



**The Dominant Messages and Patterns in Far-Right Extremist Memes on Instagram: A
Qualitative Analysis**

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Extremist far-right movements have long since made their way into online spaces, having recognized and seized opportunities to further promote their messages effectively, such as by using memes (Burnham et al., 2022). Memes can be defined as a wide category of images and videos containing a combination of visual and textual components that are extensively shared online (Askanius, 2021). By using overtly hate-promoting memes or hate disguised under the label of irony and humor, memes are seen as one representation of digital propaganda, a strategic tool for carrying information, making it a crucial component of the far-right's conveyance strategies (McSwiney et al., 2021). Irony and ironic humour are key features of the current online youth culture which is heavily exploited by far-right extremist groups (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). For instance, ironic memes promoting violence against minorities and Jews are done in a way so that far-right group members can insist that it is only a joke, allowing plausible deniability (Bostdorff, 2004). Additionally, from the perspective of the individuals exposed to these far-right memes, a meme's humorous quality can cause the viewers themselves to misinterpret the meme and view the encouragements in it to commit violent actions as harmless jokes (Burnham et al., 2022). This, in turn, not only allows far-right extremist memes to exist on social media websites but also allows them to be spread by the viewers. Viewers can boost the Instagram post to be recommended to other users by liking, commenting, and sharing the original post. These viewers include: individuals who do not understand the true intentions behind the meme and instead view it as a regular meme, the supporters of alt-right ideologies, and those who recognize alt-right posts and share them or comment on them intending to ridicule and refute their messages (Lamerichs et al., 2018; Burnham et al., 2022). Through this method, far-right groups maximize

their reach using only a few resources and are able to do so without having their efforts be impeded by the broad societal values of what is right and what is wrong (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Instagram exacerbates this influence through its engagement objective (Swart, 2021). That is, the interaction that users have with any content—a far-right meme in this case—directs the algorithm to show more of the same type of content and reduces exposure to other types of content (Swart, 2021). Instagram tailors the posts displayed on the explore page to the user, meaning that the individual is exposed to more far-right memes due to prior interaction with them. Instagram and similar social media websites are not able to adequately filter out this harmful content. Additionally, individuals who are unfamiliar with the far-right groups' online manipulative tactics and are uninformed of the subject matters being discussed in the memes will be heavily influenced (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023). Recent studies in the literature indicate that the influence of these propaganda memes is pervasive as the impact of right-wing extremist memes on individuals cannot be removed by highlighting the misinformation present in the memes (Burnham et al., 2022).

Purpose

This study aims to provide a foundational understanding of the type of far-right extremist content that people, especially youths, are being exposed to and manipulated by on Instagram. Specifically, through a literature review and a qualitative analysis, categories, and descriptions of the types of far-right memes and their recurring features will be created. The goal of these categories is to provide a basic understanding of the common types of ideas, misinformation, and general persuasive tactics alt-right groups and individuals focus on when creating propaganda

memes to influence and recruit others. This is crucial as memes are seen to be an effective tool to attract and recruit new supporters (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019).

Also, given the ability of memes to be constantly shared and re-uploaded (Lamerichs et al., 2018), it is impractical to have these extremist memes removed from Instagram or any other social media platform. This solution is also made next to impossible considering that outsiders to the far-right groups may not grasp the underlying intention of memes that utilize icons and references known specifically by individuals who are familiar with the far-right movement. A more practical solution is taking preventative measures to prevent people from getting entwined in far-right online spaces and adopting their ideologies. Therefore, the findings of this research have strong future implications for further research that explores possible counter-tactics against far-right groups' online efforts and the development of preventative measures (e.g., awareness education and promoting the development of media literacy). This ultimately will minimize the effects and influence of far-right extremist memes and their online presence by impeding individuals from adopting such damaging views and becoming radicalized.

Research Question

The research question contains two components: (1) What are the types of recurring/dominant far-right messages being conveyed through the memes on Instagram and (2) how is the content and/or features of the meme being utilized to help convey the message?

