The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics (ISSN 1556-2034) is published biannually by the Sigma Upsilon Chapter of Pi Sigma Alpha, Elon University, Department of Political Science, 100 Campus Drive, Gray Pavilion, 2333 Campus Box, Elon, NC 27244. The Journal is funded by Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honor Society, 1527 New Hampshire Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20036, http://www.pisigmaalpha.org/

The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics was founded in the Spring of 2001 by the Delta Omega Chapter of Pi Sigma Alpha at Purdue University, under the name The American Undergraduate Journal of Politics and Government. With the sponsorship of Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honor Society, the name of the publication was changed to The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics as of the Fall 2004 edition.

Electronic editions of the Journal are available online at http://www.psajournal.org. For further information, please contact Dr. Baris Kesgin at Elon University (bkesgin@elon.edu).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the editors and faculty advisors of The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics.

The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics and its content are copyrighted by Pi Sigma Alpha. While holding these rights, Pi Sigma Alpha exerts editorial or other control over neither the content of the Journal nor the decisions and actions of its staff in the course of normal business operations. As such, Pi Sigma Alpha neither asserts nor accepts responsibility for the content and actions of staff of the publication in the normal course of business as the customs and usages of the law allow.

All assertions of fact and statements of opinion are solely those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honor Society, the Editorial Board, the Advisory Board, the Faculty Advisors, Elon University, or its faculty and administration.

COPYRIGHT © 2022 PI SIGMA ALPHA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
The Pi Sigma Alpha
Undergraduate Journal of Politics

Spring 2022
Volume XXII Number 1
Forty-Fourth Edition

Tasia Theoharis
Christy Dickman
Lily Blake
Ashley Vann
Dr. Baris Kesgin
Dr. Aaron Sparks

Senior Content Editor
Senior Content Editor
Junior Content Editor
Junior Content Editor
Advisor and Editor
Co-Advisor and Co-Editor

Editorial Board
Megan Allen
Emma Bach
Lauren Butler
Holly Cardoza
Alicia Clanton
Nina Dascoli
Anna Gillespie
Lily Harkes
Maggie Harsh
Whitney James
Andrew Lymm
Katherine McCormick
William McCoy
Oliver McGowan
A. Austin Moore
Max Mrus
Solan O’Malley
Mary Thibodeau
Charlotte Woodham

Faculty Advisory Board
Dr. Victor Asal
Dr. Damion Blake
Dr. Adriana Boersner
Dr. Dillan Bono-Lunn
Dr. Jessica Carew
Dr. Youssef Chouhoud
Dr. May Darwich
Dr. J. Jarpa Dawuni
Dr. Ransford Edwards
Dr. Emily Farris
Dr. Ken Fernandez
Dr. Cymone Fourshey
Dr. Hakeem Jefferson
Dr. Andrea Lopez
Dr. Sibel Oktay
Dr. Raul Pachego-Vega
Dr. Christine Pappas
Dr. Elisha Savchak-Trogdon
Dr. Joel Shelton
Dr. Brent Steele
Dr. Heather Sullivan
Dr. Liza Taylor
Dr. Robert Pepperman Taylor
Dr. Cameron Thies
Dr. Kelebogile Zvobgo
Editor’s Preface to the Spring Edition

Here at Elon University, we are extremely grateful to host *The Pi Sigma Alpha Undergraduate Journal of Politics*. We are proud to present the Spring 2022 issue and congratulate all authors published in this issue for their high achievement.

This publication seeks to highlight the intellectual curiosity that leads to innovative scholarship in all subfields of political science, scholarship that addresses timely questions, is carefully crafted, and utilizes diverse methodologies. We are committed to intellectual integrity, a fair and objective review process, and a high standard of scholarship as we showcase the work of undergraduate scholars, some of whom pursue questions that have been traditionally ignored in scholarship but that drive our discipline forward.

Following the lead of the American Political Science Review (APSR) Editorial Board, we are excited to publish research in the areas of “American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, public law and policy, racial and ethnic politics, the politics of gender and sexuality and qualitative and quantitative research methods.” This publication also values the relationships formed through student-faculty collaboration and aims to build a culture of scholarship that expands beyond the college campus. We hope to encourage and empower students to seek out knowledge and pursue their potential, contributing to scholarship in a variety of disciplines.

This year, we thank our advisors Dr. Baris Kesgin and Dr. Aaron Sparks for their support, without which the issue would not have been possible. We would also like to thank the entirety of the Political Science and Policy Studies Department at Elon University, especially Dr. Laura Roselle; our Faculty Advisory Board; and all the students who shared their exceptional work with us this semester.

We are excited to present the Spring 2022 edition of the *Journal*. Thank you for your continued support and readership of our publication; we hope you enjoy the edition.

Sincerely,

*The Editorial Board at Elon University*
Submission of Manuscripts

The *Journal* accepts manuscripts from undergraduates of any class and major. Members of Pi Sigma Alpha are especially encouraged to submit their work. We strive to publish papers of the highest quality in all areas of political science.

Generally, selected manuscripts have been well-written works with a fully developed thesis and strong argumentation stemming from original analysis. Authors may be asked to revise their work before being accepted for publication.

Submission deadlines are September 15th for the Fall edition and February 15th for the Spring edition. Manuscripts are accepted on a rolling basis; therefore, early submissions are strongly encouraged.

