebrity status. I will start by exploring virtual violence, then move on to the implications.

Beyond helping extremist groups recruit and radicalize their users, social media administrators allow alt-right members to harass and troll their enemies behind a claim that their hateful comments are edgy jokes.³⁵⁴ Viveca S. Greene defines trolling as "an imprecise term referring to online activities, many organized by tight-knit associations, designed to provoke a response from a target without the target understanding the troll's (alleged) 'true' intention."³⁵⁵ She goes on to say that trolling is "deliberate provocation and amounts to victim blaming when individuals express the very anger, frustration, or hurt the troll sought, or, in the case of some alt-

³⁵³ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 107.

³⁵⁴ Viveca S. Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies," *Studies in American Humor* 5 vol. 1 (2019), 48.

³⁵⁵ Greene, "'Deplorable' Satire," 48.

right trolling, when mainstream media report on their memes.”³⁵⁶ Andrew ‘weev’ Auernheimer and his friend Jaime Cochrane, described trolling in an interview with *Esquire*. Cochrane said, “It’s not bullying, it’s satirical performance art.”³⁵⁷ Greene and Auernheimer’s definitions of trolling illustrate the one-sided nonchalant behavior towards online harassment. Weev and Cochrane brush off the accusation that trolling is another word for bullying and instead tap into the alt-right’s use of satire to justify their actions and disregard their victims’ accusations and pain.

Some scholars have warned against using the term “trolling” because it is an imprecise term used to describe a wide range of activities, many so abusive that they deserve stronger classification, like harassment, violent intimidation, and stalking.³⁵⁸ When alt-right victims react with understandable hurt and anger, the perpetrator responds with “just trolling” or “just kidding” as a go-to defense to avoid any responsibility for the hurt they cause. A “just kidding” claim protects the perpetrator from legal and administrative trouble, mainly when a “just kidding” follows unsettling racist or misogynistic posts.³⁵⁹ With the rise of social media deplatforming, a “just kidding” remark could be the difference between a platform ban and a warning and comment removal. Despite the “just joking” defense, the troll’s material should not be disregarded or made to believe the poster does not believe the message behind their words. Trolling includes a wide variety of toxic online behavior, the least of which is bullying. While alt-right members enjoy mocking political correctness, they save their gruesome rage for women in the gaming and technology industries.

³⁵⁶ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 48.

³⁵⁷ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 25.

³⁵⁸ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 48.

³⁵⁹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 105.

The alternative right realized its power during the Gamergate controversy, but trolling has become more effective as 4chan, and the alt-right have gained notoriety. Despite the increased reliance and culture around trolling, there has been a less than adequate response from law enforcement and social media companies to address the actual harm alt-right trolls inflict. Now that I have sufficiently defined and explained trolling, I shall explore the ramifications of virtual violence.

4.2.1 Implications

To fully understand the implications of trolling, we must add complexity to the definition. Scholars hesitant to use the term “trolling” to describe the toxic behavior on social media are more inclined to use the term “technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment” (TFSV) as it better represents the toxic, misogynistic sentiment behind gendered e-bile.³⁶⁰ The harmful effects of TFSV on victims transform psychological harm into physical and social harm. The absence of a physical body in cyberspace allows critics to disregard online sexual victimization, but naming the harm as real, embodied harm is crucial to theorizing and acting against technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment.³⁶¹ As briefly described in chapter three, TFSV is a term used to describe the “range of criminal, civil, and otherwise harmful sexually aggressive behaviors perpetrated against women with the aid or use of new technologies.”³⁶² Henry and Powell categorize TFSV into six different forms,

(a) the unauthorized creation and distribution of sexual images, (b) the creation and distribution (actual or threatened) of sexual assault images, (c) the use of a carriage service to procure a sexual assault, (d) online sexual harassment and cyberstalking, (e) gender-based hate-speech, and (f) virtual rape.³⁶³

³⁶⁰ Jane defines e-bile as “cyber-harassment such as rape threats and sexualized vitriol.” Jane, “Online Misogyny and Feminist Digilantism,” 1.

³⁶¹ Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 767, 770.

³⁶² Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 759.

³⁶³ Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 759.

What gets broadly categorized as “trolling” typically falls into one of these categories when the victim is female. TFSV, or “trolling,” is a common practice for alt-right members, often enjoyed by personality types who enjoy holding outrageous and provocative views.³⁶⁴ Feminist researchers and academics quickly point out that gendered cyber-harassment is not “harmless teasing that women should expect and tolerate” but is indicative of broader attitudes towards women.³⁶⁵

Henry and Powell discuss the implications of real-world harm verses virtual harm. They point out that “harms in the so-called ‘virtual’ world can have real effects, both bodily and psychical, and are not tangential, but increasingly central, to how individuals experience and live their everyday lives.”³⁶⁶ Henry and Powell argue that there does not need to be a direct translatable law against current “real-life” sexual violence in the virtual world, but rather that digital harm against women is taken seriously.³⁶⁷ They make this point against accusations that they are attempting to pursue the same legal punishments for real-life sexual violence and virtual sexual violence. For example, when a male avatar rapes a female avatar. As they point out, a direct, translatable law is not the goal; taking women’s concerns about gendered digital harms seriously is.

Emma A. Jane speaks to the prevalence and type of harassment men and women experience. She points out that “while men are more likely to be subjected to less severe harassment such as name-calling and embarrassment, young women are particularly vulnerable to more severe kinds of cyber abuse such as sexual harassment and stalking.”³⁶⁸ Disproportionate

³⁶⁴ Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 57.

³⁶⁵ Jane, “Online Misogyny and Feminist Digilantism,” 4.

³⁶⁶ Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 765.

³⁶⁷ Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 760.

³⁶⁸ Emma A. Jane, “Online Misogyny and Feminist Digilantism,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* (2016), 3.

abuse against women demonstrates the rampant misogyny in the alternative right and the freedom alt-right “trolls” experience from online anonymity and a vast Internet community to hide among. The “trolls” know there are no consequences for creating revenge porn or cyber stalking, meaning there is no incentive not to act out their hate fantasies against women.

Beyond the rampant misogynistic hate speech against women online, men enjoy support systems that encourage rape-supportive attitudes, rate how “rape-able” female students are, doctor photographs to create sexually explicit and degrading images and applaud threats of sexual violence—including positing the names and addresses of women who “deserve to be raped.”³⁶⁹ Henry and Powell argue that the harm goes beyond the virtual space to embody women physically and psychologically, supporting the argument that virtual violence is real violence. Rape threats and gendered doxing cause profound harm to women and prohibit their full involvement in online life.³⁷⁰

The echo-chamber of online communities—like that of AudoAdmit, where unmoderated discussions degrading and naming female law students are regularly posted³⁷¹—gives members the illusion that their behavior is appropriate. As Henry and Powell explain, “group dynamics also work to diffuse moral or legal responsibility for group members, displace accountability, provide greater anonymity, and dehumanize and blame victims in ways never before imagined.”³⁷² A support system creates an environment where men believe their behavior is normal and are not held accountable for inflicting harm. Their victims suffer physical, psychological, and financial harm as law enforcement further victimizes them, as they are unable

³⁶⁹ Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 769.

³⁷⁰ Jane, “Online Misogyny and Feminist Diligantism,” 4.

³⁷¹ Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 769.

³⁷² Henry and Powell. “Embodied Harms,” 769.

and unwilling to take the threat seriously. As a result, women must provide security against online and in-person threats. Some with technical skills turn to vigilantism. However, the responsibility should not lie with the victims.

There are clear cases of physical and psychological harm to the female victims of online harassment. Brianna Woe, Zoë Quinn, and Tanya Gersh are three examples of how “trolling” impacted their lives. Wu had to leave her house for weeks because her address was leaked. Quinn hired security at speaking events because harassers threatened her safety, and Gersh was so distressed from the violent intimidation that her primary care physician prescribed antidepressants, valium, and acupuncture.³⁷³ In the digital age, online abuse does not remain online. It spills into the “real” world, affecting businesses, careers, personal relationships, and mental health.

This section has explored virtual violence as one of the two avenues in step 2 of the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between social media and violence. First, it investigated two sources on the definition of trolling, one from a scholar and one from an alt-right member. The definition illuminates the attitude and culture around trolling. Essentially, alt-right trolls evade any responsibility for the harm they inflict, which brought me to the second point on the implications of trolling. I start by complicating the trolling definition by introducing Henry and Powell’s argument that a more accurate term for trolling is “Technology-Facilitated Sexual Harassment,” as “trolling” can be dismissed as harmless online rhetoric instead of the unsettling amounts of death and rape threats alt-right members send their female victims. Then I presented scholars who research the real effects of online harassment to emphasize that law enforcement

³⁷³ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 71, 82-83, and 117.

should take virtual violence seriously. Additionally, gendered e-bile indicates a more significant problem in society, where sexual harassment is the victim's fault, and men do not take responsibility for the harm they cause.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN

I am using an epistemological approach to analyze the data sets, which will illustrate the cyclical relationship between social media and acts of terror. With the help of a colleague studying computational linguistics, I scraped four datasets from 4plebs, an archival website that houses 4chan posts and replies. For this work, I am focusing on the ‘Politically Incorrect’ board—/pol/—instead of the overall 4chan website for multiple reasons. First, to address the overwhelming amount of data, second, to focus on the most relevantly topical board, and third, to get a well-rounded understanding of the alt-right’s social media home.