Present Study

This paper will proceed in two parts. First, I will review the relevant literature to establish major categories of far-right extremist memes that are displayed on Instagram. The goal is to aggregate the findings of previous research to determine the major themes or areas of focus that can be used to distinguish and classify the different types of far-right extremist memes. This

component begins to answer the first part of my research question. Next, a sample of far-right memes will be collected based on the categories that emerge and a qualitative analysis will be performed with the intent of discovering and labeling recurring symbols, patterns, and general features of the meme, focusing on answering the second part of the research question.

Literature Review: Dominant Categories

1. Anti-Semitism

Expectedly, quite a number of memes created by far-right groups tend to espouse anti-Semitic messages, containing Jews or Zionists as their main subject matter (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019). Jews are painted to be menacing, immoral, and different from other humans, and thus far-right groups justify the suppression and the eradication of the Jewish community (Weimann & Masri, 2021). A well-known symbol used to characterize the Jews is the happy merchant caricature, which shows a hunched-over bearded man with a big nose rubbing his hands together. This illustration is meant to push the stereotype that Jews are greedy, deceitful, and penny-pinchers (Weaver, 2013). Although the approximate date of origin for the happy merchant caricature dates back to 2001, the symbol has deeply rooted itself in present-day anti-Semitic memes and is regularly re-used by far-right groups in their online activism work (AJC, 2021). In addition to the negative portrayal of Jews, anti-Semitic memes focus on holocaust denial and conspiracy theories created by far-right groups. For instance, Jews are believed to have the ultimate goal of committing white genocide by causing an influx of immigrants in European countries, which results in European societies becoming more multicultural (Askanius, 2021).

2. Anti-feminist/anti-liberal/anti-LGBTQ

As feminism, liberalism, and the LGBTQ movement share similarities such as their alignment with progressive political ideologies and prioritization of social progress, I have

grouped them into a single category. Some far-right memes also do not make distinctions between feminists and individuals from the LGBTQ community. For instance, in a qualitative study by Askanius and Keller (2021), a visual content analysis of far-right extremist memes was performed which revealed that the anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ memes overlapped enough that they could be combined into a single subcategory. Memes in this category allude to the idea that these social and political movements are a threat to the ideal traditional lifestyle in which there is a binary opposition between a woman's work and a man's work (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019). As liberal and feminist values strive for social equality and equal opportunities for men and women, it becomes a direct threat to the traditional gender roles that far-right groups exert their efforts to support and uphold. In addition, Dafure (2020) mentions in his paper discussing alt-right memes that feminists are labeled as "feminazis," which refers to feminists as irrational, overly emotional, and furious women who hate men. The author also mentions how videos and images created by online far-right activists contain hand-pick moments from videos of feminists when they appear enraged and emotional during political discourses, pushing the idea that feminism is linked with anger and illogical thinking.

3. Anti-government

The category consisting of anti-government memes is framed around the idea that the current society and its government need to collapse which will allow the emergence of a pure national socialist society (Askanius & Keller, 2021). Calls for violent actions and threats of destruction are normalized and believed to be necessary to achieve the aspired nationhood (Miller-Idriss, 2018). Furthermore, the memes celebrate ideas of mass murder and brutal measures in the name of justifiable actions to fuel anti-state sentiment (Askanius & Keller, 2021). This sentiment is followed by the idea of dismissing the legitimacy of the government and

therefore rejecting laws or submitting to any authorities (Bjørge & Braddock, 2022). Yet, it is important to mention that the authors Bjørge and Braddock (2022) point out in their paper discussing anti-state movements that anti-government extremism is not only restricted to far-right groups. For example, historically, radical left-wing movements such as the New Left in the 1970s espoused anti-government and anarchist ideas.