Students may submit their work through Elon University’s submission portal, found here: https://www.elon.edu/u/academics/arts-and-sciences/political-science/psa-journal/

Alternatively, students may email psajournalelon@gmail.com with an attached Word document of the manuscript. In the body of the email, students are asked to include their name and university, the title of the manuscript, and the closest subfield of political science to which their manuscript pertains (American politics, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, or policy studies). Due to the time committed to the manuscript review process, we ask students to submit only one manuscript per submission cycle.

Submitted manuscripts must include a short abstract (approximately 150 words) and citations/references that follow the *APSA Style Manual for Political Science*. Please do not exceed the maximum page length of 35 double-spaced pages, which includes references, tables, figures, and appendices.

The *Journal* is a student-run enterprise with editors and an Editorial Board that are undergraduate students and Pi Sigma Alpha members at Elon University. The Editorial Board relies heavily on the help of our Faculty Advisory Board, which consists of political science faculty from across the nation, including members of the Pi Sigma Alpha Executive Council.

Please direct any questions about submissions or the Journal’s upcoming editions to the editors at Elon University: psajournalelon@gmail.com.
Contents

Redpilling Normies: Alt-Right Identity on “Chan” Imageboards.............................................................. 7

Jack Corp, Drury University
Redpilling Normies: Alt-Right Identity on “Chan” Imageboards

Jack Corp, Drury University

Online forums such as 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun are infamous for a self-consciously offense culture characterized by racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and misogynist posts, couch the spread of this extremist messaging in “satirical” language and media. But to what extent are these “chan” imageboards similar in the construction and signaling of radicalized identity in the alt-right movement? This paper employs discursive analysis to underline the metapolitical mechanisms turning beneath digital identities across the imageboards 4chan/pol/, 8kun/pnd/, and an artifact of 8chan, “The Great Manifesto.” On “chan” imageboards, memes function as a collective project against a common opponent, and work to reinforce the bond of the community and to mark in-group members. Discursive analysis unveils floating signifiers littered around the memetic styles of the alt-right; these signals functioning as a force of collectivization through the delineation of an “other.” Within these spaces is an interplay between personal creative freedom and a larger, subcultural practice that positions “anons” as co-producers of burgeoning extremist ideology at the fringes of the internet.

INTRODUCTION

Redpilling Normies: The Alt-Right in Digital Spaces

On March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant shot dead 42 people in Christchurch, New Zealand. Before the attack, a targeted assault on Muslims, Tarrant posted a 16,000-word manifesto, formatted in a Q&A style, onto the anonymous messaging board 8chan. In the document, entitled “The Great Replacement,” the self-described ethno-nationalist and eco-fascist, fighting to preserve white Western culture against “degenerate” immigrants, reveals the source of his beliefs: “the internet, of course. You will not find the truth anywhere else” (Anonymous 2019, 23). Tarrant is not a lone-wolf. In 2020 the Anti-Defamation League recorded 16 right-wing extremist-related plots/attacks in 2020, an increase from the 13 documented incidents in 2019, and marked more than 4,500 incidents of white supremacist propaganda distribution compared to only 2,724 in the previous year (Murder and Extremism in the United States in 2020 2021). Online forums such as 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun are infamous for a self-consciously offense culture characterized by racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, and misogynist posts, couch the spread of this extremist messaging in “satirical” language and media. But to what extent are these “chan” imageboards similar in the construction and signaling of radicalized identity in the alt-right movement? This paper employs discursive analysis to underline the metapolitical mechanisms turning beneath digital identities across the imageboards 4chan/pol/, 8kun/pnd/, and an artifact of 8chan, “The Great Manifesto.”

After a brief content advisory detailing the use of hate speech, the first section begins with an exploration of three schools of thought: Identity as Discursive Capital, Identity as Cultural Borders, and Identity as Frequency. Through quantitative or qualitative analyses, each school, despite differing methods and explanatory frameworks, tracks the construction of an alt-right identity in digital spaces. My research then constructs a theoretical framework that situates alt-right identity within the concept of metapolitics devised in Critical Theory. For users of the “chan” imageboards, the task of metapolitics is to weaken the culture that sustains the liberal democratic socio-economic and political order, on both the domestic and international stage. It is an active form of political thinking that reconfigures the boundaries, relationships, and identities that constitute established public culture. My research concludes with three cases, connected by a shared link to “The Great Replacement,” across 4chan/pol/, 8kun/pnd/, and 8chan. An examination of the most widely used and accessible “chan” imageboards stresses how the alt-right signal in-group identity.

On the Use of Hate Speech: A Content Warning

Much of the content this paper reproduces from 4chan, 8kun, and 8chan is extremely offensive. Language and visuals across the two sites often invoke dehumanizing stereotypes, employ hateful symbols, or promote violence towards specific groups of persons. This paper considers it necessary to present the actual language as used by members of these forums. It is done for three reasons. First, an examination of the discursive tactics wielded by the alt-right concerns the analysis of
language as used, with the purpose of providing nuance to case study analyses. Second, language, as used, is an inextricable component of the metapolitical theoretical framework used by both the alt-right and this paper, illustrating the normalization of hate speech and the distortion of political subjectivity. Finally, it is as 8kun boasts, “Speak freely – legally” (8kun.top). This motto encapsulates 4chan and 8kun’s fundamentalist belief in the freedom of speech. Without analyzing the language used, my research would produce only an obscured understanding of what “free expression” means to these communities.

