

Hidden lol and hate

Extremist narratives in extreme right memes on Hiddenlol.com



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Abstract

Extremists use the internet to propagandize and recruit. Especially the new generation of the extreme right, the alt-right, has skillfully adapted to using online culture and memes. Getting an understanding of new methods, memes, and the current narratives helps to create an understanding of this recent phenomenon.

This thesis looks at narratives used in alt-right memes on the website Hiddenlol. Its research question is: *To what extent can coherent extremist narratives be found in memes on Hiddenlol, and how do they react to real life events?*

It identifies narratives found in the memes on Hiddenlol. This resulted in nine Hiddenlol narratives. A second question this thesis asks is how the memes are affected by events, such as terrorist attacks or political issues.

Tagwords: extreme-right, alt-right, extremism, memes, narratives, online radicalisation.

About the author

Willemijn Kadijk is a master student Crisis and Security Management at Leiden University. She received her bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts and Sciences world politics with a minor in governance, economics and development. Her bachelor thesis was written on *"The development of political involvement in the online New Right"*.

During the writing of this thesis, she was working as a researcher on political extremism for a consultancy bureau. She has worked for the Dutch Leiden university team of the European radicalisation research project Dialogues about Radicalisation and Equality.

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The world is made of stuff and stories, and is fueled by hopes and worries.

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1. Introduction



An image shows how a videogame character shoots into a crowd; below it a comment: “practising for gay pride month”.

Memes such as these are commonly found on the memesite Hiddenlol. Should it be interpreted as a macabre joke? Or should it be taken seriously, as a political message or a declaration of intent? Depending on how the reader interprets it, it can be both. It is exactly that ambiguity that allows content such as this to be shared in places where explicit extremism is too controversial. A funny joke, easily shared, but with a potentially extremist message.

This gives cause to worry; because memes are very popular, especially among young people. Several academics, authors such as Hawley¹, Pollard², Maly³, Maik Fielitz⁴, and Nagle⁵ have researched and expressed their worries about the role of online culture and memes in extreme right radicalisation. They see how the extreme right uses meme culture to

¹ Hawley, G (2017). *Making Sense of the alt-right*. New York: Columbia University Press.

² Pollard, T (2018). *alt-right Transgressions in the Age of Trump*. Perspectives on Global Development and Technology. 17(1-2)

³ Maly, I (2018), *Nieuw rechts*. EPO

⁴ Fielitz, M. (2019), “Do you want meme war?” *Understanding the visual memes of the German far right, Postdigital cultures of the far right*, Transcript political science, volume 71

⁵ Nagle, A (2017). *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan to Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*. Winchester and Washington: Zero Books.

appeal to a new group. Alt-right figureheads, such as Daily Stormer⁶ editor Andrew Anglin, have been open about using humor as a way to transfer transgressive messages. He discusses the extreme right using meme-culture on the website 4chan: *“This made promoting the right-wing agenda not only meaningful, but also extremely fun.”*⁷

Memes make it possible to transfer extremist ideas with an air of “fun”. Exactly this double purpose, being fun and at the same time being a propaganda tool makes it hard to say they are part of an extremist narrative. After all; it’s just one short statement. A joke, right? Jokes should be allowed. However, when you put many of these memes together, will other narratives appear? Identifying this narrative is the purpose of this research. This research works on the premise that if a high percentage of a site’s content can be interpreted as extremist, this is not a coincidence. Also, if a site only likes transgressive humor, content would not be ideologically consistent. If memes are consistently extremist, and consistently ideologically coherent, it makes sense to conclude the site tries to send a consistent ideologically driven extremist message. The goal of this research is to find this message and pin it down by describing narratives. This thesis will also look into events in the world and see if (and how) these were presented and framed on Hiddenlol. This is interesting because it shows how narratives interact with the world, and how new narratives are integrated or shaped.

This thesis looks at a meme-site dedicated to very transgressive memes. The content on the site often shows extreme right symbols and references: Hiddenlol.com. Memesites with a format like Hiddenlol are meant to be funny. However, Hiddenlol shows memes that are more politically charged than on other meme-sites. They are also more transgressive, and often even extremist. This research tries to find which narratives show on Hiddenlol.com when all small messages by individual memes are put together.

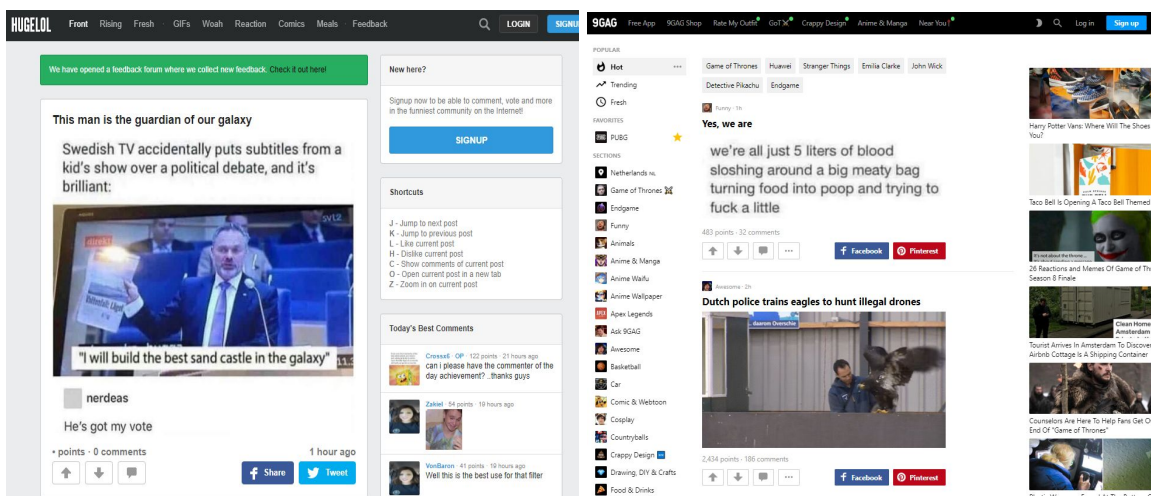
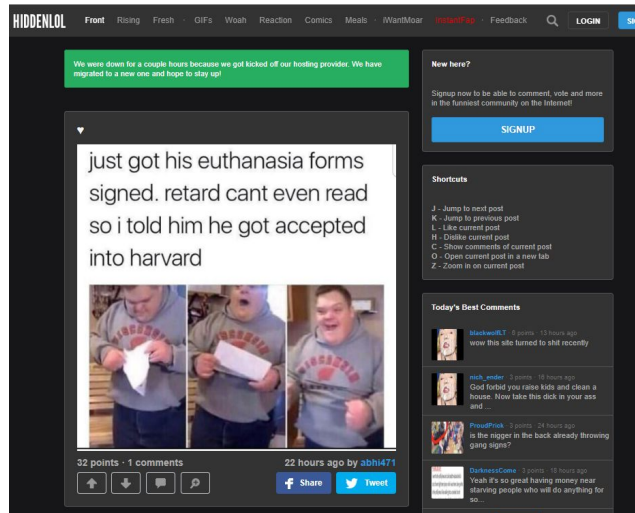
Memes were chosen based on their novel ways of impacting political debates and engaging people. Also, because they are strategically used by the extreme right.⁸ Another reason for choosing memes is the fact that they do not stay on one site, but travel all around the internet. Hiddenlol is in that sense just as much a distribution centre for memes as a gallery. This is why studying Hiddenlol can give broader insights on extreme right meme narratives.

⁶ A neonazi, white supremacist magazine that among other things advocates for the extermination of Jews. (O’Brein, L. (2017). *The Making of an American Nazi*. The Atlantic, december issue.)

⁷ Anglin, A (2016), *A Normie’s Guide to the alt-right “Troll culture”*, Daily Stormer

⁸ Anglin, A (2016), *A Normie’s Guide to the alt-right “Troll culture”*, Daily Stormer

The memes were translated into meaning using semiotics, a method for deciphering meaning from symbols. From this, nine major narratives were identified.



Above: Hiddenlol.com and two comparable mainstream 'normal' memesites: hugelol.com and 9gag.com

By academically researching extremist narratives in memes, we get insight in which messages they are sending. Insight about these narratives and memes can contribute to academic debates about polarisation, the extreme right and new media extremism. Further, the found narratives can provide new data for other research on the extreme right and their narratives. This is especially of use in the study of the alt-right, which is a hard to point down and fluid new apparition of extreme right ideology. Meme-culture is central to the alt-right, and this study into extreme right memes can give some holdfasts for studying this new phenomenon.

Outside of academia, these insights can help with recognizing narratives and developing focussed alternative narratives and counternarratives. The best way to contain

extremism is to understand the appeal of its ideology.⁹ We know the extreme right uses extremist narratives in memes, which may cause people to radicalize to become extreme right extremists and terrorists. To combat extremism, one must understand their narratives.¹⁰ With this in mind, this thesis tries to understand the narratives of extreme right meme platform Hiddenlol.

The research question is: *“To what extent can coherent extremist narratives be found in memes on Hiddenlol, and how do they react to real life events?”*

This thesis opens with a literature review that elaborates on concepts such as “extreme right”, “memes” and “narratives”. The next chapter explains the methodology; discusses the research question, data collection, semiotics, validity and limitations. This is followed by a discussion of the data, in which the identified narratives are discussed. The thesis ends with conclusions and recommendations for further research.

⁹ Richardson, L. (2006). *What terrorists want: Understanding the enemy, containing the threat*. New York: Random House.

¹⁰ Caryl, C. (2005, September 22). *Why they do it*. New York Review of Books, p. 30

2. Literature review

This literature review starts with a discussion of the extreme right, followed by a discussion on online extremism. Hereafter this thesis discusses memes, ambiguity and humor. In this part internet culture will also be discussed. Next it covers narratives, extremism and combining all previous topics: extremist narratives in memes. Lastly, it discusses agenda setting, framing and its relation to memes.

2.1. The extreme right

To analyze memes with an extreme right theme, it is important to understand its context. The extreme right is a context with its own views, use of language and symbols. Without understanding the basics of this context, it will be hard to understand and contextualize the narratives later discussed in this research. Therefore, this literature review will start with discussing the extreme right. It will first discuss important definitions to give clarity about what is exactly discussed. Next a summary of the extreme right's history follows. This does not only give insight into the context of the extreme right, but also in the way it develops.

Research about the extreme right has been going on for decades. It has many names, and even more definitions: twenty six according to Cas Mudde, with sixty eight different suggested characteristics. Five characteristics were mentioned by half of the researchers: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and a desire for a strong state.¹¹

Apart from this lack of academic consensus, there are other issues that prevent us from finding a good definition. Firstly, Mudde describes that a recurring problem in describing characteristics is that they are framed in a negative way, that reflects the stance of the researcher.¹² "Xenofobia" could for example also be phrased as "love for his/her own people".

Secondly, definitions of the extreme right, according to extreme right researchers Sarah Harrison and Michael Bruter, are often contradictory, non-exhaustive and inefficient at differentiating different parts of the extreme right.¹³ The same words are used for different levels of extremity, different ideologies and different kinds of groups. A parliamentary party labeled as extreme right needs different words than extreme right terrorists such as Anders

¹¹ Mudde, C (1996), *The war of words defining the extreme right party family*, West European Politics 19(2): pp. 229

¹² Mudde, C (1996), *The war of words defining the extreme right party family*, West European Politics 19(2): pp. 229

¹³ Harrison, S., Bruter, M. (2011). *Mapping extreme right ideology : An empirical geography of the European extreme right*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 5

Breivik. Researchers also sometimes use the same terms, such as radical-right, far-right, and extreme right, interchangeably.¹⁴ Cas Mudde notes that unclarity of the terms are partly due to the fact that the terms are not only used academically, but also politically.¹⁵

In the next part this thesis will discuss some definitions and narrow on on which ones will be used:

“Extreme right” is an ideology.¹⁶ When speaking about “the extreme right”, this means the followers of this ideology. The definition of “extreme right” is based on an adaption of Cas Mudde’s definition by Ravndal and Bjørgo. This definition was chosen due to it linking to many other studies about the extreme right.¹⁷ Extreme right ideology:

- 1). Sees hierarchies as inevitable, natural or even desirable.
- 2). Has an authoritarian inclination; a need for sameness, oneness, group authority. This leads to an intolerance toward diversity and individual autonomy.
- 3). Has some form of nativism or ethnic nationalism.¹⁸

Some terms are closely related to “extreme right” but mean something different. First there can be made decisions about the extremity of the ideology:

The term “radical/ radical right” is often used in the context of the extremism. It is defined as being against the status quo and opposing to the principles of the democratic rule of law, but not breaking the law.

“Extremism/ rightwing extremism” does however break this law and the principles of the constitution.¹⁹ This is an important difference - especially for law enforcement - between acting against the rule of law and breaking it. “Far right” includes both the radical and the extreme right.²⁰

A more detailed discussion of extremism follows further in this thesis in ‘2.6. Extremism.’

Throughout history, extreme right ideology has appeared in many forms.

¹⁴ Aasland Ravndal, J., Bjørgo, T.. (2018) *Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research*, Perspectives on terrorism, Volume 12, issue 6. p. 6

¹⁵ Mudde, C (1996), *The war of words defining the extreme right party family*, West European Politics 19(2): pp. 228

¹⁶ Mudde, C (1996), *The war of words defining the extreme right party family*, West European Politics 19(2): pp. 228

¹⁷ Aasland Ravndal, J. Bjørgo, T. (2018), *Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research*, Perspectives on terrorism, Volume 12, issue 6. p. 7

¹⁸ Aasland Ravndal, J. Bjørgo, T. (2018), *Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research*, Perspectives on terrorism, Volume 12, issue 6. p. 6

¹⁹ Mudde, C (1996), *The war of words defining the extreme right party family*, West European Politics 19(2): pp. 321

²⁰ Anti-Defamation League, *Extreme Right / Radical Right / Far Right*, retrieved on 25-2-2019

For example, neonazis and neo fascists, are those who want to restore or reproduce fascism from the 1930s.²¹ White supremacists, such as the KKK, believed in the supremacy of a white race. The Lonsdale youth was an extreme right branch within the “gabber subculture”.

A less well known, but influential, form of extreme right ideology is the Nouvelle Droite (*New Right*). The nouvelle droite is an extreme right cultural school of thought born in 1968 in France. Its thinkers, such as Alain de Benoist and Julius Evola, aimed to be an intellectual avant garde for the extreme right movement. It based itself on the Conservative Revolution, a fascist movement of the Interbellum period that discussed ultranationalism, defence of organic folk community, technological modernity and a reborn authoritarian state that valorized workers and soldiers. This state would triumph over the “*egalitarian ‘decadence’ of liberalism, socialism and traditional conservatism.*”²² Their thinkers included Ernst Junger, Carl Schmitt, Oswald Spengler and Arthur Moeller van der Bruck.²³ The Nouvelle Droite was not a violent extremist group, nor did it try to get influence through mainstream politics or grassroot activism.²⁴ They did not believe the current political system was a fruitful way to achieve their goals. They rather focused on “metapolitics”; changing politics through changing its surrounding culture. As a result, they mainly focused on building a philosophical foundation to rival and replace liberalism.²⁵

In several countries, far right line of thought seeped through to the mainstream political stage. Inspired by these thinkers, around 2000, far right activist groups such as the Identitarian movement emerged in France. These movements later spread to other European countries.²⁶ These activist groups, mainly formed from young activists, use high profile activism such as occupation of mosques, blocking a mountain pass to protest border control and sending a ship to the mediterranean sea to protest refugee-policy. They were strengthened through tensions arising from the refugee crisis caused by the war in Syria and emboldened by the success of populist far-right parties gaining influence in Europe.²⁷

In America, around 2016-2017, conservative anti-immigration anti-political-correctness movements, sometimes even far right movements, formed a new

²¹ Mudde, C (1996), *The war of words defining the extreme right party family*, West European Politics 19(2): pp. 230

²² Bar-On, T (2011) *Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite*, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 45:3, p. 200

²³ Hawley, G (2017). *Making sense of the Alt Right*, Columbia University Press, p. 36, 2017

²⁴ Hawley, G (2017). *Making sense of the Alt Right*, Columbia University Press, p. 37

²⁵ Bar-On, T. (2001). The Ambiguities of the Nouvelle Droite, 1968-1999. *The European Legacy*, 6(3) p. 342

²⁶ Hawley, G (2017). *Making sense of the Alt Right*, Columbia University Press, p. 37

²⁷ Hawley, G (2017). *Making sense of the Alt Right*, Columbia University Press, p. 38

opposition to the more moderate conservative Republican establishment.²⁸ Far right groups, feeling emboldened, appeared during Trump's campaign. One example is a rally in Washington where Trump supporters made a Hitler salute saying "Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory".²⁹ Another sign of the extreme right influencing the campaign is the fact that Steve Bannon, former executive chairman of the far right Breitbart News, became a advisor for the president. Bannon himself called his platform "the platform for the alt-right".³⁰ Donald Trump was elected president of the United States of America, which resulted in polarisation between Trump supporters and opponents. His presidency emboldened the far right. One notable decision was after an attack in Charlottesville, where an extreme right rally was going on. Here a man drove his car into a crowd of counter protesters, killing one. President Trump commented that there was "blame on both sides".³¹

It was around this time that the "alt-right" took its current shape. For this thesis, it is not possible to describe an extensive genealogy of the alt-right. However, a brief descriptions of some factors that played a role will give an introduction into the situation that created 'a perfect storm'. This new generation of the extreme right largely grew on online fora and was driven by people such as Richard Spencer, Milo Yiannopoulos³² and Andrew Anglin.³³ Its views include anti-social justice warriorism, free speech, anti-feminism, anti-globalism, anti-elitism, anti-Islam, pro western culture and racial issues.³⁴ Several events related to the online played a crucial role in the development of the alt-right to become a large online political movement:

2.1.1. Politicization of online communities

Firstly; politicization of online communities, which happened during Gamergate. Gamergate is an online controversy about gaming journalism. In 2014 game designer Zoe Quinn was wrongly accused of receiving good reviews in return for giving sexual favours. The conflict evolved to be about how much political correctness should influence gaming-culture, which was accused of being sexist and racist. Gamergate sparked murder-

²⁸ Shermer, E (2017), *Party Crashers: How Far-Right Demagogues Took Over the GOP*, Dissent

²⁹ Maqbool, A (Nov 22 2016), *Hail Trump: White nationalists mark Trump win with Nazi salute*, BBC,

³⁰ Elliott, P; Miller, Z(November 18, 2016). *Inside Donald Trump's Chaotic Transition*. Time.