4. Anti-BIPOC and Xenophobic

The memes in the anti-BIPOC and xenophobic category revolve around racist ideas and stereotypes. The reason I have grouped xenophobia and beliefs against BIPOC individuals as a category is because far-right groups rely on the same messages/themes to ridicule and criticize immigrants and BIPOC individuals. Through memes, far-right extremists normalize racist beliefs about non-white groups and express the idea that anti-racism is akin to anti-white attitudes (Dafaure, 2020). Similarly, anti-immigration policies are endorsed, and diversity is viewed to be a threat to the pure Aryan race, and one of the causes of white genocide (Greene, 2019). Appeals are made to the idea of white reservation, which is meant to protect the believed biological superiority of the white race (Askanius, 2021). With their use of specific imagery and text, the memes in this category tend to be blatantly racist against a variety of ethnic and religious groups such as Muslim immigrants and Mexicans, while strongly endorsing deportation and ethnic cleansing (Lamerichs et al., 2018).

Methods

For the present study, the collected sample ($n = 69$) consists of memes that were circulating on Instagram and posted on public Instagram pages. Emulating the meme sample criteria by Hakoköngäs et al. (2020), only Instagram posts that contained an image/photograph with accompanying text were considered memes and included in this research. The comments,

likes, followers, as well as the following on far-right extremist Instagram pages were used as an avenue to discover more far-right memes. The meme collection period ranged from June 5th, 2023 to June 19th, 2023. The sample collection period occurred during Pride Month. Only memes that fit into any one of the pre-defined four categories were included. The criteria for the first category, anti-Semitism ($n = 15$), was any meme that contained Jews or Zionists as the subject matter as well as references to the holocaust or holocaust denial. For the second category, anti-feminist/anti-liberal/anti-LGBTQ ($n = 26$), memes that included feminism, liberalism, or the LGBTQ as the subject matter were included in this category. For the third category, anti-government ($n = 7$), memes that contained anti-establishment sentiment were included. For the fourth category, anti-BIPOC and xenophobic ($n = 21$), memes that contained BIPOC individuals and immigrants as the subject matter were included.

After the dataset was finalized, a manual visual content analysis was conducted using 66 annotation questions. Like a qualitative data analysis software, the annotation questions are created for the purpose of extracting trends and patterns (e.g., elements such as symbols) in each meme that are significant or systematically reoccur. One particular feature that the annotation questions extract is the representation of power in the far-right memes (i.e., people who are represented as powerful and people who are represented as powerless). Another feature of interest being analyzed is the representation of women with white children, and the representation of women with non-white children. This is of interest as depictions of women and children are reoccurring visuals in far-right memes (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020).