This chapter will describe 4chan in detail before moving to an explanation of the datasets and analytical approaches. From there, I will lay out the process, which includes subsections on data structure, data collection, and data processing. Next, I will present limitations and relevant ethical considerations. Lastly, I will include an acknowledgment section and provide a brief conclusion.

5.1 4chan

4chan is a highly trafficked imageboard site where anons, or anonymous users, post millions of posts and comment on threads daily. 4chan plays a unique role in the alt-right movement that other, more established platforms cannot compete with. Sites like Stormfront, Vandal Void, and The Right Stuff have a place in the alt-right. However, they act in supporting roles, producing propaganda, reinterpreting white supremacist ideas from the 80s and 90s, and fulfilling the public relations need for a prototype. The core of the alt-right movement is a

“disorganized shitstorm of thousands of obsessed, angry, and unhinged young men”³⁷⁴ attempting to protect what is “rightfully” theirs. 4chan represents this more than any other alt-right, white supremacist, neo-Nazi, or manosphere platform on the internet. 4chan birthed meme and trolling culture in the early 2000s, and most of the core concepts of the alt-right were debated on 4chan before the alt-right presented itself as a unified front.³⁷⁵ Authorities have accused organizations like the Council of Conservative Citizens of brainwashing alt-right terrorists like Dylann Roof,³⁷⁶ but 4chan has a unique role in recruiting, radicalizing, and “redpilling” that is unmatched by any other social media site or organization in the twenty-first century.³⁷⁷

5.1.1 Boards

4chan has seventy-six boards that fall under seven broad categories: Japanese Culture, Video Games, Interests, Creative, Other, Misc. (NSFW), and Adult (NSFW). They all cover a wide range of topics from “Anime & Manga” to “Advice” to “Hardcore” porn, but “Politically Incorrect” is under the “Misc.” category.

5.1.2 Anonymity

Users are not required to create an account to read or write posts on 4chan. Anonymity is the default for users and is the preferred method of posting. When someone posts on a 4chan board, they can change the username, but anonymous is the default, and the site does not require

³⁷⁴ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumbler to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017), 101.

³⁷⁵ Andrew Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*, August 31, 2016. [Stormer-daily.rw/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/](http://stormer-daily.rw/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/).

³⁷⁶ Anglin, “A normie’s guide to the alt-right,” *Daily Stormer*.

³⁷⁷ Viveca S. Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies,” *Studies in American Humor* 5 vol. 1 (2019), 46.

the user to change it.³⁷⁸ If they wish, users can change their username with each post. This anonymity intends to protect the identity of members from each other, although users misconstrue the anonymity. 4chan's servers have safeguards to link threads with IP addresses, even protecting against anons using Tor browsers.³⁷⁹ The anonymity allows users to express beliefs considered taboo in other communities.

5.1.3 Ephemerality

Each board has a finite catalog of threads based on a bumping system. The most recent posts appear first, and when users reply to posts, the threads bump to the top of the queue. When posts go unanswered, they get bumped to the bottom of the queue until the system moves them into the catalog. They stay in the catalog for three days and then move to the archive, where users can no longer comment on them. After remaining in the archive for seven days, the system permanently deletes the thread from 4chan's servers.³⁸⁰ The bumping system ensures fresh content.

5.1.4 Moderation

4chan's rules regulate topics to their appropriate forums. For example, rule 15 of 4chan's "Global Rules" is: "All pony/brony threads, images, Flashes, and avatars belong on /mlp/."³⁸¹ Regulation rules do not eliminate crossover in topics, but the guidelines state that the punishment

³⁷⁸ Gabriel Emile Hine, Jeremiah Onalapo, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Nicolas Kourtellis, Ilias Leontiadis, Riginos Samaras, Gianluca Stringhini, and Jeremy Blackburn, "Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan's Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web" *ICWSM* (2017), 2.

³⁷⁹ Hine, Onalapo, De Cristofaro, Kourtellis, Leontiadis, Samaras, Stringhini, and Blackburn, "Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump," 2. 4chan is not as lawless as users may believe. Moot (4chan's creator) turned over server logs and other records to the FBI.

³⁸⁰ Hine, Onalapo, De Cristofaro, Kourtellis, Leontiadis, Samaras, Stringhini, and Blackburn, "Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump," 2.

³⁸¹ "Rules," *4chan*, <https://www.4chan.org/rules>.

for continuously posting in non-designated chats is banishment.³⁸² Moderation is limited, with volunteers acting as “janitors” who monitor posts and report them to 4chan employees who decide if they will remove a post or block the anon.³⁸³

5.1.5 /pol/

4chan considers the /pol/ board as a containment board, meaning that there are few topics or rhetoric that are off-limits.³⁸⁴ Anons come to debate and discuss politics and current events. The /pol/ board is notable for widespread racist, white supremacist, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, misogynistic, and anti-LGBTQ content.³⁸⁵ As of 2020, it is the most active board on 4chan.³⁸⁶

5.2 Datasets and Analytical Approaches

We compiled data from two case studies—Elliot Rodger’s shooting spree and the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting—and four datasets in this study. The first dataset is a sample of posts from May 20, 2014, to May 22, 2014, two days prior to Elliot Rodger’s shooting spree. The second dataset is from May 24, 2014, to May 26, 2014, the two days following Rodger’s mass murder-suicide. The following two data sets are concerning the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting. The third dataset is a sample of posts from October 24, 2018, to October 26, 2018. The fourth set is a sampling from October 28, 2018, to October 30, 2018. The case studies will demonstrate how these events influence social media rhetoric.

³⁸² Banishment from 4chan means very little because it is an anonymous social media platform that does not require identification of any kind, nor does it authenticate identification, so there are no built-in protocols to

³⁸³ Antonis Papasavva, Savvas Zannettou, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, and Jeremy Blackburn, “Raiders of the Lost Kek: 3.5 Years of Augmented 4chan Posts from the Politically Incorrect Board,” *Fourteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (ICWSM 2020), 2.

³⁸⁴ Papasavva, Zannettou, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, and Blackburn, “Raiders of the Lost Kek,” *ICWSM*, 2-3.

³⁸⁵ “Rules,” *4chan*.

³⁸⁶ Asta Zelenkauskaitė, Pihla Toivanen, Jukka Huhtamäki, and Katja Valaskivi, “Shades of Hatred Online: 4chan Memetic Duplicate Circulation Surge During Hybrid Media Events,” *First Monday* 26 no. 1 (January 2021), <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/11075/10029>.

4chan anonymous users, anons, posted 71,934 times between May 20, 2014, and May 22, 2014, and 97,455 times from May 24-26, 2014. Alternatively, anons posted 256,441 times from October 24-26, 2018, and 272,496 times from October 28-30, 2018. In total, the universe of posts on 4chan surrounding the two events is 698,326. We decided to work with a smaller sample based on our capacity to crawl the first hundred pages of the data. 4plebs organizes twenty-five posts on each page, which gave us the 2,500-sample size. The dataset information, including the timeframe and number of posts collected, is summarized in the table below.

Table 5.1: Overview of Datasets		
Dataset	Timeframe of Post Collection	Number of Posts Collected
Elliot Rodger Before	May 20-22, 2014	2,500
Elliot Rodger After	May 24-26, 2014	2,500
Robert Bowers Before	October 24-26, 2018	2,500
Robert Bowers After	October 28-30, 2018	2,500
Total		10,000 posts

4chan’s ephemerality made it impossible to crawl the data from their servers due to the desired time frames. As a result, we had to search for alternative archive sites. After researching many alternatives, we discovered 4plebs. They archive the posts and replies for every 4chan board, including the ‘Politically Incorrect’ board. Multiple websites archive 4chan’s old posts, but 4plebs allows for searches on specific boards and, more importantly, 4plebs catalog by date.

Christopher “Moot” Poole created 4chan as an image board, which has remained true to its origin. Despite being an image board, we focused on written texts instead of gifs and images like memes, although an image is required to post. I decided to only analyze text from 4chan in the datasets because it is more challenging to analyze pictures to determine anti-Semitic and misogynistic rhetoric.

5.3 Process

We used Python programming language to crawl the data from 4plebs. Python is a popular, high-level programming language released in 1991, used for web development, software development, mathematics, and system scripting. Its design philosophy emphasizes code readability through significant indentation.³⁸⁷ An Application Programming Interface (API) for the 4plebs archive provides data through an API accessible link. We accessed the data between October 24, 2014, and October 26, 2014:

<https://archive.4plebs.org/ /api/chan/search/?boards=pol&start=2014-05-24&end=2014-05-26&page=1>. We changed the URL automatically based on the specified time I am interested in, namely the days before and after the two mass shootings.

5.3.1 Data Structure

We fetch the data in JSON data format. JSON is a dictionary format that stores data in key-value pairs. All the keys in a dictionary are unique and can have another dictionary or a list as their value. Here is an example of a JSON format: {key: value, key 2: value 2}. To extract the textual data of the posts, we first get the value of the key “0,” which is a dictionary with a key called “posts.” The value of the key posts is a list of dictionaries which are the actual posts from 4plebs. We iterate through the lists. Each object in the list is a dictionary with the text comment I was looking for as the value of the key “comment.” Our JSON data is more complicated than the previous example because we were crawling larger amounts of data. Here is an example of our JSON data: {“0”: {“posts”:[{“comment”: text1}, {“comment”: text2}, ..., {“comment”: text25}]} }.

³⁸⁷ “Python Introduction,” *W3School*, https://www.w3schools.com/python/python_intro.asp.