³¹ Shear, M, Haberman, M (Aug 15 2017), *Trump Defends Initial Remarks on Charlottesville; Again Blames 'Both Sides'*, New York Times

³² Yiannopolous, M. and Bokhari A. (2016) *An Establishment Conservative's Guide To The alt-right*, Breitbart

³³ Anglin, A (2016), *A Normie's Guide to the alt-right "Troll culture"*, Daily Stormer

³⁴ Squirrell, T (2017) *Linguistic data analysis of 3 billion Reddit comments shows the alt-right is getting stronger*. alt-right Open Intelligence Initiative

and rape-threats.³⁵ It also polarized parts of the internet.³⁶ One side were the online liberals, feminists and civil rights movements; sometimes called “Social justice warriors”. The other side claimed to defend freedom of expression and not changing things. Some referred to it as a “Culture war”³⁷. Sentiments from the last mentioned side would later form a fertile soil for the alt-right.

As a result of Gamergate, communities’ fierce discussions became increasingly toxic. Those who disagreed with the dominant side of the argument and/or did not like the brutality of the discussion often left. This caused some online communities to become homogeneously politicized.

Later, some of these online communities, i.e. parts of Reddit, 4chan’s /pol and 8chan, became a clubhouse and recruiting ground for the Alt Right. Developments like these formed the basis of the link between the alt-right and gamerculture, meme-culture and online culture.

2.1.2. Shared frustrations and common causes

Secondly, this online anti-political correctness movement found allies in the extreme right. They both had to deal with social disapproval, including being called racists and sexist. This is illustrated by their symbol Pepe the Frog. Pepe is a comic figure who did not care about social standards and expectations. In the comic he can be seen pulling his pants down to his ankles and peeing. Instead of displaying shame at his behavior, Pepe says “*feels good, man*”.³⁸ The extreme right and the online movement both had frustrations about restricted freedom of expression. The online group and the extreme right could, to some degree, bond over their shared dislike of diversity and political correctness.

As absolute freedom and speech and (transgressive) humor where the norm, there were few social barriers for Nazism. Nazi humor, being very transgressive and scandalous, does well on the internet which prioritizes content with lots of interactions. Some of this humor struck a note with the members of these online communities, who more and more often seriously discussed the messages shown in these memes.³⁹

³⁵ Wu, B. (2014). *Rape and death threats are terrorizing female gamers. Why haven't men in tech spoken out?*, The Washington Post

³⁶ Nagle, A., (2017) *Kill all normies, online culture wars from 4chan and tumblr to Trump and the Alt Right*, John Hunt publishing, p. 21

³⁷ Hanson, R E. (2017). *Mass Communication: Living in a Media World* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications. p. 375.

³⁸ Collins, S. (2015). *The Creator of Pepe the Frog Talks About Making Comics in the Post-Meme World*. Vice.

³⁹ Beran, D, (February 20 2017) *4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump*, Huffington Post

One community that contributed to this discussion was the Dark Enlightenment movement.⁴⁰ The Dark Enlightenment, or the neoreactionary movement, is a collective of online bloggers and political theorists who have been active since 2000.⁴¹ They, among other sources, took inspiration from New Right.⁴² They argue against enlightenment ideals such as egalitarianism and democracy and for a monarchical or corporate structure government.⁴³ Another notable actor that contributed to these discussions was Bob Whitakers, with his theory of “white genocide”; the idea that white people are being replaced due to low white birth rates, high rates of immigration and high non-white birth rates.⁴⁴ A second movement that found common ground with the Gamergaters (those who chose the anti-feminist freedom of speech side) was the menosphere, a community of online men's rights activists.⁴⁵ They include anti-feminist movements, men's rights movements, Men Going Their Own Way⁴⁶, pick up-artists and incels. Best known from this group are these Incels, involuntary celibate men who blame liberal sexuality and feminism for the injustice of their celibacy. According to them, liberal sexual norms made it possible to have several partners, which resulted in women only picking “Alpha-males”, causing “beta-males” to not have sex. In the past, the Alpha-male could only have one partner and other women would be left for the beta-males. Feminism, which emancipated women and made them less likely to have traditional relationships, is therefore seen as bad. The extreme right, which also values traditional gender roles, and the Gamergaters, who hated feminist political correctness, found common ground with the manosphere in a fight against feminism and liberal gender norms.

2.1.3. Political emancipation of the internet

A third driver was the political emancipation of the internet. People realized how to use the internet as an extremely potent tool to share ideas and to organize. Communities from sites such as 4chan and Reddit used grassroots organization principles to quite successfully achieve shared goals. The most successful example of these was the online

⁴⁰ Hawley, G. (2017) *Making sense of the Alt Right*, Columbia University Press, p.36

⁴¹ Bar-On, T (2011) *Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite*, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 45:3, 199-223,

⁴² Finley, K (2013). *Geeks for Monarchy: The Rise of the Neoreactionaries*. Techcrunch

⁴³ Hawley, G. (2017) *Making sense of the Alt Right*, Columbia University Press, p.45

⁴⁴ Hawley, G. (2017) *Making sense of the Alt Right*, Columbia University Press, p.49

⁴⁵ Cook, J (2018). *A Toxic 'Brotherhood': Inside Incels' Dark Online World*. Huffington Post.

⁴⁶ Men declaring they do not need nor want women

freedom movement Anonymous which successfully united many individual users in several political campaigns.⁴⁷

2.1.4. Political climate

The combination of far right- and other groups meeting, and the political emancipation of the internet resulted in the online movement now known as the alt-right. One more driver to contribute to this was the political climate. All this happened around the 2016 presidential elections in the United States of America. Candidate Donald Trump was supported by a crowd of far right internet users, who made it their goal to get him elected. Memes were used by Trumps online supporters as a campaign tool to praise Trump and criticise his opponents.⁴⁸ His campaign provided a common cause, and an opportunity to organize and attract new people.⁴⁹ This campaign is referred to as “the great meme war”. Later, similar tactics were used in the campaign to promote Brexit.⁵⁰

The breakthrough of the alt-right occurred when Hillary Clinton’s campaign team accused Trump of working together with the alt-right; labeling the latter “deplorables”. This gave the movement a worldwide mediaplatform and increased their anti-establishment identity significantly.⁵¹ Other politicians have also been supported by the alt-right, such as Rassemblement National in France,⁵² FVD (Forum voor democratie) in the Netherlands⁵³, the FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) in Austria⁵⁴ and UKIP (UK Independence Party) in England.⁵⁵ Another issue that helped the far right in agenda setting was the European refugee-crisis. This caused tensions and public debates in Europe. The alt-right has also influenced the offline world and society by normalizing far right ideas, lobbying against laws that limit hate speech, helping radical politicians getting elected and disturbing electoral processes in Europe.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Beyer, J L. (2014) *The Emergence of a Freedom of Information Movement: Anonymous, WikiLeaks, the Pirate Party, and Iceland*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol.19(2), p.141(14),

⁴⁸ Heikkilä, N (2017), *Online Antagonism of the alt-right in the 2016 Election*, *Popularizing Politics: The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*, European Journal of American studies

⁴⁹ Beran, D (2017) *4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump*, Huffington Post,

⁵⁰ *The great meme war*, Encyclopedia dramatica, retrieved on 2-5-2019

⁵¹ Heikkilä, N (2017), *Online Antagonism of the alt-right in the 2016 Election*, *Popularizing Politics: The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*, European Journal of American studies

⁵² Valens, A (2017), *Twitter’s alt-right wants feminists to vote for Marine Le Pen because she’s a woman*, The Daily Dot

⁵³ Kranenberg, A. Bahara, H. (2018) *Hoe alt-right online Jodenhaat verspreidt*, Volkskrant

⁵⁴ *The great meme war*, Encyclopedia dramatica, retrieved on 2-5-2019

⁵⁵ Walker, P. (2018), *Ukip welcomes social media activists linked to 'alt-right' into party*, the Guardian

⁵⁶ Davey, J. Ebner, J. (2017) *The Fringe Insurgency, Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the extreme Right*, ISD global, p.5

Summarizing the alt right; the alt-right is a mix of movements from the extreme right, online anti-political correctness movements and the manosphere. Its culture is heavily influenced by online-, gamer- and meme-subcultures. It innovates from the New right in that it focuses on youth and the broader public.⁵⁷ It found a fertile context in the tensions from European refugee crisis and the election of the US president Donald Trump.

To summarize the last paragraphs: the extreme right is an ideology that can be interpreted in different levels of extremity. Its most current form, the alt-right, took inspiration from previous movements and combined with other online movements. This thesis focuses on memes, which are most part of the most recent alt-right extreme right. However, previous manifestations of extreme right ideology are its history, and will inspire its future. The most unique novel thing about the alt-right is its use of the online and online culture.

2.2. Online extremism

In the previous paragraph, online-culture was described as an important aspect of the alt-right. In the following paragraph, online extremism is described. Due to its link with online culture, the extreme right is particularly successful online.

To understand social processes, one must understand their context. For example, one could not study politics in China without understanding the culture it is embedded in. Online culture is just as much a cultural context that needs to be understood.

Online culture values free speech greatly. Many see the internet as a place where ideas can be shared without boundaries. It is a place that can connect people and give those who would otherwise be silenced a platform to organize and to spread their opinions.⁵⁸ It facilitates an unmoderated space where you can freely and anonymously exchange ideas.⁵⁹

As a result of this, like minded people can find each other without the social barriers that would otherwise isolate them offline.⁶⁰

The internet also has a tendency to create so called 'echo chambers' or filter bubbles, which might also lead to radicalisation. Echo chambers are online spheres where people only

⁵⁷ Maly, I (2018), *Nieuw rechts*. EPO, p.193

⁵⁸ Barber, B R. (1999) *Three scenarios for the future of technology and strong democracy*. Political Science Quarterly 113(4): 573–589

⁵⁹ Nagle, A., (2017), *Kill all normies, online culture wars*. Winchester, Zero Books publishers

⁶⁰ Omotoyinbo, F. (2014) *Online Radicalisation: the Net or the Netizen*. Socialines Technologijos, Vol.4(1)

discuss their views with likeminded people in a community without encountering opposing views.⁶¹ When people are surrounded by such echo chambers, they can not only develop a view that is at odds with the rest of society, but experience affirmation and strengthening of those views. Those who are unsure of their beliefs or disagree are more likely to stay silent than voice dissent in such communities. Those who do are discouraged or shunned.⁶² The individuals that remain will start to believe in the narrative due to its widespread acceptance in their online social sphere.⁶³ This process helps the extreme right to radicalize and recruit online.

The online is increasingly used by extremists to share and find their views.^{64 65} Platforms such as Youtube, Twitter and Facebook are reported to be used by various extremist groups to share their narratives.⁶⁶ These platforms are also used by the extreme right, but the extreme right predominantly has a strong presence in the online communities 4chan's /pol/ board and 8chan.⁶⁷

The extreme right has a long tradition of using websites; the most prominent being Stormfront.org.⁶⁸ This website, founded by KKK Grand Wizard Don Black in the 90's, was the first major racial hate site. It has 300.000 registered users, which does not include the thousands of unregistered visitors. A notorious user of the site was the terrorist behind the Utoya shooting in 2011.⁶⁹

There is, however, a new generation of extreme right sites; such as Gab.ai, a far right alternative to Twitter, where the terrorist who killed people in a synagogue in Pittsburgh posted an announcement of this attack.⁷⁰ There is also Fascistforge (a successor of Iron march), an online community that connects and teaches extreme right violent extremists. It is

⁶¹ Sageman, M. (2008). *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*" University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia

⁶² Gupta, D. (2008). *Understanding terrorism and political violence : The life cycle of birth, growth, transformation, and demise*, London [etc.]: Routledge. p. 284.

⁶³ Sageman, M. (2008) *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia.

⁶⁴ Corman, S. R. Angeka Trethewey, and H. L. Goodall, Jr (2008). *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Strategic Communication to Combat Violent Extremism*. New York: Peter Lang

⁶⁵ Omotoyinbo, F. (2014) *Online Radicalisation: the Net or the Netizen*. *Socialines Technologijos*, Vol.4(1)

⁶⁶ Conway, M. (2012) *From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki: The emergence of the Internet as a new form of violent radical Milieu*. *Combating Terrorism Exchange*, 2, 12–22. 27-7,

⁶⁷ Maly, I (2018), *Nieuw rechts*. EPO, p.119

⁶⁸ Burris, V., Smith, E., Strahm, (2012) A.: *White Supremacist Networks on the Internet*. *Sociological Focus* 33(2), 215–235

⁶⁹ Dees, M. (2015) *White Supremacists Without Borders*. NY Times.

⁷⁰ Roose, K (2018), *On Gab, an Extremist-Friendly Site, Pittsburgh Shooting Suspect Aired His Hatred in Full*, New York Times

on this platform that the Atomwaffen SS met, who are responsible for killing at least five people.⁷¹ Then there are 4chan, and it's more extreme brother 8chan, on which the shooter of the Christchurch mosque attack posted his manifest and shooting-livestream. The perpetrators of these last three attacks all show aspects of meme culture. For example, the attacker of the Christchurch mosque used many references to memes in his manifest, and used the slogan at that time hyping in meme-culture "subscribe to Pewdiepie" as a battlecry.

2.3. Memes, ambiguity and humor

One of the most prevalent examples of humour used by the alt-right are their memes.

Memes are the most prominent form of online humor. They can be defined as "a combination of phrases and images which are produced to make funny jokes or usually criticize recent social phenomenon and hypes."⁷²

The term "meme" originated from a term describing the replication of genes and was later applied to the replication and copying of information like habits, skills and stories by imitation.⁷³ Memes share these aspects in that they self-replicate, mutate and respond to selective pressure and are therefore very effective in spreading a message.⁷⁴ According to Putra and Triyono, memes have three roles: firstly, they are a medium of communication. People substitute words with memes to transfer messages.⁷⁵ Secondly, memes are a vehicle for transferring ideas, knowledge and propaganda. Memes can be easily shared on internet society despite of the information they contain. This is due to their recognizability. Some people use memes to send distrust, alter truth and provoke conflict. Thirdly, memes can function as a cultural marker.⁷⁶ They showcase a cultural background.

Memes needs a format. Forcing a random picture with unclear rules will not be accepted by the meme-society.⁷⁷ Memes have codes and rules, which are created by the society they originated from.⁷⁸ There are universal rules and guidelines how to use memes.

