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Exploring Petro-Masculinity in Alt-Right Internet Culture: The Circulation of Pepe the Frog on 4chan

Spronsen, Else van

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Else van Spronsen

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Introduction

Fossil fuels have built the modern world, with their abundant energy contributing to the rise of mass liberal democracy (Daggett, 2018, pp. 29-30). Despite the environmental concerns associated with fossil fuel use, there has also been recognition for the benefits they provided, especially in terms of societal progress. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) the correlation between this progress and fossil fuel use is not accidental, highlighting that many of our freedoms have relied heavily on energy-intensive processes (p. 208). Western dominance has historically been supported by 'fossil rule', a governing logic heavily dependent on fossil fuel usage, both materially and psychologically (Dagget, 2018, p. 30). Built on this Western fossil fuel rule was the American fossil fuelled lifestyle. It has been argued that American society has been built on fossil fuel systems and white patriarchal rule. This reliance has manifested into such an interconnectedness that a threat to one of the two can be seen as a threat to both (pp. 32-33). Any form of threat to energy supply can therefore be seen as a threat to the American dream, and the American society on the domestic stage as well as the international stage (p. 32). In the article *Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire* Daggett (2018) has developed a concept on the entanglement of petro-culture, white patriarchal rule and toxic masculinity and called this petro-masculinity (PM). It can be defined as a form of exaggerated masculinity as a reaction to increasing gender and climate anxieties (pp. 29-33).

In her article Daggett (2018) describes how petro-masculinity sees masculinity as a socially constructed identity. This identity is used as a mechanism that aims to perpetuate patriarchal rule, shaping norms, values and behaviours. In the existing literature on petro-masculinity, a relatively similar, but still distinctly different concept that is often mentioned is the concept of toxic masculinity (TM). In the article introducing petro-masculinity it can be seen that PM and toxic masculinity share very similar values. This is mainly evident in the shared idea of traditional gender norms and the promotion of aggression and male dominance that are present in both concepts.

Toxic masculinity is defined as a set of harmful practices of masculinity that contribute to the oppression of men, women, and gender-diverse individuals (Waling, 2019, pp. 365-366). The concept is further associated with the suppression of emotions, sexual and physical violence inflicted by men and the deterioration of both the mental and physical health of men (p. 365). One notion the literature on toxic masculinity highlights is the lack of conceptual

clarity with regards to the concept (Harrington, 2021; Waling, 2019). This is mainly due to the diverse usage of the concept in both scientific literature, feminist movements and popular culture. This has resulted in the concept becoming “a framework for popular *and* scholarly understandings of the gender factor in social problems” (Harrington, 2021, p. 246). This has affected the way in which the concept was studied and has led to a lack of a clear definition and connections to the theorization of masculinity (Harrington, 2021). Seen as toxic masculinity is a components of which petro-masculinity exists, both concepts share many similarities. While this is the case, the concepts remain two self-contained entities in the field of gender studies and petro-masculinity can best be seen as a specific expression of toxic masculinity intertwined with the cultural and economic structures of fossil fuel consumption.

One of the similarities found in the literature on both concepts is cultural reinforcement. Both PM and TM enforce traditional gender norms and behaviours. In addition, PM also entails behaviours and identities linked to fossil fuel consumption. An example of fossil-fuelled behaviour is the practice of rollin’ coal. It is described by Daggett (2018) as a way of protesting against sustainable practices by deliberately wasting fossil fuels in front of people practicing green consumerism. This behaviour entails the practice where a diesel engine is modified to emit great amounts of black smoke. There are examples of car owners that deliberately blast smoke at protesters, bikers and Prius cars. Priuses are seen as the ‘symbols of green consumerism’, which is so opposite of PM that it is the ideal way of showing disdain with the movement. Practices like rollin’ coal have become of symbolic value for the community that relates to petro-masculinity. Through these practices the petro-masculine identity is upheld and spread (Daggett, 2018, p. 40). While Daggett does mention real life petro-masculine behaviour, like rollin’ coal, the author does not mention whether petro-masculinity is also practiced online.

The Internet, social media platforms and especially memes have been proven effective in connecting people and spreading certain (secret) messages, so-called dog whistles (Pérez-Torres, 2024, p. 3; King, 2021). Multiple authors agree on the capacity memes have to spread ideologies and attitudes (Özer, 2021; Drakett et al., 2018; Shifman, 2014). According to Özer (2021) this power of memes lies within the visuality of memes. Shifman (2014) explains this skill of memes by stating that because of the accessibility of the creation of Internet memes, enabling anyone to generate their own version of a meme. This continual creation of new versions of the same message provides a sense of novelty to social media users, while the same idea is being shared (pp. 19-20). Furthermore, Shifman (2014) adds that memes can connect the personal with the political, serving to encourage participation through humour and the

mocking of certain ideologies and behaviour (p. 122). Given the relevance and significance of petro-masculinity topics to many individuals' lives, discussions on these subjects naturally attract attention. Finally, social media algorithms are designed to retain user engagement by recommending content that is likely to provoke a response or reshare (Manago, 2013).

This would make social media a useful medium and especially the posting of memes an effective way to spread and thus uphold petro-masculinity. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that petro-masculinity is present in the online sphere. In order to examine the extent to which petro-masculinity exists not only as a real-life practice but also as an online phenomenon, the research question of this thesis is formulated as follows:

To what extent do memes articulate and perpetuate themes of petro-masculinity?