Results and Discussion

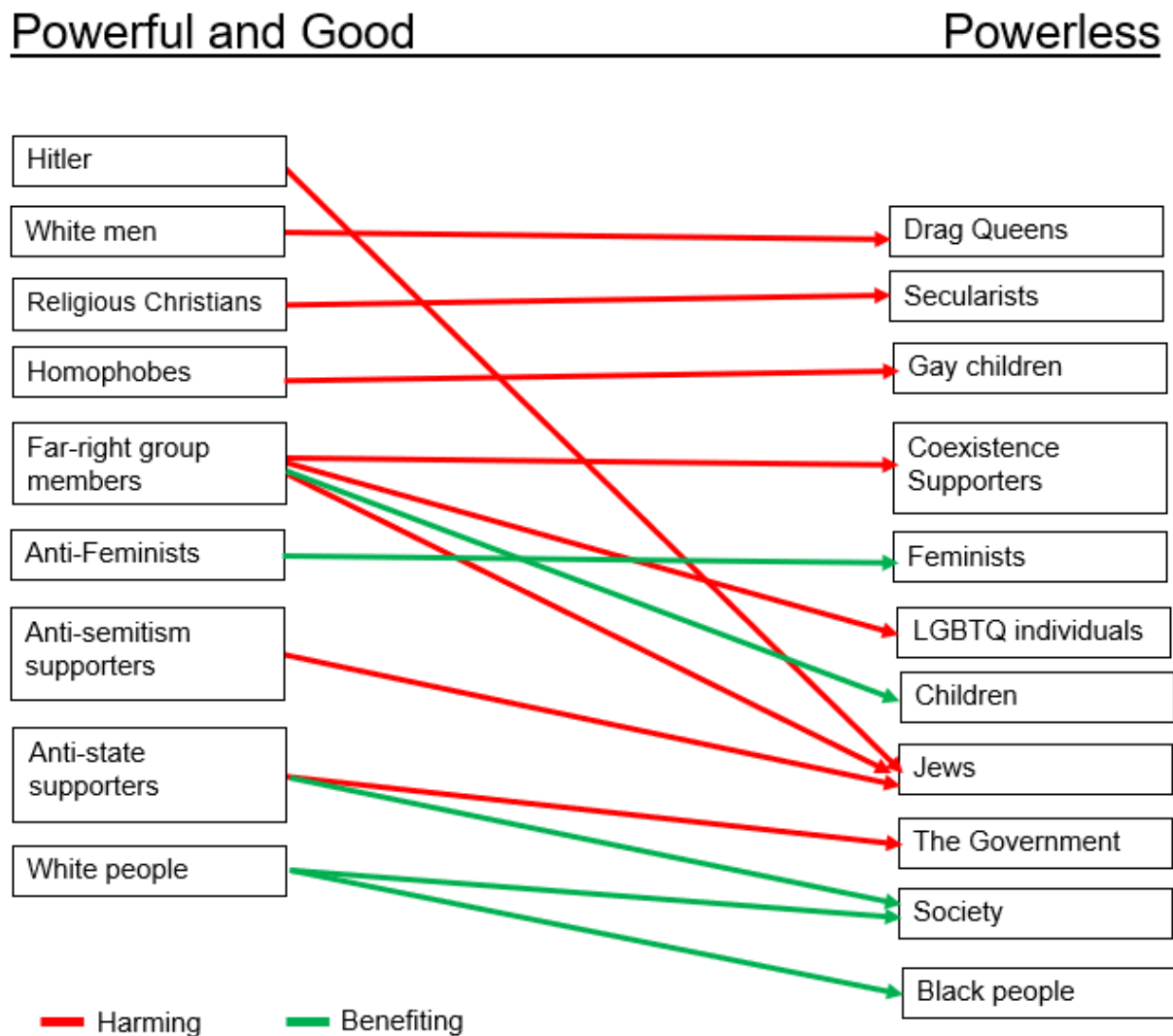


Figure 1. Portrayals of Powerful and Good vs. Powerless

People/groups in the meme shown to be in power and utilizing their power for good (see Figure 1) are associated and/or in alignment with far-right extremist groups and their ideologies, such as Hitler, anti-feminists, and religious Christians. They are shown in a positive light by being represented as heroic individuals using their power to fight against evil. A common narrative of the fight against evil in the anti-feminist/anti-liberal/anti-LGBTQ category is that the LGBTQ community and drag queens are harming society and children. Children, especially, are illustrated as vulnerable individuals who are susceptible to brainwashing tactics who far-right

group members feel obligated to protect. For example, a meme in the dataset shows a white man holding a gun with the caption “When you see a drag queen walking into a school library.” This overt call for violence is rationalized as acceptable and even called necessary through villainizing certain groups. Any violent action depicted in far-right memes towards villainized groups such as immigrants, Jews, and liberals is viewed to be a morally correct action that should be openly encouraged and celebrated.

Those shown in a powerless position in Figure 1 can be classified into two groups: one being the enemies of far-right movements such as ideological groups in opposition to the far-right values as well as racial minorities, and two being vulnerable individuals such as children, who are to be protected. Additionally, memes in the anti-BIPOC and xenophobic category strive to express non-white individuals as being dirty, harmful, and inferior compared to white people and white culture. In this case, white men take the role of saviours who use their powers for good to aid and save the BIPOC individuals who are showcased to be helpless and dependent on white populations in order to flourish.