5.3.2 Data Collection

We sent a get request using the get function from the “Request” library in python. This function needs the specific URL we want the data. The initial URL we used is the one shown above. We needed to create or adapt this URL for each time frame and specify which page we wanted. Each time frame includes a large amount of data that cannot be accessed through one page because each page only contains twenty-five posts.

The metadata of each query contains the total number of posts available. We divide this number by twenty-five to get the number of pages needed. In simple terms, the first data result shows the “total found” number of posts at the bottom of the page. We divided this number by twenty-five to determine how many pages were available to access. Next, we saved the data in a text file to make it easier to read. A line of stars separates each comment.

5.3.3 Data Processing

Our goal was to find the highly used words to gauge language usage during different periods. The motivation to do this is to see if the frequency of language increased after the two terrorist attacks described throughout this paper.

The task was to find the frequency of all the words in each time frame. For each time frame, we read the text. There is a pipeline of actions to find the frequency of words to perform on the comments. First, we read the comments and removed the lines of stars that separated the comments from each other. Next, we joined the lines of comments to create a chunk of text; then, we removed all the new line characters from the text. Next, we cleaned the text of all punctuation, then split the text by space to get the individual words. The result of these steps is a complete list of words. We took this list of words and used it as the input for the counter function

from the “Collections” library in python. As a result, this function returns the frequency of each word in the list. Here is an example using one comment from the dataset “start=2014-05-20end=2014-05-22”:

Comment #30240165: “why are you like always trying to save me you creep”

Counter ({‘you’: 2, ‘why’: 1, ‘are’: 1, ‘like’: 1, ‘always’: 1, ‘trying’: 1, ‘to’: 1, ‘save’: 1, ‘me’: 1, ‘creep’: 1})

Finally, we saved this frequency in a text file. See Appendix B for sampling the first twenty-five lines of the frequency file.

5.4 Limitations

The API only shows the first one hundred thousand posts, regardless of the actual number. For example, even if there are six hundred thousand posts between October 28, 2018, and October 30, 2018, 4plebs only catalogs the first one hundred thousand, so that is the maximum we could crawl. Another limitation is that the API, or server, blocks immediate repeated requests, so we had to put a delay between the requests to get the pages. Due to the time constraints and how long we anticipated it would take to crawl all the data, we decided to get the first one-hundred pages instead of the total one hundred thousand posts for each dataset.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Content posted on /pol/ is often highly offensive, yet I did not censor the content to provide a comprehensive analysis of /pol/. Language and ideology throughout this paper may be upsetting to some readers.

5.6 Acknowledgment

This project would not be possible without the coding assistance from Sepideh Mollanorozy, who is a graduate student studying Artificial Intelligence and Linguistics through the Human Language, Science, and Technology department at the University of Malta.

5.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of 4chan and the parts that make it unique, including anonymity and ephemerality. Next, I described why we crawled data from 4plebs instead of 4chan's servers. Following this step, I described in-depth the 4plebs data collection process, starting with the programming language we used to how we gathered the frequency of words in a readable document. Lastly, I presented limitations we encountered throughout the data collection and analysis process. The next chapter will present the results gathered from chapter five.

CHAPTER 6: RESULTS

This chapter will explore the results from the datasets we crawled from 4plebs. As described in chapter four, we created code that showed the frequency of words on the first one-hundred pages of posts between May 20-22, 2014, compared to May 24-26, 2014, and October 24-26, 2018, compared to October 28-30, 2018. The frequency of certain statistically significant words will demonstrate if alt-right mass shootings influence the anti-Semitic and misogynistic rhetoric on 4chan's 'Politically Incorrect' board.

6.1 Hypothesis

I listed the hypothesis in chapter two but will reiterate them here with a short explanation for each. The first hypothesis predicts the first case study, which centers around Elliot Rodger and his May 23, 2014, attack, where he murdered seven people (including himself) and injured fourteen in Southern California. Rodger was a self-proclaimed incel who claimed that his life had no value because women did not find him attractive. In his manifesto, he railed against women and the (perceived) unfair sexual hierarchy he was at the bottom of. Internet users have made Rodgers a hero, adopting his self-identified "Supreme Gentleman" mantle, so his legacy lives on. 4chan's administrators created the 'Politically Incorrect' board in 2013 as a containment board, meaning it is only one year old, so I anticipate fewer results and less traffic than the 2018 results.

H1. Misogynistic rhetoric will increase on 4chan/pol/ in the days following Elliot Rodger's shooting spree.

Hypothesis two correlates to the October 27, 2018, Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting where Robert Bower acted on his anti-Semitic beliefs, killing eleven people and injuring six. Bowers

was radicalized online, drawing on many sources to embolden him to action. Bowers posted various anti-Semitic and white supremacist conspiracy theories on alt-right social media platforms before opening fire in a place of worship. Bowers represents the underlying anti-Semitism in the alternative right.

H2. Anti-Semitic rhetoric will increase on 4chan/pol/ in the days following Robert Bowers' terror attack.

Hypothesis number three is less relevant to the overall goal of this project but remains an essential factor to consider as I discuss the increased popularity of the alt-right and the role misogyny and anti-Semitism play in the current United States political arena. I gauge popularity through the number of overall posts 4plebs archives from 4chan.

H3. There will be a higher volume of original posts and replies on 4chan/pol/ following the 2018 Pittsburgh shooting than Rodger's shooting due to the increased popularity of 4chan and the Politically Incorrect board after Donald Trump was elected president.

6.2 Statistically Valid

I chose the five words for Table 6.1, “women,” “sex,” “virgin,”³⁸⁸ “girl(s),”³⁸⁹ and “gentleman,” for their significance to Elliot Rodger. After reading his manifesto, “My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,” I pinpointed significant words he repeatedly used. Rodgers was obsessed with having sex with a beautiful blond girl. Not only was he obsessed, but he believed he was entitled to sex. Because he could not convince a girl to have sex with him, he rambled incessantly about being a virgin. The anger and frustration at white girls having sex with

³⁸⁸ I excluded “virginity” from the count.

³⁸⁹ I excluded “girlfriend” from the count.

(according to Rodger) unattractive, intellectually inferior brown men fused with his obsession with his virginity. Rodgers often declared he was a gentleman of supreme intelligence with many conversation topics and cool accessories.³⁹⁰ Rodgers constantly harped on these topics in his manifesto, so if he followed the same practice in his uploaded videos, they should include this rhetoric. Anyone watching, reading, or researching Rodgers after the events that occurred on that fateful day would be inclined to mimic his rhetoric or reiterate his sentiments.

I chose the five words for Table 6.2, “Jew(s),”³⁹¹ “Kike(s),”³⁹² “Israel,”³⁹³ “Globalist,” and “Goy,” for their significance to Robert Bowers and the overall anti-Semitic white supremacist mentality. Kike is a derogatory term for Jewish people, often used by white supremacists and members of the alt-right.³⁹⁴ Globalist is code for a Jewish elite. If an anti-Semite writes for general consumption, they will typically use coded words to express their anti-Semitic beliefs. Those in the know will understand the deeper meaning, while the “globalist” rhetoric ostracizes outsiders. Goy is part of a popular meme, “The Goyim Know,” a phrase white supremacists use to mock Jewish people using pseudo-Yiddish.³⁹⁵ Goy is a reclaimed title many alt-right members use to describe themselves as knowledgeable about Jewish world domination. Israel is a keyword because anti-Semites tie the Jewish question in the United States

³⁹⁰ Elliot Rodger, “My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,” (manifesto) May 23, 2013.

³⁹¹ I excluded “Jewry,” “Jewess,” and “Jewish” from the count.

³⁹² I excluded “kikery” from the count.

³⁹³ I excluded “Israelis” and “Israelites” from the count.

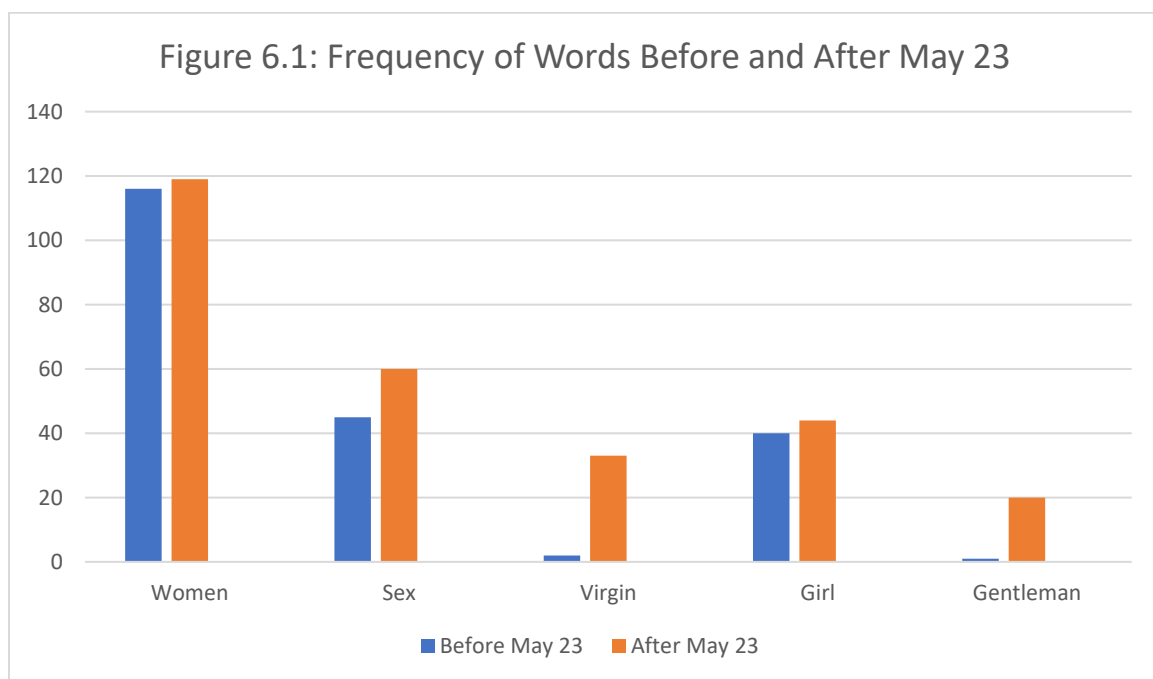
³⁹⁴ The word dates to the nineteenth century. Some sources say it originated on Ellis Island when illiterate Jewish people would sign their names with an “O” instead of the typical “X” other illiterate immigrants used. The “X” was too closely related to the Christian cross, hence the “O.” The Yiddish word for “circle” is *kikel* (pronounced KY – kel). The immigration officers eventually started calling anyone who signed with an “O” a kike. Some sources claim Kike evolved from “ike” or “ikey” which is short for Isaac.

