

Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures

FULL REPORT

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This report contains offensive imagery and language that might be upsetting to some readers.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Several violent far-right attacks in recent years have revealed an apparent connection with 'chan culture', not just in the tangible examples of attackers uploading manifestos, final messages, and live streams to chan sites themselves, but in the widespread community support exhibited in some corners of this online subculture where violence is both trivialised and glorified. Commonly, this is manifested in the visual culture present on chan sites, particularly memes, which may be used to promote extreme or even violent narratives under the guise of humour and irony.

This project sought to understand how the visual culture of chan sites was contributing to, and/or encouraging violent discourse. To do this, the project team combined quantitative data scraping, ethnography, and visual analysis across 12 chan sites ranging in popularity between March – June 2020, in addition to conducting 12 interviews with experts over this period.

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KEY FINDINGS

- Several chan sites and boards appeared to be facilitating an 'in-group' status that is so critical in fostering an extremist mindset, partially due to the visual culture present on chans which obfuscates extremist messaging to less-familiar observers.
- While some memes explicitly promoted violence or extremist narratives, others can be considered 'malleable', meaning they took on these connotations only when situated within a broader extremist context. Memes such as these require some level of digital literacy and familiarity with chan culture to interpret.
- Memes and visual culture were used to target out-groups including (but not limited to) Black and

ethnic minorities, Jewish people, women, and the LGBTQ community.

- Antisemitic and conspiratorial attitudes were particularly prevalent in ubiquitous memes, such as the 'Happy Merchant', as well as within 'textual' images that contained lengthier ideological exposition and were commonly shared between chans.
- Global instability relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the reignited Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 became a focal point for racist, antisemitic, and misogynistic narratives online, which played heavily into the visual culture on the chans. Some users interpreted these events as an opportunity to sow discord and accelerate race war in the United States and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhance literacy in digital and visual culture interpretation among practitioners, researchers, and young people in education, who would benefit from an understanding of memetic subtext.
- Develop a database of 'hateful' memes as a resource for practitioners working in this space.
- Ensure the work of experts in the field from academia and industry feeds into HMG's policy formation. This could be achieved through the creation of a biannual working group, in which experts could present ongoing research and update relevant government stakeholders about ongoing trends in this space.
- Deepen knowledge by considering how memetic content is deployed by extremists in the coming months and years, extending our analysis to mainstream social media and combining knowledge of chan communities with other 'push factors' to radicalisation.

OVERVIEW

The latest Global Terrorism Index (GTI, 2019) revealed that incidents of far-right terrorism increased by 320% between 2013-18, which did not include the 2019 attack in Christchurch, New Zealand that killed 51 people, proving to be the most fatal of its kind in recent memory. Notable about this attack was the attacker's use of 8chan's /pol/ (politically incorrect) board to announce his intentions ahead of time, upload his manifesto, and link to a Facebook live stream of the events themselves. Several far-right attacks in the United States and Europe have since followed a similar pattern, and despite 8chan's removal from the publicly available internet, the 'Clarnet' in August 2019, new chan sites have taken its place, most notably 8kun.

The connection between chan sites and violence is concerning not only because of the chans' tangible connection to specific far-right attacks but of the widespread community support that exists within these online subcultures – in which violence is both trivialised and glorified. Specifically, this manifests within the visual culture of chans, in which memetic content is deployed to promote extremist narratives under the guise of pop-cultural aesthetics, humour, and irony, thus lowering the barrier for participation. Moreover, chan culture appears to be fomenting the gamification of violence, in which users challenge one another to achieve 'high scores' by killing as many people as possible in acts of real-world violence, thus indicating a community that is both tolerant and encouraging of, violence.

This project sought to answer one primary research question: **How does the visual culture of chans, including memes contribute to, and/or encourage violent discourse?** To do this, it took a comparative, data-driven approach, in which the team conducted data scraping and digital ethnography on 17 boards across 12 chan sites, specifically the '/pol/' or equivalent boards and '/k/' (weapons) boards between March – June 2020. The team was then able to determine the most popular memes and images shared on these chan sites, as well as their reach within the chan ecosystem, to show how they contribute to or are situated within, violent discourse. Alongside this, the project team conducted 12 off-the-record interviews

with experts from government, academia, and the private sector, to refine the project's definitional scope and research objectives, and to ensure that our findings were suitably relevant to our key stakeholders

The objective of this study was to enrich quantitative and qualitative understanding of the diversity of memetic content shared between chan sites, by seeking to understand how memes may influence violent discourse between chan sites; and in doing so integrate an in-depth and multi-disciplinary understanding of the promotion of violence within the chan ecosystem into practitioner and policymaker understanding of the far right online. Moreover, it sought to enhance the current online radicalisation literature by extending understanding of the chan ecosystem, which must be treated as somewhat distinct from mainstream social media sites.

KEY FINDINGS

Our project has revealed that while chan sites, *in general*, are places for individuals to discuss shared passions, several boards appear to be facilitating the 'in-group' status centred around the shared consumption of extremist content. In large part, this is due to the modern pop-cultural aesthetic deployed by users via memes, attracting a younger generation of digital natives who are initially drawn in by the visual culture, and then become slowly more tolerant of radical and extreme ideologies. Through this gradual indoctrination, a seemingly infinite number of racist, misogynist, and bigoted worldviews are made more palatable. Chan culture is, however, not representative of one specific group or organisation, and is tantamount to a coalescing of individuals and movements around a variety of ideologies. This inherent vagueness is important to its success.

Our findings indicate the malleable meanings of memes, wherein several images may not be overtly extreme or promote violence, but take on these connotations when situated within a wider context of extremism. Thus, whilst not appearing violent or extreme initially, one familiar with chan culture will

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be able to recognise a seemingly innocuous meme as more sinister if deployed in a particular situation. Thus, the meaning of any given meme is therefore not 'fixed' and is dependent on context and intent, and so understanding them requires a level of digital literacy. Our dataset nonetheless reveals a subsection of popular images that explicitly depict physical violence, often targeted towards identifiable 'out-groups'. These images serve to dehumanise, and may contribute to gradual desensitisation to the concept of violence against these groups, which included Black and ethnic minorities, Jewish people, women, and the LGBTQ community.

This study also explores certain ubiquitous memes such as the 'Happy Merchant', various edits of which are deployed to serve hateful ideological purposes, including fuelling historical antisemitic conspiracy theories such as the 'Zionist Occupied Movement' and 'Cultural Marxism'. "Textual images" that contained lengthier ideological and philosophical exposition were found to have significant reach *between* chan sites, indicating that there is likely to be some level of deep ideological convergence between separate chan sites. As with memetic content, these textual images often conveyed conspiratorial and antisemitic narratives.

Global instability stemming from Covid-19 and police brutality in the United States, which reignited the Black Lives Matter movement, played heavily into the visual culture of chans and became a focal point for racist and misogynistic narratives online, therein cementing the 'in-group' status of chan communities. Some users interpreted these events as an opportunity to sow discord and accelerate race war in the United States and beyond, as was manifested in both images and text. While there is no concrete evidence that this translated into real-world violence, it is nevertheless important to note, particularly as previous attacks have demonstrated the relationship between chan culture and mass-casualty far-right terrorism. The memetic trivialisation and glorification of violence observed throughout this project thus remain a real and present danger.

RECOMMENDATIONS

LITERACY IN DIGITAL AND VISUAL CULTURE

- The ironic memetic subculture found within chans makes interpretation of violent content particularly challenging, and it is thus essential that practitioners and researchers working in this space embed themselves within the culture to understand its nuances and codes. Without this, chan content risks being interpreted at face-value, which may lead to wasted resources.
- Human analysis must be retained alongside data-driven approaches, as our project showed that computer-based methods alone fail to capture the subtext and many layers behind chan content. This is particularly true of the promotion of violence, in which we identified both subtle and overt examples.
- Literacy in digital and visual culture interpretation should not be limited to researchers and practitioners, as young people in education would benefit from an understanding of memetic subtext and an ability to discern between humour and bigotry, given that the younger generation is generally the intended audience for this form of content. To this end, adopting lessons from sectors working to combat manipulated information would be valuable.

DEVELOP A CROWDSOURCED DATABASE OF 'HATEFUL' MEMES

- Connected to the above, researchers and practitioners would benefit from access to a dedicated website for memes which may be somewhat ambiguous or are often used in a 'hateful' context. This could follow the format of the Anti-Defamation League's 'Hate Symbols Database', and be similarly conducted via crowdsourcing to the 'Know Your Meme' database, however, with a sole focus on hateful memetic content, and including descriptions of hateful edits of popular memes which alter their original meanings.

DEEPENING KNOWLEDGE

- This project provides a 'snapshot' of activity over several turbulent months in 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning to accelerate worldwide.

It would therefore be beneficial to further consider how memetic content continues to be deployed in the coming months and years on the chans selected.

- Furthermore, our analysis does not extend to mainstream social media, which are favoured by an overlapping yet distinct community of far-right actors, and often utilise memes that originated from within chan culture. Connecting niche chan sites with mainstream social media in a broader analysis would provide a more holistic understanding of the deployment of memes online.
- Ensuring the work of experts in the field from academia and industry feeds into HMG's policy formation. This could be achieved through the creation of a biannual working group, in which experts could present ongoing research and update relevant government stakeholders about ongoing trends in this space.
- Finally, academics should seek to combine knowledge of chan communities with other 'push factors' to radicalisation, including social isolation, vulnerability, proclivity to violence, and political factors (to name a few) to develop a sense of how chans intersect with other radicalisation factors.

INTRODUCTION

On Friday, March 15th, 2019, the Australian national Brenton Tarrant opened fire during Friday prayers in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people. Ahead of his killing spree, he posted on 8chan's '/pol/' (politically incorrect) board that it was "time to stop shitposting and time to make a real effort," which can be roughly translated as 'less talk, more action'. Tarrant then posted a link to a Facebook live stream of his attack, as well as a 74-page manifesto entitled *The Great Replacement*, which was littered with in-jokes from online chan sites including the sprawling 'Navy Seal Copypasta' meme, and the ironic assertion that the American right-wing conservative Candace Owens served as his greatest influence for the attack. These references made the text largely impenetrable to those unfamiliar with online chan culture, and therefore somewhat obfuscated his motivations for the attack.

Consisting of a series of "fast-paced, interest-based, anonymous imageboards", each containing various sub-fora (Manivannan, 2020) chan sites represent the "antithesis of a [sic.] Twitter or Facebook", and constitute a vast subcultural ecosystem operating in parallel to mainstream social media (McLaughlin, 2019). Chan sites have been linked to a string of recent far-right attacks. Indeed, just over a month after Tarrant's attack, John Earnest entered the Chabad of Poway Synagogue in San Diego, California, and opened fire at worshippers, killing one and wounding several others. Before his attack, Earnest also posted to 8chan's '/pol/' board, linking to a failed live stream of his attack and his manifesto, which was again filled with memetic references to 8chan (Bogost, 2019), and which described the Christchurch shooting as a "catalyst".

Then, in early August 2019, Patrick Crusius opened fire at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, killing 22 people of mostly Hispanic heritage, again, uploading his manifesto to 8chan (Stewart, 2019), and referencing the Christchurch attacker. Crusius' motives also chimed with Tarrant's, as he claimed to be defending his country from "cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion [of non-white US citizens]." Subsequently, the US-based web infrastructure service 'Cloudflare' terminated 8chan's network security

provision, pulling the plug on its ability to operate on the publicly accessible internet, hereafter, the 'Clearnet' (Perryer, 2020). However, just months after it disappeared from the Internet, 8chan was relaunched by its previous owners as '8kun', a new chan site containing a number of the same boards as 8chan, although notably the ill-fated '/pol/' board had been rebranded as '/pnd/', meaning 'politics, news, debate' (Fingas, 2019).