In terms of those shown in a powerful position and represented as bad (see Figure 2), these individuals and groups have some correspondence with those represented as powerless in Figure 1. They consist of groups and movements in opposition to the far-right ideologies and values and, as expected, none of the individuals/groups in the sample data were depicted as using their position of power to benefit others. One recurring pattern is the idea that those viewed to be in power by far-right movements—such as Jews, the LGBTQ community, large corporations, and the government—are utilizing their power to damage society, with an emphasis on harming women and children. Characterized as evil entities, memes with this theme may help solidify far-right extremist beliefs and motivate viewers towards activism and action. In a similar way,

BIPOC people, immigrants, and refugees are described as inherently violent and barbaric people who are a threat to white populations and white culture. In some cases, past instances of black-on-black crimes are showcased in the memes to further emphasize the “danger” that certain groups possess. The persistent narrative of non-white cultures and groups as dangerous in far-right memes can help fuel racist and prejudice beliefs, as well as anti-immigration sentiment.

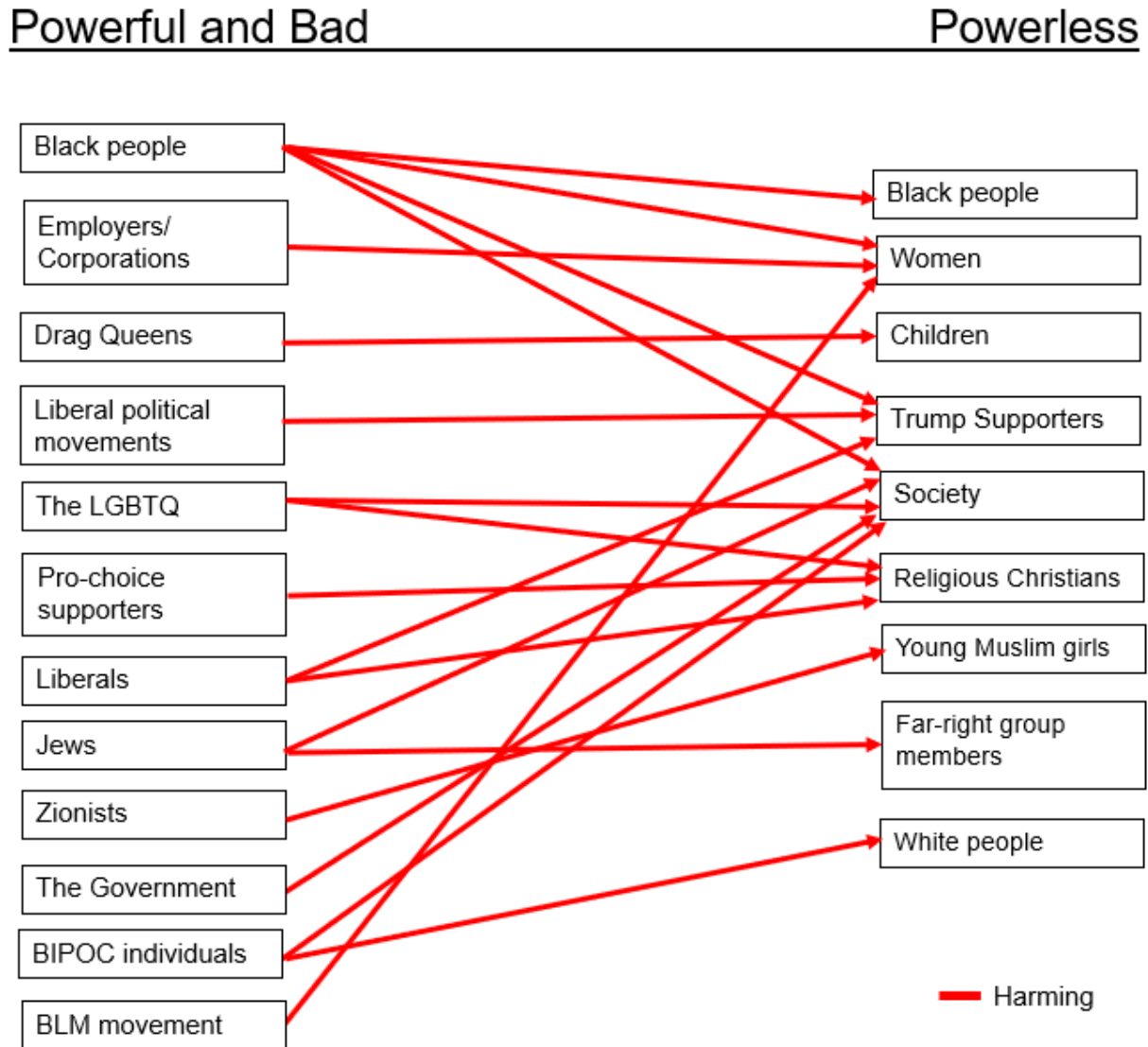


Figure 2. Portrayals of Powerful and Bad vs. Powerless

Features and Symbols

1. Wojak

The Wojak meme (see Figure 3) is a crude drawing of a man from above the shoulders, usually used in memes to portray sad feelings such as regret or loneliness (Z, 2015). In the meme sample, the original Wojak meme, and the female variation of it is used to portray white conservative people or far-right group members. These characters are often depicted with other characters who are saying or doing something irrational or illogical (which are usually characters representing BIPOC people, feminists, or LGBTQ individuals). In this case, the original Wojak drawing is being used to represent individuals who are intelligent and suffering, i.e., having to tolerate unreasonable demands and actions of non-white individuals. The use of symbols in memes can help communicate the important values and sentiments of far-right extremist groups (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). Here, far-right groups rely on the well-known Wojak meme icon and use it to illustrate the harm and distress racial minorities cause white people. Considering how Caucasians—and particularly young Caucasian males—are the target audience for these memes (Burnham et al., 2022), seeing white people as “victims” can emotionally engage the target audience which in turn can encourage them to adopt and advocate for far-right objectives such as anti-immigration laws and acts of violence against out-group individuals.