³⁹⁵ “The Goyim Know” typically accompanies the “Happy Merchant” meme. Goyim refers to Gentiles, or anyone not involved in the Jewish cabal’s plan to take over the world and destroy the white race. Both memes depict anti-Semitic caricature depictions of Jewish men. Both depict tropes of greed, manipulation, and the need for world domination.

to Israel's military and financial aid. Robert Bowers participated in the belief and spread of dangerous disinformation of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories through memes and posts on Gab.

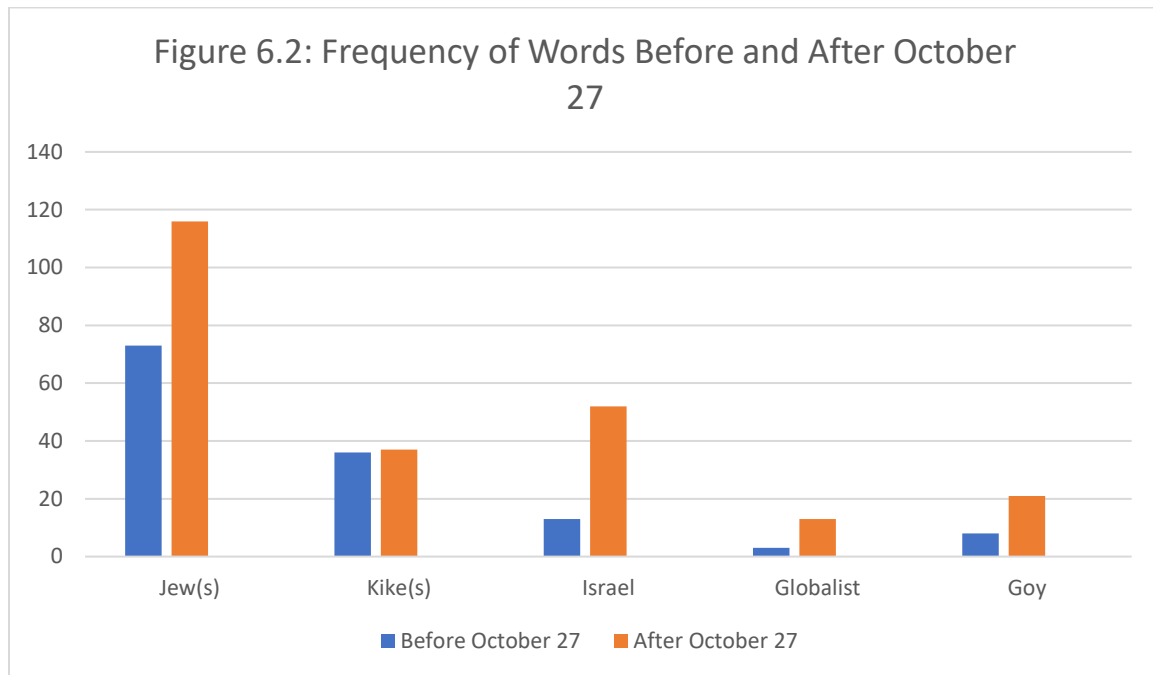
In addition to why I chose the words, I combined variations of the same word to get a more accurate frequency count. For example, instead of just including “Jew,” I have included “jew,” “Jews,” and “jews” in the graph to include a complete representation of frequency. I incorporated uppercase, lowercase, and an “s” at the end of the word into the frequency word count.

6.3 Results



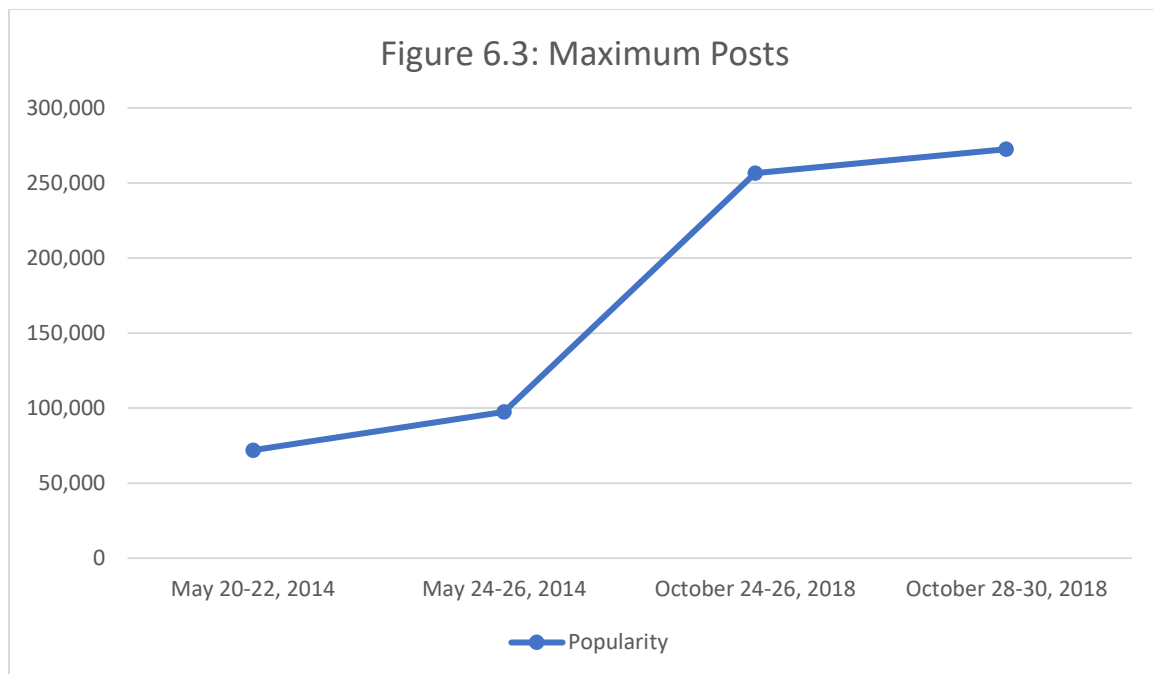
The datasets from May 20-22, 2014, to May 24-26, 2014, showed that the use of “women” increased from 116 to 119. The dataset mentioned above displayed the frequency of anons using the word “sex” from 45 to 60. Additionally, variations of the word “virgin” increased from 2 to 33. “Girl” saw a slight increase in frequency, with 40 to 44 uses.

“Gentleman” saw a drastic increase in the datasets. Before, the count was 1, and after Rodgers’ attack, the count was 20. The rampant misogynistic rhetoric on 4chan increased after Rodgers set out to kill the women of the Alpha Phi sorority.³⁹⁶



The datasets from October 24-26, 2018, to October 28-30, 2018, demonstrated the increase in anti-Semitic rhetoric. Variations of the word “Jew” increased from 73 uses to 116. “Kike” saw a slight increase, with only one usage increase; frequency went from 36 to 37. Anons used “Israel” more after Bowers’ attack. The frequency heightened from 13 to 52 uses. “Globalist” saw a slight increase, from 3 to 13. The use of “Goy” increased from 8 to 21 uses. The increase in all categories demonstrates how already present anti-Semitic rhetoric increased following the synagogue shooting.

³⁹⁶ Elliot Rodger, “My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger,” (manifesto) May 23, 2013.



The graph above indicates the total number of posts 4plebs archives from 4chan on the four relevant time frames: May 20-22, 2014, May 24-26, 2014; October 24-26, 2018, and October 28-30, 2018. Each point on the line graph represents the overall posts and comments that 4plebs archives, although they only display the first one-hundred thousand. The first dot on the graph showcases 71,934 posts and comments between May 20-22, 2014. The second dot, representing May 24-26, 2014, jumps to 97,455. Next, we see a significant leap from 97,455 to 256,441 comments between October 24-26, 2018. The last point on the graph indicates that 4chan users posted 272,496 times between October 28-30, 2018.

6.4 Estimation and Results

Figure 6.1 is a graph depicting the frequency of statistically valid words crawled from 4chan two days before and the two days after May 23, 2014, the day Elliot Rodger went on his killing spree. The graph illustrates that the statistically valid words increased after Rodger's attack. Popular topics, like women and sex, increased at a lower rate than event-specific words,

like virgin and gentleman. Internet users often refer to Rodgers as the “virgin killer,” making the frequency of words like “virgin” more prevalent. The chart above shows that misogynistic rhetoric on 4chan’s ‘Politically Incorrect’ board increased after Elliot Rodger’s attack.