The problem of violence emanating from within chan culture is not unique to 8chan. Just six days after the El Paso shooting, on August 10th, 2019, Philip Manshaus posted to the fringe chan site 'Endchan', announcing his intentions to spark a "race war", before attempting to carry out a firearms attack at the Al-Noor Islamic Centre, in Bærum, Norway. Similarly, in October 2019, Stephan Balliet uploaded several manifesto-style documents and a link to a Twitch live stream to 'Meguca', an obscure chan site focussed mainly on anime and manga-style art, before attempting to initiate a firearms attack inside a synagogue in Halle, Germany, eventually killing two people in the surrounding area (Basma et al, 2019). Notably, Balliet's manifesto contained several particularly irreverent references to chan culture, with one section containing a list of hypothetical "achievements" such as "Crusty Kebab: Burn down a Mosque," and "Gender Equality: Kill a Jewess", designed to challenge and encourage potential future attackers, playing on the "gamification" of violence present within chan sites, where users challenge each other to commit increasingly devastating acts of mass casualty violence (Evans, 2019).

Thus, chan sites are not only notable for their connection to this string of interrelated attacks, but also because they foster relatively large online communities within which violence is simultaneously trivialised and glorified, with the largest English-language chan site, 4chan, attracting approximately 27,700,000 unique visitors per month (4chan, 2020). Indeed, in the wake of his attack, Brenton Tarrant has been lauded as a "saint" within several chan sites, with subsequent attackers being similarly praised as his "disciples" (Davis et al., 2019). This kind of glorification is

situated within the broader ironic ethos which typifies chan culture, as is particularly evidenced by chan users' frequent use of 'memes' - images, videos, or texts which often employ humour to communicate a concept or idea. Memes are a particularly important aspect of online culture as pertains to the far right, as Marwick and Lewis (2017) have stressed that they may lower the barrier for participation in extreme ideologies by masking overtly racist narratives under a guise of humour.

The connection between the ironic subculture of chan sites and far-right attacks has thus become a policymaker concern, particularly as this trend has persisted since 8chan's closure. Indeed, even before 8chan was removed from the Clearnet, many users had already flocked to smaller, more fringe chan sites, to preserve their online communities (Glaser, 2019). It is therefore critical that we deepen our understanding of how the far right brand themselves online and use imagery to represent and disseminate extreme and violent messages. Given the vast differences which exist between mainstream social media and chan culture, it is particularly important to understand how these dynamics manifest within chan sites specifically, to address any gaps that may exist in government and practitioner understanding of these communities.

This project takes a comparative, data-driven approach, in which the team conducted data scraping and digital ethnography on 17 boards across 12 chan sites, specifically the '/pol/' or equivalent boards and '/k/' (weapons) boards between March – June 2020. The team was then able to determine the most popular memes and images shared on these chan sites, as well as their reach within the chan ecosystem, to show how they contribute to or are situated within, violent discourse. Alongside this, the project team conducted 12 off-the-record interviews with experts from government, academia, and the private sector, to refine the project's definitional scope and research objectives, and to ensure that our findings were suitably relevant to our key stakeholders.

CONCEPTS

The term ‘meme’ was first coined by Dawkins in his 1976 book ‘The Selfish Gene’, in which they were described as cultural analogues to genes through how they self-replicate, mutate and react to external events (Dawkins, 1967; Zannettou et al., 2018: 1). In the context of internet culture, a meme can be defined as a “highly medium-specific” (Lamerichs *et al* 2018: 181) “unit of cultural transmission” (Dawkins 1976: 192) through which (often humorous) messages are created in a visual medium or through the “intertextual” relationship between image and text (Huntington, 2017: 78). They are often designed to be quickly and easily disseminated within online space.

Whilst this report refers to examples of real-world terrorism, which Hoffman (2006: 2-3) defines as “violence – or equally important the threat of violence – used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of a political aim”, it is also concerned with (far-right) ‘extremism’. Extremism, as defined by J.M. Berger (2019: 44) refers to the belief that “an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group”. Extremism may be “cognitive” in nature, where individuals simply hold “radically different ideas about society and governance”, or “behavioural” where they “pursue their extremist aims by violent means” (Neumann 2013: 874-876).

We employ the umbrella term of ‘far right’ to describe “politically active groups or individuals which fall at the far end of the left/right political spectrum” (Davey and Ebner, 2017). The ideologies of those on the far right typically include some form of cultural, ethnic, or racial nationalism. The term “far right” encompasses actors on the ‘extreme right’ who believe that democracy must be replaced and that violence against enemies is justified, and the ‘radical right’ who believe that democracy should be maintained but that liberal elites must be replaced (Bjørngo and Ravndal, 2019). Although Caiani and Parenti (2013) assert that the extreme right is comprised of a loose association of political and ideological nodes, and is, therefore, difficult to describe as a cohesive ‘movement’, Mudde’s (2000) broad characterisation of these groups as linked by their allegiance to idealised authoritarian

political systems, ethnic nationalism, and xenophobia, can be profitably employed to provide structure to the fractured far-right sphere.

Further to this, the “alt-right” can be considered as a particularly “nebulous, fluid [and] sometimes anarchic” facet of the broader far right, which exists almost entirely online (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir, 2019: 2). According to Ganesh (2020: 1), the alt-right is a “product of decades of white supremacist organising,” spanning across far-right narratives in both Europe and North America, leveraging the ideological underpinnings of scholars such as Barrés who theorised an inseparable link between cultural and racial philosophy (de Orellana and Michelsen, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of existing literature and reports as relates to online radicalisation, chan culture, visual culture, and memes.

(ONLINE) RADICALISATION

There is no general theory of radicalisation and various schools of thought highlight different factors as the driving force behind trajectories into extremism. For example, Social Movement Theory (Della Porta and Diani, 1999) places precedence on social networks and social interaction (Sageman, 2004), while some stage models such as Moghaddam's staircase (2007) emphasise individual psychological differences, showing socially isolated individuals to be more susceptible to the successive processes of radicalisation. Moreover, current approaches generally struggle to explain why a minority of individuals turn to violence.

Whereas Borum (2012) has argued that terrorist violence may occur in isolation from cognitive radicalisation, others contend behavioural extremism is necessarily preceded by the cognitive (Guhl, 2018). As Neumann has contended (2013), it is near-impossible to draw a clear distinction between one's cognitive beliefs and one's actions, and attempting to do so in such binary terms may prevent scholars from understanding the holistic process of radicalisation. Thus, factors such as group dynamics, social networks, and personal grievances must be understood alongside ideological and political beliefs.

This debate is particularly pertinent to online radicalisation. Often, online identities are considered "pluralist" (Caiani and Parenti, 2013: 11) and thus the influence of online socialisation on radicalisation is generally regarded as more partial than offline interaction. However, Neumann (2013: 18) suggests users may utilise violence to resolve the tension between their virtual and "actual" selves. Furthermore, Archetti (2015: 52) stresses that online interactions may play a particularly influential role in instances of radicalisation into lone-actor terrorism, where individuals may feel strongly connected to an

"imagined community", feeling their sense of self-identity converging with that of the broader whole. In some instances, individuals may then go on to commit acts of violence on behalf of this broader online community. In this report we argue that chan sites facilitate this kind of community formation, fostering a sense of belonging and enabling individuals to feel part of a virtual in-group.

Furthermore, Bozdogan et al (2014: 405) show how internet users often operate within "filter bubble[s]" where online algorithms may repeatedly expose users to mutually reinforcing extremist material. Koehler (2014: 124) suggests that operating within these "echo chambers" may normalise extreme ideology and lower one's resistance to committing violent acts. Moreover, Macklin (2019) shows that the online sphere may effectively trans-nationalise violent networks, with an attack in one part of the world appearing to inspire another.

CHAN CULTURE

A recent influx of far-right terrorist attacks committed by individuals who did not belong to any specific group or organisation has linked their attacks to online chan culture. However, academic literature on chan culture is scarce and is particularly lacking in ethnographic insight, with some exceptions such as Manivannan's various ethnographic studies on 4chan, (2012, 2013) which she considers as a "discourse community" where "anti-normative, egregious, and abusive dialogue" pervades (2013: 114). Similarly, Knuttila (2011:7) has researched 4chan by way of "ontological inquiry", focusing on the holistic experience of participating on the site's /b/ (random) board. He concludes that 4chan is both a "simple message board and a complex community", which, grounded in a foundation of anonymity, "embodies an ontological position filled with both promise and peril" (17, 18).

The first large-scale quantitative study of 4chan's /pol/ board was conducted by Hine *et al* (2017), who studied over 1,000,000 unique images shared by users over 2.5 months alongside analysing "hate speech" on

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the board. They conclude that "/pol/'s ability to find or produce original content is likely one of the reasons it is thought to be at the centre of hate on the web". Additional quantitative analysis of 4chan has been carried out by Zannettou *et al* (2018: 14), who find that overall, the site's /pol/ board was particularly influential in the propagation of racist and political memes into other online communities. However, they conclude that when normalised by its size, it is comparatively inefficient in this propagation concerning Reddit or Twitter, suggesting 4chan may primarily influence its internal audience.

Almost no studies have directly compared chan platforms, except for a study by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which found that genocidal language concerning "white supremacy, ethnic hatred and anti-Semitism" was "more pronounced" on 8chan than on 4chan and other far-right social media sites (ADL, 2018). This lack of comparative studies is concerning as the social climate between the chans is not homogenous (Nagle, 2017: 26; Needleman and Olson, 2019). This study addresses this knowledge gap by conducting a mix of quantitative and ethnographic research across several chan sites and boards within.

VISUAL CULTURE AND MEMES

According to Bogerts and Fielitz (2020), visual culture incorporates "what is made visible (or invisible), how, by whom and for whom," and in today's world includes all manner of communication, such as GIFs, emojis and videos, which can become tools of political mobilisation. Visual culture has long been a propaganda technique deployed by actors across the political spectrum, including Hitler's Nazi party which aestheticized its offering through uniforms, pageantry, and parades, in what has been described as "crucial elements of the spectacular visual politics of fascism" (Stanovsky, 2017: 133).

Kølvraa and Forchtner (2019: 229) have argued that the self-representation of the contemporary extreme right is defined by "depictions, framings or imaginings" more than any overtly political message, which they describe as "cultural imaginaries". Through visual rhetoric and other styles of communication, the extreme right aestheticizes and presents an "ideal extreme-right subject" that sympathisers to the cause can identify with – incorporating repertoires of gender,

nature, and the body, as well as elements of dress code and personal style (2019: 227-229).