⁷¹ Lamoureux, M. (2019) *Fascist Forge, the Online Neo-Nazi Recruitment Forum, Is Down*, Vice

⁷² Anugrah Putra, R, and Triyono, S. (2018) *The Diversity of Internet Memes Interpretations: A Discourse Analysis of Incongruity of Popular Memes Made by Indonesian Netizen*. Parole: Journal of Linguistics and Education 6.2 : p.49

⁷³ Kariko, T, Abdul Azis (2012), *Analysis on Internet Memes using Semiotics*, Binus University

⁷⁴ Kariko, T, Abdul Azis (2012), *Analysis on Internet Memes using Semiotics*, Binus University

⁷⁵ Anugrah Putra, R, and Triyono, S. (2018) *The Diversity of Internet Memes Interpretations: A Discourse Analysis of Incongruity of Popular Memes Made by Indonesian Netizen*. Parole: Journal of Linguistics and Education 6.2 : p.51

⁷⁶ Anugrah Putra, R, and Triyono, S. (2018) *The Diversity of Internet Memes Interpretations: A Discourse Analysis of Incongruity of Popular Memes Made by Indonesian Netizen*. Parole: Journal of Linguistics and Education 6.2 : p.51

⁷⁷ <https://knowyourmeme.com/>

⁷⁸ Anugrah Putra, R, and Triyono, S. (2018) *The Diversity of Internet Memes Interpretations: A Discourse Analysis of Incongruity of Popular Memes Made by Indonesian Netizen*. Parole: Journal of Linguistics and Education 6.2 : p.51

These can be found on sites such as the Know Your Meme database. When rules and codes belonging to a certain meme are not followed, this transgression is seen as a violation of the meme.

In general, meme producers come from the same community as meme-consumers, a difference being that they produce memes.

In general, memes do not contain gore, pornography, extreme non consensual sadistic behavior or disgusting displays.⁷⁹ These are marked NSFW (Not Safe For Work, implying that hypothetical coworkers will judge you for these memes), and usually have specific subsections on regular memesites or are published on special meme sites. Hiddenlol is such a NSFW memesite, with an extreme right theme.

Several academics have emphasized the impact that memes have on extreme right radicalisation.^{80 81 82} Memes make it possible for extreme right actors to share their views widely where they otherwise would not have succeeded due to social stigma.

A leaked instructional guide for the extreme right site Daily Stormer describes the benefits of using memes. The guide encourages to not use obvious extreme right content that can repel mainstream readers. Instead, it encourages authors to hijack existing memes because “*memes are familiar, funny, and naturally lower the audience’s critical defenses*“.⁸³ The guide also emphasizes that using racist jokes plants the seeds for racist beliefs. Examples of the usage of extreme right memes by extreme right organisations are the Belgian Schild en Vrienden⁸⁴, the American Proud Boys⁸⁵, the Identitarian movement⁸⁶ and the Dutch Erkenbrand.⁸⁷

⁷⁹ Anugrah Putra, R, and Triyono, S. (2018) *The Diversity of Internet Memes Interpretations: A Discourse Analysis of Incongruity of Popular Memes Made by Indonesian Netizen*. Parole: Journal of Linguistics and Education 6.2 : p.51

⁸⁰ Evans, R. (2018), *From Memes to Infowars: How 75 Fascist Activists Were “Red-Pilled”*, Bellingcat

⁸¹ Bogerts, L, Fielitz, M. (2019) “*Do You Want Meme War?*” *Understanding the Visual Memes of the German Far Right, Post-digital cultures of the far-right*, Political science, volume 71

⁸² Hine, G, Onaolapo, J, de Cristofaro, E, Kourtellis, N, Leontiadis, I, Smaras, R, Stringhini, G, Blackburn, J (2017), “*Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan’s Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web*” University of Roma Tre, University college London, Cyprus University of technology and Telefonica Research

⁸³ Phillips, W. (2018), *The Oxygen of Amplification, Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online*, Data & Society

⁸⁴ Evers, F. (2018), *Na de heisa rond Schild & Vrienden: memes kunnen nog steeds grappig zijn*, deMorgen

⁸⁵ Southern Poverty Law Centre, *Proud boys*, retrieved on 20-2-202

⁸⁶ Dearden, L., (2017), *Far-right extremists targeting UK as they ‘weaponise internet culture’ to spread hatred around the world*, Independent

⁸⁷ Kranenberg, A. (2017), *alt-right in Nederland: Hoe Erkenbrand zich opmaakt voor de strijd om een blanke natie*, de Volkskrant

2.3.1. Ambiguity of symbols and humor

On the internet it is hard to know what is meant seriously, and what is meant as a joke if the author does not clearly state his intent. This problem is dubbed “Poe’s law”.⁸⁸ Humor can be used as a cover for serious messages. Firstly, humor gives the speaker a way out. Irony and exaggeration are common tropes in humor. If the extremist is called out on his statements, he can claim it was just a joke, meant ironically or an exaggeration. One message can have several meanings, depending on who reads it. This causes a “dog-whistle”-effect. A dog/whistle effect is a narrative strategy in which you project a message that only those on the right frequency (insiders) can hear. Extreme-right insiders will understand the hidden message and recognize it for its true meaning, while others will not understand the radical meaning.⁸⁹

Memes are also very symbol-heavy. Confusion about the true meaning of a symbol is sometimes created on purpose by the alt-right. The double meaning of a symbol as something mundane, or as an extremist symbol makes it difficult to recognize narratives. The alt-right uses mundane symbols on purpose to create this ambiguity. Some examples of symbols used to signify racism: milk⁹⁰ and a moon-figure from a 80’s McDonalds.⁹¹ Another symbol is one that became established as a hate symbol after the shooter of the Christchurch mosque-attack signaled it in court. The “White Power”-hand symbol, previously known as the “okay-hand sign” thumb and forefinger touching, others spread out. The sign is meant to look like a “w” and “p”, signifying “White Power”.⁹²

The white power symbol was only one in a collection of extreme right symbols using mundane symbols, with other symbols such as the V-sign (“there are only 2 genders”)⁹³ and milk (being able to digest lactose as adults is a trait more common in white people)⁹⁴

A goal achieved by using mundane symbols is dogwhisteling; being able to do it without people noticing. Only those who are aware of the meaning understand it. Another goal is to frame critics as overreacting. The alt-right starts using symbols in their memes and

⁸⁸ Phillips, W. & Milner, R.M. (2017) *The ambivalent internet. mischief, oddity, and antagonism online*. Cambridge:polity press

⁸⁹ Maly, I. (2018), *Nieuw rechts*. EPO p. 202

⁹⁰ Gambert, I, Linné, T (2018) *How the alt-right uses milk to promote white supremacy*, the Conversation

⁹¹ Sheffield, M (October 5 2016) *Meet Moon Man: The alt-right's racist rap sensation, borrowed from 1980s McDonald's ads*, Salon

⁹² ADL, Okay Hand Gesture, racist hand symbols, retrieved on 7-5-2019

⁹³ Bernstein, J. (April 30 2017), *The Trump Internet Keeps Making Fake Hate Symbols, And People Keep Falling For It*, BuzzFeed News

⁹⁴ Harmon, A. (October 17 2018), *Why White Supremacists Are Chugging Milk (and Why Geneticists Are Alarmed)*, the new York Times

discourse and soon enough journalists journalists start to write about it. The alt-right counteracts with comments that “everything is racist nowadays, even milk!”⁹⁵

Seeing extremist memes as just a joke can lead to not being wary of their influence. Lured in by the funny aspects, people are exposed to extreme right content while not seeking political messages. After being exposed to extremist content for some time, its previously shocking narratives become less shocking. Seeing it on a daily basis leads to desensitization and normalisation of extreme narratives.⁹⁶

2.3.2. Transgressive humor in the attention-economy

Social media’s algorithms (rules that decide what is shown prominently) show content with the most interaction most prominently. This causes transgressive or funny content, which generates interaction, to do well in the internet’s attention-economy. Both outrage and appreciation increases the prominence of content. Extreme right content is often used in transgressive humor, which generates both outrage and appreciation. This causes their narratives to do well online.

2.3.3. Humor as a rhetorical tool

Research describes humour as being a potent tool to “counter extremist narratives”.⁹⁷ The following points were described by a group of academics who promote using humoristic narratives against extremism⁹⁸, but also work for extremist narratives as well (for whom the status quo is the relative extreme). Humor is described as disrupting narratives about dictators, demeaning them. Using humor as a rhetorical tool is not new in warfare; many leaders have banned humor fearing it would sow dissent. They recognized that being able to laugh at something diminishes its power.

Humor was often used in historical conflicts; songs in the American Revolutionary War, films in the Second World War and more recently against Al-Qaeda by comedy show South Park

⁹⁵ Hawley, G. (2017). *Making Sense of the alt-right*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 203

⁹⁶ Kadijk, W. (2018) Development of political involvement in the online New Right, Bachelor Thesis Leiden University. p. 58

⁹⁷ Goodall, H.L. , Hope Cheong, P, Fleischer, K, & Corman S.. (2012). *Rhetorical Charms: The Promise and Pitfalls of Humor and Ridicule as Strategies to Counter Extremist Narratives*.

Perspectives on Terrorism, 6(1), Perspectives on Terrorism, 01 March 2012, Vol.6(1). p. 71

⁹⁸ H.L. Goodall, Pauline Hope Cheong, Kristin Fleischer, & Steven R. Corman. (2012). *Rhetorical Charms: The Promise and Pitfalls of Humor and Ridicule as Strategies to Counter Extremist Narratives*. Perspectives on Terrorism, 6(1), Perspectives on Terrorism, 01 March 2012, Vol.6(1).

and a ventriloquist act “Achmed the Dead Terrorist”.⁹⁹ Humor gives the author's people/reference group morale and hope¹⁰⁰, and delegitimizes the enemy. Humor is described as a rhetorical device that both “unites and divides”.¹⁰¹ Jokes can become symbols of the struggle between “freedom of expression” and “what people consider hate speech”. They can be the ignition for conflict. A famous example of this was the cartoon of the Islamic prophet Mohammed drawn by the Danish Jylland-Posten in 2013. In this comic, Mohammed, an important figure for Muslims who may not be depicted, was drawn with a turban shaped like a bomb. It caused global outrage and riots in several countries, both in favor of, and against, the drawing.

Humor is also a good way of low-key distributing rumours. Jokes spread fast, and are often assumed to have a core of truth.

For the extreme right, their enemies must be demeaned and their own group must be motivated. Also, for those who want conflict, humor igniting conflict is not a risk; but a feature.

Humor also contributes to seeming unthreatening. Extremist narratives that use humor and ambiguity, for example in the case of the Jihadi-Salafist extremist organization Sharia4Belgium,¹⁰² are less likely to be identified as a threat early on.

2.4. Narratives

The previous paragraphs covered extreme right ideology, online culture, the use of humor, and memes. The next part of this literature review will discuss a type of content: narratives. Memes on their own are often hard to interpret due to the fact that they only transmit a very short message and are by nature ambiguous. However, if you see a collection of memes as a collective of messages, a coherent narrative might appear, which is more fit to analyze for extremity.

⁹⁹Goodall, H.L., Hope Cheong, P., Fleischer, K., & Corman S.. (2012). *Rhetorical Charms: The Promise and Pitfalls of Humor and Ridicule as Strategies to Counter Extremist Narratives*. Perspectives on Terrorism, 6(1), Perspectives on Terrorism, 01 March 2012, Vol.6(1). . p. 72

¹⁰⁰ Waller, M., (2007) *Fighting the War of Ideas like a Real War*. Institute of World Politics Press, p. 100

¹⁰¹ Burke, K. (1950) *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., pp. 55-59.

¹⁰² Roex, I, Aarns, P, (2017) *Als ik iemand beledigd heb, dan was dat mijn bedoeling, Sharia4Belgiums ideologie en humorgebruik*, Amsterdam University press.

There has been scholarly discussion on the definition of narrative. Some definitions of narrative are relatively limited. Abbott's defines narratives as a "*representation of an event or a series of events*".¹⁰³ The definition supported by Scholes requires several events: "*a representation of sequence of events*".¹⁰⁴ Genette combines them "*the representation of an event or sequence of events*".¹⁰⁵ These definitions require some form of action to happen.

Fisher gives more importance to the context of narratives, and the experiences of those that interact with it. He describes narratives as "*symbolic actions—words and/or deed—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them*".¹⁰⁶

Ryan follows a different approach, and defined five topics that narratives cover: "1. *Problem solving*, 2. *Conflict*, 3. *Interpersonal relations*, 4. *Human experiences* 5. *The temporality of existence*".¹⁰⁷

Hinyard en Kreuter combine these aspects in one more extensive definition: "*Narratives are any cohesive and coherent story with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end that provides information about scene, characters, and conflict; raises unanswered questions or unresolved conflict, and provides resolution*".¹⁰⁸ Due to its completeness, this is the definition used in this thesis.

Researchers have established that narratives in memes are a driver behind extreme right radicalisation.^{109 110 111} But how do narratives affect people?

Stories have an effect on our emotional state, our belief systems, our behavior patterns, our health and our response to the world around us.¹¹² In a review of the data of sixteen papers it

¹⁰³ Abbott, H, Porter. (2008) *The Cambridge introduction to narrative* xvii. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 252

¹⁰⁴ Scholes, R. (1981). *Language, narrative, and anti-narrative*. In W. J. T. Mitchell (Ed.), *On narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p.205

¹⁰⁵ Genette, G.. (1982) *Figures of literary discourse*. Trans. Alan Sheridan; New York: Columbia University Press, p.127

¹⁰⁶ Fisher, W. R. (1987). *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. p. 24

¹⁰⁷ Ryan, M. (2007) *In The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, edited by Herman, David, Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, pp. 22-35.

¹⁰⁸ Hinyard, L.J; Kreuter, M.W. (2007) *Using Narrative Communication as a Tool for Health Behavior Change: A Conceptual, Theoretical, and Empirical Overview*, Health Education & Behavior, Vol. 34, Iss. 5 p.778

¹⁰⁹ Evans, R. (2018), *From Memes to Infowars: How 75 Fascist Activists Were "Red-Pilled"*, Bellingcat

¹¹⁰ Bogerts, L, Fielitz, M. "Do You Want Meme War?" *Understanding the Visual Memes of the German Far Right, Post-digital cultures of the far-right*, Political science, volume 71

¹¹¹ Hine, G, Onaolapo, J, de Cristofaro, E, Kourtellis, N, Leontiadis, I, Smaras, R, Strnghini, G, Blackburn, J (2017), "*Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan's Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web*" University of Roma Tre, University college London, Cyprus University of technology and Telefonica Research

¹¹² Braddock, K. and Dillard, James P 2012). *Fighting Words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. p.77

was concluded that narratives can change beliefs, intentions and/or behavior.¹¹³ Research has shown that narrative form of communication has a potent effect on the psychology of those exposed to it.¹¹⁴ For example, in communicating an ideology. Ideology is often¹¹⁵ conceptualized as “a body of normative or normative-related ideas about the nature of society, its organisation and purpose, and the nature of man.”¹¹⁶ Cas Mudde phrases it slightly different as “a set of normative ideas on how man and society are versus how they ought to be”.¹¹⁷ Infinite configurations of ideas are possible.¹¹⁸ Rowland and Theye give ideology several purposes: it provides a cognitive map of the world of how it is and should be, and it “fills the void of uncertainty with beliefs”. They also note that it gives people a strong sense of identity, which can bind them together.¹¹⁹ These things influence how people see themselves, the world and how to interact with it.

These aspects fit with Busselle and Bilandzic’s comments on successful narratives: a successful narrative requires models for characters, a modelled story world, and modelled situations. A “character model” consists of identities, traits, and goals of individual characters. “Story world models” define the place and time of the story, and establish internal logics of the storyworld. “Situational models” combine these two and “track the events and actions of characters, as well as spatial and chronological cues”.¹²⁰ Narratives can give an idea of who you and others are, what place you are in, why it is that way and how you can affect it. A convincing narrative plausibly explains away any deviations from the actual world with story world logic.¹²¹ For someone to comprehend a narrative, they must shift away their focus from the actual world to the narrative’s world. If this is done successfully, the subject loses awareness of the actual world due to psychological immersion in the narrative world.¹²²

¹¹³ Braddock, K. and Dillard, James P (2012). *Fighting Words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. p.99

¹¹⁴ Braddock, K. and Dillard, James P (2012). *Fighting Words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.. p.77

¹¹⁵ Harrison, S., & Bruter, M. (2011). *Mapping extreme right ideology : An empirical geography of the European extreme right*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 34

¹¹⁶ Sainsbury, D. (1980), *Swedish Social Democratic Ideology and Electoral politics 1944-1948. A study of the functions of the party ideology*, Almqvist & Wicksell, Stockholm

¹¹⁷ Mudde, C. (2000), *Ideology of the Extreme Right*, Manchester university press, Manchester

¹¹⁸ Harrison, S., & Bruter, M. (2011). *Mapping extreme right ideology : An empirical geography of the European extreme right*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 34

¹¹⁹ Rowland, R., & Theye, K. (2008). *The Symbolic DNA of Terrorism*. Communication Monographs, 75(1), p. 58

¹²⁰ Busselle, R.; Bilandzic, H.(2008) *Fictionality and perceived realism in experiencing stories: A model of narrative comprehension and engagement*. Communication Theory Vol. 18, Iss. 2 p. 272

¹²¹ Busselle, R.; Bilandzic, H.(2008) *Fictionality and perceived realism in experiencing stories: A model of narrative comprehension and engagement*. Communication Theory Vol. 18, Iss. 2 p. 272

¹²² Braddock, K., and Dillard, J.P. (2012) *Fighting Words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process*, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. p.101

When people are ‘transported’ into a narrative, they are more likely to accept messages contained in it due to the fact that people are not motivated enough to critically evaluate them.¹²³ Being transported in a narrative causes enjoyment, regardless of how happy, sad or angry that world is. This joy causes people to be open to topics they usually would have avoided due to fear¹²⁴ or disinterest. It follows, then, that the narrative form is an especially fruitful tool to influence people's minds. In the state of uncritical absorption, they might accept values or symbols they would otherwise dismiss out of hand.