Figure 6.2 is a graph depicting the frequency of statistically valid words crawled from 4chan two days before and the two days after October 27, 2018, the day Robert Bowers opened fire in the Pittsburgh synagogue. Based on the frequency of the five words in Figure 6.2, this shows a change in anti-Semitic rhetoric on 4chan’s ‘Politically Incorrect’ board after the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting.

Figures 6.1 and 6.2 demonstrate how misogynistic and anti-Semitic rhetoric increases after an alt-right terrorist attack. While the datasets we scraped are small, they indicate a more significant trend on 4chan. Since 4chan is the alternative right's self-proclaimed home, the results represent the alt-right as a whole. For perspective, we scraped 10,000 posts out of the total 698,326 posts over the four relevant time frames. Due to 4pleb’s server limitations, it would only have been possible to access 369,389 out of the 698,326 posts. Despite the limitation, we find evidence supporting the three hypotheses described at the beginning of this chapter.

The increase demonstrated in Figure 6.3 represents that more users joined 4chan or previous users posted more often. The research indicates that posts on an alt-right leaning social media site increased after two alt-right terrorist attacks. It is important to note that Rodgers committed mass murder before the Gamergate controversy. The timeline is essential because Gamergate was a popular conversation topic on 4chan before it was banned.³⁹⁷ The acute leap between the graph's second and third points indicates the four-year time jump. If I plotted every

³⁹⁷ Gamergate would have increased traffic on 4chan, bringing new users in and encouraging current users to post more frequently.

year since Christopher Poole created 4chan, the graph would illustrate a gradual increase in posts as the image board site gained popularity. However, because this paper focuses on four crucial time frames, we see a gradual but steady increase between points one and two, points three and four, and a sharp increase between points two and three.

Additionally, the evidence adds value by proving the second half of the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between social media and violence. As a reminder from chapter one, the first half of the relationship—steps one and two (see chart in chapter six)—is recruitment, radicalization, and the push to violence. The second half of the relationship—steps three, four, and five (see chart in chapter six)—is the support and fame the perpetrator receives after committing violence and the surge of event-specific rhetoric online. Misogynistic rhetoric increases after a man become a mass shooter, declaring women to be the cause of his pain. Anti-Semitic rhetoric rises after a terrorist publicly attacks a synagogue. The cycle restarts when the fame emboldens copycats, and the rhetoric radicalizes another to action.

6.5 Conclusion

Chapter six presented the results from the four datasets we crawled from 4plebs, which archives 4chan's posts. After reminding the reader of the three hypotheses I predicted in chapter two, I moved on to an explanation of the statistically valid words I chose to analyze. Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2 compare the frequency of words before and after the terrorist attack. Figure 6.3 demonstrates the maximum number of posts on 4chan for the project's relevant dates. Following the description of each graph, I analyze the graphs, provide an analysis of the results, and tie the results to the thesis statement. The next chapter will discuss each aspect of the cyclical relationship, starting with the first half, which includes recruitment, radicalization, and the push

to violence. Next, I will explore the second half of the cycle, specifically the perpetrator's fame after their attack and how online inflammatory rhetoric restarts the violence cycle.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

This chapter will provide an exploratory analysis of the comments posted on 4chan's Politically Incorrect, /pol/, board. The results show a correlation between misogynistic and anti-Semitic hate speech and alt-right mass shootings. First, I will discuss the first two dataset results to explore misogynistic rhetoric. Next, I will discuss the last two dataset results to explore anti-Semitic rhetoric. The increased frequency of statistically significant words demonstrates a language change directly following Elliot Rodger and Robert Bowers' attacks.

Increased supportive rhetoric and ample media coverage achieve the shooter's goal, whether fame for themselves or to draw attention to their ideological cause. As discussed in chapter three's literature review on social media, fame is a primary motivator for mass shooters, while bringing attention to a cause is a motivator for terrorists. Alt-right shooters draw on both motives for personal fame and ideological attention. Rodger and Bowers are examples of successful cycles, as they represent different ideological beliefs in the alternative right. Despite the different beliefs they act on, alt-right members memorialize them and learn from their attacks. In the years following the two attacks, multiple alt-right shooters have copied Rogers and Bowers, some explicitly stating their intent to copy them, some implicitly following their lead.

While the results cannot prove misogynistic and anti-Semitic rhetoric increases following alt-right terrorist attacks, they show a change in activity. The change is significant because 4chan influences mainstream social media platforms. 4chan's heightened popularity and influence on other social media platforms indicate that more people will be exposed to alt-right ideas, which will cause a chain reaction of normalized hate speech, acceptance of disinformation, and the

spread of hate. Increased rhetoric of alt-right events results in perpetrator fame, a higher likelihood of copycats, and a shift in the Overton window.

7.1 Misogyny

Figure 6.1. illustrates that the five statistically valid words increased after Elliot Rodger killed six people (not including himself) and injured fourteen. As demonstrated in his manifesto, Roger's misogynistic rhetoric impacted the larger alt-right community, which is evident in his glorification. The Southern Poverty Law Center credits Elliot Rodger as the first alt-right shooter in a long line of shooters who would follow him.³⁹⁸ As he was recruited and radicalized online, he set an example for what other frustrated young men could achieve.

None of the five statistically significant words I compared in the first two datasets are inherently misogynistic. Usage and intent would determine whether the sentiment is misogynistic, although that is outside the scope of this project. While I could draw conclusions from the comments we crawled from 4chan/pol/, I cannot definitively prove that the increased frequency of those five words means misogynistic rhetoric increased after Rodger's attack. However, after researching the alternative right and manosphere, I can confidently assert that misogyny is an underlying ideological motivation for virtual and real-world violence. The increased number of posts, the toxicity of the posts, and the alt-right's reaction to Rodger demonstrate a correlation between misogynistic rhetoric and increasingly deadly attacks where women are the targets.

³⁹⁸ Keegan Hanks and Alex Amend, "The Alt-Right is Killing People," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 5, 2018, [splcenter.org/20180205/alt-right-killing-people](https://www.splcenter.org/20180205/alt-right-killing-people).

A plausible confounding factor for the increase in “virgin” is that media outlets used this moniker to describe Elliot Rodger. They described him as the “virgin killer,” which became a famous phrase to identify him on fringe social media platforms like 4chan. 4chan users are exposed to mainstream media and could have adopted the moniker. Therefore, 4chan anons using the word “virgin” may not demonstrate a correlation between misogynistic rhetoric and violence.

The results in chapter six show a change in the rhetoric type directly following an alt-right terror attack. By this logic, we expect more attacks to increase online rhetoric and perpetrator fame. Therefore, more young men will be exposed to alt-right ideas online, be inspired by previous attacks, compete for higher body counts, and hurt or kill more innocent people.

7.2 Anti-Semitism

The results of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting vary from Elliot Rodger’s results, and the primary difference is the statistically significant words I chose. Three of the five words in Figure 6.2 are derogatory or code words, meaning we cannot confuse their use for anything other than hate speech. As with the first two datasets analyzing misogyny on 4chan, I cannot definitively prove that the increased use of these five words means anti-Semitic rhetoric increased following the synagogue shooting. 4chan anons may have used variations of “Jew” to describe the event’s details rather than expressing hateful sentiments. This explanation falls short with “kike,” “Globalist,” and “Goy,” as two out of the three are derogatory terms for Jewish people or part in parcel of a Jewish-mocking phrase. The increase in derogatory words is an indication of anti-Semitic beliefs.

While the results do not prove anti-Semitic language on 4chan, a deeper analysis of the comments they are part of would illuminate the intention behind the words. However, as 4chan is the self-proclaimed home of the alt-right, it is plausible that the comments would demonstrate that the words are part in parcel of hateful comments. The dissertation research and discourse analysis on anti-Semitism in the alt-right increases the likelihood that the comments containing the five statistically relevant words express anti-Semitic sentiments.

7.3 Conclusion

Comparing the four datasets and word frequency demonstrates a correlation between hateful rhetoric and alt-right terror attacks, and the results show that the social media-violence cycle is reinforcing. Showing an increase in statistically significant words is essential because of the influence 4chan has on other social media platforms. The short literature review in chapter two briefly discussed academics and researchers who researched 4chan's influence as an extension of the alternative right. They concluded that 4chan content, namely memes and gifs, frequently appeared on mainstream sites, including Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook. The intentional spread of disinformation to popular sites through easily consumable pictures increases the exposure of alt-right white supremacist ideas. Constant exposure normalizes hate speech, leading to acceptance. Hate speech exposure and disinformation acceptance shift the Overton window and what is an acceptable political view to hold. 4chan influence on other social media platforms provides more opportunities to recruit, radicalize, and redpill normies. Glorification of alt-right terrorists emboldens copycats, leading copycats to commit violence.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

After reading this paper, you could ask, “so what? The only people engaging in 4chan are fourteen-year-old boys.” Nevertheless, fourteen-year-old boys become eighteen-year-old voters who become twenty-year-old thugs who become twenty-six-year-old website creators who become thirty-five-year-old politicians or mass shooters. The underlying sentiment behind the claim that “it is just fourteen-year-old boys in their mother’s basement” is the assumption that boys are incapable of violence. However, the United States has a long history of mass shootings and violence to confirm that it is false. Teenagers are capable of violence and are often pushed to violence by older, charismatic men.