Memes in particular are a dominant aspect of the visual culture of chans and have become a central tenet in the way in which the far right spreads its narratives online. Milner (2013) shows how many far-right memes are created to appear as comedic and benign, however often "familiarity with racist tropes is necessary to get the joke" (Lamerichs *et al*, 2018: 186) meaning racial stereotypes are made more salient through their dissemination. Memes also act as a form of "subcultural capital" (Prisk, 2017: 9) whereby sharing them, users signal awareness of various alt-right norms, thus creating a community bound by mutual understanding. By disseminating memes online, users may intend to shift the "Overton Window", meaning the boundaries of acceptable public discourse, enabling the Gramscian-style slow creep of extreme right-wing narratives into broader societal consciousness (Nagle 2017: 33)

Far-right memes may also influence radicalisation trajectories into violence, by contributing to the "online politics of transgression", wherein offensive content is viewed as having inherent countercultural value (Nagle, 2017: 20). Within this framework "pity is replaced by cruelty", and "empathy is only an invitation to assault" from others in the community (Nagle 2013: 29, 34). In some extreme far-right circles, users accrue status by sharing explicit and graphic "shock memes" (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir, 2019: 13), which frame violence as inherently thrilling. DeCook (2018), for example, shows how the memes circulated by the alt-right group, the "Proud Boys" aided its recruitment practices, by embodying an ideology that consists of symbolic and physical violence that is particularly attractive to young men in the West.

Bogerts and Fielitz (2020) have stressed the importance of memes to far-right terrorism – introducing the concept of "meme terrorism." Here, far-right actors create and share memes that have a modern visual aesthetic, often infused with humorous and/or pop-cultural references. These memes are strategically designed to be appealing to an online audience and to normalise their tolerance to extreme ideals, and thus constitute an important propaganda tool for right-wing terrorists. Thus, the importance of memes and visual culture within far-right movements cannot be overstated.

METHODOLOGY

This project combines quantitative data-scraping and qualitative data methods including ethnography and visual analysis across 17 English-language chan boards within 12 chan sites of interest, to gain an informed insight into the cultural climate of chan sites and how certain memes might contribute to violent discourse. Specifically, this research focused on the /pol/ ('politically incorrect' or equivalent) and /k/ (weapons) boards on more prominent chan sites like 4chan and 8kun, as well as similar communities on ten more fringe, or 'niche' chans, between March – June 2020. This was conducted with approval from CREST's Security Research Ethics Committee (SREC) in addition to King's College London's Research Ethics Committee, which ensured our methods were ethically correct, and prioritised researcher and participant safety.

QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

Our quantitative data collection involved developing an internet bot, hereafter referred to as a 'crawler', to systematically gather material from 12 chan sites and a total of 17 chan boards, including memetic content and discourse. The objectives of the crawler were to:

1. Ensure completeness, meaning that all pre-selected boards, threads, posts, and images were scraped in their entirety
2. Ensure efficiency, meaning that we did not scrape images that had already been downloaded thus avoiding duplication
3. Ensure anonymity, meaning that our data collection remained anonymous and was not connected to our institutional network address.

To complete this final step, we connected through TOR (The Onion Router), and repeated all steps several times a day, each time randomly selecting a new network address to ensure that the chan administrators were not made aware of the crawler, and did not block it for making persistent queries.

The data collection process proved more challenging than those utilised in recent works on 4chan (Papasavva *et al*, 2020) because many of the alternative boards that we focused on did not have publicly available APIs (Application Program Interfaces). To overcome this, we obtained the catalogue of active threads in each board by systematically browsing the index pages and scraping the identifiers of the most recent posts being discussed, as well as the threads they belonged to. We then downloaded the Web page hosting all the posts in a thread and stored a snapshot of all active threads every hour from when the thread was created. We stored all the snapshots of a post instead of just the most recent one because of the fact that posts can be easily removed, thereby ensuring we did not lose any information. For each thread, we scraped all messages posted and downloaded all images therein.

We then leveraged the data collected to track how images were discussed across the different boards. In particular, we selected and counted the number of posts in which every image appears and ranked the images based on their overall popularity and their spread across different chan sites. To compare images we applied an algorithm, called 'Perceptual Hashing', which calculates when two images appear visually similar to the human eye. Specifically, we used a DCT-based algorithm which uses the Discrete Cosine Transform to obtain a high-level representation of the image. To account for small modifications in the images we applied the DBSCAN clustering algorithm, which was used previously in a project by Savvas Zannettou *et al* (2018). This algorithm connected images that were very visually similar to form clusters based on a distance function. We used the Hamming distance between Perceptual Hashes. To perform the clustering, we first made a pairwise comparison and extracted the distances between all images, for which we used a high-end computer. The clusters which are analysed in more depth in this report have been selected based either on their size, or their relevance to the ethnographic observation of chan sites we also conducted.

ETHNOGRAPHY

We combined quantitative methods with ethnography, here defined as “the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant observation” (Simpson and Coleman, 2017). Our ethnographic research focussed on the experiential practice of participating or ‘lurking’ on each chan site, enabling us to get an accurate *feel* of the different social and cultural climate of each platform, as well as understand the technological specificities of chan sites as they pertain to user experience. Because the language and culture of many chan sites are cultivated to be off-putting to newcomers, this period of ethnographic observation was an important element to our research process, allowing us to more thoroughly appreciate the nuanced social norms and practices common between chan sites and understand how these were reflected within memes and visual culture.

Supplemental to this ethnographic observation we also regularly consulted the online ‘wiki’ site ‘Know Your Meme’. Founded in 2008, the site “researches and documents Internet memes and viral phenomena”, and contains a vast database of memetic content, providing descriptions of the origins and context for a huge number of popular memes, compiled by “an independent professional editorial and research staff and community members” (Know your Meme 2020). The site was a valuable resource in assisting with our interpretations of visual culture.

INTERVIEWS

The project team interviewed 12 subject matter experts, which included stakeholders from the UK and overseas governments, law enforcement, academia, and the technology sector. Participants were selected based upon their professional activities, as well as being recommended by other interviewees. They were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing interviews to remain both guided and flexible (Drever, 1995), thereby ensuring that all major topics were covered whilst not limiting participants to our predetermined ideas. Crucially, they were strictly off-the-record, ensuring the anonymity of interviewees which enabled them to be more open with their views. These interviews were instrumental in guiding our initial research objectives and ensuring that our focus

was sufficiently targeted towards the chan sites and memes of most concern.

ETHICS OF REPRODUCING VIOLENT IMAGES

We have included a small number of memes in the results section of this report that depict violent and more graphic scenarios. We carefully considered the ethical implications of reproducing these images and decided to use only cartoon-style images as opposed to real photographs that depicted violence and gore. The memes deemed worthy of inclusion were done so on the basis they provide a visual representation of how chan participants make use of digital and visual culture, in a way that textual descriptions alone cannot achieve.

LIMITATIONS

Given the limited period of our data collection, this report provides a ‘snapshot’ of chan culture over a particularly turbulent political period. Moreover, we did not extend our analysis to more mainstream social media spaces, which are favoured by a different community of far-right actors, and are often the recipients of memes downstream in the online ecosystem – with many memes originating from within chan culture. It would thus be beneficial in the future to consider how memetic content continues to be deployed in the coming months and years in both niche and mainstream spaces.

RESULTS

We were able to ascertain the most popular images shared between chan sites, providing an insight into how visual culture contributed to the discourse on the chans throughout this project. We then filtered this content, creating two distinct yet overlapping datasets of the most commonly shared images.

The first contains the top 200 images shared within each of the chan sites studied, ordered by their *overall* popularity, i.e. the total number of times an image was observed on any of the chan sites.

The second dataset contains the top 200 images shared *between* chan sites, ordered by their *reach* within chan culture, i.e. the number of unique chan sites that a specific image was observed on.

By comparing these two rankings, we can see that although some images feature in both datasets, the type of content most frequently shared *between* chans appears to differ somewhat to content which achieved the most *overall* popularity. The primary distinction was that the content shared between chans contained more images that contained significantly longer excerpts of text, hereafter referred to as “textual images”, whereas the dataset of content ranked by overall popularity was primarily dominated by images that would be more easily recognisable as memes.

Appendix A contains the top 20 images collated from both datasets, presented with a short interpretation of each image and how it may fit within the context of chan culture. Each image is also accompanied by statistics on the total number of times it was observed across all chan sites (repetitions); the total number of posts the image featured in (posts); the number of boards an image appeared on, and the total number of chans it was shared across. Finally, while each image has been named here, it should be noted that some of the images are relatively obscure or are edits of more popular memes, and thus not all of these titles are the 'official' meme names.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

MEMES AND MALLEABLE MEANINGS

Upon first viewing of the top 20 images included in both datasets, it emerged that few *overtly* encourage violence. However, certain memes have a more 'fixed' meaning than others. The 'Happy Merchant Wojak' for example, is encoded with obvious visual stereotypes, imbuing the meme with overt antisemitism. However, others, such as the 'It's all so Tiresome' meme, require a significant level of background knowledge to fully understand the subtle racist implications behind the image (*see Appendix A*). Thus, a certain level of "digital literacy" is required to understand the nuances contained within many of the images (Koltay 2011: 216), and the meanings conveyed by a large number of memes cannot be properly understood when they are viewed without context.

Indeed, many of the memes studied like the 'Yes Chad' meme, the overall most popular meme featured in this research, appear entirely innocuous when viewed in isolation. The meme features the blonde-haired, blue-eyed 'Nordic' figure with a non-emotive face, and is frankly captioned "Yes". According to Know Your Meme (2019), the meme was originated on 4chan as part of "a series of memes in which various races, subraces, and nationalities, primarily Nordic and Mediterranean, are compared to each other".



The 'Yes Chad' meme.

While, the figure has spread on to mainstream social media, where it is often used without any racist connotations, on 4chan, we observed that it was often used as the archetypical (white) face of /pol/ culture, with the blunt 'yes' caption often being used to succinctly undermine 'leftist' politics or to frankly affirm racist statements.

For instance, in one interaction the meme was simply posted as a response to one user ironically questioning whether /pol/ users are all fascists, while in another case it was posted as a reply to a thread which claimed "Black lives DO NOT MATTER". In both instances, therefore, the meme was used as a kind of anti-humour, cutting through any potential irony or ambiguity which are common on chan sites, and simply affirming racist sentiments. Thus, while the meme's seemingly innocuous appearance allows it to be used without these connotations within mainstream social media circles, potential prior knowledge of the image's origins and the context it is situated within during discussions within some racist threads, allow it to often take on racist meaning within chan culture.

Similarly, we observed that the 'Comfortable Pepe' meme, was used with a range of intents and took on different meanings depending on the context within which it is situated. For instance, in several cases, the meme was used to imply users were confused or simply letting discussions wash over them rather than actively participating. This was the case in one thread discussing declining oil stock prices, where a user posted the meme to signal that they did not fully understand the implications of the situation. Similarly, the meme was also used in a separate thread discussing alternative timelines, where a user posted the image, signalling they didn't wish to get too involved in the conversation but were enjoying the focus on supernatural events. In these instances, the Comfortable Pepe figure conveyed that users were in a state of 'ignorant bliss'.

However, the meme was also used with somewhat more sinister intent. Near the beginning of March of 2020, a user posted the meme in response to a thread

making fun of US citizens who frantically stockpiled emergency supplies before the coronavirus lockdowns. This meme was shared alongside a post stating: “This will be quite the show”. In this instance, the image appears to indicate that the user anticipates enjoying observing the potential widespread chaos caused by Covid-19 and the panic it incites in others, while the user presumably feels prepared and calm by comparison. Thus, here the image is not posted with any violent intent but implies a subtle sense of *'schadenfreude'* or taking pleasure in others' suffering. This meme was utilised similarly by several other users throughout March 2020, to imply they were enjoying the panic brought on by coronavirus and Covid-19-related lockdowns.