Narratives can be disturbed. This can happen when an actual world event happens which is not previously explained by storyworld logic. The external world disrupts the internal logic. (i.e. a black person is the smartest in the class).

A second way this can happen is when internal logic of the narrative is incoherent, implausible or inconsistent¹²⁵ (i.e. the Holocaust did not happen, but was also glorious).

2.5. Extremism

We have discussed how narratives can influence our belief systems, behavior, and our response to the world around us. We also concluded that the extreme right uses online memes to radicalize people with extremist content. The next part discusses the concept “extremism” in more detail.

To discuss extremism, we first need to discuss the definition of extremism. It is important to make the distinction between:

- 1). the label extremism, that labels “*activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary*”¹²⁶ (as in “extreme right”), and;
- 2). the label extremism that says something about how extreme people think of and justify violence (as in “extremist extreme right). This second label is defined as: “*Close-minded and seek to create a homogeneous society based on rigid, dogmatic, ideological tenets, which suppresses all opposition and subjugates minorities.*”¹²⁷

¹²³ Green, M. C.; Brock, T. C. (2002). *Narrative Impact*, 13. In *the mind's eye: transportation-imagery model of narrative persuasion*. Social and Cognitive Foundations, ABELLGreen,

¹²⁴ Leventhal, H. (1970), *Findings and Theory in the Study of Fear Communications*. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology; New York, N.Y. Vol. 5, p. 119.

¹²⁵ Braddock, K., and Dillard, J.P. (2012) *Fighting Words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process* ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. p.101

¹²⁶ Coleman, P, Bartoli, A, *Addressing Extremism, The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR)*, Teachers College, Columbia University, The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) George Mason University. p. 1

¹²⁷ Schmid, Alex J. (2013) *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT

Radicalisation in relation to extremism is defined as *“the process of supporting or engaging in activities deemed (by others) as in violation of important social norms (e.g., the killing of civilians).”*¹²⁸

Radicalisation is not necessarily bad. Sometimes a society benefits from radical change. It often depends on the point of view and interests of the one who judges. A paper by the International Center for Cooperation & Conflict Resolution gives a couple of quotes that elegantly illustrate this:

“I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.” –Barry M. Goldwater

“Extreme justice is often injustice.” –Jean Racine

“They violate our land and occupy it and steal the Muslim’s possessions, and when faced by resistance they call it terrorism.” –Osama bin Laden

“God deliver you, dear reader, from a fixed idea...it is they that make both supermen and madmen.” –Friedrich Nietzsche

“The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be...The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists” –Martin Luther King, JR

*“What is objectionable, what is dangerous about extremists is not that they are extreme, but that they are intolerant” –Robert F. Kennedy”*¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Kruglanski, Arie W. ; Gelfand, Michele J. ; Bélanger, Jocelyn J. ; Sheveland, Anna ; Hetiarachchi, Malkanthi ; Gunaratna, Rohan, (2014) *The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism*, Political Psychology, Vol.35, pp.69-93

¹²⁹ Coleman, P, Bartoli A, Addressing Extremism, The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR), Teachers College, Columbia University, The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) George Mason University p.1

2.6. Extremist narratives in memes

Identifying memes as extremist is important, because it marks them as encouraging extremist acts. This thesis will look at narratives and whether they show indicators of extremist narratives, which will be specified below..

Extremist narratives are increasingly spread online.¹³⁰ Examples of the usage of extreme right memes by extreme right organisations are the Belgian Schild en Vrienden¹³¹, the American Proud Boys¹³², the Identitarian movement¹³³ and the Dutch Erkenbrand.¹³⁴

Extremists narratives are a main method used by terrorists to share information and influence others.¹³⁵ They are very useful to discuss and change people's morality, religion, personal and social values and the meaning of life, which are important aspects for a terrorist group and the promotion of its ideology.¹³⁶

Whether people act on believes depends on many other factors; for example the way a person believes in an ideology,¹³⁷ and societal factors on macro (the world), meso (the community) and micro levels (personal circle).¹³⁸ Many people in bad conditions have not turned to terrorism; education and poverty are not necessarily linked to terrorism.¹³⁹

However, some ideologies do promote extremism more than others, making it more likely.

Which aspects make a narrative extremist? Some emphasize the sender of the message matters. If the source is a terrorist or extremist entity, this makes it more likely its narratives are extremist.¹⁴⁰ Messages can have different meanings at the same time; which depend on the context they are placed in.¹⁴¹ Part of that context is authorial intent, although

¹³⁰ Corman, S. R. Angeka Trethewey, and H. L. Goodall, Jr (2008). *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Strategic Communication to Combat Violent Extremism*. New York: Peter Lang

¹³¹ Evers, F. (2018), *Na de heisa rond Schild & Vrienden: memes kunnen nog steeds grappig zijn*, deMorgen

¹³² Southern Poverty Law Centre, *Proud boys*, retrieved on 20-2-202

¹³³ Dearden, L., (2017), *Far-right extremists targeting UK as they 'weaponise internet culture' to spread hatred around the world*, Independent

¹³⁴ Kranenberg, Annieke (2017), *alt-right in Nederland: Hoe Erkenbrand zich opmaakt voor de strijd om een blanke natie*, de Volkskrant

¹³⁵ Hinyard, L.J; Kreuter, M.W. (2007) *Using Narrative Communication as a Tool for Health Behavior Change: A Conceptual, Theoretical, and Empirical Overview*, Health Education & Behavior, Vol. 34, Iss. 5 pp. 777-792.

¹³⁶ Braddock, K. and Dillard, J.P. (2012). *Fighting Words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Burke, K. (1950) *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall Inc.. p.115

¹³⁷ Schuurman, B.W., & Taylor, M. (2018). *Reconsidering radicalization: Fanaticism and the link between ideas and violence*. Perspectives on Terrorism, 12(1), 3-22.

¹³⁸ Schmid. A. P (2013). *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*. ICCT Research Papers, 4(2), p. 3

¹³⁹ Krueger, A. B., & Maleckova, J. (2003). *Seeking the roots of terrorism*. Chronicle of Higher Education, p. 10.

¹⁴⁰ Braddock, K. and Dillard, J.P. (2012). *Fighting Words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. p.122

¹⁴¹ Hoed. B.H. (2009). *Semiotik dan Dinamika Sosial Budaya*. Depok: Komunitas Bambu. p. 245

that does not guarantee the reader reads it as the author has intended. However, some narratives do not have a clear author, as is the case with Hiddenlol. In that case meaning needs to be derived from other indicators in the context.

Some academics choose to focus on ideology and narratives that inspire violence. An important premise of the relevance of studying terrorist narratives is the theory that terrorism has a strong rhetorical nature.¹⁴² It argues that specific narratives transform terrorism into sacramental violence, thereby encouraging and legitimizing it.¹⁴³ Kenneth Burke labels this premise as “*terministic compulsion leading to violence*”; people act out the implications of their ideology.¹⁴⁴ It might be good to emphasize that terministic does not mean deterministic, the difference being that a narrative does not have to lead to violence. Not everyone who believes in such an ideological narrative will act on it.

Academics are still in discussion about which aspects make a narrative extremist. Robert C. Rowland and Kirsten Theye, for example, have developed a theory on which aspects are present in a terrorist ideological narrative; the DNA of terrorism. The narrative they found does not mean an actor will deterministically become a terrorist, which is an extremist act, but does increase its likelihood by giving a legitimization for violence.¹⁴⁵ It includes three requirements that form its acronym¹⁴⁶:

“A1). *Denial of identity. The very existence of a group has been denied and is threatened with annihilation by some Other.*

A2). *Negation of the identity of the Other.*

A3). *Affirmation of a an identity through a fundamental myth associated with the origins of the group, or a millennial myth about a perfect future to come.*”¹⁴⁷

Coleman and Bartoli summarize extremist aspects emerging from “*apocalyptic, eschatological ideologies*” as:

“B1). *Good vs. evil framing*

¹⁴² Richardson, L. (2006). *What terrorists want: Understanding the enemy, containing the threat*. New York: Random House.

¹⁴³ Rowland, R., & Theye, K. (2008). *The Symbolic DNA of Terrorism*. Communication Monographs, 75(1), p. 54

¹⁴⁴ Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

¹⁴⁵ Rowland, R., & Theye, K. (2008). *The Symbolic DNA of Terrorism*. Communication Monographs, 75(1), p. 56

¹⁴⁶ Rowland, R., & Theye, K. (2008). *The Symbolic DNA of Terrorism*. Communication Monographs, 75(1), p. 63

¹⁴⁷ Rowland, R., & Theye, K. (2008). *The Symbolic DNA of Terrorism*. Communication Monographs, 75(1), p. 63

- B2). *An other-worldly orientation*
- B3). *A need for self-purification*
- B4). *Devine sanctioning of horrendous violence*
- B5). *A depiction of martyrdom as an act of self-purification.*
- B6). *The elevation and glorification of the righteous (ingroup).¹⁴⁸*

Another group of researchers have identified 3 “master” narratives used by Al Qaeda.¹⁴⁹
 Edited for non-Jihadist general application, these are:

- C1). *An underlying grievance in which an “other” who are responsible, in collaboration with local elite, for the mistreatment and humiliation of the “us-group” around the world.*
- C2). *The notion of an ideal society where, under a purist notion of law or perfect Divine law the establishment of a “pure” governed polity serves to replace the corrupt governance structures.*
- C3). *A means of moving from that grievance to achieving an ideal society namely through violent activity.*

When we look at these three theories, we see some similarities: 1). There is an apparent “us”, who is perceived to be threatened, corrupted, mistreated and humiliated.¹⁵⁰

2). This is done by a tainted, evil, unjust “other”, who threatens, corrupts, mistreats and/or humiliates the “us”.¹⁵¹

3). Ideals are presented, which can be made possible by purifying society of the “other”.¹⁵²

4). Lastly, violence is often shown as a solution for solving problems.¹⁵³

These will be the factors used in analyzing extremism in the narratives found on Hiddenlol.

¹⁴⁸ Coleman, P, Bartoli, A, *Addressing Extremism, The International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR), Teachers College, Columbia University, The Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) George Mason University p.4 derived from Wessells, M.(2002). *Terrorism, apocalyptic ideology, and young martyrs: Why peacebuilding matters.* the American Psychological Association Conference in Chicago*

¹⁴⁹ Beutel, A., Weine, S., Saeed, A., Mihajlovic, A., Stone, A., Behrs, J., & Shanfield, S. (2016). *Guiding Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives.* Journal of Terrorism Research, 7(3), 35.

¹⁵⁰ Combining A1, A3, B1, B6 and C1

¹⁵¹ Combining A1, A2, B1 and C1

¹⁵² Combining A3, B2, B3 and C2

¹⁵³ Combining A2, B4, B5 and C3

2.7. Memes as persuasive tools; agenda-setting and framing

Narratives and memes do not exist in a vacuum. They react to world events. These reactions are not mere commentaries and administration of history, but also acts in itself. By discussing something, you make it relevant. By presenting something in a certain way, you influence its narrative. By mourning or celebrating something, you give it an emotional charge.

According to scholars on the topic of the politics of attention, people only have a limited potential for understanding and processing things. Our cognition is limited by a “bottleneck” of short-term memory that allows us to attend to only limited elements of the environment at any given time. An audience can only process their attention on a limited perspective advocated in a debate.¹⁵⁴ Memes, being funny, small and often easy to process are an effective way to communicate. Memes can accomplish things that the traditional news media cannot always achieve, such as near instantaneous distribution of news, extended audience reach, viral and easily shareable content, and being able to focus on seemingly unimportant, but very viral events.¹⁵⁵ Memes also seem to have more leeway in what can be said. They can be more transgressive than other forms of media due to their use of humor. Also, by using humor they are able to transfer information on a subliminal level, below the conscious mind.¹⁵⁶ Combined with the power of a strong narrative or well constructed ideology, they can be very convincing.

Memes also have power as an agenda setting tool, which means that they can influence what people care about. Internet memes can turn very trivial moments, gossips or rumours into central talking points.¹⁵⁷ This democratizes debates about politics, because everybody can make an attempt at influencing the discussion. However, the other side of the coin is that these authors are almost always anonymous and cannot be held accountable.¹⁵⁸ This makes it harder to counter fake news or criticize creators.

Memes also play a role in framing. Framing is how something is set up for the audience. It created a context for the audience of why the topic of the message is discussed.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Jones, B., Baumgartner, F. (2006), *Politics of Attention*, The University of Chicago

¹⁵⁵ Reinhard, C.L. (2012). *Memes: Popular, but Persuasive?*, Newswise

¹⁵⁶ Brannon, L.A. and Brock, T.C. (1994). *The Subliminal Persuasion Controversy: Reality, Enduring Fable and Polonius's Weasel*. The Ohio State University

¹⁵⁷ Kadir, S., Lokman, A (2014). *Memes: Persuasive Political Warfare*, The Centre for Media and Information Warfare Studies Review, Issue 7, p. 32

¹⁵⁸ Nasri, G. (2012). *Presidential Candidates Don't Always Meme What They Say*. Digital trends

¹⁵⁹ Kadir, S., Lokman, A (2014). *Memes: Persuasive Political Warfare*, The Centre for Media and Information Warfare Studies Review, Issue 7, p. 32

Memes as a tool in agenda setting are relatively new, but has proven to be significant in modern communication. As mentioned before, one event where memes had a large impact was the presidential election in America in 2016, where Donald Trump was elected. Memes were used by Trumps online supporters as a campaign tool to praise Trump and criticise his opponents.¹⁶⁰ This influenced which topics were discussed and how these topics were perceived. But even in the 2012 election, both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney memes played a role in agenda setting.¹⁶¹

Sharing memes can be a political speech act, an act by which politics is influenced. It can convince other people, and it influences agenda setting and framing of a topic. The main goal of political warfare is to win votes by building preference and shaping perception.¹⁶²

This thesis will also look into events in the world and see if (and how) these were presented and framed on Hiddenlol.

¹⁶⁰ Heikkilä, N (2017), *Online Antagonism of the alt-right in the 2016 Election, Popularizing Politics: The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election*, European Journal of American studies

¹⁶¹ Nasri, G. (2012). *Presidential Candidates Don't Always Meme What They Say*. Digital trends

¹⁶² Kadir, S., Lokman, A (2014). *Memes: Persuasive Political Warfare*, The Centre for Media and Information Warfare Studies Review, Issue 7, p. 34

3. Methodology

In the following chapter, this thesis will first describe the main research design: a qualitative case study and research question. Secondly, case selection, thirdly data collection, fourthly the methods used, Fifth, analysis of narratives. Sixth, it will discuss external validity of the research. Lastly, it covers the limitations and difficulties of this research.

3.1. Research Question and main research design

This research is a qualitative study that applies semiotics to analyze memes in a content analysis. The choice for qualitative research was made because it is crucial for interpreting symbols in the first place. Secondly, a quantitative analysis might give an interpretation of how much a narrative shows, but not all representations of narratives are equally strong, or easily sorted into categories which can be counted. This makes it less well suited.

This research analyzes the discourse on Hiddenlol.com with memes as its units of analysis, and uses those to get insight into the narratives on Hiddenlol. This thesis builds on a constructivist epistemology, believing that concepts/symbols are given meaning within and by their context. This means that memes on Hiddenlol can be interpreted in different ways by different people. However, this thesis takes them seriously in their messages and analyses them from the premise that they can be taken as a political message.

The research question is: *“To what extent can coherent extremist narratives be found in memes on Hiddenlol, and how do they react to real life events?”*

This research question can be split in 2 sub questions:

Rq1: To what extent can coherent extremist narratives be found in memes on Hiddenlol?

Rq2: How do they react to real life events?

3.2. Case selection

Hiddenlol is a website that allows users to anonymously upload, upvote and see memes.¹⁶³ It has a comment system and requires users to make accounts. Hiddenlol gives achievement awards for being active in the community, commenting and posting.

¹⁶³ Memes are “An element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means.” according to the Oxford Dictionary. In this context they usually refer to images with recognizable phrases or symbols meant as a joke.