Remember that it is violent intimidation for those who would diminish the severity of trolling because it typically does not escalate to physical violence. Online harassment unsettles families, destroys businesses, drives victims to therapy, and turns lives upside down.³⁹⁹ Furthermore, if your advice is to turn off your computer or delete your social media accounts, remember that doxing is one of the fundamental techniques used by trolls.⁴⁰⁰ Doxing is when hackers find personal information, including phone numbers, home addresses, and social security numbers, and make them public. The ramifications are terrifying for victims, leading some to vacate their homes, hire private security guards, or become gun owners.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁹ Jonathan Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*: *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 111.

⁴⁰⁰ Aside from the insensitive dismissal of the “turn off your computer” strategy, it is equivalent to telling victims of cross-burning to not go outside. It is impractical, insensitive, and avoids the problem. Even if the harassment stayed online, it is not a plausible solution for people who make their living through online platforms, like the female gamers, content creators, and journalists that alt-right member’s target. But the harassment does not remain online, as discussed in the previous chapter.

⁴⁰¹ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 65.

Social media is a highly addictive product where the psychological effects are long-lasting. Due to the lawlessness of un-monitored, unregulated, and un-controlled platforms, social media will only become more prevalent and influence real-life events. With this sentiment in mind, we must take counterterrorism efforts seriously if we want to see an end to the mass shootings epidemic in the United States. Social media and violence are complicated topics with many layers and moving parts, but the first step is to take the alt-right seriously, despite their “humorous” delivery style. Solutions for addressing the alternative right are still in their infancy stage, but the next section will describe different approaches taken. Counterterrorism tactics include government and private collaboration, supporting victims through legislation and law enforcement, and protecting free speech, free press, and the truth by fighting disinformation and misinformation.

8.1 Counterterrorism

While online harassment is a new problem, some ways to fight back have come from expected and unexpected sources. The United States government and the private sector are the two primary expected avenues. Despite the complicated discussion on free speech and company liability, the U.S. government maintains responsibility for domestic terror groups operating within the United States. Following public outcry, private companies started taking more responsibility for the active users on their platforms. Former victims have been at the forefront of the alt-right counterterrorism movement, advocating for victims, speaking against the alt-right, and creating support systems for other victims. They are the unexpected defense against doxing and support for victims lacking from the official response.

8.1.1 United States Government

The rhetoric around the shooters has been inconsistent or faulty for all the media attention public mass shooters receive. The counterterrorism implications for alt-right shooters, or shooters motivated by alt-right ideas, are lagged. The terrorism label is often reserved for Islamist groups like the Islamic State or Al Qaeda but falls short of white supremacists and racial violence.⁴⁰² Daniel Byman analyzes law enforcement and media's use of terrorism, with the conclusion that "the terrorism label is often overused for everything Muslim-related," while "white power terrorists are more likely to be labeled 'mentally ill.'"⁴⁰³ Organizations, including the Southern Poverty Law Center and Anti-Defamation League, and scholars, including Byman and James A. Piazza, have described alt-right shooters as terrorists and their attacks as terrorism.⁴⁰⁴ Public discourse around the alt-right has not caught up with these organizations and scholars, and until they do, they will not be taken seriously as a threat.

Without a government push, the companies' profit motive will keep them from taking dramatic steps.⁴⁰⁵ The government must set standards for private companies to adhere to. Private companies fear criticism from banning and deplatforming certain groups, but if the government set a standard they were required to follow, it would protect them from criticism and spur them to action. A model already exists with jihadist terrorist organizations. However, unlike the government response to Muslim jihadists, the United States does not designate white supremacist groups as terrorist groups for fear the list would be part of a political agenda.⁴⁰⁶ The U.S. government would classify violent white supremacist groups as terrorist groups, but the First

⁴⁰² Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 3.

⁴⁰³ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 3.

⁴⁰⁴ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 10.

⁴⁰⁵ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 121.

⁴⁰⁶ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 114.

Amendment prohibits political speech and assembly restrictions.⁴⁰⁷ Treating white supremacist and alt-right groups with the same seriousness as groups like the Islamic State would provide tech companies the incentives they need to block users, crack down on hate speech, and protect targets of coordinated social media hate campaigns.

The alt-right's rise in popularity on the internet has led to a counterterrorism mindset shift where private company policies play a more significant role than government action.

Additionally, no country can tackle the situation alone because of the global nature of current white supremacist organizations. The jurisdictional issues put more responsibility on social media companies to address issues, including propaganda and recruitment.⁴⁰⁸

8.1.2 Private Sector

The private sector's response to its role in spreading hate is complicated, and scholars like Daniel Byman have written extensively on it. However, private social media companies are hesitant to respond and take responsibility for the white supremacists who use their platforms to spread hate. The Unite the Right rally altered the climate around the alt-right, leading private companies to act, but progress is stagnant. Alternatively, anti-hate organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center have stepped up their efforts to combat the alternative right.

As the private sector's role is complicated, there are both the good and bad to analyze. While the U.S. government is hesitant to assign a terrorism label to white supremacist organizations, private entities can, to an extent. Following the Christchurch massacre in New Zealand, Facebook blocked 1.2 million copies of the live stream video Brent Tarrant filmed

⁴⁰⁷ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 113.

⁴⁰⁸ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 121-122.

during the massacre and removed another three hundred thousand.⁴⁰⁹ Part of Facebook’s success can be attributed to designating the shooting of a terrorist attack, so praising or supporting it was banned from Facebook, just as it is not permitted to praise or support an ISIS beheading video.⁴¹⁰ Additionally, the Unite the Right rally demonstrated the power of the alt-right and their willingness to mobilize in person after organizing online.⁴¹¹ After the rally, leading companies like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube altered their policies, cracked down on what language was acceptable, and banned language and videos that endorsed neo-Nazism and white supremacy.⁴¹² The Christchurch shooting confirmed that social media sites, like Facebook and Twitter, can stop or minimize coordinated attacks but is less motivated to do so without external pressure from the public.

The Unite the Right rally forced companies to change their policies or start enforcing the anti-hate portions of their terms of service. Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr are a few social media sites to “deplatform”—the simple step of kicking groups and individuals off social media—white supremacists. Furthermore, while right-leaning sites like Gab and 4chan will not regulate their users’ rhetoric, restricting access to mainstream platforms reduces the scope and scale of white supremacists’ audience, making it more challenging to troll their victims.⁴¹³ Other private entities have pulled their services or denied white supremacist groups access to their services. Payment processors like PayPal and Venmo have closed accounts or suspended transfers into white supremacists’ accounts. Deplatforming became a broader practice after the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Social media administrators deplatformed

⁴⁰⁹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 94.

⁴¹⁰ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 96.

⁴¹¹ Over five hundred white supremacists from formal and informal organizations attended the rally in Charlottesville.

⁴¹² Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 109.

⁴¹³ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 110-111.

many white supremacists, antigovernment, and conspiracy theorists off various platforms.⁴¹⁴

Deplatforming does not change extremist opinions or keep them off the internet but instead forces them into seedier websites where all rhetoric is welcome; websites like 4chan.

Part of the slow response is that limiting certain groups or banning speech angers a portion of the population, which is against their business model of making money. Social media's recommendation algorithm ensures viewers stay entertained with click-worthy content so they can sell advertisements. As Byman explains, "because many of the proposals to hinder white supremacist content involve decreasing the amount of salacious and provocative content, companies fear they will drive customers away and hurt their bottom lines."⁴¹⁵ The companies need government guidance to push them towards responsibility and proactive solutions. While private entities and social media companies respond to public outcry, they are slow to provide solutions and only do so in a post-conflict scenario. Authorities must take proactive steps to stop the spread of hate.

On the flip side, a few private, anti-hate organizations have a successful history of fighting white supremacy and actively supporting victims. Sothern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) frequently reports on alt-right happenings, including influential actors, violence against minorities, and alt-right terrorist attacks. SPLC is taking the initiative to hold alt-right members accountable for their actions. A female blogger and alt-right trolling victim, Zoë Quinn, has become a spokesperson against online harassment and the level of unaccountability men on social media are allowed to get away with. She has spoken to law enforcement, politicians, and policy makers, encouraging them to take the alt-right and online harassment seriously. In

⁴¹⁴ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 111.

⁴¹⁵ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 113-114.

response to people claiming that responding to the trolls only encourages them and makes the situation worse, she replies, “The thing that really gets me is this notion that any response emboldens them. No, what emboldens them is showing that there are no consequences for behaving like fucking little monsters.”⁴¹⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center is one organization that seeks to hold members accountable through historically successful lawsuit practices. The SPLC approached Tanya Gersh in April 2017 about suing Andrew Anglin. Gersh jumped at the opportunity to strike back against a leading perpetrator of her and her family’s pain.⁴¹⁷

Southern Poverty Law Center has a long history of crippling white supremacist organizations through lawsuits. White supremacist groups in the 1980s and 90s were constantly recruiting and fundraising. As the law shifted against them, they allocated much of their funds to defense attorneys and lawsuits when police arrested low-level members after they committed non-authorized violence against minorities.⁴¹⁸ With the change in societal norms came a change in legal avenues, a change that upheld the law for all citizens, African Americans included. Cases against the Black communities were taken up by federal courts and Department of Justice lawyers instead of local law enforcement and lawyers, as they may be subject to political pressure or have ties to extremists. Southern Poverty Law Center emerged as a formidable force against white supremacist groups. A successful tactic SPLC employed was “agency theory,” which argued vicarious liability—the Ku Klux Klan and groups like it should be held liable for crimes its members commit in its name.⁴¹⁹ Part of their genius was going after white supremacist groups in civil courts, where the standard of guilt is lower than in a criminal court, and a unanimous jury is unnecessary. These tactics ensured a higher level of success, often resulting in

⁴¹⁶ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 117.