**Constructing an Alt-Right Identity: Three Approaches**

Three schools of thought present different conceptualizations of radicalized right-wing identity in digital spaces: Identity as Discursive Capital, Identity as Cultural Borders, and Identity as Frequency. From the 1960s and 70s, the birthplace of the alternative-right (alt-right), emerges the conceptual foundation of the Discursive Capital School. Discursive capital, as an explanatory model, situates Michel Foucault’s “community of discourse” as the mechanism of identity formation. Memes and humorous or ironic speech become a form of cultural capital, discursive weapons: a form of speech that organizes, redirects, and checks group members through the imagined figures of “Social Justice Warrior” or “Cultural Marxist” (Finlayson 2021; Ganesh 2020; Greene 2019; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Salazar 2018). The Cultural Borders School challenges the digital and physical divide by understanding alt-right language and imagery as claim-making exercises over virtual spaces—a demarcation of an imagined community, complete with its own culturally intelligible lexicon of objects, norms, and beliefs (Davey and Ebner 2019; Hodge and Hallgrimsdottr 2019; Valentini et al. 2020). Identity as Frequency largely abandons qualitative discourse analysis for elaborate statistical modeling. Identity formation, for this school, relies on repetition and overlap—the frequency of hate speech across several websites illustrates the fragmentation of distinct yet overlapping far-right sub-cultures (Baele et al. 2021; Hine et al. 2017; Papasavva et al. 2020).

At the heart of the Discursive Capital School (DCS) is the Foucauldian notion that external procedures of prohibition, will to truth, and power mark the alt-right as a community of discourse. Phillipse-Joseph Salazar’s study, “The Alt-Right as a Community of Discourse,” is the most ideologically pure of the DCS, urging researchers “to go back to the basics of the philosophical comprehension of discourse,” that is to Michel Foucault,” and extract these procedures to understand the alt-right (Salazar 2017, 3). Salazar draws on these three mechanisms to explain the alt-right’s prominence in the public sphere: the movement’s tactical agility to maintain ambiguous, coded styles alongside grass-roots activism dances around any attempts by the media to understand the phenomenon (Salazar 2018). First is prohibition. Communities of discourse, in this sense, are the actualizations of procedures made to control, redirect, check, and organize speech. Finlayson, drawing on digital media studies and rhetoric, explores how “online radical conservatives” form “ideological families” around concepts of natural inequality, and express hostility to those who deny them (Finlayson 2021, 167). Prohibition becomes the means to create a “new class” – an Other that works in the shadows, exercising cultural power to undermine the “natural order” of gender and race, imagined through the figures of the “Social Justice Warrior” and the “Cultural Marxist” (Finlayson 2021).

These imagined boogeymen require the second procedure, will to truth, to exist. Green pinpoints the weaponization of satiric irony as the means to create a “counterpublic” that generates its own truths. Alt-right trolling, or the act of antagonizing someone online, functions as a “hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic, hyper-distanced mode of discourse” that renders intent difficult to assess and meaning indiscernible (Green 2019, 53). Only the “redpilled” members of the community can make truth claims. By taking “redpill,” these members liberate their minds, professing an awareness of the alleged false consciousness of liberal brainwashing, and acquire the third procedure: power. Analyzing memes as cultural capital, Nissenbaum and Shifman argue that visual and linguistic content function as signifiers of superior status and reminders of shared identity. On 4chan, memes are performative. Each image is a projection of membership used to judge, condemn, and exclude other users, and signal intra-group identity under conditions of anonymity (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). From prohibition, will to truth, and power emerges the rhetorical construction of the alt-right. Yet this school does not suggest how to distinguish between satirical and authentic messages embedded in the language and imagery of the “chan” imageboards.

Next is the Cultural Borders School. Hodge and Hallgrimsdottr position the clearest theoretical basis for this school of thought by characterizing debates within the alt-right as claims-making exercises that mirror bordering processes. Cultural borders, argue Hodge and Hallgrimsdottr, transcend traditional geopolitical jurisdiction to exist in virtual spaces where cultural objects, such as memes, function as signifiers of “which side of the border one occupies” (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottr 2019, 3). Language defines the contours of a community and the virtual geographies across which alt-right networks form—trolling, memes, and satire is as much about spreading information as it is staking claim on virtual spaces (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottr 2019). To account for processes of radicalization, Valentini et al, analyzing the Islamic State, conceptualizes these cultural borders as a hybrid environment that incorporates elements of online and offline experiences (Valentini et al 2020). This hybrid environment reframes online radicalization as partially dependent upon everyday physical behaviors as feedback loops that form within cliques and groups act in unison with digital spaces. Moving the internet beyond the role of an echo chamber, Primavera Fisogni applies the General System Theory to explain the process of
self-radicalization. General System Theory accounts for “an ordered of interrelated parts whose characteristics depend both on the characteristics of the parts and on the web of their interconnections” (Fisogoni 2019, 22). Interactions between online and offline spaces provide materials that function as fertile grounds for decision-making, for moving someone to act. Alt-right identity, in this sense, forms as an infrastructure that enables and justifies action, recognizing the presence of coordinated activity.