Hiddenlol has a strong extreme right theme and stance. In the Urban dictionary¹⁶⁴ Hiddenlol is described by a user named *Hitlerhitler* as “*the internet version of Auschwitz, it is the Mecca of all the Hitler, gore and bizarre shit enthusiasts. Arbeit Macht Frei!*”¹⁶⁵

Another site, Encyclopedia Dramatica¹⁶⁶, describes Hiddenlol’s history: it started as a site for memes that were too offensive for the normal memesite Hugelol. Encyclopedia Dramatica describes how the site was “*funny*” during the 2016 Trump election and Brexit because of its “*anti-spic,*¹⁶⁷ *anti-sandnigger*¹⁶⁸ *and Hitler-memes*”. Encyclopedia Dramatica reports that the site has been declining because “*all the meme-lords*¹⁶⁹ *have left*”, and the site is now dominated by “*genuine Nazi fundamentalists.*”¹⁷⁰

It described the content of the site to be about “*Niggers, Muslims, Jews, Trump, Manliness and racial purity, Gore*¹⁷¹ *and Porn*”. Encyclopedia Dramatica also describes ways to “*troll*¹⁷² *on Hiddenlol*”, things that will anger the community of Hiddenlol. It includes criticizing Nazism, saying genders or races are equal, being anti-gun, or promoting veganism, globalism or communism.

According to Hypestat, a free internet statistics site, Hiddenlol had 24.900 daily visitors in february 2019.¹⁷³ Its pageviews are mainly from western countries such as the USA (16.8%), Norway (8.7%), Germany (7.1%), Romania (6.9%), Spain (6.3%), Netherlands (5.7%), France (5.6%), Denmark (5,3%), Sweden (4,9%) and Belgium (4.6%). Non-western countries represented are South Africa (0.9%) and Brazil (0.2%). Hypestat estimates the site, with porn as their core advertisers, makes €9500 per month. The site is hosted in Kansas, USA and its server is located in San Francisco, USA. These statistics were automatically collected, and as such might not be precise, but they do give a general indication.

¹⁶⁴ A crowdsourced encyclopedia that is mainly valued because it describes words and concepts that regular dictionaries will not.

¹⁶⁵ hitlerhitler, (2015) Hiddenlol, Urban dictionary, retrieved on 18-2-2019

¹⁶⁶ *Encyclopedia Dramatica was started by people banned from posting on Wikipedia. It is a satire site with alt-right tendencies, but it also “catalogues internet phenomena”, to which it prides itself to be “a fairly good reference.” The site has an alt-right bias*

¹⁶⁷ *A slur for latino people such as Mexicans*

¹⁶⁸ *A slur for Arab people.*

¹⁶⁹ *Those who make memes for fun, or chaos*

¹⁷⁰ Encyclopedia Dramatica, *Hiddenlol*, Retrieved 20-2-2019

¹⁷¹ “*Gore*” *in this context often means videos or photos of people dying or getting seriously injured*

¹⁷² *annoying people with the goal of creating havoc*

¹⁷³ Hypestat, *Hiddenlol.com*, Retrieved on 20-2-2019

Hiddenlol describes itself as “*the place where you go if you want to have a laugh, be surprised, meet cool people or check what's new on the internet.*”¹⁷⁴ They claim to have 348.000 users. In 2017 the site gives three rules: “*1. You will not upload, post, discuss, request, or link to anything that violates local or United States law. This includes, but is not limited to, Child Pornography and Bestiality. 2. You will immediately cease and not continue to access the site if you are under the age of 18. 3. You will not post or request personal information (“dox”) or calls to invasion (“raids”). Inciting or participating in cross-site (HUGELOL) raids is also not permitted.*” In their terms and conditions they also state that they are not responsible for the content on Hiddenlol, links on Hiddenlol, or errors in the content on Hiddenlol. The owner is unknown.

The Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism’s rapport on the extreme right in 2018 mentioned Hiddenlol as a place where racist memes are distributed.¹⁷⁵

For this thesis, Hiddenlol.com is chosen as the case study and source of data because of several reasons:

Firstly, Hiddenlol is focussed on memes, which are interesting to study due to them being a new form of communicating (potentially extremist) narratives. Memes were chosen based on their novel ways of impacting political debates and engaging people. Their relevance and link to rightwing extremism has previously been discussed in the literature review. It is important to be able to use memes as data, to keep up with the study of internet culture.¹⁷⁶ Researching how memes transmit extreme right views gives us insight in how the extreme right looks in 2019’s meme culture/youth culture. As far as I am aware, Hiddenlol is the only extreme right meme platform that enjoys this level of popularity.

Secondly, Hiddenlol was chosen because of its content which has transgressiveness and radicalness, on-topic extreme right focus. Hiddenlol also consistently has new content.

Thirdly, it has international popularity. Do to the fact that Hiddenlol is open to all users, it is a good representation of extreme right meme enthusiasts. Its users are likely younger people due to the fact that meme’s are mainly a thing in youth culture.

Lastly, Hiddenlol was also chosen based on its voting system. This voting system represents popularity of (the message) of a meme in the extreme right scene on Hiddenlol. This makes sure only memes with a certain degree of popularity are used in the research.

¹⁷⁴ Hiddenlol, *about*, retrieved on 25-2-2019

¹⁷⁵ NCTV (2018), *De golfbewegingen van rechts extremistisch geweld in West-Europa Aard, ernst en omvang van de rechts-extremistische geweldsdreiging in West-Europa, inclusief Nederland*, Ministry of Justice and Security, p. 29

¹⁷⁶ Turhan, K., Abdul, A (2012), *Analysis on Internet Memes using Semiotics*, Binus University

3.3. Data collection

The data used for this research are 284 memes retrieved from Hiddenlol.com over the duration of a month. Only pictures were used. The few videos on Hiddenlol were ignored due to them being hard to catalog reliably and for the consistency of the study.

Hiddenlol has a system where any person can upload content. Upvotes and downvotes decide the ranking of a meme on the site. The highest ranked memes are shown on the frontpage of the site. The frontpage shows memes with a score of at least 50 upvotes within 24 hours. The rising page shows posts with a score of at least 10 within 24 hours. The fresh page shows memes with at least -10 points.¹⁷⁷

The memes that appear on the front page can be seen as the local dominant discourse because they were upvoted to be there by site's community. What shows up on the front page is decided by popular vote. Only memes that are supported by the community make the front page.

Memes were collected from the 3rd of March 2019 to the 3rd of April 2019. The period of a month was chosen to ensure data was not too influenced by one point in time. This specific period was chosen due to the timing of the thesis process.

Several events impacted data collection: first of all the site had some difficulties which decreased the number of uploaded memes on some days. This was especially the case in the last week of March. The error message on the site read: *"We were down for a couple hours because we got kicked off our hosting provider. We have migrated to a new one and hope to stay up!"*

A second influential event was the extreme right wing terrorist attack on the Christchurch Mosque in New Zealand. This event dominated the discourse for several days, and also increased the number of uploaded memes. Taking the overrepresentation into account, it does give an unique chance to also see how a terrorist attack influences the discourse.

3.4. Method: semiotics

The units of observation are memes, which make up the narratives on Hiddenlol.

The memes, their author, date and number of upvotes were collected in a document. A description of their signifier (explaining what can be seen on the meme) and the signified (what the expressed meaning of the symbols and text is) were added later on.

¹⁷⁷ Hiddenlol, (2019), *Help: Frequently Asked Questions & more*, Hiddenlol.com retrieved on 2-4-2019

To analyse the data in a controllable manner, semiotics will be used to decode the memes. This has been used before to decode memes.¹⁷⁸

The semiotic approach is an approach that decodes the relation between images, text and meaning. It is a qualitative interpretive method which is used to decode images, gestures, voices, music, objects setting or a combination of these.¹⁷⁹ Symbols are interpreted in their form and their meaning. The form is the symbol itself, also called signifier (for example, the swastika). The meaning, or signified, is the society's perspective, the meaning that society gives to the form¹⁸⁰ (...the Swastika can be a Buddhist symbol, or a symbol used to represent Nazism).

The units of analysis are also memes. To interpret memes, one needs to first describe the meaning of the symbols, the signifier. Secondly, one analyses the context of the symbol. By looking at the context you derive the meaning, the signified. If there are more symbols that interact with each other, one should explain how they interact to create a new connection.

One example:



¹⁷⁸ Turha, K, Abdul, A.(2012), *Analysis on Internet Memes using Semiotics*, Binus University

¹⁷⁹ Tona, S. (2010). *Miskin itu Menjual: Representasi Kemiskinan sebagai Komodifikasi Tontonan*. Yogyakarta: RESIST Book. p. 22

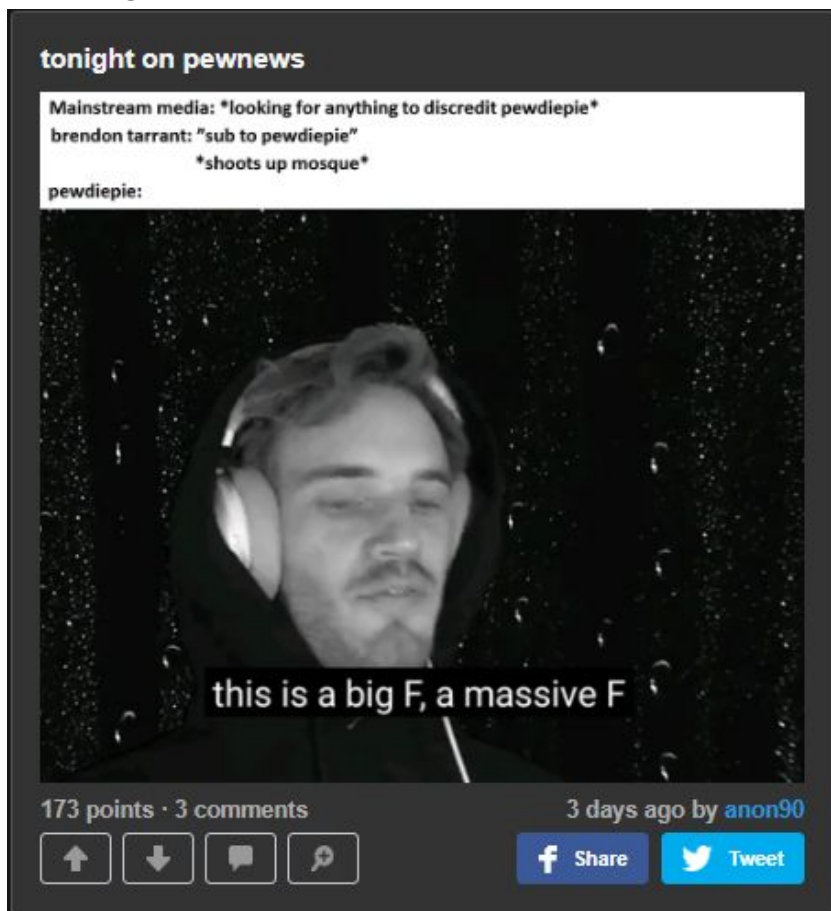
¹⁸⁰ Hoed, H. B.(2009). *Semiotik dan Dinamika Sosial Budaya*. Depok: Komunitas Bambu. pp. 241-242

Signifier: This meme shows stock image of a couple of happy looking doctors of which one is Photoshopped to hold a baseball bat. it is accompanied by the text "scientists found a cure for communism". The title says" we found a cure"

Signified: This meme implies that a baseball bat can be used to cure communism, implying that beating a communist cures them. This meme frames communism as a disease. It also signifies that violence against communists is something beneficial.

Other memes require very specific knowledge of memeculture or extreme right culture, such as the next one:

119. tonight on pewnews



Signifier: This meme shows the text *looking for anything to discredit PewDiePie* .Brendon Tarrant" sub to PewDiePie shoot up mosque." PewDiePie: It then shows a picture of PewDiePie saying "this is a big F, a massive F." The title is "tonight on Pewnews".

Signified: This meme indicates that PewDiePie gives respect to the attacker. "Press F for respect" is a meme culture way to express respect for something.

A symbol can have several meanings at the same time. The meaning of symbols is created by experience of a social group or society.¹⁸¹ The meaning of a symbol depends on the culture it is placed in, and should therefore be studied in that context.

To analyze, a researcher should use their cultural knowledge.¹⁸² To interpret symbols, a researcher needs to be knowledgeable about the relevant cultural environment.¹⁸³ Due to the fact that the content has to be interpreted from the point of view of the culture that it is placed in (extreme right culture), this will be the used context. An overview of this culture is described in the literature review in 2.1. The extreme right, 2.2. Online extremism and 2.3. Memes, ambiguity and humor.

Narrative-categories were shaped inductively while analyzing the data. A category was created when several memes discussed a similar topic. Some thematic categories were merged or separated to be a good representation of the data. The data is presented as much as possible from an inside-perspective.

The narratives on Hiddenlol are not written by one author, and not homogenous. However, they are presented and read together, and “selected” by the a consistent community. With that in mind, narratives can contradict each other. However, this did hardly occur. Therefore, the memes will be analyzed as being part of one larger narrative; the narrative of Hiddenlol.

Not all memes are represented in this data due to them being mentioned only once, or due to not being judged important.

The memes shown in this discussion are the most representative memes, not the only ones.

3.5. Analyzing narratives

To analyze narratives, a mix of content analysis and discourse analysis was used. Content analysis analyzes content by coding how often and in which way things are said in a replicable and systematic manner. Discourse analysis also looks at what is expressed in meaning, but focuses more on expressed power relations in the content.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Hoed. B. (2009). *Semiotik dan Dinamika Sosial Budaya*. Depok: Komunitas Bambu. Page 245

¹⁸² Parker, I (1992) *Discourse Dynamics: Critical Analysis for Social and Individual Psychology*, London: Routledge

¹⁸³ Aikin, S. (2013). *Poe's Law, group polarization, and argumentative failure in religious and political discourse*. *Social Semiotics*, 23(3). pp. 301-17

¹⁸⁴ Herrera, Yoshiko Margaret. 2004. *Symposium: Discourse and Content Analysis*. Harvard University. p. 16

Discourse analysis was used in the semiotic translation of memes. Content analysis was used to inductively find narratives.

Every time a meme discussed a certain topic in a certain way, the number of the meme was noted down with a short description of what it discussed.

When a topic was discussed in different ways, subcategories were formed.

Examples:

- Truth about Holocaust was manipulated - 20, 98, 48, 167, 199, 98, 281, 9
- Christchurch was good - 69, 70, 71, 73, 81, 84, 86, 87, 88, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 101, 103, 106, 107, 110, 111, 113, 116, 120, 121, 122, 125, 128, 129, 133, 135, 136, 137, 141, 143, 149, 151, 152, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 16, 223
 - It was revenge - 74, 75, 80
 - Perpetrator was "our guy" - 90, 93
 - Memeculture appreciation - 84, 132, 133, 135, 157
- Women are manipulative - 24, 57, 202, 275

When a minor narrative showed up more than one time, it was added to a major narrative. After all memes were analyzed, nine major narratives were formed by looking at which narratives discussed similar topics.

The same system was used to analyze memes that discussed recent events. This means that memes discussing a similar event were categorized as such. Three significant events showed up: JK Rowling changing facts about Harry Potter, the EU's Article 13 and the terrorist attack in Christchurch.

After these were collected, this thesis tried to find out why these resonated within the Hiddenlol community. Why were these made, and why were they successfully upvoted?

3.6. Internal and external validity

Concerning internal validity, which concerns how well the research answers the research question in a correct way that prevents confounding: this thesis identifies narratives found on Hiddenlol, and discusses them. This answers the research question: *"To what extent can coherent extremist narratives be found in memes on Hiddenlol, and how do they react to real life events?"*

To increase validity, every step of the analysis was written down. The document of the collected memes, what was seen on this memes and how it was interpreted counts more than 200 pages and 27.600 words of description. All memes were marked with a number for identification. This document should explain which data was used, what was seen, and what was interpreted.

Which data were deemed part of a narrative can be seen in the chapter “Discussion of data”. Discussion about coherence of narratives and reactions to recent events can be found in the conclusions.

The document with memes is not added as an annex based on the advice given by a paper on better practice for reporting on extremists, antagonists and manipulators online.¹⁸⁵ They advise not sharing extremists memes unnecessarily or without contextualisation. A database of 284 units of potentially extremist and radicalizing content is not risk free to be taken out of context. The database was open to the supervisors of this thesis and can be provided on request.

Regarding external validity, how valid the conclusions of the research are outside of the research case; this study will say something about extreme right meme narratives in 2019. It will be a relatively good representation of extreme right meme culture in 2019. However, this was only one site and only one month. The way people talk about something comes and goes; it has a history and will be history.¹⁸⁶ This is not different for extreme right of meme-culture narratives.

This thesis tries to be a good representation of what the narratives are in 2019. It might provide a benchmark of this period for future research.

Hiddenlols user base is international, so it gives a good insight in the globally shared ideas among the online extreme right. This is focussed around the English language. National cultures may differ per country.