⁴¹⁷ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 119-120.

⁴¹⁸ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 33-37.

⁴¹⁹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 36.

million-dollar verdicts. As Byman points out, “a legal campaign against white supremacist groups hurt their finances and ensured that leaders and foot soldiers suffered for their crimes.”⁴²⁰ As a result of changing social norms and increased legal pressure, white supremacist groups' recruitment numbers steadily declined. Ideologically, groups like the Klan interpreted the change in laws and government support as betrayal, resulting in the government becoming an enemy.⁴²¹

Unfortunately, SPLC's methods are less effective while battling the alt-right because of how social media works. In response to the SPLC lawsuit, Anglin capitalized on the situation, using the lawsuit as proof that the SPLC is anti-American and will attack anyone who speaks out against Jewish people. The Daily Stormer—the website Anglin operates—released a statement presenting his case and pleading for cash. The post said, “Anglin’s being sued by the SPLC for lawful, First Amendment-protected criticism of Jewry. The site needs a huge chunk of cash to keep going. Right now.”⁴²² An online fundraising tool set a \$150,000 minimum, which they reached by early June. Richard Cohen, the president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, sought to seriously harm Andrew Anglin and the Daily Stormer with Gersh’s trial. He stated that the goal is “simply to put Anglin out of business by winning as large a judgment as possible and then pursue it for the twenty years that the statute allows.”⁴²³ Cohen’s goal proved to be a less effective method due to the alt-right’s widespread support. Financially crippling alt-right members and organizations is not an efficient strategy when a single post can inspire thousands of followers to offset the financial burden.

⁴²⁰ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 37.

⁴²¹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 37.

⁴²² Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 120.

⁴²³ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 120.

In conclusion, private social media companies' reaction to white supremacists has been complex and varied. Following Brent Tarrant's live feed of his attack, Facebook deactivated accounts and removed thousands of uploads. In reaction to public outcry following the Unite the Right rally, social media organizations deplatformed white supremacists. Social media companies do not treat white supremacist groups like jihadists and often delay their response to a problem until after it has manifested into real-world violence. Their slow reaction demonstrates how they choose which hate groups they will enforce the anti-hate aspects of their terms of service with. Anti-hate organizations, including the Southern Poverty Law Center, have become a primary force fighting the alt-right by supporting their victims and suing leaders for the actual harm they inflict. While the SPLC brings lawsuits against the alt-right, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) monitors hate speech and hate groups, keeping the public informed through journal articles and regular reports. The ADL released a document titled "From Alt Right to Alt Lite: Naming the Hate," where they provided an overview of the alt-right and alt-lite, then proceeded to identify and describe prominent members of each.⁴²⁴ Public awareness is a crucial aspect of fighting the alt-right. If doxing remains a primary tool used by the alt-right to harass members of society, then they shall not have the luxury of living in the shadows.

8.1.3 Former Victims

Zoë Quinn and her business partner, Alex Lifschitz, founded Crash Override in 2015, a support service for victims, social workers, lawyers, and security experts dealing with Internet abuse.⁴²⁵ Crash Override offers practical tools to strike back against cyber thugs. The tools include software tools to protect victims, advice on protecting personal records from doxing, and

⁴²⁴ "From alt-right to alt-lite: naming the hate," *Anti-Defamation League*, July 12, 2017, adl.org/resources/backgrounders/alt-right-alt-lite-naming-hate.

⁴²⁵ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 130-132.

legal referrals.⁴²⁶ Her helpline directs callers to personalized help depending on what stage of abuse they are experiencing. They will walk callers through the steps to remove personal information from the internet, protect remaining information, and refer them to people in law enforcement that Quinn and Lifschitz have built relationships with who understand the seriousness and danger of online assailants.⁴²⁷ They even provide a talking sample of what to say to the police if they suspect swatting. Swatting is the “potentially deadly practice of phoning in false 911 calls claiming that dire activities are occurring at a given address – active shooter, weapons spotted, and so on – often triggering the dispatching of a SWAT team to the target’s house.”⁴²⁸

The defining factor of Crash Override is that the victim guides the response; they determine what course of action to take. Quinn is clear that online and offline abuse is about controlling another person. Her organization gives the control back to the victim by providing information and support while leaving the ultimate decision-making up to them. Quinn eventually had to shut down the phone hotline, but the email hotline remained open. At the time Jonathan Weisman’s book, *(((Semitism)))*, was published, Quinn was trying to transition her non-profit into a private company. Her goal is not to make money but take advantage of the secrecy protections private companies enjoy. Additionally, her goal is to monetize the effort and hire professionals to provide support to more people.⁴²⁹

Quinn’s reaction to the alt-right online harassment campaign against her is not a guide on how to deal with the alt-right. Victims respond to harassment in different ways, some by trolling

⁴²⁶ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 130.

⁴²⁷ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 130.

⁴²⁸ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 130. Swatting has resulted in SWAT and ATF fatally shooting victim’s dogs.

⁴²⁹ Weisman, *(((Semitism)))*, 131.

the trolls, others by keeping silent and hoping it will go away. No response is right or wrong, but what the victims need to regain control of their lives. Crash Override is one avenue of assistance that an alt-right survivor has created to help others in the same position. Until the United States government takes a strong stance against white supremacists and private organizations stop helping the alternative right spread hate, people like Quinn and Lifschitz will continue fighting the alt-right. Law enforcement and policymakers are vastly unprepared to deal with online threats. While the Southern Poverty Law Center is doing what it can to fight the alt-right, it lacks the technical skills to prevent doxing.

8.2 Free Speech in the United States

Jonathan Weisman concludes his book with advice for his readers on what to do in the era of Trump. He advises the audience to defend freedom of speech and support organizations that do the same, including the Southern Poverty Law Center and Anti-Defamation League. As a journalist, Weisman has a unique relationship with free speech and the protected free press, both under attack and discredited during Donald Trump's presidential campaign and term in office. America's relationship with free speech is complicated and deserves more time than I can provide here, but I will provide a short analysis.

The constitutional protection of free speech contributes to the governmental and private sluggish response to the alt-right. Not only does the United States not designate domestic terrorist organizations, but some companies are adamant about not restricting any speech, regardless of its hatefulness or the violence it incites. Many alt-right platforms like the Daily Stormer, Stormfront, 4chan, 8kun, and others market themselves as pro-free speech and declare that mainstream media and platforms are anti-free speech. Gab, a popular alt-right social media

site, declared his goal as seeking “to make speech free again and say FUCK YOU Silicon Valley elitist trash.”⁴³⁰ Gab had attracted half a million users by 2018, including Robert Bowers. Bowers frequently posted white genocide, anti-Semitic, and migrant caravan conspiracy theories and memes.

Some governments, including New Zealand and Germany, have taken initiatives against hate speech. New Zealand made it illegal to possess a copy of Brent Tarrant’s manifesto, and Germany has arrested individuals who post hateful content online.⁴³¹ While those steps are options for Europeans, they would violate the First Amendment right to free speech. The First Amendment provides broad protection on all platforms, including all forms of hate speech. The only restriction is when that speech is likely to incite imminent lawless action.⁴³² Companies exist as private entities, which have two applications. First, they can deplatform anyone who violates their service terms, although they have historically chosen not to kick off users. Second, laws that list social media companies as distributors, not content publishers. Therefore, they are not legally liable for anything said on their platform.⁴³³ With legal and First Amendment protections, social media companies do not have to limit their users or speech types, although public pressure can be a powerful motivator.

International entities have created legal frameworks for hate speech to address cyberterrorism. Chetty and Alathur define cyberterrorism as “a special type of terrorism with an intention to harm physically or create terror in the minds of the victim by means of electronic

⁴³⁰ Maura Conway, Ryan Scivens, and Logan Macnair, “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* (October 2019), 9, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Right-Wing-Extremists-Persistent-Online-Presence.pdf> quoted in Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 117.

⁴³¹ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 119.

⁴³² Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 119.

⁴³³ Byman, *Spreading Hate*, 119.

and internet tools.”⁴³⁴ They identify hate-speech restrictions in many European and worldwide legal systems, some of which respect the rights of all, while others focus on national security issues. Despite the various legal frameworks that limit hate speech, the constitution protects free speech in the United States. Any attempts to limit or restrict free speech are met with outrage. The alt-right are self-proclaimed defenders of America and the freedom of speech they claim liberals are trying to prohibit. The alt-right has consciously used freedom of speech to oppose political correctness. The alternative right has weaponized the rhetoric of “free speech,” as they present their struggle against an oppressive elite as a struggle for freedom. It is an effective strategy because it simultaneously exploits distrust in society’s elites while mobilizing around an idea that has positive connotations.⁴³⁵

8.3 Wrap-Up

Chapter one introduced the research paper and set the tone for the upcoming chapters. It started with an overview of the two case studies I investigated—Elliot Rodger’s murderous rampage and Robert Bowers’ attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue. Next, I briefly introduced the alternative right, 4chan, and how the alt-right appeared in the public spotlight through so-called “Gamergate” and Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and victory. Next, I presented my thesis statement, paper organization, and limitations.