Furthermore, variations of the Wojak drawing are used to represent specific races or groups of people. For example, the crying Wojak (see Figure 3) is a Wojak with furrowed brows, and tears streaming down the face, representing sadness, anger, and frustration. It is commonly used to depict feminists, liberals, and black people in far-right memes. These characters are shown to be complaining or arguing, giving a negative characterization of feminists, liberals, and black people as miserable individuals living dissatisfying lives. Similarly, these inaccurate

portrayals communicate ideological narratives of hatred and racism (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019). Supporters who view these memes are further intensified in their prejudice, especially when many memes similar to these are circulated on Instagram, creating an online echo chamber (Lamerichs et al., 2018). Additionally, the juxtaposition of the crying Wojak character with the original Wojak meme—that represents white people—alludes to the superiority of white conservatives/far-right group members and the inferiority of others, a common belief espoused in far-right hateful memes (Fielitz & Ahmed, 2021).



Figure 3. Variations of the Wojak illustration, original Wojak (left), crying Wojak (middle) and NPC Wojak (right) *Source:* MemeAtlas 2023.

<https://www.memeatlas.com/wojak-memes.html>

Another variation, the NPC Wojak (see Figure 3), is also used to represent liberals, feminists, and black people, although liberals are most commonly illustrated using this Wojak. NPC (non-playable character) refers to video game characters that do not have free will and act according to the code set by the video game developer (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023). The NPC Wojak is shown with common sayings or beliefs of liberal or other progressive movements. Some examples of these common sayings present in the dataset are: “Sex and gender are different,” “Race is a social construct,” and “Everyone has pronouns.” This depiction alludes to

the notion that leftists and liberals parrot dominant social mottos and sentiments and are incapable of emotions, free-thinking, and going against the progressive propaganda exposed to them (Dafaure, 2020). Similarly, NPC Wojaks with afros and dark brown skin are used to illustrate black people. These representations are accompanied by phrases such as “white people are racist,” conveying the idea that black people lack sentience, and intelligence, and frequently echo phrases they hear around them (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023).