As mentioned before, memes are mainly popular among younger people. This research will be more representative for views held by young, meme-loving extreme right people than older online-disliking extreme right people..

¹⁸⁵ Phillips, W (2012), *The Oxygen of Amplification, better practiced for reporting on extremists, antagonists and manipulators online*, Data&Society, University of Oregon

¹⁸⁶ Gibbs, G. (2015), *Discourse Analysis Part 2: Foucauldian Approaches*, youtube.com, University of Huddersfield

3.7. Limitations and difficulties of this research

A first challenge is neutral interpretation of the data. I, as a researcher, tried to interpret the symbols as correct as possible, but acknowledge that this worldview is not my own. In this I was aided by literature on the extreme right as described in the literature review and experience from previous work on the extreme right which included interviewing people, doing fieldwork, literature reviews and open source online research. To strengthen the validity of interpretation, people with experience in transgressive meme culture were asked to review the semiotic interpretations. They agreed with the interpretations. The semiotic interpretation of the memes and screenshots of the original images were archived in a datafile to strengthen controllability.

Secondly; choosing Hiddenlol affected the data in several ways; first of all it represents a younger, meme-focussed extreme right than studying Stormfront would. It also limits the depth of the narratives, due to memes not being fit for transferring long elaborate narratives. However, when memes are put together a larger narrative does appear.

Hiddenlol is an international site, but uses English. This might influence the data in such a way that narratives about certain countries do not show up, but narratives of English Speaking countries such as the UK and the USA will. It is likely non-English speaking countries take their native language based discussion to their own platforms.

Lastly, technical issues also hindered research. Several times the website hiddenlol.com was down. This meant that posts older than the crash were removed. This made it crucial to check the website more than once a day to make sure there were enough memes to analyse before the site crashed. The initial goal was to collect 30*10 meme (10 memes a day for 30 days), but due to this technical problems this was not possible and only 184 memes were collected. This issue highlights the importance and difficulties of good documentation of online content before it disappears.



We were down for a couple hours because we got kicked off our hosting provider. We have migrated to a new one and hope to stay up!

Above; the message shown on Hiddenlol.com when the site was back online

4. Discussion of data

In this chapter, this thesis will discuss the narratives found in de memes collected on Hiddenlol. A total of nine major narratives were found. In the following part, per narrative, first the parts are described that are mentioned more than once. Below it, there are narratives that are not specifically mentioned more than once, but are notable or significant due to their message. These messages provide context.

4.1. “Jews are manipulating enemies”

The narratives about Jews is mainly focussed on framing them as the enemy. Several minor narratives are used, and together they show a larger narrative in which especially perceived manipulation by the Jews is emphasized. Jews are also seen as smart. One meme about intelligence shows them to have a slightly higher intelligence than white people.

Manipulative

One of the narratives is that Jews are manipulative; for example by controlling the media. Jews use the media to make white people look bad, keep white rape victims out of the news and to make the “us” non-violent and feminist.

Another recurring narrative was also the Jews trying to take away the “good” reputation of the New Zealand terrorist.

Jews are also accused of manipulating facts about the holocaust. Memes claim the calculations of victims do not add up, or that pictures and proof are manipulated. Memes also claim that the holocaust gets a disproportionate amount of (media)attention. It is implied that Jews use the Holocaust to profit from victimhood. Some memes do not doubt, but support the Holocaust, or encourage another Holocaust.

Influencing politics

Jews are framed as influencing US politics in such a way that Israel gets money. Trump would be under their influence as well. No apparent distinction is made between Jews and Israel.



4.2. “Sexual- and gender-liberty are bad”

Women, LGBT+ people and their sexuality are a large topic for discussion on Hiddenlol. Modern gender roles and liberal sexuality are disapproved of and seen as degenerative.

Sexuality

Women are the subject of gender role reaffirming jokes, such as calling them “dishwashers” or telling women to “go back to the kitchen”. Narratives on Hiddenlol complain about how women have changed: nowadays women are too liberal in their sexuality. It is very problematic when they have sex with black men. If they get a mixed race child, meme-authors express they won’t be tricked into caring for the child. Mixed race children are not seen as white, not of “their” group. One meme comments negatively on abortion. Meme 34 does make exceptions “depending on which race it is”.

One narrative explains how women will have a lot of sex with ‘Alpha-males’, who are sexy and exciting, when they are young.¹⁸⁷ However, when they need someone to take care of them and pay for them, they seek a Beta-male. In meme 40, an alpha-male got the woman pregnant and she now seeks a man who can pay for her and her child. Beta-males are also framed as a “*male who buys into the feminist lie that men should be subservient to women*”.¹⁸⁸

Men as victims

Men are framed as a victimized group. They become victim of fake rape accusations, of pressure to be attracted to things they are not, of annoying girlfriends, of being used by women, of being seduced by women or even of being “*eradicated*”.

Women as manipulators

Women are framed as manipulative. They use sex to get what they want. It is also suggested women lie about the father of their child or getting raped.

A narrative about women using sex and beauty for survival also appears. In it, women are criticized for using their beauty to earn money or lure men.

There are also complaints about double standards: women can have high standards for partners, while men can’t say they don’t want fat women.

¹⁸⁷ Urban Dictionary, (2014), *Alpha-male*, Urban Dictionary, retrieved on 29-5-2019

¹⁸⁸ Hammers, J. (2010), 7. *Beta-male*, Urban Dictionary, retrieved on 29-5-2019

Feminism

Feminism is framed negatively. Feminists are framed as irrational and incompetent. Non-feminist women are framed as something desirable. Male feminists are especially framed as bad, as (sexually) dominated by women.

LGBTQ

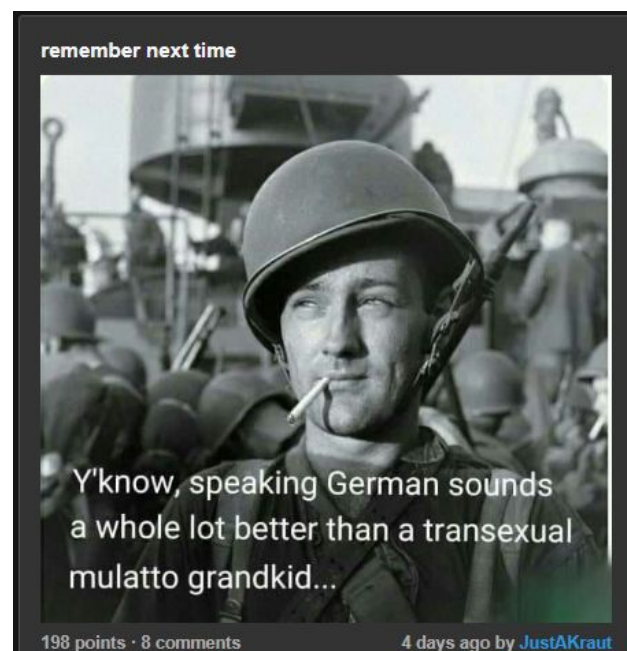
Non traditional gender roles are framed as degenerate. Men are shamed if they wear feminine clothing or take part in feminist activism. These changing norms are framed as something that changes a country for the worse. Women who do not look traditional, but paint their hair in a non-natural color and have tattoos are criticized.

One narrative criticises that liberals are disapproving of hetero cis nuclear families for being “artificial socially constructed” while they do see non gender-traditional identity expression as “born this way”. There are also complaints about LGBTQ legislation, which would only be good for a small group of the population while bothering many others. A group that is framed very negatively are transgenders. Hiddenlol’s narrative is that they don't really change gender, but remain their birth-sex. Transgenders are suspected of using their birth gender as a secret advantage, such as in gendered sports. Memes also express disgust about transgender bodies, and the idea of having (to have) sex with them

Violence against transsexuals, crossdressers and gays group is repeatedly justified. Several memes suggest maybe the Nazis should have won to prevent liberal gender norms and “mulatto” children. This likely refers to the mass killing of gays and sexually deviants in Nazi Germany.



Meme 30



Meme 65

4.3. “Liberals and left wingers are hypocritical idiots”

Several political opponents are framed in different ways. It is difficult to find a consistent narrative because a similar group of people that argues for progressive liberal politics is not described in consistent terms. One meme explicitly says communists and democratic socialists are the same.

Liberals

Socialists, social democrats, progressives and Social Justice Warriors are framed in similar ways. Therefore I combine these in the category liberals.

Liberals are seen as pushing their political correctness agenda too far. Their liberal values are seen as degrading towards the nuclear family and the country. European police and justice systems are framed as weak.

One meme implies a conflict between white male Christians and leftists/democrats: *“Leftist lunatics are radicalizing white supremacists, not Trump. Their hatred for white man in America is causing these dormant white nationalists to act out. Dems want to eradicate White, Male, Christians. Only group standing in their way”* - meme 78

Anti-racism

Anti racist activists are framed as being hypocrites because they say racism is bad, while they often say hateful things about white people. Tolerant people are framed as naive.



Meme 206



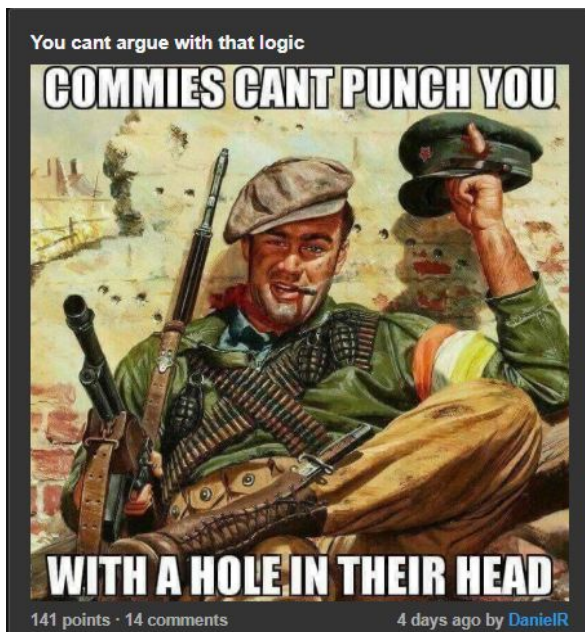
Meme 59

Communists

Communism is framed as bad, and is accused of leading to mass starvation. One meme frames communists as “wanting to punch you”. Anti-communist banners are praised.

Communist propaganda mainly targets lazy unskilled college students, according to one meme. Violence against communists is promoted.

One meme comments that authoritarian systems are good, but Communism is a bad version.



Meme 14



Meme 26

4.4. “Muslims are terrorist rapists”

Muslims are mentioned a lot, and only in a negative way. They are framed as terrorists, immigrants who will not integrate and as enemies in a large conflict between cultures. They are called “filth” or called “kebab”. Kebab is a meme-culture slur for muslims, also used by the Christchurch terrorist who called himself a “kebab remover”.

Terrorism

Muslims are often framed as terrorists, or equated to ISIS. Some memes claim that muslims would be happy about terrorist attacks, unless it is directed at muslims.

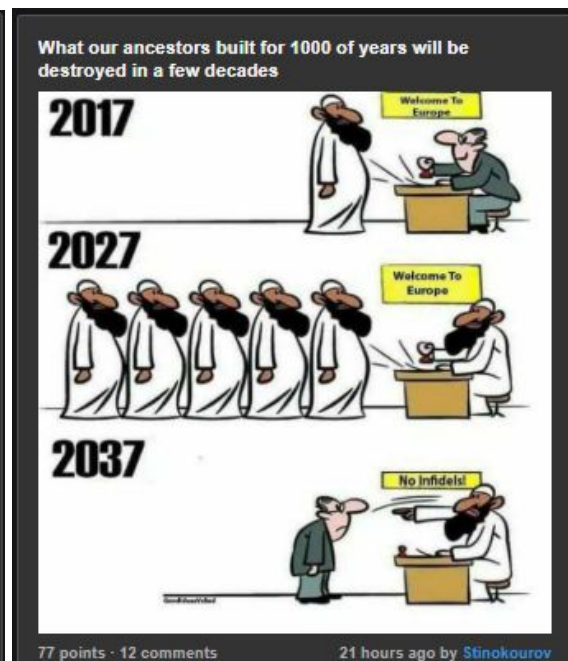
No integration

It is claimed that is is impossible to live together with muslims. It is said that muslims cannot integrate. There is also a narrative which warns for, when they become the majority, they will take over Europe and will discriminate against Europeans.

Muslims are also framed as sexual predators and pedophiles. One other meme calls the Christchurch terrorist attack “preventing rapes”.



Meme 131



Meme 31

4.5. “Black people are violent, animalistic criminals”

Black people are also mentioned a lot on Hiddenlol’s frontpage, and only in a negative way. They are framed as primitive and aggressive. Memes claim everybody hates black people. One post claims even black people do.

Low level of development

Black people are compared to animals (non-humans), such as monkeys. They are framed to have a low IQ. The word “nigger” appears often in memes about black people.

Mememes comment several times on the low level of development of Africa. It makes jokes about how people in Africa are starving. This is often combined with a narrative that black people need white people to survive and organize countries.

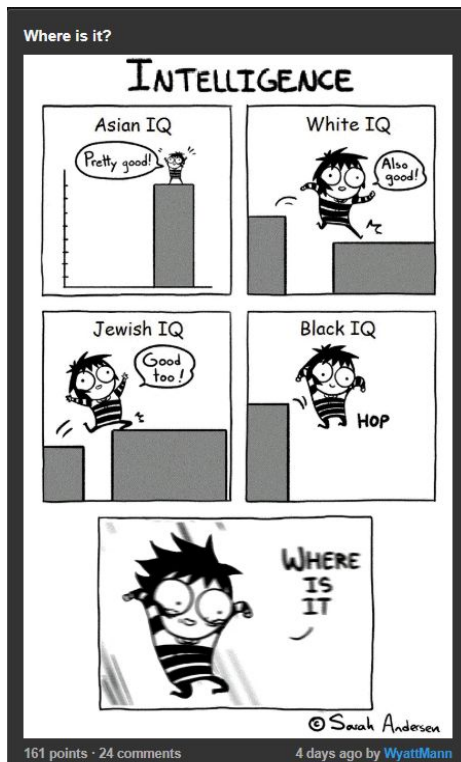
Sexuality

Mememes comment negatively on the fact that black people have a high birth rate, and therefore a high population growth.

A recurring theme is black men having sex with white women, which is seen as bad. Mixed race children are disapproved of and not seen as white anymore. One meme calls the sterilization of Ethiopians “defusing a bomb”.



Meme 191



Meme 163

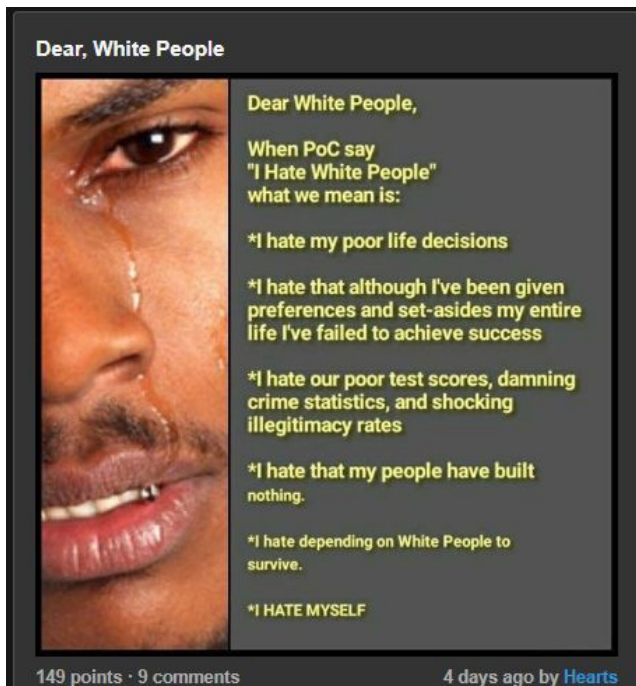
Violence

Black people are framed to be violent. Black people are also are framed to be criminals, thieves and murderers. Their overrepresentation in crime statistics is emphasized. Violence against black people is romanticized.

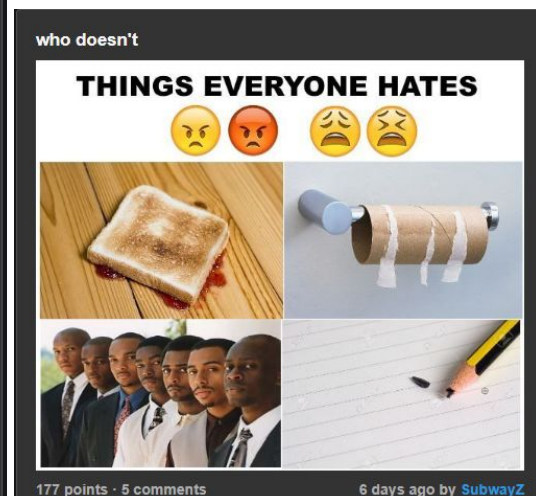
Memes on Hiddenlol like saying the word “nigger”. This is linked to an anger about not being ‘allowed’ to say the word.