In chapter two, I outlined the methodology I used in this research endeavor. After introducing the chapter, I clarified essential terms and how I used them. Next, I laid out the research impact and the value I have added to the field. The following two sections focus on the

⁴³⁴ Naganna Chetty and Sreejith Alathur, “Hate Speech Review in the Context of Online Social Networks,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 40 (2018), 116.

⁴³⁵ Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (London and New York: Routledge: 2020), 56.

hypothesis and the research question I answered, which I demonstrate in the research statement. The following three sections displayed the dependent variable, unit of analysis, and independent variable. Succeeding these sections is an introduction to my methods, primarily discourse analysis and digital rhetoric. A commentary on case selection and comparability, including a short literature review, precedes the final section on research challenges. In the next chapter, I will explore the existing literature to present the shoulders my research stands on.

In chapter three, I discussed the main themes covered in the literature on the alt-right, specifically regarding the relationship between violence and social media. The first section I explored examined ingroup community dynamics as a precursor to domestic terrorism. Disinformation, polarization, and inside jokes all play essential roles in distinguishing ingroup from outgroup members and act as recruitment and radicalization tactics. Next, I examined the fame-infamy dichotomy in the context of alt-right shooter motivations, giving special attention to media-encouraged copycats and shooters who bring awareness to their ideological cause through mass killing. Thirdly, I explored the lawlessness of the internet and the slow official response in the context of trolling. In this section, I paid particular attention to “technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment” (TFSV) and how women turn to do-it-yourself vigilantism in response to an official inability and unwillingness to act. Finally, I delved into Robert Gurr’s theory of relative deprivation, as entitlement remains a rampant subconscious motive within the alt-right. I put Gurr’s theory of relative deprivation in conversation with Vamik Volkan’s theory of chosen trauma and Karina Korostelina’s “4C Model” and theories of group identity to establish how ingroup community dynamics interact with feelings of relative deprivation. In the next chapter, I will outline the research design, explaining the information retrieval process, datasets, and results.

In chapter four, I explored literature on the alt-right's recruitment cycle. I focused on the first two steps of the cyclical and reinforcing relationship between social media and violence, focusing on steps one and two. The recruitment, radicalization, and push to violence, or step one, is a significant part of the alternative right's online action. Step one leads to step two, where the recruit commits an act of violence. I differentiate between real-world violence—mass shootings, attacks against minority groups, and terrorist attacks—and virtual violence—trolling and Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Harassment.

In chapter five, I provided an overview of 4chan and the parts that make it unique, including anonymity and ephemerality. Next, I described why we crawled data from 4plebs instead of 4chan's servers. Following this step, I described in-depth the 4plebs data collection process, starting with the programming language we used, then how we gathered the frequency of words in a readable document. Lastly, I presented limitations we encountered throughout the data collection and analysis process. In the next chapter, I will present the results gathered from chapter four.

In chapter six, I presented the results from the four datasets we crawled from 4plebs, which archives 4chan's posts. After reminding the reader of the three hypotheses I predicted in chapter two, I moved on to an explanation of the statistically valid words I chose to analyze. Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2 compare the frequency of words before and after the terrorist attack. Figure 6.3 demonstrates the maximum number of posts on 4chan for the project's relevant dates. Following the description of each graph, I analyze the graphs, provide an analysis of the results, and tie the results to the thesis statement. In the next chapter, I will discuss each aspect of the cyclical relationship, starting with the first half, which includes recruitment, radicalization, and the push to violence. Next, I will explore the second half of the cycle, specifically the

perpetrator's fame after their attack and how online inflammatory rhetoric restarts the violence cycle.

Chapter seven discussed the relevance of the results presented in chapter six. Comparing word frequency is significant due to the influence 4chan has on mainstream social media platforms. 4chan users intentionally spread alt-right disinformation to Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit through memes and gifs. Constant exposure to alt-right white supremacist ideas normalizes hate speech and leads to acceptance of those ideas. Exposure and acceptance shift the Overton window of what is an acceptable political view to hold. Additionally, 4chan's influence provides more opportunities to recruit, radicalize, and redpill social media users. Glorification of alt-right terrorists emboldens copycats, leading copycats to commit violence and restart the social media-violence cycle.

8.4 Further Research

As I conclude this project, I look ahead to how I can expand on this research for future ventures. First, if time allows, I will do a big data project and crawl all 698,496 posts from 4chan surrounding Elliot Rogers and Robert Bowers's attacks. I would conduct a more comprehensive frequency analysis of statistically valid words with those posts. Alongside frequency, I would include a contextually relevant analysis to determine if the combination of words has significance, then draw conclusions on what that significance means in a broader context. Additionally, I would include more alt-right terrorist events to expand the scope of research and determine trends. To conduct a more extended, all-encompassing project, I would live-crawl the data from 4chan's Politically Incorrect board instead of relying on an archive site like 4plebs.

Appendix A: Definitions

Accelerationism – trying to worsen societal polarization, with the goal of hastening an inevitable race war that will allow whites, once again, to rule the land.⁴³⁶

Anon – short for “anonymous user.”⁴³⁷

Crawl(ing)(ed) – technical term for retrieving data through coding; use interchangeably with scrape(ing)(ed)

Cuckservatives – conservative ‘race traitors’ who have surrendered their masculinity

Cyberterrorism – a special type of terrorism with an intention to harm physically or create terror in the minds of the victim by means of electronic and internet tools⁴³⁸

Digilante tactics – ‘calling out’ and/or attempting to ‘name and shame’ antagonists⁴³⁹

Disinformation – the intentional spread of false information⁴⁴⁰

Domestic terrorism – politically motivated acts of deliberate and premeditated violence perpetrated within one country by nonstate actors against co-national targets aimed at influencing a wider audience.⁴⁴¹

Doxing – Exposing someone’s personal details in a public setting to enable their mass harassment

E-bile – cyber-harassment such as rape threats and sexualized vitriol.⁴⁴²

Identitarian - one who works to influence political and socio-economic activity to protect and preserve racial, ethnic, and cultural identity⁴⁴³

Incel – short for involuntary celibate

Manosphere – a web of online blogs and forums which reject mainstream conceptions of gender inequality.⁴⁴⁴

⁴³⁶ Daniel Byman, *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 2.

⁴³⁷ I will refer to 4chan users as anons throughout the paper.

⁴³⁸ Naganna Chetty and Sreejith Alathur, “Hate Speech Review in the Context of Online Social Networks,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 40 (2018), 116.

⁴³⁹ Emma A. Jane, “Online misogyny and feminist digilantism,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* (2016), 2.

⁴⁴⁰ Lisa Schirch, “Digital Information, Conflict, and Democracy” in *Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy* (New York: Routledge Press, 2021), 27.

⁴⁴¹ James A. Piazza, “Fake news: the effects of social media disinformation on domestic terrorism,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 15 no. 1 (2022), 56.

⁴⁴² Emma A. Jane, “Online misogyny and Feminist Digilantism,” 2.

⁴⁴³ Jossur Surtson, “Identitarianism and the great replacement,” *AltRight.com*, May 12, 2017, <https://altright.com/2017/05/12/identitarianism-and-the-great-replacement/> in Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (London and New York: Routledge: 2020), 65.

⁴⁴⁴ “Elliot Rodger: how misogynist killer became ‘incel hero,’” *BBC News*, April 26, 2018, bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43892189.

Memes – user-generated media that share recognizable characteristics in content or form through which their creators seek to guide viewers’ interactions and interpretations⁴⁴⁵

Normie – a pejorative term referring to “someone who is not a member of a given subculture: someone who uses popular social media holds mainstream opinions, and is thus considered “sheeple” (docile, sheep-like people)⁴⁴⁶

Redpill – alt-right slang term for getting a normie to “wake up” to the realities of the world, a world where the elite’s goal is to keep white men down

RINOs – Republicans in Name Only – conservatives who are not sufficiently committed to defending the white ‘race’

Scrape(ing)(ed) – technical term for retrieving data through coding; use interchangeably with crawl(ing)(ed)

Shitposting – derailing an online conversation through irrelevant or offensive posting⁴⁴⁷

Terrorism – politically motivated acts of deliberate and premeditated violence perpetrated within one country by non-state actors against co-national targets aimed at influencing a wider audience⁴⁴⁸

Trolling – deliberate provocation that amounts to victim blaming when individuals express the very anger, frustration, or hurt the troll sought, or, in the case of some alt-right trolling, when mainstream media report on their memes⁴⁴⁹

White privilege – inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice.⁴⁵⁰

White sharia – “misogynistic anti-feminist vision of extreme patriarchy, where women are subjugated to the extent they’re nothing more than white baby factories, preferably in headscarves.”⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁵ Viveca S. Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies,” *Studies in American Humor* 5 vol. 1 (2019), 38.

⁴⁴⁶ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 36.

⁴⁴⁷ Hermansson, Lawrence, Mulhall, and Mudroch, *The International Alt-Right*, 108.

⁴⁴⁸ James A. Piazza, “Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 15 no. 1 (2022), 56.

⁴⁴⁹ Greene, “‘Deplorable’ Satire,” 48.

⁴⁵⁰ Oxford Dictionary definition of “white privilege.”

⁴⁵¹ Brandon Joel Kelley, “‘White sharia’ and militant white nationalism,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, November 27, 2017, splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/11/27/white-sharia-and-militant-white-nationalism.

Appendix B: Dataset Frequency Results

May 20-22, 2014

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May 24-26, 2017

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October 24-26, 2018

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October 28-30, 2018

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