The NPC characterization effectively dehumanizes outgroup members to far-right supporters and activists (Dafaure, 2020). Not only are individuals such as minorities and LGBTQ members shown to have intelligence on par with non-sentient programmed machines, but their concerns and values are also downplayed. For instance, the black afro-wearing NPC Wojak saying “white people are racist” diminishes the very real prejudice and systematic racism that is experienced by black people. Instead, these types of memes guide viewers and supporters of far-right groups to view black people as targeting white populations by painting them as vicious.

Another variation of the Wojak is the Troon Wojak (also known as the Trannyjack or Troonjack) which is used to depict LGBTQ individuals, specifically those who are genderfluid, nonbinary, or those who identify opposite to their sex. As a result, only memes in the anti-feminist/anti-liberal/anti-LGBTQ contain this type of Wojak. The common features of this Wojak are: bright colourful unkept hair, smeared makeup, facial hair, and various piercings. These wojak are made to appear physically unattractive with some being illustrated as overweight, having acne and wrinkles. These unfavourable illustrations are used to express the belief that transgender women can never be real women. Similar to the NPC Wojak, these Wojaks are generally accompanied by LGBTQ sentiment and signifiers such as text displaying a wide range of pronouns and socialist values, mocking those values and beliefs (Bell, 2018).

2. Skull mask

The skull mask is a black-and-white face mask that has printed on it the lower half of a skeleton face. It is a predominant and reoccurring symbol in the anti-government category, present in 71% of the memes in that bracket. It is associated with neo-fascism, neo-Nazism, and anti-government sentiment (Philipp, 2020). Moreover, the skull mask is a transnational symbol found in particularly violent neo-Nazi extremist movements, such as the Atomwaffen Division based in the US, and CasaPound based in Italy, creating a sense of solidarity among those groups (Upchurch, 2021). Within the memes, the mask is worn by white men who are portrayed as committing or encouraging acts of domestic terrorism such as blowing up power plants and participating in violent mass protests. The photographs or drawings of men wearing the mask promote strong anti-state sentiment through references to civil war and government collapse. Compared to the other categories, individuals wearing skull masks in the memes have one of the most violent depictions or actions shown. These meme depictions accurately portray the real-world activities of these extremist groups as far-right organizations used the skull mask to create a sense of affiliation between groups and carried out real-world activism (Upchurch, 2021).

3. Happy white family

A collection of vintage 1950s paintings depicting a white nuclear family unit in memes can be found in the anti-feminist/anti-liberal/anti-LGBTQ category and the anti-BIPOC and xenophobic category. These illustrations show a mother, a father, children, and sometimes pets. The family members are shown as interacting with each other, happy, and in complete harmony with nature (see Figure 4), which is used in far-right memes for the purpose of depicting an ideal family. The blonde hair and blue eyes of the individuals represent racial purity, as the Aryan Germanic heritage is considered to be superior in far-right beliefs (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019).

Additionally, the women can be seen wearing traditional dresses and carrying out domestic tasks, emphasizing patriarchal gender roles in which the ideal woman is the one who takes care of the house and children (UNESCO & United Nations, 2022). Within the context of the memes, this imagery is used to serve as a reminder of how immigrants and liberals are responsible for the “corruption” of this ideal life and family. It also evokes a feeling of nostalgia for “the good old days” that can be reacquired through eradicating liberal values and banning immigration.



Figure 4. “Family Cookout, 1950s” *Source:* 1950sunlimited, 2012

<https://1950sunlimited.tumblr.com/post/30699629021/family-cookout-1950s>

4. “It wasn’t 6 million”

The phrase “it wasn’t 6 million” and similar expressions appear only in memes in the anti-Semitism category. This phrase is used specifically for holocaust denial propaganda. As historians estimate that the total number of Jews killed by Nazi Germany during the holocaust was around six million, memes that include this phrase are meant to directly refute this fact. Moreover, none of the memes containing this expression are followed by explanations or further sentences backing up this claim. Through this, the expression becomes a reference only understood by in-group members or those familiar with online far-right activism.