Asians

Asians are not mentioned a lot on Hiddenlol. They are shown to have a slightly higher IQ than white people, be able to build castles and be good at math. One meme jokes about Asians eating cats.



Meme 64



Meme 35

4.6. “Immigration is a threat, we are being replaced”

Immigration is seen as a threat. Immigrants are seen as a risk due to them being dangerous and them demographically taking over countries.

Population replacement

A recurring narrative is that immigrants would replace the current population of countries they immigrate to. An example of this is a picture of the American team for the International mathematical olympiad, which are all Asians.

It is noted that immigrants have high birth rates. Some memes imply that a population will be replaced by immigrants. One meme signifies that it would like to shoot people who hold signs about ‘replacing you’ and ‘your grandkids are gonna be brown.’ Notable is that mixed race children are rejected from the us-group. Deportation policy is cheered on.

Immigrants as criminals

Refugees are framed to be human garbage, thieves and rapists. Memes comment on the narrative that immigrants are naively seen as not dangerous by many people. People who do not see them as a threat are framed as race traitors or mentally ill.



Meme 194



Meme 60

4.7. “White people are threatened, there is a battle”

In the memes of Hiddenlol is a narrative of white people being a group, and that group being threatened. This threat is partly mentioned in the previous narratives (such as gender norms degenerating a country, communists, muslims and black people being violent, immigration replacing the population). A recurring frame is the need to defend white/European society and its people.

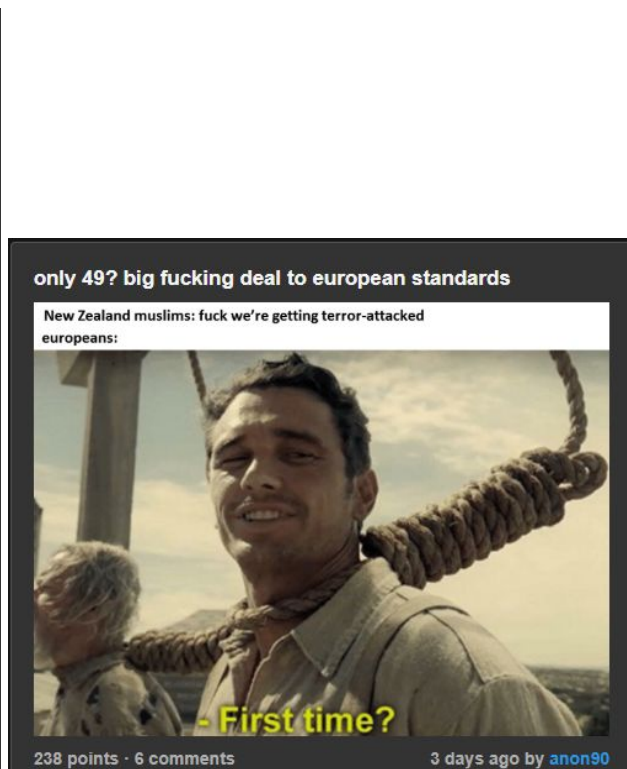
Terrorist attacks

White victims of terrorist attacks are shown often. One meme comments that terrorist attacks are something Europe is used to.

Meme 75 frames revenge as inevitable: “*Did they expect to get away with it forever?*”. The Christchurch is framed as a revenge attack several times.



Meme 75



Meme 138

Doom

A recurring narrative is that of the homeland being destroyed, or impending doom approaching Europe. There is also a narrative of a larger conflict approaching. One of those is the race war. The author of meme 124 is happy to be alive to fight it, which assumes it is happening now or will happen soon. Meme 118 says “*Those who make peaceful revolution*

impossible will make violent revolution inevitable. - JF Kennedy” with the title *“its time”*. One memes implies that there will be a next time after the Second World War.

Meme 127 mentions “accelerationism”. This means *“a general understanding that we must accelerate the decay of the Union (or in some cases Western/European society in general) in order to preserve its founding principles, most likely through extreme civil conflict.”* Implying that a race war is coming but that the start needs to be accelerated.

Meme 241 implies a battle between religions by showing a warrior with the text *“Every religion to every other religion; ching ching your religion is wrong”* with the title *“religion battle royale”*.

Making white people weak

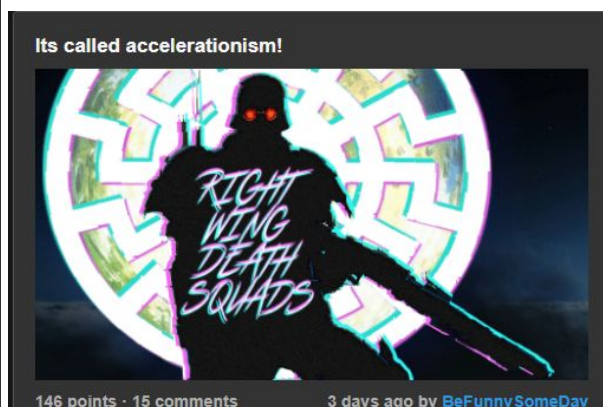
Another expressed worry is that white people are convinced to not fight, but to remain peaceful after attacks. Jews are mentioned as a source of these messages.

Weaponry and violence are presented in a romanticized way and as a solution for problems. It is good to keep in mind some memes are made in an American context, where guns are more common.

Western justice systems are criticized of not being effective. A recurring criticism is for example, that child mollesters are not punished harsh enough. Two memes promote the death sentence.



Meme 1



Meme 127

Best meme I can think about when I check comments on fb about the NZ shooting

YOU WERE BORN TOO LATE
TO EXPLORE THE WORLD

YOU WERE BORN TOO EARLY
TO EXPLORE THE STARS

YOU WERE BORN JUST IN TIME
TO FIGHT RACEWAR

179 points · 15 comments · 3 days ago by [power2go3](#)

Meme 124

Religion Battle Royale

Every religion to every other religion

Ching Chong your religion is wrong

205 points · 49 comments · 6 days ago by [1vergil](#)

Meme 241

4.8. “We are oppressed in our freedom of speech”

Many memes on Hiddenlol discuss (limitations on) freedom of speech. The main narrative is that freedom of speech is too limited, and that people risk prosecution too easily.

Biased media

Some narratives complain about manipulative and biased media. Some of those say the media is leftist or controlled by Jews.

The media would be manipulated in such a way that they underemphasize white victims of rape or terrorist attacks and overemphasize muslim victims and perpetrators in extreme right attacks. Some memes suggest there might be fake victims portrayed in the media.

Social media

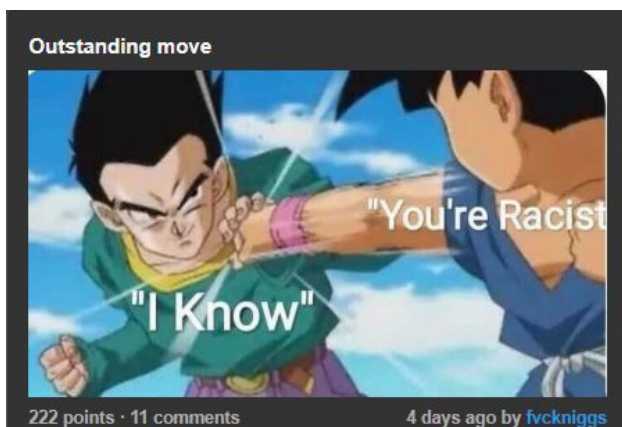
Social media, for example Twitter, is accused of being unfair in their censorship. They are accused of not banning people who discriminate against white people, but do ban others for little reason.

The sites 4chan and 8chan appear prominently on Hiddenlol. Screenshots of fragments of their posts are shown as memes.

Freedom of speech and racism

Another complaint is that accusations of racism are being used as an argument to limit freedom of speech. One other criticism is that racism against white people is not seen as racism. Some memes embrace the label of racism. They acknowledge they are racist, and do not care.

Another recurring complaint is not being allowed to say “nigger”.



Meme 49



(part of) Meme 203

4.9. “Us, White people and white supremacy, are good”

Hiddenlol sometimes also comments on themselves and their users. In this, it frames its users as extreme right, and often as warriors. They also comment on how they like memes.

Nazism

Meme-authors on Hiddenlol identify themselves and Hiddenlol-users as Nazis. The Nazis are being framed as good, not-as-bad or better-than-the-current-government. Hitler is being framed as a hero, or a godsend.

Symbols of the extreme right are shown often; such as the “white power” hand-symbol, the Swastika, the Nazi marching song Erika, 14, 88¹⁸⁹, and the Black sun.



Meme 278



(part of) meme 166

White people

Hiddenlol also identifies itself several times as Arians or the white race. One meme says that those who believe they can live with Muslims are “traitors of the Aryan race”. Worth emphasizing is that Hiddenlol makes distinctions between people based on race.

White people are praised for being able to build better societies than other “races”. They are framed as being the second most intelligent race, just below Asians.

Ancestors and the history of the west are praised.

Some meme comment that after the attack, Hiddenlol-users will rush online/to Hiddenlol.

The perpetrator of the Christchurch shooting is framed as a hero. Twice he is depicted as a crusader knight.

¹⁸⁹ “14, 88”. This refers to ‘the 14 words’: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children”. 88 refers to the 8th letter of the alphabet; HH; Heil Hitler.

Meme 67 narrates how a user visits Hiddenlol for dark, humor, funny porn and gore, but then is reminded of Hiddenlols political message: the impending doom of Europe.



Meme 67

4.10. Hiddenlol on real life events

Hiddenlol's memes react to current events. The next paragraph will describe the three most present discussions of real life events:

Christchurch (memes from 15-3-2019 to 28-3-2019)

On March 15 in 2019, a man¹⁹⁰ killed 50 muslims in a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. The man had an extreme right ideology and wanted to stop white genocide (non-whites taking over white countries). He hoped his attack would incite violence against muslims and create an "atmosphere of fear".

Notable about the attack was the perpetrators use of memeculture. He uses meme references in his manifesto and during the shooting.

"Normal" meme culture did not react celebrative. The article about the event on Know Your Meme, a meme database site, does not mention any celebrative memes.¹⁹¹

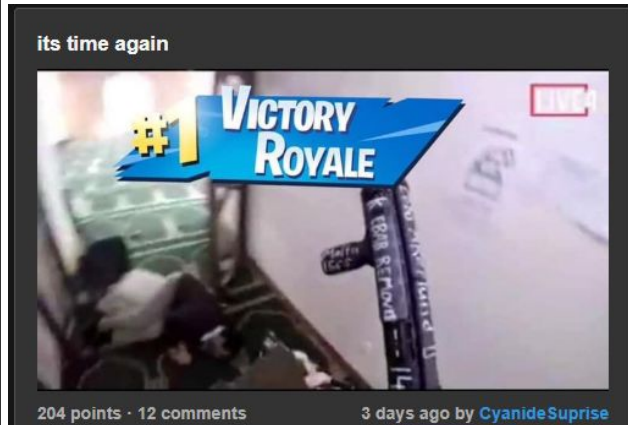
On Hiddenlol, 48 memes made the hotpage about Christchurch. The attack and its perpetrator are celebrated on Hiddenlol. Especially the use of meme-culture is appreciated. Some memes frame him as as one of "us".

The attack in Christchurch is praised, and put in the context of a larger conflict: some see it as part of a larger racial conflict. Some memes claimed that the attack was revenge for previous attacks perceived to be committed by Muslim terrorists. Especially white female and young victims of previous attacks were shown.

Another recurring theme is the combination of games and the terrorist attack; where the attack is framed as being part of a shooter game. Some of these frame the shooting as an "achievement" of "Victory Royal".

¹⁹⁰ Name is not mentioned on purpose.

¹⁹¹ Don (2019), *2019 Christchurch Mosque Shootings*, Know Your meme <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/2019-christchurch-mosque-shootings>



Meme 144

Meme 160

Muslims are framed as trying to gain advantage from victimhood. Some memes complain that Muslim victims receive more media-attention and anger than victims of Islamic terrorism.



Meme 149

Meme 159

These memes about Christchurch show how extreme right extremist deeds are very interesting to Hiddenlol. The attack is framed as something good, and the perpetrator as a hero. He is even seen as “one of us”, which shows Hiddenlol identifies itself with the perpetrator.

JK Rowling's social justice rewriting (memes from 22-3-2019 to 30-3-2019)

JK Rowling, the writer of Harry Potter, is criticized for changing things about her book universe to make it more diverse and LGBT-inclusive. Some criticize her for trying to make it look like her originally very white and straight universe was diverse. Others, including the user base of Hiddenlol, criticize her for changing something white and straight into something LGBT and non-white.

This meme hype was also present on normal meme sites¹⁹², but with a less negative view on gayness and anti-whiteness.

Hiddenlol discusses this with seven memes, which frame her actions in several way. First as being done on purpose in a bigger plan to make things non-white. It also mocks her for changing other people's identity by saying she would even decide for her parents that they are gay. Some memes do not explicitly mention a non-white narrative, but mock her in general for making outrageous changes.



Meme 234



Meme 219

This shows that Hiddenlol follows some of the same trends as 'normal' meme-culture, but with their own twist. It was possible for them to give it an ideological layer, which likely caused this topic to find a place on Hiddenlol where others did not.

¹⁹² Sophie, (2019) *J.K. Rowling Reveals*, Know Your Meme <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/jk-rowling-reveals>
Matt, (2019), *J.K. Rowling Tweet parodies*, Know Your Meme <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/jk-rowling-tweet-parodies>

Eu (memes from 22-3-2019 to 30-3-2019)

The European union passed Article 13, which discusses expanding copyright law.¹⁹³ In meme-culture it was feared this would heavily influence their creative exchange of content. These worries were also visible on Hiddenlol; on which 6 related memes were posted. Memes on Hiddenlol reacted very negatively to the passing of Article 13. It is framed as limiting freedom of speech and compared to China's strict internet censorship. The man responsible for the article, Axel Voss, is singled out and labeled as "a condom failure".¹⁹⁴

Mememes discuss how to circumvent online censorship. One meme comments that people will start using VPN to dodge Article 13. Another meme, 253, explains how to get around the Australian ban on the website 4chan. Many websites, including 4chan and 8chan, were blocked by the Australian government for hosting the video of the Christchurch shooting.¹⁹⁵ These memes show again that the topic of interest for 'normal' meme culture overlap with Hiddenlol's culture. Another online freedom of speech related thing were memes related to 4chan being banned in some regions after the Christchurch attacks. related the guide how to circumvent blockades. This shows Hiddenlol does not only comment on news, but also gives advice on how to deal with news.



Meme 266



Meme 253

¹⁹³ Kleinman, Z. (2019) *Article 13: Memes exempt as EU backs controversial copyright law*, BBC

¹⁹⁴ This signifies he should not have been born

¹⁹⁵ Prema, S, (March 19 2019), *Telstra, Optus and Vodafone block access to 4chan, LiveLeak and other sites after they refuse to take down sickening footage of the Christchurch mosque massacre*, Dailymail

One event that did not show up on Hiddelol, but was important in this month, was the tram shooting on March 18 in the Netherlands by someone with a likely terrorist intent.¹⁹⁶ Likely, this event was too local or news was slow with providing clear facts about the perpetrator. This made it hard for the global meme community to make memes about it, and relate enough to it to upvote the event.

Protests in Algeria and Sudan also went undiscussed, which likely has to do with the fact that Hiddelol does not care much for African internal politics unless it emphasizes inferiority to Western countries.

Another notable thing is that memes try to delegitimize mainstream media covering of events. This makes sense, as not both the extreme right narrative and the mainstream media can be right

Memes also give explicit advice on how to act (for example, how to circumvent online blockades by using VPN)

Some narratives about real life events show up even though they happened some time ago. An example of this is the killing of two Scandinavian girls in Morocco in december 2018¹⁹⁷, which was used as an example of white victims of terrorism which justified the Christchurch attack. All this shows that memes contribute to agenda setting in the extreme right sphere, by covering some topics and ignoring others.