The 'Comfortable Pepe' meme.

In other instances, the image was used to affirm racist sentiments. In late May 2020, a 4chan thread was created, sharing a link to a live stream of the Black Lives Matter protests which occurred in Minneapolis the wake of the death of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American man (Noor 2020). Threads such as these are common on 4chan where users are encouraged to gather together in a thread to watch and gleefully comment on a ‘Happening’ – a particularly important or interesting political or societal event, often involving violence. One user replied using the Comfortable Pepe meme, excitedly commenting “Everything is burning! :D”.

In this case, the use of the meme implies more than simple *schadenfreude*. The implication here is that the user may find the social unrest and collective distraught caused by George Floyd's death amusing, and views the ensuing chaos as a source of entertainment. This interpretation inherently trivialises Floyd's death and the subsequent protests which were framed by many

as a catalyst for high-level critical reflection on race relations and sparked numerous international Black Lives Matter protests (Hassan and O'Grady 2020). In this instance, the user positions himself as a satisfied onlooker being passively entertained by mass political unrest, contentedly observing the suffering of others brought on by racial crises. Other similar instances were observed where the meme was posted apparently with the same intent in threads discussing violent incidents.

This example captures the fact that several innocuous memes take on a different meaning in relation to the contexts in which they are used. While it is not insignificant that the latter meme discussed here features the Pepe the Frog character - which has become an enduring symbol of the alt-right despite the original artist, Matt Furie's best intentions (ADL, 2016) – it is clear that the image can be used with a variety of intents and may indicate simple lethargy or smugness, or be employed to convey delight at observing racial tension and societal discord. In this way, it should be stressed that a number of images and memes may not have an entirely *fixed* meaning, rather the implications of many memes may be malleable, and can change given the *context* and *intent* with which they are posted.

‘VIOLENT’ IMAGES

While the above section has outlined that some of the memes studied here may be used relatively innocuously until situated within a broader context of violence, the following two sections will attend to images that had a more ‘fixed’ meaning. During this research, we encountered several images which overtly depicted actions of violence or references to violent acts – which this section will attend to specifically – and which must be considered inherently discriminatory no matter the context in which they were used – which will be discussed further in the following section.

While viewing so-called ‘offensive images’ which might contain negative stereotypes may be considered violence owing to the harm they may do to viewers, other images may also contain unambiguous references to physical violence.

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Indeed, we were able to manually identify a number of images depicting violent scenarios across the top 200 images from each dataset. For the sake of clarity and brevity, here we define a 'violent scenario', as one which depicts physical harm being done to a human or animal – be this in a photograph or cartoon-style image – or which implies that physical violence has very recently occurred. Relatedly, we also recorded images showing figures covered in blood, or wielding firearms. The parameters of this analysis were designed to capture images that directly portray physical violence – excluding other, less direct forms of violent action from this analysis – however, there are some drawbacks to these definitions. For instance, images that could be judged to have a threatening 'tone' have not been included in this analysis.

Following this definition, we identified five images depicting violent scenarios in the dataset containing the top 200 images ranked by their overall popularity. Also, it was noted that two further images depicted cartoon-style characters covered in blood, and a further six images showed various figures wielding firearms. These results differed slightly for the dataset containing the top 200 images ranked by their spread between chan sites, where three images showing 'violent scenarios' were identified, one image showed a cartoon figure covered in blood, and eight images depicted figures wielding firearms. It is of additional note, that of these eight firearms-related images, three were screencaps taken from the Christchurch attacker's live stream of his attack, with various edits made to increase the images' aesthetic appeal.

It is worth briefly qualifying these results. Our analysis here is limited to the top 200 images in each dataset, and thus only accounts for the most popular images which were shared *more than once* on or between chan sites. The scope of this analysis therefore excludes any images depicting gore and violence which were only shared once to a chan site. Similarly, this study has focussed upon the *most popular* images found within chan culture, and thus, it is probable that many more violent images were shared to the chans, however, they have not registered highly within the datasets studied here. Based on ethnographic observation of various chan sites, we observed several images depicting violent scenarios or implying violence which do not feature within these datasets, thus the absence of large numbers of violent images presented here should

not undermine the fact that they can be found easily during casual browsing on chan sites. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy in itself that many of these images do not feature among the most popular images studied in this report – indicating that explicitly violent memes are reshared less than seemingly innocuous or more subtly threatening images.

Finally, the potential *impact* of encountering a violent image online should not be belittled due to their underrepresentation within the datasets here (Feinstein *et al* 2013). Similarly, nor should it be suggested that it is only images depicting explicitly violent scenarios that may influence potential trajectories into violent extremism. Indeed, it has been noted throughout this report that images may convey negative ideas and stereotypes, or may take on such meanings through a context which may also influence users in this direction.



A selection of images judged to depict 'violent scenarios'. The most graphic content has not been included in this example.

The above images depict violent scenarios and have been taken from the datasets studied as part of this report. The power dynamics that they embody are of importance. One (above: top) depicts Pepe the Frog violently driving a stake or firearm through the skull of a figure depicted with overly stereotyped 'Jewish

features'. The implications of the image appear clear, with the Pepe character being used to represent the alt-right more broadly, and thus implying that the violent murder of Jewish people is permissible within alt-right communities. The tone of the image is also important. Its cartoon-style and the somewhat surreal inclusion of the anthropomorphised Pepe character contribute to the image's subversive and ironic feel, conveying that violence against members of the Jewish community is also something which can be trivialised.

In contrast, the second manga-style image (left: bottom), which depicts a communist woman being shot in the head, places more emphasis on the sensation of violence, using blurred lines to imply a more thrilling *feel* of shooting someone. The woman's large eyes and pained expression in juxtaposition to the blood shooting from her head also make the image somewhat emotive particularly when contrasted with the harsh lettering which frames the murder of 'communists' as acceptable.

Memes like those pictured above serve a dehumanising purpose, suggesting that it is 'okay' to kill or commit acts of violence towards groups or individuals identified as 'outsiders'. Luke Munn (2019) shows that through repeated exposure, the extreme narratives contained within far-right memes "slowly edge their way into the psyche, normalising fascist beliefs and transforming the individual". He goes on to note that sustained exposure to dehumanising content "transforms rights-bearing subjects into apolitical objects", paving the way for "targets to be mistreated, as in rape threats, or managed by others, as in the deportation schemes of racial utopias", and as a logical extension of this concept, targeted in acts of physical violence. Indeed, Randy Borum (2012: 29) notes that processes of dehumanisation may "erode psychological barriers to violence", thereby lessening one's moral repulsion towards committing violent action against a designated out-group. Thus, repeated consumption of memes which trivialise violent scenarios may establish a new baseline, wherein one's moral repulsion to such violence is weakened.

The cartoon style of such memes and their heavy-handed surrealism is likely intentionally ironic and trivialising, yet it also provides users with a degree of inherent deniability. The harsh depictions of violence when juxtaposed with such a trivial aesthetic, not only

allows extreme visuals to be masked by a guise of humour, but allows users to mock outsiders who might take the brutality of the images seriously by responding with shock or condemnation (Crawford 2020). Ryan Milner (2013: 66) has described this dynamic as the "logic of lulz", wherein online users are continuously able to 'troll' outsiders, "using humour and antagonism to rile angry responses and shift the content and tone of the conversation", it is this mechanism which enables the continuous replication of such images, and potentially, the gradual desensitisation towards violence. Thus, while memes of this sort cannot be taken as literal endorsements of physical violence or murder, it is this vagueness in and of itself that enables images such as these to be shared and reshared, both potentially desensitising viewers to extremist concepts and causing harm and distress to onlookers.

The potential dangers of this desensitisation become more pressing when considering that the 54th most overall popular image shared between chan sites was a photograph white man kneeling beside the bloodied dead body of a black man who appeared to have been violently murdered with much of his face having been shot off. The image, which was shared a total of 150 times, is an example of extreme gore and exemplifies the fact that not only do some cartoon-style memes trivialise violence, other extremely graphic images glorify and to some extent fetishize the graphic reality of violence, transforming images of dead bodies into "dark spectacle[s]" within far-right communities (Nagle 2017: 31).

'IDEOLOGICAL' AND 'CONSPIRATORIAL' MEMES

Several images observed throughout this project were used to convey or represent complex ideological concepts. One example of this is the 'Happy Merchant' meme, which depicts a derogatory drawing of a bearded Jewish man with exaggerated facial features who appears to be rubbing his hands together in satisfaction. This visual representation of Jews is not novel, nor would it look out of place in the Nazi propaganda reels of 1930s Germany.

The Happy Merchant is one of the most ubiquitous memes shared within chan culture, and our analysis identified a large cluster of 21 different variants of

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the original meme. The basic iteration of the meme is typically deployed to reinforce a myriad of antisemitic beliefs and conspiracy theories, including the idea that Jews throughout history have controlled the global financial market (Neuberger, 2019: 84). This is implied through the Happy Merchant's greedy and gleeful hunched posture. The visual stereotypes conveyed by the images make it one of the memes within our dataset which must be considered discriminatory no matter the context it is situated within. It is an inherently antisemitic image. However, various 'edits' of the meme were observed which add further nuance to its meaning.

One iteration of the meme was identified by the cluster analysis showing the Merchant character leering behind a mask. Inherent within the image is the idea that while some individuals or organisations may appear innocent or innocuous, they may be being controlled by Jewish influence. This notion accords with various antisemitic conspiracy theories such as the "Zionist Occupied Government", and "Cultural Marxism" conspiracy, which both contend that Jewish elites secretly preside over, and rule various aspects of society (Tourish and Wohlforth 2001; Mirrless 2018). Accordingly, in early 2020 versions of the image depicting the Merchant figure wearing gloves and a face mask were circulated, appearing to imply that Jewish people were the creators or orchestrators of the Covid-19 pandemic, chiming with a number of antisemitic conspiracy theories which a 2020 investigation by the British charity the Community Security Trust (CST, 2020) shows were rife online during the early stages of the pandemic.

In short, visually simple memes can be shared online to convey complex ideological concepts and conspiracy

theories. These images may then be 'built upon' and edited to convey various layers of nuance to these narratives. This visual format is 'easily digestible' and complex ideological concepts can therefore be transmitted at a glance in image format.

'TEXTUAL' IMAGES

Finally, in comparing the top 20 images from each dataset, it is immediately apparent that many more of the images featured in the second set which were shared widely *between* chan boards contained significantly longer excerpts of text. Indeed, the majority of these images, when shared on a chan site, would require users to open the image and zoom in on it manually to be able to read the finely-printed text. This kind of visual format calls into question what a 'meme' is, as many of these posts, which gained considerable traction between chans more closely resemble a long-form essay. In general, it might be concluded that images containing long swathes of text are not memes in the 'traditional' sense as they do not rely mainly upon visual elements or the interplay between image and text to produce easily-digestible meanings, rather they are long-form 'memes' made popular within specific online subcultures. Thus, they can be considered 'textual' images, containing written narratives and arguments.

However, this distinction should not diminish their importance in our analysis. As is evidenced within our results, 12 of the 20 most popular images shared between chan sites referenced an omnibus of popular antisemitic conspiracies, many of which accorded with Cultural Marxist narratives and implied that Jewish



The original 'Happy Merchant' meme and two edits.

people, by nature, wished to destroy and exterminate the white race. Of these images, ten contained long bodies of text which could not be read unless they were enlarged.