Quantitative analysis defines the third school of thought: Identity as Frequency. Hine et al address the lack of scientific studies on 4chan by initiating the first measurement study of the forum (Hine et al 2017). Papasava et al amassed a dataset with over 3.5 million /pol/ threads across 3.5 years, observing high degrees of toxic content in over 37% of the 134.5 million posts (Papasavva 2020, 7). Hine et al, using a dataset of over 8 million posts, found that 12% of posts contained hate speech, and more notably evidenced 4chan's extensive influence on the wider Internet, particularly on YouTube (Hine et al 2017, 11). Hine et al also ran a term frequency-inverse document frequency analysis to identify topics per country. The paper concludes that the majority of posts from countries match geographically: posters from the United States, for example, discussed issues in American politics, whereas Greek users discussed the economic crisis. Zannettou et al confirm / pol/’s obsession with ethnicity, and Baele et al compare these observations with alt-right communities at the fringes of the Internet (Baele et al 2021; Aannettou et al 2020). Baele et al seek to establish the extent to which /pol/ boards across chan forums fragmented into distinct “sub-subcultures” along extremity lines. Through co-occurrence network analyses of 4chan, 8kun, 16chan, NeinChan, InfinityChan, and Endchan, Baele et al concluded that the alt-right is not fully coherent across each forum. As the largest of the forums, 4chan featured the least extreme content, whereas the boards with fewer users hosted more esoteric and fringe threads.

The research to date is only beginning to recognize how the alt-right derives its shared identity from a sense of superiority. This project relies on the procedures outlined by the Discursive Capital School to contextualize images and text posted by redpilled users, while also drawing from the Cultural Borders School to examine the relationship between online behavior and actions offline. By tracing the movement of alt-right rhetoric from digital forums to the physical world, a task performed by “influencers” like Brenton Tarrant, this study explores how “chan” imageboard users broach the prohibitions of contemporary political culture.

Metapolitical Mechanisms: A Breakdown of Political Structures

This paper understands the construction of the alt-right identity as a metapolitical practice. Through discursive tactics, predominantly exercised online, the alt-right seeks to subvert and deconstruct the boundaries, relationships, and identities that constitute established public culture. Metapolitics emerged from the prison cell of Antonio Gramsci, took its shape under the neo-Marxist theorists of the Frankfurt School, and received a spirited renewal with the critical theorists Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou in the 1970s. At its core, metapolitics is an ideological project that recognizes the primacy of culture over politics as the necessary mechanism of revolution, with cultural hegemony as its primary goal (Bar-On 2021). A key study by Zienkowski defines metapolitics as consisting “of practices that potentially reconfigure existing modes of politics, the associated logics, and rationalities, as well as the dominant power structures in a given public sphere,” (Zienkowski 2019, 2). Zienkowski further distinguishes the concept as a “programmatic attempt” to break down the egalitarian legacy of the Enlightenment and replace it with a fascist model of society (Zienkowski 2019). Despite its origins and continued prominence in leftist theory, metapolitics is at the heart of the alt-right.

The way politics is usually understood and practiced – politicking within polities, within and outside of democratic systems – relies on sediment but contingent decisions on what counts as a legitimate mode of politicization within a public realm. The establishment of a society’s constitutive and antagonistic outside operates through a rationality that seeks hegemonic status. Metapolitical projects clash over the socio-political imaginaries that define the boundaries of what is to count as legitimate and/or illegitimate political language, practice, subjectivity, or modes of organization (Zienkowski 2019). Far-right forms of populism are metapolitical projects in that they are antagonistic to post-Enlightenment political configurations and ideologies, such as liberalism, socialism, and representative democracy. Victor Orbán’s “illiberal democracy” in Hungary, for example, is an anti-democratic metapolitical project that attacks civil society and the separation of powers.

Metapolitics bridges social movement and political strategy by rendering cultural expressions as deliberate political acts. Discursive activities such as the creation and distribution of memes, tweeting, shit-posting, and trolling are explicitly categorized by self-described alt-right activist James Lawrence as a “form of dirty and lawless skirmisher warfare, carried out by non-centrally-organized partisans” in a “subjective metapolitical war” (Anonymous 2016). To use Lawrence’s description, it is also a heavily coded form of warfare. Part of the alt-right’s discursive tactic is to exacerbate the ideological drift encircling the First Amendment. Free speech is weaponized as a battle cry of the alt-right. Provocateurs and trolls frame hateful or offensive speech as an insurmountable commitment to the freedom to say anything (Stein 2018). By commandeering free speech, the alt-right obscures its dehumanizing and abusive rhetoric under a protective veil of universal rights.

Distinguishing between metapolitical language use and discourse highlights two essential fields of alt-right metapolitics: political subjectivity and politicization. The analytical concept of political subjectivity examines how people relate to governance and denotes how actors enter a
position to stake claims, to have a voice, and to be recognizable by authorities (Krause and Schramm 2011). It also stresses the power-ridden dimensions of politics of identity and belonging. The second concept, politization, involves an “act of naming something as political, including the controversies surrounding the acceptance of this naming” (Palonen 2003, 182). Metapolitical language use refers specifically to linguistic discourse that seeks system-wide change through a reconfiguration of political subjectivity and modes of politicization. When non-linguistic symbols (e.g. auditory, visual), such as memes, accompany metapolitical language, and act, in practice, as patterns within and across specific messages, this is metapolitical discourse. Alt-right trolls rely on language as well as non-linguistic symbols in their metapolitical struggle (Nagle 2017).