Furthermore, this phrase is part of a broader conspiracy theory about Jewish power and their control over the world. As many young individuals turn to Instagram to learn new things and seek knowledge, far-right groups create a gateway to rehabilitate values and ideologies consistent with the Nazi regime (UNESCO & United Nations, 2022). This distortion of history and discrediting stories of the victims and survivors of the holocaust helps build apathy toward the suffering of Jews and incites violence to take action against the Jewish community today.

5. Women and Children

Generally, white women with blonde hair and blue eyes are shown in positive and favourable ways (e.g., beautiful, and modest) compared to BIPOC women. Memes in the Anti-BIPOC and xenophobic category focuses on making this comparison to appeal to nativist values. However, this representation of white women varies depending on if there are children present in the meme, and the race of the children. The portrayal of white women who are shown alongside white children is consistent with the flattering image of white women discussed previously. However, the representation of white women with BIPOC children is negative. The white woman is no longer an ideal standard but becomes the antithesis of what a woman should be according to far-right values. These women are shown to be physically unattractive, obese, and labeled with the racial slur “mudshark.” This term is used to describe white women who are “race traitors” by having sexual relationships with black men, which is believed by far-right extremists to play an instrumental role in white genocide (Dictionary.com, 2021). Another type of depiction of white women with BIPOC children focuses on the white woman as a victim of domestic violence. These women are displayed as battered and depressed, serving as propaganda material directed toward white women to show what would happen to them if they were to enter

a biracial relationship. This imagery also touches on the topic of non-white men being violent and a danger to white women (Askanius, 2021).

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that due to the research period's time constraint, a literature review was conducted to classify the memes into their most salient themes instead of using an empirical method such as randomly sampling far-right memes from Instagram and utilizing a software to run a qualitative analysis. The latter method would have provided a deeper, accurate, and more of an up-to-date understanding of the far-right memes on Instagram. This is particularly significant as currently, only a few empirical studies analyze the content of far-right memes. Previous studies may not reflect the current state of online far-right activism as the memes and propaganda tactics of far-right groups can evolve over time. As a result, this present research may be missing new significant developments in the propaganda meme that far-right extremist groups online are creating.

Likewise, this research is limited in the sample size that was used to identify salient content and features of the memes. Due to this, this study does not provide an overview of all possible reoccurring themes. For example, a study by Dafaure (2020) discusses the concept of “Rapefugees” and the presentation of this word alongside pictures of Muslim men. To elaborate, bearded men are shown wearing traditional wear that is associated with Muslims, such as long tunics, and turbans, showing a “ferocious lust” toward white Western women (Dafure, 2020). As this imagery and symbolism were not present in this research dataset, there is a very likely possibility that other significant symbols are also absent from the meme sample. To address these limitations, a large-scope examination of far-right extremist memes needs to be conducted with a substantive sample size.

Future Direction

The messages within memes are an emergent phenomenon and they cannot be fully understood by analyzing the components of the memes in seclusion. Rather, combinations of specific features within the memes gives rise to its meaning. In a similar way, the context and the individuals/groups sharing the memes and to whom it is being shared with can influence and determine the message behind the meme. For example, if an individual shares an Instagram post with a text saying, “Black lives matter,” it is usually seen as a way of showing support and expressing sympathy towards black victims of violence. However, when this same post is posted by far-right extremist accounts, it is done with the intention of mocking or using ironic humour, and not showing actual support. The followers and supporters of these accounts would accurately interpret the meaning of this post as “black lives do not matter.” Moreover, to out-group members, this message may not be clear which results in expressions of subtle racism and propaganda to thrive on Instagram. For this reason, it is crucial for future research to examine the context in which these memes are created and shared, paying attention to who it is created by and for what audience.

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