Posts such as these contained far more detailed arguments and analysis of ideological concepts and political minutiae than could be conveyed in a single picture containing little or no text. Thus, by sharing longer ‘textual-images’ users were able to share and discuss ideological and political complexities with each other, as well as spread detailed accounts of conspiracy theories. This image format may remain popular within chan culture, as it allows longer-form content such as essays or detailed lists to be easily downloaded and shared online in an image format, rather than requiring a user to type, or copy-and-paste large bodies of text into a thread.

Similarly, screencaps taken of written posts previously made to chan sites featured prominently within both datasets. Again, posts such as these might enable users to engage with longer-form content and more complex ideological concepts. However, by specifically re-sharing archived content from various chan sites, users are also participating in the construction and preservation of a kind of ‘written history’ of chan culture. It is not insignificant that posts originally made to 8chan or more niche chan sites gained considerable traction as screencaps on the more mainstream 4chan. Although ideological and cultural differences exist between individual chan sites (and boards within sites), the sharing of chan-based content between various chan platforms clarifies that users of chans share some kind of overarching sense of community, distinct from mainstream social media, and thus further legitimises the concept of ‘chan culture’ as a particular form of social media praxis.

MEMES IN CONTEXT: KEY EVENTS IN 2020

The first half of 2020 proved to be especially turbulent, being a time of both political and societal unrest due to the Covid-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests that spread globally. Because these events coincided with our data collection period, we have included this additional chapter to explore some of the primary reactions of chan communities to these events, in particular how certain memes played a role in fostering and accentuating extremist narratives and unrest.

Many of the memes discussed in this section feature among the top 200 images shared between and within chan sites, while others have been included in this analysis as they are thought to be particularly clear visual depictions of narratives observed during our ethnographic research on chan sites during this time. Other images were identified as belonging to the most prominent meme clusters observed within our data collection period. Thus, a range of images have selected for analysis in this section for their varied contributions to discourse across chan sites during this project.

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

As has been noted above, the Covid-19 pandemic dominated this research and was a key aspect of discussion across all the chan boards studied in this report. Indeed, the 4chan archiving database '4plebs' (2020) shows that the term "coronavirus" has been used in a total of 189,067 posts made to 4chan's /pol/ board, with a further 67,375 posts featuring the term "Covid-19", and 25,810 using "coronachan". This influence was also evidenced in the visual culture across chan sites - of the top 200 most popular memes 43 made direct references to Covid-19.

It is of note that some 4chan users were aware of the Covid-19 in its early stages, with posts relating to the outbreak in China being made as early as 2nd January 2020. Yet, it was not until 21st January, that

the "Corona-chan" meme, which would go on to be the most widely shared and likely the most ubiquitous meme of the pandemic, was posted to 4chan's /pol/ board. The meme is an anthropomorphic representation of the virus itself, depicted as a young Asian woman, often pictured carrying a bottle of Corona beer and waving the Chinese flag. Since first being posted on 4chan, the meme has been reworked and reimagined by various users and there are now numerous iterations, with the figure often wearing a facemask or touting bat wings and vampire fangs. This kind of artwork is itself an extension of the similar 'Ebola-chan' figure which was shared extensively on 4chan during the Ebola pandemic in 2014.



The original "corona-chan" meme.

The visual style of 'Corona-chan' memes is immediately notable. The Corona-chan figure is very obviously depicted as being Chinese, most often wearing traditional Chinese garments, and originally drawn holding a Chinese flag. These visual choices irrevocably link China with the pandemic, conveying that Covid-19 is an inherently 'Chinese virus'. This visual depiction accorded with various instances of anti-Asian sentiment across chan sites throughout this research.

Across many of the chans studied, users floated the conspiracy that the virus was deliberately engineered by scientists in China, using this narrative as justification for using a variety of anti-Asian slurs to describe the virus, a phenomenon which Human Rights Watch (2020) shows has increased since the Covid-19 outbreak. This conspiracy appears to be

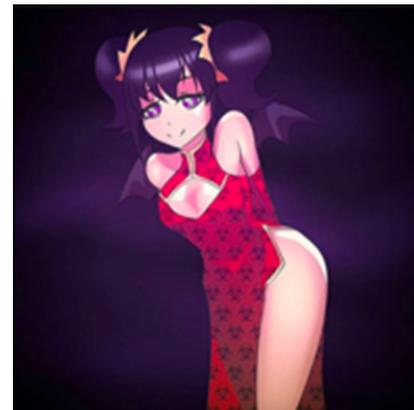
reflected in several Corona-chan memes where the figure is pictured celebrating new cases of infection, thus reinforcing the false notion that the virus was deliberately released and spread.



A corona-chan meme celebrating new cases of infection.

The artistic style also conveys a number of inherent power dynamics. Most of the most popular Corona-chan memes collected were sexualised, with many depicting Corona-chan with large breasts or buttocks which could not be covered by her clothing. Images such as these accord with popular depictions of women in media where their agency is reduced to their sexual appeal (Stankiewicz and Rosselli 2008). Thus, many interpretations of the Corona-chan meme are imbued with misogynistic undertones.

Yet more broadly like the images discussed above, these sexualised depictions trivialise the devastating impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, minimising the death and unrest that the pandemic has caused and instead emphasising the over-sexualised feminine features of the fictional corona-chan figure. These trivialising dynamics accord with Nagle's (2019) observation that within alt-right online spaces, traditional sources of empathy are disregarded in favour of a sense of unaffected subcultural cool. In this way, the corona-chan meme is used to minimise and ironize the emotional impact of the coronavirus.



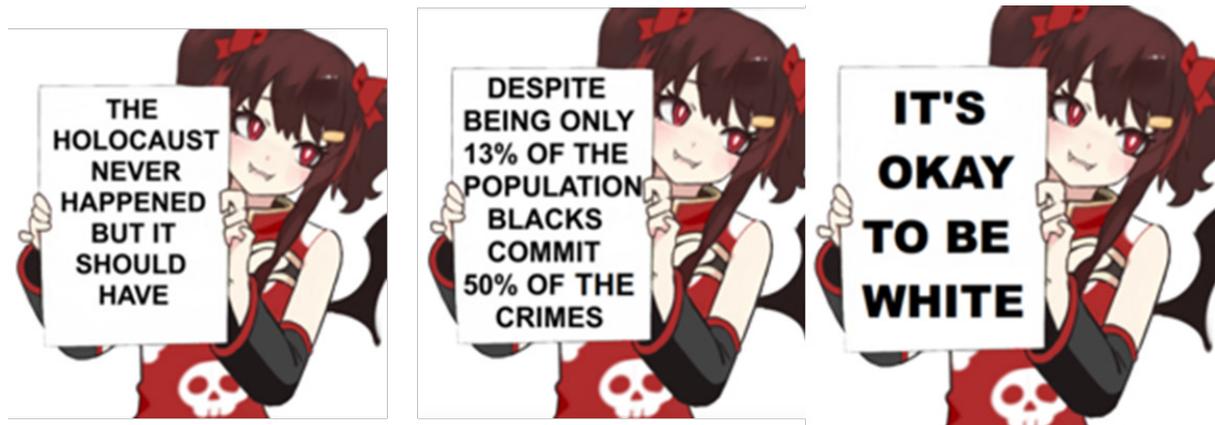
Sexualised depictions of the Corona-chan figure.

Finally, one of the most prevalent meme clusters was a 'template' Corona-chan meme, showing the figure holding a blank slate which could be filled with text. This kind of meme is designed to be easily shared and edited between users, with each new user being encouraged to insert new text onto the image, thereby bringing new meaning to each iteration of the meme.

It is evident that many users utilised this remix function to combine the Corona-chan meme with more overtly racist or National Socialist messaging, editing in messages like "it's okay to be white" - a favourite provocative catchphrase of the alt-right (ADL, 2018), "Hitler did nothing wrong and the Holocaust is a hoax", or messages such as "despite being only 13% of the population blacks commit 50% of the crimes", thus again pushing popular alt-right ideological tropes like the notion that black people are inherently more violent or prone to crime than whites.

MEMES IN CONTEXT: KEY EVENTS IN 2020

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Corona-chan template meme cluster

In these images the Corona-chan figure was invoked to 'soften the blow' of these sentiments, making them more easily shareable, or simply to be humorous because of the juxtaposition of the 'cute' character and overtly racist messages. These examples show how the corona-chan meme in some ways became a vehicle for more overtly virulent hate. The format of the meme is also significant. By being so easily editable, the image lowers the barrier for inclusion in the production of meme content, thus encouraging users to actively participate in creating their own memes and joining a community of "semiotic productivity", producing frames which can themselves be reproduced and shared (Fiske, 1992). This kind of meme is therefore important in encouraging participation with an online community and thereby fostering a sense of mutual identity formation.

In this way, the Corona-chan figure was centrally important to discourse with chan culture, and in influencing and reinforcing racist, and misogynistic stereotypes online. Some iterations of the meme also fostered active engagement from users, transforming them into active participants within online chan communities.

BLACK LIVES MATTER 2020

As has been noted throughout this study, the death of George Floyd, which reignited the global Black Lives Matter movement that gained prominence in 2013 in reaction to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, also significantly influenced discourse within chan sites. Based upon our ethnography, it became evident that across several chans, Black Lives Matter protests were used

to encourage traditional racist tropes, as well as to encourage popular extreme right-wing narratives that an apocalyptic 'race war' in the United States was imminent. In both instances, visual culture was instrumental in fostering the 'in-group' status of the chan userbase, through the resharing of memes that both trivialised racism and violence against minorities, while also glorifying the prospect of societal collapse and race war.

ENCOURAGEMENT OF RACISM

The death of George Floyd sparked a particular upsurge of activity on 8kun's /pnd/ board, which hosted an ongoing thread entitled "The Great Chimpout 2020". This became the site's primary source of posts and information relating to the Black Lives Matter movement, with other fringe sites referring to it as the "global chimpening". This choice of language invokes historic abuse that black people have long been subject to by comparing them to animals, specifically apes and monkeys, in a manner designed to dehumanise and 'other'. Deployed in this way, it is also used to undermine the legitimacy of the protests themselves, characterising protestors as animals that lack 'human' self-control. Within this thread, images such as the 'Bix Nood' meme (below: left), which originated on 4chan were commonplace, showing a caricatured Black man speaking gibberish to a white man – whilst appearing as an intruder at his window. The 'bix nood' phrase originally appeared in a racist caricature by artist Nick Bougas, and the trope has been used in a variety of online memes to depict Black people speaking in long strings of nonsense or gibberish, with animalistic implications that they are less educated or less evolved than white people (Ward 2018).



'Bix Nood' meme



'Looting man before officer' meme

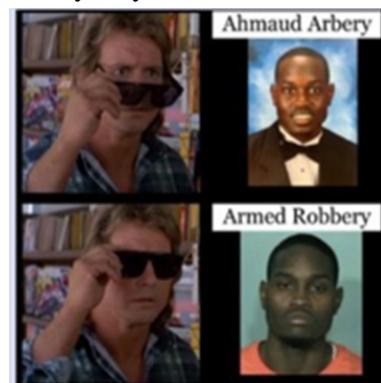
Other memes presented a similar visual style in their unfavourable representation of Black men. In the example (above: right), a black man is depicted as clutching presumably looted goods against the backdrop of a burning city while a white officer kneels before him, trivializing the notion of 'taking a knee' associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. In both examples, the dehumanising tropes are manifest in their depiction, through the exaggeration of certain facial features and gormless expressions.