Attempts to distinguish the genuine from the disingenuous, the ironic from the unironic, grow increasingly complicated and fuels extremism. J.M. Berger stresses the threat and vulnerability gap, by which in-groups cast themselves as increasingly vulnerable and out-groups as increasingly threatening, as an essential tactic of escalation (Berger 2017). victimization through global conspiracy is a habitual form of alt-right discourse: Jews and other “social engineers” pursue white genocide by “collapsing white birthrates through sowing beliefs and attitudes that make family formation impossible, and by sanitizing and normalizing miscegenation” (Shaw 2018, 186). These strategic discursive tactics are never solely linguistic or visual acts. Memes function as a short-hand for unique forms of performative speech. A sense of performativity captures the social and cultural dimensions of these forms of speech as the alt-right articulates discourse in and as social norms (Butler 1997). Performativity adapts discourse to specific strands of the movement, to specific identities constructed in the respective communities of 4chan and 8kun. As “chan” imageboards promote alt-right identity through performative, memetic acts, it lowers the barrier for participating, opening the door for potential new members. This leads to my hypothesis: “chan” imageboards serve as recruiting spaces for extremist groups but are unable to concentrate a coherent in-group identity for the digital alt-right movement.

Designing the Red-Pill: What is the Alt-right?

Virtual communities disseminate and consume variants of far-right ideologies, no one organizational form prevailing, no single platform spearheading the movement. It is leaderless, anonymous: an amalgamation of digital content connected by a shared belief in the eradication of “white identity” and “white civilization” by the forces of multiculturalism, “political correctness,” and “social justice,” with an appeal to youth counter-culture. But anonymity should not suggest a lack of strategy. Gatekeepers facilitate alt-right paral successfully: “anons,” the title given to long-time users, abuse new members, known as “newfags,” when they fail to understand accepted vocabulary and symbols (Colley and Moore 2020). These “anons,” alongside alt-right terrorists like Brenton Tarrant, occupy influencer roles as prominent figureheads of the in-group. By enforcing the community’s dynamic language and imagery, often through an obscure mix of humor and irony, in-group members entitle passive lurkers of “chan” forums and mainstream social media sites into a reactionary worldview.

To those of the alt-right, swastikas alone are rather boring. Traditional far-right forums, such as Stormfront, are relics of the early internet, of an early approach to radicalization in digital spaces. Forums littered with brazen displays of Nazi iconography pale before post-ironic imagery: photoshop edits of mass shooters holding anime body pillows, videos of a crudely drawn bear listening to lo-fi beats as the Black Sun shines behind European monuments or memes of an anthropomorphic frog wearing the uniform of the Schutzstaffel (SS). To define the alt-right, and to further distinguish it from traditional far-right movements, I will locate its intellectual and communicational inspiration to the French Nouvelle Droite (“New Right”) of the 1960s and 70s.

Propelling the experimental processes behind an “alt-right identity” is the construction of disparate in-group signals that forge a new, modernized identity to inhabit the revived specter of traditional fascism. It is a project that seeks to re-imagine established modes of doing politics; a metapolitical strategy that shifts political identification towards a white supremacist identity base. Alt-right engagement in cultural struggles borrows from the Nouvelle Droite and its main ideologue, Alain de Benoist, and his adoption of “right-wing Gramscism,” (Zienkowski 2019). Although Benoist denounces Nazism and its biological racism, his political ideology rejects legal equality and “the religion of human rights,” and hopes “a metapolitical strategy…allows [the Nouvelle Droite] to gain cultural power before political power” (Bar-On 2012; de Benoist 1981). In online spaces, such as 4chan and 8kun, alt-right actors establish arenas in which cultural power foments as conflicting strands of the movement struggle for hegemonic control. The Breitbart Doctrine marks an evolution of the Nouvelle Droite, a continuation of the premise that “politics exists downstream from culture,” and that the source of a viable political revolution is cultural upheaval (Roberts 2018). From this analysis, the alt-right metapolitical strategy characterizes public culture and its established modes as corrupted by a conspiratorial left, a diabolical and often racialized “other,” that tricks white males into allowing the existence of concepts like the patriarchy or equal status between genders and races (Roberts 2018).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper applies qualitative analysis to research the extent to which “chan” imageboards are similar in the construction of an alt-right identity. Across the internet is a constellation of far-right imageboards: an ever-evolving network of nearly identical websites containing some variation of the term “chan” with similar internal architecture, visual design, and moderation...
Redpilling Normies: Alt-Right Identity on "Chan" Imageboards

practices. From these forums disseminates a meme culture that creeps into mainstream social media as users, known as “anons,” generate and package anti-establishment humor that takes a variety of forms, including images, catchphrases, and GIFs (Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair 2019). An anonymous user, the “original poster” (OP), creates a thread by posting a message and attached image to a thematic board, with topics that range from television and anime to history and literature. This paper focuses on iterations of “/pol/,” boards dedicated to “politically incorrect” conversations. Rampant across these /pol/ boards is a festering commitment to racist and anti-Semitic language and alt-right activity impossible to maintain on more moderated and mainstream social media sites, such as Facebook or Reddit (Colley and Moore 2020). On the /pol/ board of the now-defunct 8chan, for example, Brenton Tarrant exclaimed that he “will carry out an attack against the invaders” and posted a manifesto and link to a livestream video of his attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021). Two other /pol/ users, John Earnest and Patrick Crusius, followed Tarrant’s example, posting their manifestos before committing hate crimes and acts of terrorism.