¹⁹⁶ Franck, R (2019), Gökmen Tanis bekennt schietpartij in tram in Utrecht, AD

¹⁹⁷ BBC (2 May 2019), *Scandinavian hikers murder trial begins in Morocco*, BBC

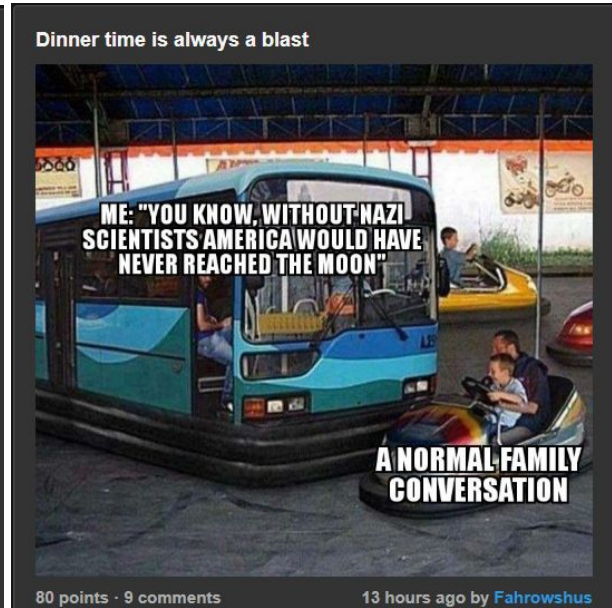
4.11. Other relevant comments

There were other, smaller, recurring themes on Hiddenlol that are relevant to mention for context.

For example, that Hiddenlol loves transgressiveness in itself. Although many of the more political jokes are also transgressive, some jokes seem to be about transgressiveness.

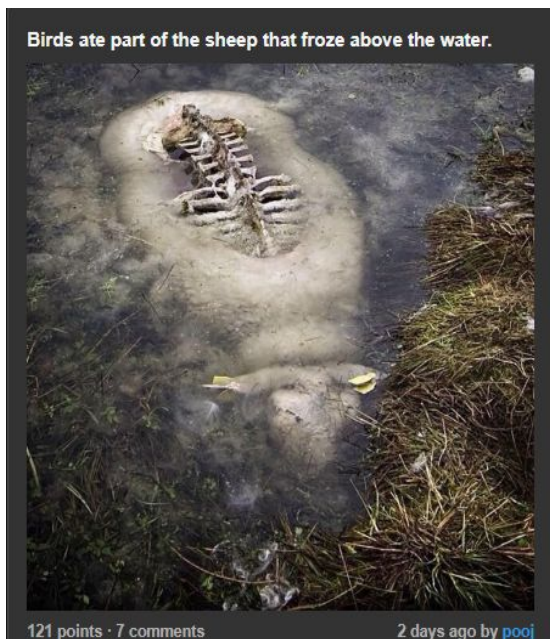


Meme 228



Meme 213

"Gore" is also shown on Hiddenlol; horrific images for shock value. Horrific images can however normalize dead bodies and mutilations, which can add to an extremist worldview.



Meme 259



Meme 258

Sexism and defending freedom of speech are also part of normal meme culture. Although sexism is more extreme on Hiddenlol, it is not unique.

4.12. Hiddenlol narratives; extremism and/or extreme right?

In this subchapter, this thesis tries to see whether the narratives on Hiddenlol are extremist and/or extreme right according to previously established definitions.

4.12.1. Extremism

The narratives described above show signs of extremist ideology discussed in 2.6. Extremist narratives in memes:

- 1) There is an apparent “us”, who is perceived to be threatened, corrupted, mistreated and humiliated.
- 2) This is done by a tainted, evil, unjust “other”, who threatens, corrupts, mistreats and/or humiliates the “us”.
- 3) Ideals are presented, which can be made possible by purifying society of the “other”.
- 4) Lastly, violence is often shown as a solution for solving problems.

On all four points many examples can be presented. A more detailed analysis of extremist narrative per Hiddenlol narrative:

Narrative	1. “Us” being threatened	2. Tainted, evil, unjust “other”	3. Society must be purified	4. Violence is legitimate
1. Jews	X	X	X	X
2. Sexuality	X	X	X	X
3. Left	X	X	X	X
4. Muslims	X	X	X	X
5. Black people	X	X	X	X
6. Immigration	X	X	X	x
7. Threat/war	X	X	X	X
8. Free speech	X	X	-	-
4.9. “Us; whites”	X	X	X	X

1. **“Jews are manipulating enemies”**
 - 1.1. Jews are accused of manipulating, emasculating the “us” and stealing money.
 - 1.2. Jews are framed as manipulative, evil and as an enemy.
 - 1.3. Jews are referred to as “being kicked out of countries” for legit reasons.
 - 1.4. The holocaust is seen as something good.
2. **“Sexual- and gender-liberty are bad”**
 - 2.1. The “us” is being demasculated by feminism. Bothered by LGBT+ (policy).
 - 2.2. LGBT+ is seen as foul. Women are seen as manipulative, exploiting.
 - 2.3. It is said that the Nazies, who “removed” LGBT+, should have won.
 - 2.4. It is implied that the Nazies, who murdered LGBT+, should have won.
3. **“Liberals and left wingers are hypocritical idiots”.**
 - 3.1. Communists are seen as wanting to attack the “us”.
 - 3.2. Liberals are hypocrites, enemies of whites. Communists are violent.
 - 3.3. Communism is seen as a disease.
 - 3.4. Using violence against communists is promoted.
4. **“Muslims are terrorist rapists”**
 - 4.1. Muslims are framed as replacing the “us”, and being in conflict with “us”.
 - 4.2. Muslims are seen as terrorists, rapists, manipulative, not integrating.
 - 4.3. Killing muslims is seen as winning, or preventing rapes.
 - 4.4. Killing muslims is seen as winning, payback or part of a conflict.
5. **“Black people are violent, animalistic criminals”**
 - 5.1. Black people are seen as attacking the “us” and degrading societies.
 - 5.2. Black people are framed as animals, violent, stupid, a plague.
 - 5.3. Black people are framed as a plague.
 - 5.4. Violence against black people is promoted.
6. **“Immigration is a threat, we are being replaced”**
 - 6.1. Immigration is seen as replacing population, and threatening the “us”.
 - 6.2. Immigrants are framed as “human garbage”, violent and criminal.
 - 6.3. Deporting immigrants is seen as good.
 - 6.4. *Deportation, which can be seen as violence, is promoted.*
7. **“White people are threatened, there is a battle”**
 - 7.1. White people are seen as being threatened.
 - 7.2. Several “others” are responsible for this.
 - 7.3. It is implied that groups will fight each other, implying forced homogeneity.
 - 7.4. Having to fight back in a war using violence is promoted.
8. **“We are oppressed in our freedom of speech”**
 - 8.1. The “us” is being manipulated and silenced.
 - 8.2. The “other”, the media and those perceived to be behind it are manipulative.
9. **“Us, White people and white supremacy, are good”**
 - 9.1. The “us” is seen as good, and as threatened/declining.
 - 9.2. The “other” is seen as degrading the purity of the “us”.
 - 9.3.

Taking all this into account, this thesis concludes that narratives on Hiddenlol show many signs of extremism.

4.12.2. Extreme right

The ideology also fits within the previously established definition of extreme right ideology in chapter 2.1. extreme right:

- “1). *Sees hierarchies as inevitable, natural or even desirable.*
- 2). *Has an authoritarian inclination; a need for sameness, oneness, group authority. This leads to an intolerance toward diversity and individual autonomy.*
- 3). *Has some form of nativism or ethnic nationalism.*^{198.}

1. Hiddenlol clearly established hierarchies between races and gender.
2. It has an outspoken authoritarian inclination, as can be seen by expressing support for authoritarianism and Nazism. It also tries to push people into groups that imply all members are the same. This can be seen in how they talk about “blacks” and “muslims” as if they are one homogenous group. Hiddenlol repeatedly and explicitly condemns diversity. It also argues for acting according to what your group/nation/race needs and assumes others do to, which shows a disregard for individual autonomy.
3. Hiddenlol argues for ethnic nationalism and nativism. This can be seen in the racism, and the literal support for ethnic nationalism.

This means this thesis concludes that a significant part of the narratives on Hiddenlol are extremist and extreme right.

¹⁹⁸ Aasland Ravndal, J. Bjørge, T. (2018), *Investigating Terrorism from the Extreme Right: A Review of Past and Present Research*, Perspectives on terrorism, Volume 12, issue 6. p. 6

5. Conclusions

In the following chapter, this thesis will answer the research question:

“To what extent can coherent extremist narratives be found in memes on Hiddenlol, and how do they react to real life events?”

The conclusion of this thesis is that there are clear extreme right extremist narratives that can be found on Hiddenlol. Real life events show up on Hiddelol when they contribute to extreme right narratives, and relate enough to a large enough part of the Hiddenlol community.

This strengthens the claims by authors such as Hawley¹⁹⁹, Pollard²⁰⁰, Maly²⁰¹, Maik Fielitz²⁰², and Nagle²⁰³ that memes play a significant role in extreme right radicalisation, and tells us more about the how and what.

The discussion about the answer of the research question can be split in 2 sub questions:

Rq1: To what extent can coherent extremist narratives be found in memes on Hiddenlol?

5.1. Narratives on Hiddenlol

The narratives together form a coherent ideology. Following Cas Mudde’s definition of ideology; the narratives give *a set of normative ideas on how man and society are versus how they ought to be*²⁰⁴.

¹⁹⁹ Hawley, G (2017). *Making Sense of the alt-right*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁰⁰ Pollard, T (2018). *alt-right Transgressions in the Age of Trump*. Perspectives on Global Development and Technology. 17(1-2)

²⁰¹ Maly, I (2018), *Nieuw rechts*. EPO

²⁰² Fielitz, M. (2019), “Do you want meme war?” *Understanding the visual memes of the German far right, Postdigital cultures of the far right*, Transcript political science, volume 71

²⁰³ Nagle, A (2017). *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan to Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*. Winchester and Washington: Zero Books.

²⁰⁴ Mudde, C. (2000), *Ideology of the Extreme Right*, Manchester university press, Manchester

The messages of individual memes easily fit within larger narratives. These were nine larger narratives:

1. "Jews are manipulating enemies"
2. "Sexual- and gender-liberty are bad"
3. "Liberals and left wingers are hypocritical idiots"
4. "Muslims are terrorist rapists"
5. "Black people are violent, animalistic criminals"
6. "Immigration is a threat, we are being replaced"
7. "Whites are threatened, there is a battle"
8. "We are oppressed in our freedom of speech"
9. "Us, Whites and white supremacy, are good"

These narratives do not stand apart from each other, but overlap and strengthen each others narratives. For example, the inherent goodness of "us" (9), and the badness of the "other" (1, 3, 4, 5, 6) make the threat of the racewar (7) worse. The supposed manipulation of the Jews (1) and liberals (3) tries to explain the causes behind the gender-degeneration (2). The supposed motivation behind this manipulation is again explained in the context of the racewar (7).

In the last discussion of data chapter, it was concluded the narratives showed many signs of extremism and extreme right ideology.

Therefore this thesis concludes that there are clear extremist narratives on Hiddenlol, that together form an ideological narrative. This narrative is ideologically, extreme right.

5.2. Narratives in memes

Four observations were derived from looking at (extremist) narratives in memes. These mainly had to do with the use of humor in memes.

1). It is unlikely that if almost all content can be interpreted as extremist, these are all misinterpretations or a coincidence.

When, in large number of memes, the majority can (also) be interpreted as extremist, it is unlikely this is by accident. Those memes are as a whole, even when intended to be funny, likely to project a extremist message.

2). Just because it is funny, does not mean it can not also be extremist, and the other way around.

Instead of trying to decide whether a meme is funny or serious, accept them as being both. A large body of funny memes can send an extremist message. A large body of of extremist memes can be hilarious if they suit your taste in humour.

3). Due to using humor, memes on one platform can contradict each other, which allows such a platform to serve a broad audience.

Both “the Holocaust should happen again” and “the Holocaust didn’t happen” were present on Hiddenlol. This is possible because Hiddenlol serves a broad audience. A person can chose to take one thing seriously, and judge the other piece of information as humor.

4). Due to using humor, memes on one platform can have different levels of extremity, which provide content for every step of the radicalisation process.

Users of Hiddenlol can decide for themselves which parts of the sites are humor and which ones are serious. Due to this, both radicals and extremists can find appropriate content on Hiddenlol. Due to the fact that prolonged exposure to an ideology can normalize it, Hiddenlol is an attractive community to start and spend your radicalisation-path.

5.3. Reactions to life events

Rq2: How do they react to real life events?

There are coherent narratives on Hiddenlol, which sometimes react to real life events. Mainly, they discuss general trends and observations rather than events. The events they reacted to (internet legislation, JK Rowling's progressive changes and Christchurch) all had some link to internet culture or alt-right ideology. For a meme to make it to the hotpage (front page), it needs many votes from the Hiddenlol community. This means that likely only events that are recognized by and relevant to the community will have a chance of making it to the front page.

The memes that react to events are very political. They often frame the events within one of the larger narratives that can be found on Hiddenlol, which are representations of extreme right ideology.

The memes were framed to fit within this ideology. This was done in four ways:

1. Framing non-extreme right events in an extreme right context, to make it ideologically charged (for example, framing decrease of the power and number of white people).
2. Framing extreme right events in a popular culture context, to make it more relatable (for example, creating video game versions of the Christchurch attack).
3. Framing something as positive or negative by celebrating or condemning it (for example, celebrating violence against black people)
4. Framing by selectively presenting facts (for example, by only mentioning white victims).

By doing this the memes tell the narrative of the extreme right. The memes also affirm the groups shared perspective. This affirms the group's identity and alliance against/in supporting what happened.

To summarize: After analyzing the memes, it can be concluded there are clear narratives in Hiddenlol that together form an extreme right ideology. Hiddenlol mainly discusses general trends and observations about the world. When it discusses real world events, it is because it fits within their narratives. In such cases, the facts are framed to strengthen the ideology. If we combine these observations with the power of ideologies in creating a reality and motivating people in their views and actions, and with the charisma and virility of memes, it shows reason for concern.

The internet is a sphere where politics and social processes can start, which can immensely impact the offline. It is also a sphere in which governments, academics and the general public often do not understand how it works. Often, what happens online doesn't stay online, but the facts of why it influences things or how it started does.

The growth of the alt-right is one of the processes that went unseen. It reached a gigantic target audience worldwide. But things can still be done; the online sphere must be taken seriously as a social sphere and be made accountable. Just like it would be unacceptable to have extremist propaganda in soccer clubs, bars and schools, it should be online. It is hard to realize this due to a myriad of technical issues such as the amount of content to monitor, the ambiguity of symbols and phrases, the risks of limiting free speech, anonymity which makes it hard to make actors accountable, the lacking power of governments to take sites offline or effectively block them. If we do not take charge of unwanted developments in our online societies, they will increase to have influence over us without boundaries.

6. Reflections and further research

The findings of this research can be used as a reference for online alt-right extreme right ideology. Of course they are skewed towards a younger, meme-using public, but this is a significant group of the extreme right. Hopefully it can add to the fields of extreme right and extremism studies.

It is interesting how relatively coherent the narratives are. With the growing importance of the online sphere we will encounter more datasets that consist of images and brief statements. Combinations of semiotics, discourse analysis and content analysis will be more important, and hopefully this study showed one way to do it.

Working on this thesis gave some insights about researching and discussing (extremist) memes:

1). Good interpretations require an updated and extensive knowledge of meme-culture.

This culture has new phenomenons on a daily basis and is heavily influenced by hypes. Many of the memes would be impossible to interpret without following the news, online hypes and the symbols used in meme-culture.

2). Many of the memes build on assumed knowledge already known to the reader. This contributes to the dogwhistle potential.

Memes only transmit a small part of a larger story in a larger context. For example, the statement "*media is controlled by Jews*" can be given without a value-judgement whether this is good or bad. This knowledge is assumed to be familiar to the reader. This contributes to the meme's dog whistle potential, which results on non-radical people not reading radical messages.

3). Online culture is not widely understood

Online culture is not widely understood. Just like writing and reading about China would require knowledge about the history, laws, politics culture and practises of China, reading and writing about something online requires such knowledge about the online world.

There is a gap between the gigantic impact and relevance of online research and often lacking knowledge about online culture in the academic world. In writing about the online world, authors need to balance between explaining the basics and writing in a focused way.

4). Online content needs to be archived

During the month this research took place, Hiddenlol became the target of many attacks on the site. This removed their archive of memes. If the memes were not collected in a datafile, they would have been lost as data. This problem is a larger problem of studying online content. If it is not archived; it can disappear.

Further research

Further research can be done about how extremist memes are shared and received. For example, it can be studied how extremist memes enter non-extremist spaces, and what decides whether such a space accepts or rejects it. It might also be interesting to test how many young people are exposed to such memes, and how they react to them.

Secondly, research can be done about how other extremist groups use memes. An interesting comparison can be made between other extremist groups, such as the extreme left or Jihadist terrorism. They all argue for some form of extremism (dehumanization, violence) and it can be interesting to see their similarities and differences.

Thirdly, humor and how it can help to avoid government prosecution, but also to avoid societal disapproval and taboo's can be studied.

Thirdly, research might be done about policy to stop extremist narratives on- and offline. This can be about policy from governments or social media websites, and its effectiveness.

Lastly, this thesis can be a good a good basis for developing counternarratives and alternative narratives to the extreme right.

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