These stereotypes are starkly contrasted by the depiction of both white characters, one of whom (above: top) appears strong, protective, and virtuous in comparison, while the other (above: below) is portrayed as being humiliated by being forced into an 'apologist' role by 'politically correct' societal norms surrounding race relations. Moreover, these memes perpetuate the harmful stereotype of black men as criminals and intruders, with the second meme, in particular, intended to delegitimise the Black Lives Matter protests by implying that the protesters were

motivated by consumerism more than they were their civil rights.

Images depicting George Floyd's death in both trivial and gruesome ways also became a feature across several chans. One particularly graphic representation of the incident which mocked Floyd's final moments using extremely graphic imagery was one of the top 200 memes shared within our dataset, appearing over 100 times across two chans. The meme's popularity exemplifies the casual and mocking approach to violence within chan culture and how some chan users appeared to regard Black lives as disposable.

The death of Ahmaud Arbery, another unarmed African-American man shot and killed in the United States in early 2020 (BBC News, 2020) also became a feature of "The Great Chimpening" thread. Arbery had been jogging at the time of his murder, which became the source of wordplay within the thread as "jogger" was used as a synonym for the racial slur "n*gger."



'They Live Sunglasses' meme with Ahmaud Arbery/ Armed Robbery

The slur inherently trivialises how Ahmaud Arbery was killed and is exemplary of the mocking tone found within chan culture.

Visually, memes concerning the event also sought to draw a connection between Ahmaud Arbery's race and his alleged criminality. For example, in a version of the 'They Live Sunglasses Meme' (above), which is typically deployed within chan culture to symbolise the poster's understanding of the 'true' message behind a particular event, Ahmaud Arbery's face was juxtaposed with a mugshot and the words "Armed Robbery". Here, the indication is that because of his race, Arbery was inevitably engaging in illegal activity, and was thus 'deserving' of what happened to him,

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once again reinforcing the stereotype that Black men are predisposed to criminality, whilst at the same time making light of his death. Of note, is that this was one of the most popular memes shared within our dataset, appearing 125 times across 2 chans, indicating how widespread this racist attitude towards Ahmaud Arbery's death was across chan culture.

Given the presence of bigotry and racism within general chan culture, the memes observed in reaction to Black Lives Matter are not necessarily surprising, yet they do reveal how increased uncertainty and racial tensions can be manipulated online and used to foster the alt-right's 'in-group' status. While there is no tangible evidence to suggest that individuals moved from consuming chan content into committing real-world violence, it is important to understand how increased exposure to certain memes may cement a more racist and violent worldview.

THE ACCELERATION OF VIOLENCE AND RACE WAR

Another trend observed in response to the protests was the promotion of the accelerationist narrative that events surrounding the Black Lives Matter protests signified the beginning of a race war in the United States and beyond. According to Jade Parker (2020), accelerationism is an "ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to "accelerate" its destruction," and seeks to disrupt the "political discourse to specifically concentrate attention on highly polarizing subjects." As seen above with this version of the 'Doom Paul/It's Happening' meme, members of the community appeared palpably excited about an escalation of violence. According to Know Your Meme, Doom Paul originated on 4chan in 2009 and is in an image featuring the American physician and former presidential candidate Ron Paul. It was originally used to depict what could happen if Ron Paul was not elected for president – however, is now commonly used to indicate events that may have apocalyptic consequences.

While this anticipation of a race war can be interpreted as entirely ironic, some users did appear to consider seriously engaging in violence, and made posts to chan boards discussing potential weapons and tactics they might use if conflicts occurred. In some instances,



The 'Doom Paul/It's Happening' meme.

users debated how countries in Europe with stricter gun controls would be able to "join in the festivities," as the violence spread. In others, users described how people should seek to destroy infrastructure and use the chaos of darkness to hurt Jewish people and non-whites. In one particularly concerning post, a user referenced the Boston Marathon bombing, reminding others how "insanely easy" pressure cooker bombers are to make.

It thus became clear that as unrest across the world grew, some users viewed the Black Lives Matter protests as a potential opportunity to revel in instability and sow discord. Within these posts, we observed numerous 'nods' to neo-Nazi terminology and texts such as James Mason's 'Siege' and William Pierce's 'The Turner Diaries', both of which advocate violence to pave the way for a utopian white future. Interestingly, the tone of several posts even revered groups such as Islamic State, indicating a desire for the far right to become similarly disciplined and coordinated.

The visual promotion of accelerationist narratives was particularly revealing. The meme (below: left), which was shared over 100 times on both prominent and niche boards depicts a version of the 'Yes Chad' meme (below: right) dressed as an 'Accelerationist' in paramilitary attire next to 'Soyjak' who appears to be lamenting society's collapse. The artistic style is indicative of how this community wishes itself to be perceived, as the paramilitary figure conveys power and strength – in comparison to Soyjack's sobbing mess.

Of note, are the neo-Nazi symbols emblazoned on

his uniform including the Celtic Cross, the numbers 1488 (14 representing the 'Fourteen Words' slogan coined by the white supremacist David Lane, and 88 representing the eighth letter of the alphabet repeated twice for Heil Hitler), the Black Sun, which was a symbol of the SS and the runic symbol 'Wolfsangel'



An accelerationist edit of the Yes Chad meme.

which was appropriated by the Nazi Party, as well as the slogans "Free Earnest", "Free Tarrant" and "For Ebba", referring to the attacks in Poway, the United States, and Christchurch, New Zealand.

Given the context in which it was deployed, we can assume that this meme is intended to glorify and promote violent accelerationism. Indeed, alongside this meme, a user commented "this is the perfect time for the next Saint to descend", implying that another user should capitalise on societal discord and carry out a Christchurch-style mass-causality attack.

Despite the promotion of accelerationism through visual culture within several chans during this time, there is no evidence to indicate that chan users are organising strategically to 'capitalise' on unrest relating to the Black Lives Matter movement. That said, the ongoing anger following George Floyd's death, police brutality, a poorly handled pandemic, and tensions surrounding the upcoming November election reveal a particularly fragile United States, which chan users may continue to exploit for their purposes, particularly to encourage the societal collapse and race war.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Our project has revealed that while chan sites, *in general*, are places for individuals to discuss shared passions, several boards appear to be facilitating the 'in-group' status that is so critical in fostering an extremist mindset. In large part, this is due to the modern pop-cultural aesthetic deployed by users via memes, attracting a younger generation of digital natives who are initially drawn in by the visual culture, and then become slowly more tolerant of radical and extreme ideologies. This ironic subculture, however, makes the interpretation of violent content particularly challenging, as discerning genuine intent from trolling or shitposting is near impossible.

Unlike mainstream social media, chan sites are intended to be anarchic and impenetrable to outsiders, their appeal lying in their nicheness and self-referential jokes, which further deepens a unique sense of community. This is not to imply that chan communities are entirely homogenous or cohesive – as our findings reveal a coalescing of individuals and movements that intersect across a variety of ideologies and preferences. This ambiguity plays to chan culture's advantage as the mainstream often interprets content at 'face value' without recognising the multiple interpretations and uses of particular images. This lack of digital literacy in turn may cement chan users' sense of in-group belonging in the face of outsiders who do not understand the specific qualities of visual culture within chan sites.

When considering the promotion of violence, our findings reveal the malleable meaning of memetic content shared across the chans, whereby memes which at first glance appear innocuous take on subtle and more sinister meanings when understood in their correct context. However, our data additionally reveals a subset of popular images that explicitly glorify violence against 'outsiders'. Whilst not all of these images should be taken as a literal endorsement of physical violence, their presence within chan culture is significant, as they serve to dehumanise and 'other', whilst contributing to gradual desensitisation to the concept of violence.

This project also points towards a subset of chan users who leveraged memetic content as a way in which to engage within political and ideological conversations. This was evidenced by the ubiquity of certain memes based upon ideological narratives or conspiratorial stereotypes such as the 'Happy Merchant' meme, as well as the significant reach of textual images shared *between* chan sites. Often, these served to push conspiracy theories and antisemitic narratives, while simultaneously indicating a desire to participate in the construction and preservation of chan culture itself.

Finally, the overlapping of our project with several months of global and political unrest, namely the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and renewed Black Lives Matter protests provided us with unique insight into how the discourse within chan culture is shaped by real-world events. Notably, the visual culture observed across the chans proved influential in reinforcing several racist and misogynistic narratives, once more fomenting the 'in-group' status of the community. Several users on some chans appeared to view these events as an opportunity to sow discord and bring about an apocalyptic race war. While there is no concrete evidence that this translated into real-world violence, it is nevertheless important to note, particularly as previous attacks have demonstrated the relationship between chan culture and mass-casualty far-right terrorism. The memetic trivialisation and glorification of violence observed throughout this project thus remain a real and present danger.

RECOMMENDATIONS

LITERACY IN DIGITAL AND VISUAL CULTURE

- The ironic memetic subculture found within chans makes interpretation of violent content particularly challenging, and it is thus essential practitioners and researchers working in this space embed themselves within the culture to understand its nuances and codes. Without this, chan content risks being interpreted at face-value, which may lead to wasted resources.

- Human analysis must be retained alongside data-driven approaches, as our project showed that computer-based methods alone fail to capture the subtext and many layers behind chan content. This is particularly true of the promotion of violence, in which we identified both subtle and overt examples.
- Literacy in digital and visual culture interpretation should not be limited to researchers and practitioners, as young people in education would benefit from an understanding of memetic subtext and an ability to discern between humour and bigotry, given that the younger generation is generally the intended audience for this form of content. To this end, adopting lessons from sectors working to combat manipulated information would be valuable.
- Ensuring the work of experts in the field from academia and industry feeds into HMG's policy formation. This could be achieved through the creation of a bi-annual working group, in which experts could present ongoing research and update relevant government stakeholders about ongoing trends in this space.
- Finally, academics should seek to combine knowledge of chan communities with other 'push factors' to radicalisation, including social isolation, vulnerability, proclivity to violence, and political factors (to name a few) to develop a sense of how chans intersect with other radicalisation factors.

DEVELOP A CROWDSOURCED DATABASE OF 'HATEFUL' MEMES

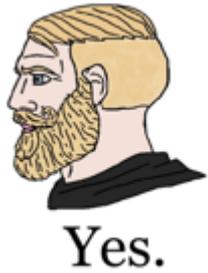
- Connected to the above, researchers and practitioners would benefit from access to a dedicated website for memes which may be somewhat ambiguous or are often used in a 'hateful' context. This could follow the format of the Anti-Defamation League's 'Hate Symbols Database', and be similarly conducted via crowdsourcing to the 'Know Your Meme' database, however, with a sole focus on hateful memetic content, and including descriptions of hateful edits of popular memes which alter their original meanings.

DEEPENING KNOWLEDGE

- This project provides a 'snapshot' of activity over several turbulent months. It would therefore be beneficial to further consider how memetic content continues to be deployed in the coming months and years on the chans selected.
- Furthermore, our analysis does not extend to mainstream social media, which are favoured by an overlapping yet distinct community of far-right actors, and often utilise memes that originated from within chan culture. Connecting niche chan sites with mainstream social media in a broader analysis would provide a more holistic understanding of the deployment of memes online.