My research examines three of these “/pol/” boards: the longstanding /pol/ of 4chan, the now-offline/pol/ of 8chan, and the /pnd/ (“Politics, News, and Debate”) of 8chan’s successor site, 8kun.top. I selected these three “/pol/” boards for reasons of influence and activity. 4chan boasts over 20 million monthly visitors and is the largest English-language imageboard (Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair 2019). 8kun’s /pnd/ comes second in traffic and posting activity and is thematic similarly to 4chan’s /pol/ (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2021). Unique to 8kun is the QAnon conspiracy that originated from 8chan’s /pol/ board. The board’s welcome page describes itself as “a war room” in which the ephemeral “Q Clearance Patriot,” or “Q,” leads the “autists of /qresearch/” against the “social chaos” and political corruption induced by Marxism (“Welcome to /QResearch/”). Since the inception of the QAnon conspiracy theory in 2016, numerous adherents committed murders, attacks, and kidnappings on behalf of Q’s “Global War.” And on January 6, 2021, several QAnon supporters, either self-described on social media or wearing Q-affiliated clothing, stormed the United States Capitol Building. Inclusion of /qresearch/ captures the undercurrents of alt-right activity in digital spaces transforming into physical mobilization. After all, it’s vital to “remember that /pol/ was here before any of you, and Q came to /pol/, not the other way around” (“Welcome to /QResearch/”).

4chan, 8chan, and 8kun are central creative nodes of the alt-right movement. To capture the imaginative processes behind alt-right identity, case studies of selected threads are the center points of analysis. It is necessary to delve into threads and examine the discursive performativity of these three boards. Several limitations stunt this approach. With no account or login necessary to read or write posts, users are distinguishable only by poster IDs – a sequence of numbers attached to a poster upon the creation of a thread (and only that thread) – and country flags, based on IP geolocation, that appear along with their posts. The use of virtual protection networks, however, easily manipulate geolocation. Threads are temporary, often purged or cataloged, and permanently gone after seven days unless a board uses an archival system. To overstep these limitations, this paper will analyze Brenton Tarrant’s manifesto, “The Great Replacement,” as it existed on 8chan/pol/, and its continued representation on 4chan/pol/. Case studies provide evidence for claims – evidence that is, like multiple regression analysis, for example, observational rather than experimental. Selected threads will capture a specific point in time, functioning as representations of alt-right culture, and not a seeing-stone penetrating the unequivocal truths of the movement. But these threads contain rich, dense information that produces the means to discover the mechanisms through which the alt-right signals in-group identity.

Digital Fascism and Internet Memes on 4chan

A creative engagement in the reconfiguration of the white supremacist ideology and promotion of an urgent need for action creates a cohesive ideological network across “chan” subcultures. By wrapping fascist aesthetics and white

Figure 1. The Happy Merchant


© Pi Sigma Alpha 2022

11
supremacy beneath layers of irony, users experience a significant sense of agency and control through the creative production of transgressive content. Users adopt a sense of superiority as they move from “newfags” to “anons” through the redpilling process. But this is not an instant switch: alt-right rhetoric ranges from the obvious to the esoteric, demanding users to frequently engage with its evolutionary language and imagery. The transitory nature of memes allows alt-right users to affirm their redpilled status and to continuously check group membership.

On 4chan/pol/, memes express and reinforce myths of a threatening or illusive other as users transform, reimagine, and circulate images (Greene 2019). Memes on /pol/ feature an abundance of dehumanizing and racist caricatures. Jews are often the subject, with images framing them as the masterminds of the Great Replacement (Tuters and Hagen 2020). By far the most prevalent antisemitic meme is the Happy Merchant, a cartoon depicting a Jewish man with a hooked nose, crooked teeth, and a hunched back rubbing his hands (Figure 2). The Happy Merchant often accompanies a message that implies a hidden conspiracy, orchestrated by the Jews, that facilitates the Great Replacement and white genocide.

For the “normies,” a pejorative slang term for those considered mainstream, the innovative subcultural use of memes exceeds the boundaries of comprehension, functioning as an exercise of grammar. Figure 3 is another iteration of the Happy Merchant meme in a reduced and isolated form. It is an exercise in abstraction, a critical technique that renders alt-right memetic culture incomprehensible to outside viewers. A technical reimagining of memes allows for strangers, connected only through the shared use of 4chan, to negotiate in-group belonging. Extending the theoretical lens of discursive capital developed by Nissenbaum and Shifman, memes exist in a linguistic market (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Like material capital, the market is unevenly distributed, as those attuned to the grammar of in-group slang wield a sort of wealth and authority over the uninitiated. Engagement with memetic grammar amplifies the voices of some users while silencing others, creating a ritual of communication that stimulates in- and out-group distinctions (Tuters and Hagen 2020). These distinctions are not drawn through political opposition or dissenting voices but the formation, through visual representation, an “us” and a “them” composed of those aware of a meme’s underlying or intertextual meaning.

On 4chan, /pol/ especially, the frequent use of memes follows an illusive and ironic subcultural form. Only those on the “inside” understand the current course of meaning. Collective identification in an anonymous space relies on this memetic abstraction. Pepe the Frog, by far the most popular image reposted on 4chan/pol/, captures the metapolitical desire to demonopolize what constitutes authentic instances...
Redpilling Normies: Alt-Right Identity on “Chan” Imageboards

of political meaning. An illustration of a humanoid frog, Pepe takes myriad forms across its expansive history. For much of the meme’s early usage, Pepe accompanied textual posts as a “reaction face” on 4chan and Tumblr before the Anti-Defamation League, in 2016, labeled it a hate symbol (Tuters and Hagen 2020). But the meme has other uses. Anti-extradition protesters in Hong Kong utilized Pepe in the 2019 demonstration, but even so, the trend to combine the frog with Nazi imagery renders it a precarious image. To explain Pepe’s amorphous adaptability, Ernesto Laclau’s concept of a floating signifier, used in his analysis of populism, provides a critical lens (Laclau 2005). The value of a floating signifier is its emptiness. Disparate political groups can approach these symbols and give them meaning, forming a “chain of equivalence” across these varying constituencies. “Chan” imageboards mobilize Pepe the Frog as a floating signifier in attempts to string together a loose network of alt-right communities.

Brenton Tarrant on 8chan: A Template for Chaos

Brenton Tarrant’s “The Great Replacement” is a complete manifestation of the alt-right project, mobilizing memetic rhetoric into physical action. “The radicalization of young Western men is not just unavoidable,” Tarrant writes, “but inevitable…to combat the social and moral decay of their nations and the continued ethnic replacement of their people” (Tarrant 2019, 44). The source of this decay is a “suicidal nihilism” spawned by “mainstream, ‘multicultural’, egalitarian, individualistic insanity” that threatens “a future for white children” and “the natural order” (Tarrant 2019, 46, 25). An analysis of Tarrant reveals a link between memetic language and terrorist action that distorts the line between earnestness and irony. By trolling mainstream media sources, and placing white supremacy in the guise of “shitposts,” Tarrant creates a template for the spread of his propaganda and future violent attacks.

To rationalize his violent methods and conspiratorial thinking, Tarrant merges a perverse misconstruction of history with a shadow of a reference to cultural hegemony. History is written by the victors, he claims, so, regardless of tactics, “win first, write the narrative later” (Tarrant 2019, 72). Tarrant places himself in a long historical tradition constructed on ideas of power. He claims that “violence is power and violence is the reality of history” (Tarrant 2019, 28). He stresses the Battle of Vienna – the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by a coalition of Christian states in 1683 – and calls for a similar attack against the far more dangerous unarmed invader (Tarrant 2019). If the Christian West is to survive its current state of disintegration, it will need the agency of white men prepared to combat the encroaching Muslim and non-European immigrants. An agency like that of Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian mass murder, and Tarrant’s greatest inspiration (Tarrant 2019). Breivik, on 22 July 2011, murdered 77 adults and children in Norway, espousing similar rejections of Islam, political correctness, feminism, and the “radical cultural Marxist agenda” in his manifesto (Tarrant 2019). In an eclectic mix of ideologies from different periods, Tarrant forges a new cultural script. It is a metapolitical tactic to provide a base for violent action that raises awareness of the white race’s current state of crisis. Figure 4 is indicative of the sporadic collection of cultural artifacts used to comprise the alt-right. Heavily gendered scenes of white men, women, and children in varying rural scenes underline the fantastical element behind Tarrant’s conspiratorial mode of thinking. It is a collage of thematic pictures curated to fit into the pre-constructed worldview.

Figure 4 suggests that the alt-right is not simply a form of politics but a unique form of interfacing with the external world that renders every external stimulus a floating signifier. The absence of counter-voices gives users of “chan” imageboards, like Brenton Tarrant, a sense of agency through the complete creative
control on the meaning invested into the floating signifiers. Digital subcultures thus become grounds for radicalization as users incorporate racist and gendered tropes into their schema.

Within the currents of history, according to the alt-right, is a constant encroachment on Christian nations by the aggressive process of Islamization, a “Great Replacement” committed by armed and unarmed invaders. This creeping endangerment of Western culture pushes Tarrant and Breivik to reject basic political action. Democratic elections are useless to soldiers who must only expect “a true war and to die the death of a true soldier” (Tarrant 2019, 52). Societal collapse is the true aim of the red-pilled white man – an apocalyptic restoration and rebirth of civilization through race wars. A reconfiguration of the past through conspiratorial thinking attacks the political structures protected by the prevailing liberal democratic cultural hegemony. Tarrant’s conspiratorial fascist propaganda replaces political organization with chaos: an organic and spontaneous mass movement to secure a future for the white race at all costs.

While acting alone, Tarrant’s call-to-arms forges an imagined network of combatants against the Great Replacement. Through frequent references to inside jokes, combined with targeted shitposting, the act of posting provocative content to derail a conversation, Tarrant’s transgressive comments bridge “chan” and gaming subcultures. He live-streamed the massacre, for example, from a helmet camera, an imitation of first-person shooter video games, and commented on his high score. Tarrant structured the livestream as a targeted message to a specific audience. By incorporating references to gaming YouTuber PewDiePie, and the Conservative pundit Candace Owens, Tarrant tried to troll the media and entertain “chan” and gaming insiders. Tarrant narrated his actions as if he was in a video game or on a “chan” thread, each an attempt to prolong his relevancy by encouraging viewers of his livestream to: “Do your part in spreading my message, making memes and shitposting as you usually do” (Thorleifsson 2021).