APPENDIX A

Top 20 images by overall popularity (Ranked by number of times observed across all chans)

Name	Image	Interpretation	Statistics
<p>1</p> <p>Yes Chad</p>		<p>The image shows the blonde-haired, blue-eyed ‘Nordic’ figure with a non-emotive face and is frankly captioned “Yes”. The meme is commonly used as a reaction to other posts made on the chans, often to mock other users. In many cases the Yes Chad meme appeared to be used to represent the voice of chan users, as the embodiment of unfeeling, seemingly rational reason. For example, in one instance a 4chan user simply posted the Yes Chad meme in response to a thread claiming, “Black lives DO NOT matter”. In this context, the meme was used to concur with this ideological stance and confirm that this opinion was regarded as fact within the chan.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 743</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 739</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 3</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 2</p>
<p>2</p> <p>Winnie the Flu</p>		<p>This meme depicts Xi Jinping, the President of the People’s Republic of China, reimagined in cartoon-style as Winnie the Pooh. He is positioned beside several Covid-19 particles and the caption “China’s Winnie the Flu”. The meme is a continuation of online trolling of Xi Jinping, likening him to Winnie the Pooh, a practice which has intensified after Chinese government attempted to crack down on memes likening him to the cartoon character (Haas, 2018). The meme also encapsulates elements of anti-Chinese sentiments which appeared heightened following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and a number of users posted the meme alongside anti-Chinese textual posts.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 659</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 659</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 3</p>
<p>3</p> <p>Crying Laughing Pepe</p>		<p>A version of the Pepe the Frog meme which has become a symbol of the alt-right. This close-up version implies more intense laughter than other similar edits of Pepe and was the most popular Pepe reaction image used on 4chan, often utilised to mock other users’ posts or other ideologies.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 585</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 585</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 2</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 1</p>

<p>4</p> <p>Based Department</p>		<p>This meme shows a mobile phone screen with an incoming call from the ‘Based Department’. Within online and alt-right circles the term ‘based’ means to be oneself outside the confines of social norms. In practice it is often used to imply one is enlightened to alt-right ideology, as is exemplified in the common phrase “based and red-pilled”, used to describe concepts endorsed by the alt-right. Therefore, this meme was used as a common reaction image to suggest that users making posts online in line with alt-right ideals are being contacted and endorsed by the ‘Based Department’, headed by a very business-like Pepe the Frog.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 531</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 551</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 2</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 1</p>
<p>5</p> <p>Carlos</p>		<p>This meme features the ‘Carlos’ character from the children’s television show ‘The Magic School Bus’, famous for making pun jokes. The image has long been used online within forum culture to accompany posts making intentionally bad puns. In this study the meme achieved particular spread within 4chan’s /pol/ board where users either posted stand-alone puns, or at times made puns in order to trivialize violent incidents.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 472</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 472</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 3</p>
<p>6</p> <p>Screencap of Chinese Culture</p>		<p>The image is a screencap of a number of 4chan posts discussing the history of Chinese culture. The author of the post states that the ‘native’ occupants of China are effectively ‘extinct’ after being ‘conquered’ by various foreign invaders for almost 300 years’. The screencap was particularly popular on 4chan where some of the userbase is divided in its attitude towards China, with some upholding China as an example of a mostly racially homogenous society. This image was often used in reaction to such posts glorifying China in order to imply that China is, in fact, a racially heterogeneous society, and should therefore not be regarded as a model for the white race to emulate.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 415</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 412</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 3</p>

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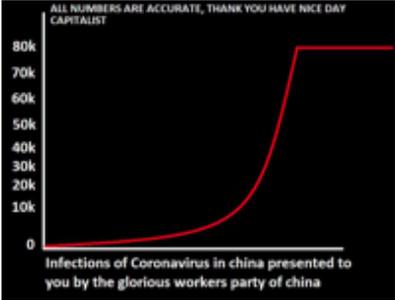
Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures

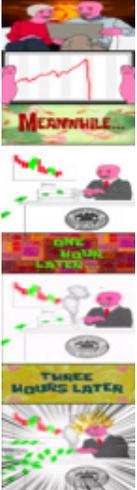
<p>7</p> <p>Emotional Wojak</p>		<p>A depiction of the Wojak character appearing both angry and emotionally frustrated. It is a frequently used reaction image to express frustration or disagreement, or to mock other users' who are judged to be behaving in an overly-emotional manner.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 359</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 359</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>
<p>8</p> <p>Screencap of Pandemic Warning</p>		<p>A screencap of a series of posts made to a very popular fringe chan site in late January 2020. The author claims to be privy to advanced knowledge about the Covid-19 pandemic from friends and family involved in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization. He claims that Chinese authorities have withheld important information about the virus and that the world should prepare for serious medical, societal and economic ramifications as a result of an impending pandemic.</p> <p>Anonymous sources claiming to have insider intelligence are not uncommon within chan culture, as has been best exemplified by the QAnon conspiracy phenomenon which originated on 4chan. This post was widely shared throughout a number of chans over the course of this research and was largely regarded as a trusted source with chan users citing the text to demonstrate the serious implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, and as time went on, to warn others that conditions could quickly worsen should the virus mutate.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 352</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 345</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 3</p>
<p>9</p> <p>It's All So Tiresome</p>		<p>A screencap taken from the 2011 documentary Empire of Dust in which the Chinese Railway Engineering Company attempted to build a railroad in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The image shows the Railway Engineering Company's Head of Logistics, Lao Yang, express his frustration at having to work with Congolese people. It is often used as a reaction image online with racist undertones.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 349</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 349</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 6</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>

<p>10</p> <p>Money Printer Go Brrr.</p>		<p>The meme depicts a Wojak-style employee representing the United States Federal Reserve printing large amounts of money in response to the economic collapse threatened by the effects of Covid-19. The meme enjoyed success across a range of social media sites and users created and shared various versions of the meme online.</p> <p>The meme was generally posted on chan sites with the apparent intent of mocking the US government's economic response to the pandemic, and ironizing the fragility of US and Western markets. Often users implied that the 'solution' of printing more money was one spearheaded by 'boomers' – members of older generations believed to be out of touch with modern society.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 303</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 303</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 4</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 2</p>
<p>11</p> <p>Mutt's Law</p>	<p>Mutt's Law</p> <p><i>As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of an Amerimutt mentioning black dicks or interracial sex approaches 1</i></p> 	<p>The meme follows the format of a dictionary definition of the 'Mutt's Law' concept, implying that Americans always derail online conversations by talking about 'interracial sex'. It is overtly racist and implies that [white] American society has been corrupted by African American influence and that as a result, US citizens are 'Amerimutt's', as a result of mixed-race relationships and are incapable of holding an intelligent conversation without sexualizing African Americans in an inherently degrading manner.</p> <p>Within chans the meme is posted in response to any mention of black people in a derogatory or sexual manner, to indicate that the prophecy of 'Mutt's Law' has once again been fulfilled.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 299</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 229</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 3</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 2</p>
<p>12</p> <p>Excited Soyjak</p>		<p>The meme shows an excited looking Wojak-style interpretation of the Soyboy Face meme. Soyboy Face refers to men who pose for photos with open mouths, and the term implies that men posing this way are (generally left-leaning) 'beta males'. In particular the irreverent Soyboy Wojak version of this meme is used to mock (mainly male) fans of nerdy popular culture.</p> <p>During the course of this research the meme was utilised by users on 4chan to mock others for being overly-enthusiastic, and was also often used in an ironic, self-depreciating manner by users making fun of their own nerdy tendencies.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 296</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 296</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 2</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 1</p>

APPENDIX A

Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures

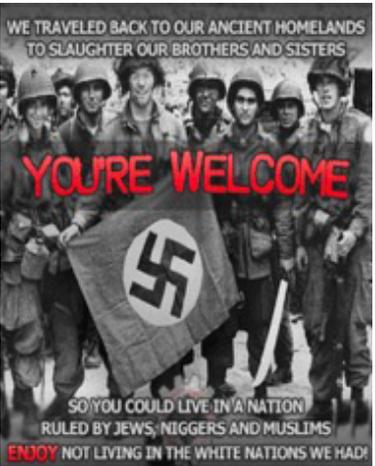
<p>13</p> <p>Happy Merchant Wojak</p>		<p>A 'Wojak-style' imitation of the antisemitic Happy Merchant meme. The long nose and kippa are heavily stereotyped features associated with the 'Happy Merchant' meme online. Here they have been 'remixed' with a Wojak-style face.</p> <p>This is a commonly-used reaction image, often used ironically to imply that Jewish people might be offended by the content being discussed online.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 280</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 280</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 6</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 4</p>
<p>14</p> <p>Soyjak</p>		<p>Another interpretation of the Soyboy Wojak meme. Notably this variation of the meme is less excited in tone, than the more popular Soyboy interpretation. Accordingly, the meme was often used to ironically imply shock, in response to posts made on chans which were not really shocking, and was used to ridicule and ironize aspects of left-wing ideology.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 277</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 276</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 3</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 2</p>
<p>15</p> <p>Covid-19 cases in China</p>		<p>The image shows a graph of the imagined numbers of Covid-19 cases in China which sharply plateaus at 80,000. It is captioned “presented to you by the glorious workers party of china”, thereby implying that the Chinese government was not reliably communicating Chinese Covid-19 statistics. The meme is consistent with other anti-Chinese sentiments which were prevalent within chan culture during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 275</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 275</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 2</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 2</p>
<p>16</p> <p>Screencap of Covid-19 conspiracy</p>		<p>This screencap of an archived thread was originally posted to 4chan. The author of the thread claims to have worked at a laboratory in Wuhan, China where two human-engineered strains of Covid-19 were accidentally leaked out into the public, triggering the global pandemic. The supposed employee has therefore created this thread to warn other 4chan users of the true nature of the virus. Again, this thread accords with the ubiquity of anti-China and anti-Asian sentiments present within chan culture during this research.</p> <p>While some users judged the posts to be fake and as an attempt at feeding into a conspiracy theory, others appeared to take the thread seriously, regarding it as a trusted source of information revealing the ‘truth’ about Covid-19, believing it to have been manufactured in a Chinese laboratory.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 263</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 263</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 2</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 2</p>

<p>17</p> <p>Comfortable Pepe</p>		<p>This meme depicts Pepe the Frog appearing particularly comfortable, relaxing under a blanket. The meme was posted a number of times by users on 4chan apparently to imply content or lethargy and was also at times used with sexual undertones.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 254</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 254</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 2</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 1</p>
<p>18</p> <p>Laughing Mask</p>		<p>This reaction image was commonly observed throughout this project, and was often used to imply that another user's post on a chan board was humorous – intentionally or otherwise.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 244</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 244</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 3</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 2</p>
<p>19</p> <p>'Shitposting' Meme</p>		<p>This meme contains Pepe the Frog in his most antagonistic form, excreting onto the floor as a dog known as the "He Does It For Free" meme cleans up the mess whilst suited Peopes watch on gleefully. The dog character symbolises chan moderators – otherwise known as "janitors" or "jannies", who are often accused of being over-zealous with their content moderation or for being too sensitive. The proclivity of this meme is indicative of the tension that sometimes exists between chan moderators and chan users, with some chan users making off-topic "shitposts" on chan boards, which need to be removed by jannies.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 243</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 241</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 3</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 2</p>
<p>20</p> <p>Stonks Cartoon Strip</p>		<p>This is a short comic strip referencing the above 'Money Printer go Brrr' meme, showing an employee of the US Federal Reserve printing more and more money in an increasingly frantic manner. Again, this meme is an obvious mockery of the United States' government's response to the economic conditions brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions</u>: 237</p> <p><u>Posts</u>: 237</p> <p><u>Boards</u>: 3</p> <p><u>Chans</u>: 2</p>

APPENDIX A

Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures

Top 20 images by spread across chan sites (Ordered by the number of unique chan sites that a specific image was observed on)

Name	Image	Interpretation	Statistics
<p>1</p> <p>'Exposé' of Jewish Council for Racial Equality</p>		<p>An 'exposé' of a website established by the Jewish Council for Racial Equality intended to provide support for volunteers seeking guidance on how to support refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom and abroad.</p> <p>The image implies that Jewish run organizations and elites are forcing international migration, as a way to dilute 'native' [white] cultures, and describes academic Barbara Spectre as a "Jew Supremacist".</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 43</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 43</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 6</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 6</p>
<p>2</p> <p>American D-Day Landing</p>		<p>A 'macro-image' of American paratroopers from the D-Day landing holding a captured Nazi flag after the liberation of a French village in Normandy (Citino, 2017).</p> <p>The overlaid text implies that those who fought against the Nazis during World War Two effectively paved the way for mass international migration orchestrated by Jewish elites, thereby 'dooming' future generations.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 11</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 11</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 6</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 6</p>
<p>3</p> <p>American Media Staffers</p>		<p>A cluster of images showing key staff members of large news media companies in the United States. Corresponding text suggests that Jewish people are vastly overrepresented within traditional media, and implies that the media industry is run by Jewish people as part of an over-arching conspiracy.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 171</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 171</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 6</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 5</p>

<p>4</p> <p>Secret Role of Jews in China</p>		<p>A 'Special Report' on 'The Secret Roles of Jews in China' which implies that Jewish people have historically exerted considerable influence over Chinese government, and used Chairman Mao as a 'puppet' through which to rule China.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 118</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 118</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 5</p>
<p>5</p> <p>Black Sun</p>		<p>Traditionally associated with Norse and Celtic cultures, the black sun emblem was appropriated by the German Nazi Party, and remains a commonly-used symbol within white supremacist circles.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 44</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 44</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 8</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 5</p>
<p>6</p> <p>Jewish Female Scholars</p>		<p>A collection of female Jewish scholars, writers and public figures known for their feminist works. The image implies that feminism is a corrupting influence forced upon women by Judaism.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 34</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 32</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 5</p>

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<p>7</p> <p>Mein Kampf quote</p>	 <p>If France develops along the lines it has taken in our day and should that development continue for the next three hundred years, all traces of French blood will finally be submergled in the formation of a Euro-African Makuta State.</p> <p>The Jew uses every possible means to undermine the racial foundations of a subjugated people. They were responsible for bringing progress into the Orient, with the sinister idea of handicapping the white race which they hate and thus lowering its cultural and political level so that the Jew might dominate.</p>	<p>A quotation from Adolf Hitler's auto-biography 'Mein Kampf' implying that international migration - as controlled by Jewish people - will be responsible for the corruption of the white race and the downfall of France.</p> <p>The text is juxtaposed with a portrait of Adolf Hitler and images of modern-day France, thus suggesting that this corruption has already taken place, and Hitler's prophetic warning has been fulfilled.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 22</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 22</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 6</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 5</p>
<p>8</p> <p>Antisemitic immigration conspiracy</p>	 <p>Jews Unite To Defend Policy on Syrian Refugees - With a Few Exceptions</p> <p>Jewish Groups Lead Push To Crack Open Doors to Syria Refugees</p> <p>Citing Holocaust, Swiss Jews Demand Open Door for Migrants</p> <p>Jews Push Washington to Admit More Syrian Refugees, Even as Some Worry About Backlash</p> <p>Over 1,000 U.S. Rabbis Petition Lawmakers To Welcome Refugees</p> <p>Recalling Shoah, European Jews Urge Aid to Refugees</p> <p>Jewish Groups Slam White House for 'Baby Step' on Syrian Refugees</p> <p>Dutch Jewish Refugee Village May Shelter Syrians</p> <p>How Can We Call Ourselves Jews and Bar Syrian Refugees?</p> <p>British Rabbis Call on Cameron to Admit More Syrian Refugees</p> <p>US rabbis envy Canadian counterparts' chance to welcome refugees</p> <p>10 Jewish Groups Defend Plan To Admit Refugees</p> <p>British Jews lay groundwork for influx of Syrian refugees</p> <p>British Jews Come to the Aid of Refugees in Calais</p>	<p>A collection of international headlines indicating that Jewish organizations have actively facilitated global immigration.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 20</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 20</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 5</p>
<p>9</p> <p>Multiculturalism Critique</p>	 <p>Staunch promoter of multiculturalism for Australia, says multiculturalism is bad for Israel</p> <p>Mr Lublin on Australia: "There is a need to sit together and establish a way in which Australians can recognize that spirit of multiculturalism which I think we are all proud being part and parcel of."</p> <p>Mr Lublin on Israel: "Multiculturalism has no place in Israel."</p> <p>Mr Lublin is an internationally known Jewish leader and former chairman of the board of directors of the World Jewish Congress and the former leader of the Free State Council of Australia. Jewish. He was major proponent of multiculturalism, open borders, and cultural Marxism in Australia. He moved to Israel in 1986 and still advocates multiculturalism for Australia while advocating assimilation and homogeneity in Israel at the same time.</p> <p>In 2013 he wrote this article explicitly praising the decline of Australia homogeneity. He claims that Australia is no longer "exclusively white and primarily of British origin." Lublin praises the downfall of the "social exclusionary" White Australia Policy.</p> <p>However, Lublin is now living in Israel and advocating building hypocrisy. He writes article for the Jerusalem Post about the horrors of multiculturalism in Israel. He recently wrote in the Jerusalem Post that "This is a country which was set up and created as a Jewish country for the Jews." Lublin has also stated "multiculturalism has no place in Israel."</p> <p>It's wife Naomi is the president of Emunah, a Jewish women's organization. She says that "assimilation and intermarriage" are the "greatest threats to world Jewry."</p>	<p>An excerpt from an article originally published on 'Top Conservative News.com' attempting to implicate Jewish people as hypocritical on issues of international multiculturalism.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 17</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 17</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 5</p>

<p>10</p> <p>List Against Race Mixing</p>	<p>POPULAR FALLACIES USED TO PUSH RACE MIXING:</p> <p>1. "Race mixing increases genetic diversity?"</p> <p>2. "We are moving towards a single global race?"</p> <p>3. "Mixed race children are healthier?"</p> <p>4. "But what about hybrid vigor?"</p> <p>5. "Don't mixed race people score better?"</p>	<p>A list attempting to present arguments against 'race mixing', or mixed-race relationships. The list adopts a genetic argument suggesting that children from mixed-race relationships may be less healthy than children from parents of the same race. It advocates that individuals should therefore only have children with people of their 'own' race.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 9</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 9</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 5</p>
<p>11</p> <p>Emotional Wojak</p>		<p>A depiction of the Wojak character appearing both angry and emotionally frustrated. It is a frequently used reaction image to express frustration or disagreement, or to mock other users' who are judged to be behaving in an overly-emotional manner.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 359</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 359</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>
<p>12</p> <p>It's All So Tiresome</p>		<p>A screencap taken from the 2011 documentary Empire of Dust in which the Chinese Railway Engineering Company attempted to build a railroad in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The image shows the Railway Engineering Company's Head of Logistics, Lao Yang, express his frustration at having to work with Congolese people. It is often used as a reaction image online with racist undertones.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 349</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 349</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 6</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>
<p>13</p> <p>Jewish Happy Merchant</p>		<p>A 'Wojak-style' imitation of the antisemitic Happy Merchant meme. The long nose and kippa are heavily stereotyped features associated with the 'Happy Merchant' meme online. Here they have been 'remixed' with a Wojak-style face.</p> <p>This is a commonly-used reaction image, often used ironically to imply that Jewish people might be offended by the content being discussed online</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 280</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 280</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 6</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>

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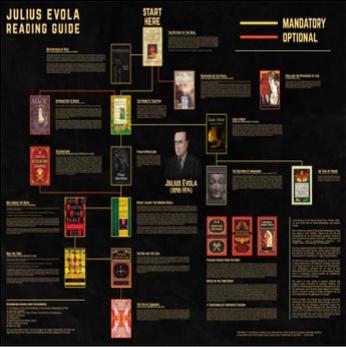
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<p>14</p> <p>Rise in Transgender People</p>		<p>A cluster of images and headlines implying that Jewish organizations and elites are responsible for a rise in visibility and prevalence of transgender people, and gender affirming surgery. The selection of images suggests that these surgeries are particularly common in young children, and implies that Jewish people are thus putting young children at risk of being forced to identify as transgender.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 116</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 116</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>
<p>15</p> <p>Jewish Celebrities</p>		<p>A selection of Twitter posts made by celebrities identifying as Jewish and, often ironically, stating that they "hate white people". The meme is often used to imply, therefore, that Jewish people are not white.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 103</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 103</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>
<p>16</p> <p>Waco Siege Greentext</p>		<p>A 'greentext' story outlining the events of the 1993 Waco Siege in Texas, United States, in which 82 Branch Davidians and four ATF agents were killed in a shoot-out following a 51-day siege (Shaw 2009). The string of posts, originally posted to 8chan's /v/ board before the site's closure, has been screen-capped and archived by another user so it can still be shared in an image format.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 82</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 82</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>

<p>17</p> <p>Jewish Ritual Murder Archives</p>		<p>An extensive list which archives instances of 'Jewish Ritual Murder' from the year 169BC to 1932 AD. The list therefore portrays Jewish people as particularly bloodthirsty and murderous, and thus posing a significant threat to non-Jewish people.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 78</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 77</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>
<p>18</p> <p>Happy Merchant versus Twitter</p>		<p>The image shows a selection of Twitter posts by users advocating that white people are afforded some degree of 'white privilege' owing to the colour of their skin. These posts are juxtaposed by a 'Happy Merchant-style' depiction of a Jewish person. Underneath are a selection of Twitter posts by the same users indicating that they are Jewish, the same Happy Merchant appears shocked and upset. The meme appears to imply that Jewish people, who are supposed to push 'false' narratives of 'white privilege' in order to facilitate white acceptance of increased immigration to therefore extinguish the white race, have instead fallen for these same narratives. The image thus implies that the Jewish users have displeased Jewish elites in charge of orchestrating the great replacement of the white race, by falling for the same narratives they were meant to push.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 74</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 72</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 5</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>

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<p>19</p> <p>Jewish immigration conspiracy</p>		<p>The image shows a selection of Jewish politicians and public figures from around the world, claiming that these voices are supportive of mass [non-white] immigration into 'Western' countries.</p> <p>A caption suggests that the fact these figures identify as Jewish is a "pure coincidence", thus ironically implying that Jewish people are behind an international conspiracy to encourage immigration into 'traditionally white' countries as a way to threaten the 'integrity' of the white race.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 70</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 69</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>
<p>20</p> <p>Fascist reading guide</p>		<p>A 'reading guide' to the works of fascist Italian philosopher and antisemitic conspiracy theorist Julius Evola, providing a short summary of each of his written works.</p>	<p><u>Repetitions:</u> 66</p> <p><u>Posts:</u> 65</p> <p><u>Boards:</u> 4</p> <p><u>Chans:</u> 4</p>

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ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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