Reproduction of Nazi iconography in “The Great Replacement” characterizes subcultural memetic irony as the central form of communication in the metapolitics of the alt-right. In the manifesto, Tarrant poses himself a question: “Were/are you a nazi?” (Tarrant 2019, 20). To which he responds with an emphatic “no,” because since the fall of Nazi Germany in 1945, “actual nazis do not exist…anywhere in the world” (Tarrant 2019, 20). Tarrant also rejects neo-Nazis, which “is a very broad category of people” with a “fuzzy” definition (Tarrant...
2019, 20). Figure 5 displays the full-page spread of the “Black Sun,” an esoteric symbol in Nazi occultism once displayed in the headquarters of the Schutzstaffel (SS), located at the start of the manifesto (“Sonnenrad”) and in Figure 4. Between the rays of the Black Sun are several images and slogans indicative of Tarrant’s desire for “a new society.” The fusion of unassuming tenets like environmentalism, anti-imperialism, and worker’s rights renders the alt-right as an autonomous conceptual category outside the classic Right/Left dichotomy.

Through an almost absurd employment of symbols, like George Washington tucked in between the rays of the Black Sun, layers of irony develop. A paradoxical frame in which insiders treat visuals and language as both true and not true. For outsiders, it’s impossible to pinpoint earnest belief. The production of a fascist internet culture and aesthetic through serious and non-serious fantasies of racial purity confuses the established differences underlying political representation. It allows the alt-right to create a transgressive and innovative political experience that reinforces the bonds of the community by distancing in-group members from the normies.

Brenton Tarrant on 4chan: Escalation and Memorialization

The rapid and anonymous production of memes creates a style of communication that is a core feature of the fascist phenomena: the perception of an endangered community that needs to be reborn through violent action. On 4chan, the glorification of Tarrant through memetic language contextualized his atrocities as the start of a glorious and divine revolution. In September 2019, one user posted:

Saint Brenton Tarrant of Grafton (pbuh) was a normal white man from upside down land until he saw the travesty that is the (((refugee))) crisis in Evropa. The slaughter of innocent Ebba Akerlund pushed him over the edge. On March 15, 2019, he entered history as the Firebrand Gallant after successfully raiding and physically removing 51 invaders from the al Noor and Linwood terrorist training camps (Anonymous 2019).

Throughout this thread is an effort to connect Tarrant to a movement unrestrained by geopolitical borders. No
matters the location, no matter the forum, the goal is the same: the survival of “white civilization.” The user’s reference to “(((refugee)))” for those on the inside, is an intelligible vehicle for othering. The triple parenthesis is a construction of a “them” through memetic abstraction, with clear ties to antisemitism (Figure 6). In practice, this paranoid conspiratorial communication is a reactionary combination of antagonistic and innuendo-laden political communication.

4chan/pol/’s memes created a pantheon of canonized figures belonging to the whole of the “white race” (Figure 7). This manipulated image of the “The Republican Club,” a painting that depicts former President Donald Trump surrounded by previous Republican presidents, now includes the faces of white terrorists. Dylan Roof, Robert Bowers, Breivik, and Adolf Hitler join Tarrant, who’s flashing a “white power” sign as he did in court (Figure 7). Figure 8 depicts Tarrant as a saint, holding his manifesto as the Black Sun glows behind him—a scene of content contrasted against Figure 9, which stirs melancholic feelings.

Memes throughout the thread also encourage “anons” to “take the action pill,” to accelerate the collapse of civilization by committing violence in real life (Anonymous 2019). More than a thousand of the archived posts stored on 4plebs.org characterize Tarrant as a saint. The sanctification of Tarrant is a call for greater engagement in terrorist activities: clear beacons around which the multiple pockets of alt-right activity across “chan” imageboards can rally. On 8kun, Phillip Manshaus, inspired by Tarrant, made similar post before attacking a mosque in Oslo: “well cobbler’s it’s my time, I was elected by saint tarrant after all…we can’t let this go on, you gotta bump the race war thread irl and if you’re reading this you have been elected by me” (Manshaus 2019). Alt-right memetic language interconnects these violent members of the movement, no matter their geographical context or background, in a chain of resistance against the conspiratorial theories of white genocide.

**RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS**

On “chan” imageboards, memes function as a collective project against a common opponent and work to reinforce the bond of the community and to mark in-group members. This paper examined alt-right identity in the anonymous and largely unmoderated forums of 4chan/pol/, 8kun/pnd/, and 8chan. It concludes that the alt-right, born and structured out of an intellectual movement aimed at rethinking the far-right’s classical ideological building blocks, binds its digital members together by subcultural and vernacular posting behaviors. New and extreme modes of political speech, muddied beneath layers of supposedly humorous or ironic claims, resonate with a metapolitical break from Western concepts of progress and egalitarianism. Discursive analysis unveils floating signifiers littered around the memetic styles of the alt-right; these signals a force of collectivization through the delineation of an “other.” Pepe the Frog, the Happy Merchant, and the triple parenthesis evidenced this phenomenon, whereas the sanctification of Tarrant and the perversion of history espoused by his manifesto create a cultural template for future mobilization. These
findings reject the hypothesis that “chan” imageboards function exclusively as recruitment spaces for extremist groups and are unable to facilitate an intelligible in-group identity. Within these spaces is an interplay between personal creative freedom and a larger, subcultural practice that positions “anons” as co-producers of burgeoning extremist ideology at the fringes of the internet.

REFERENCES


de Benoist, A. 1981. Intervista esclusiva con Alain de Benoist: Cambiare la mentalità per vincere la decadenza/Interviewer: G. B. Luca Nicchi. (Vol 40), Dissenso.