Conducting research to the topic of this thesis would help illuminate the depths of (online) petro-masculine identity construction, thereby further solidifying the concept of petro-masculinity. Secondly, although the relationship between petro-masculinity and toxic masculinity is evident, the distinction between these concepts remains ambiguous in the current literature, particularly due to the lack of conceptual clarity regarding toxic masculinity (Harrington, 2021, p. 347). This ambiguity results in uncertainty about which aspects of toxic masculinity are encompassed by petro-masculinity and which are not. Studying the relation between petro-masculinity and toxic masculinity would help clarify this ambiguity. Finally, studying how PM and TM relate to each other would help to highlight how deeply ingrained masculine norms can impact both social and environmental dynamics.

While the analysed memes do articulate themes of racism, misogyny, white supremacy and traditional gender norms, fossil fuel consumption, the basis of petro-masculinity was not found in the data. While these found themes are also part of PM, the crucial factor differentiating PM from TM, the connection to fossil fuel consumption, is missing. Therefore, this thesis concludes that memes do not articulate and perpetuate themes of petro-masculinity, but instead articulate themes of toxic masculinity. To get to this answer a thematic analysis of forty Pepe the Frog memes posted between the 1st of April and the 30th of April 2024 on the platform 4chan was conducted.

In order to find this answer, this thesis is structured as follows. First, to ground this thesis into the existing academic literature, research linking environmental anxieties, questions of gender and memes is analysed. This section is followed by an overview of literature on petro-masculinity and toxic masculinity. Here literature on both concepts as separate entities is

presented, while the similarities and differences between both are also addressed. This is done to articulate how both concepts relate to one another. Secondly, a conceptualization of PM is given. In this section the thesis also zooms in on a specific meme that will be used for this research; the meme of Pepe the Frog. Here the choice for the social media platform 4Chan as the platform for the extraction of Pepe memes will also be justified. For this research a thematic analysis of Pepe the Frog memes will be conducted. This form of analysis will allow the researcher to explore underlying ideology and culture behind the cartoons and symbols in memes, to research to what extent memes articulate and perpetuate themes of PM. Next, the results of this analysis will be presented. Concluding this thesis research, an answer to the research question will be formulated and possibilities for further research are identified.

Literature review

This literature review will start with mapping the academic scholarship on the intersection of environmental anxieties, questions of gender and (eco-) feminism to situate Daggett's (2018) concept of petro-masculinity in the literature. Secondly, the landscape of the current literature on PM will be sketched. Then, the concept of toxic masculinity will be illustrated and situated in the literature with regards to petro-masculinity. Both the similarities and differences of the concepts will be addressed

Environmental anxieties and questions of gender

The field of gendered analyses of climate change has grown, but research in this area has mostly focused on differences in equal access to fuel (Moosa & Tuana, 2014; MacGregor, 2010), leaving the area understudied (Daggett, 2018). The literature is also largely focused on the impact of climate change on both the male and female gender, concluding that females often bear a disproportionate burden due to existing gender equalities (Moosa & Tuana, 2014, p. 682). Multiple case studies present in this field of research are focused on the effect of climate change on feelings of anxiety and study this statistically (Wullenkord et al., 2021; Ramírez-López et al., 2023; Whitmarsh et al., 2022). With the study of Whitmarsh et al. (2022) stating that gender does not play a role in predicting climate anxiety (p. 6).

Research focusing on environmentalism and masculinity specifically is even more limited. Yet this is essential for understanding the (lack of) responses to climate change and understanding anxieties triggered by climate change. MacGregor (2009) argues that these can

be understood by understanding the origin of how climate change has been handled. The original approach has been to apply the masculinized frames of security and science to the problem of climate change. This has led to the masculinization of environmentalism itself (Daggett, 2018). Consequently, climate change was constructed as a problem that requires “solutions that are the traditional domain of man and hegemonic masculinity” (MacGregor, 2009, p. 128). An effect of this has been the “downgrading of ethical concerns once central to environmentalism” (Macgregor, 2009, p. 128). This explains the emergence of authoritarian desires and anxiety as a result of climate change. Daggett (2018) herself relates the anxieties to the close connection between fossil fuels and society's lifestyle. Due to the role fossil fuel played in the construction of American society and social norms, a perceived need to change this fossil fuelled lifestyle is perceived as a threat to a secure and trusted environment (p. 32-33).

In the article *Ecofascism: An Examination of the Far-Right/Ecology Nexus in the Online Space*, the authors Hughes, Jones and Amarasingam (2022) identify the concept of ecofascism to connect the far-right, ecology and gender. Here ecofascism is defined as “an imaginary and cultural expression of mystical, anti-humanist Romanticism” (p. 998). With regards to gender, the authors focus mainly on how women are characterized in the alt-right. While both concepts do focus on the felt need for authoritarianism, the concept of ecofascism merges this with nationalism and environmentalism (Hughes et al., 2022). The focus on fuel and energy Daggett (2018) uses in her article is not employed by Hughes et al. (2022).

Petro-masculinity

Since the publication of Daggett’s 2018 article, petro-masculinity has gained popularity and became an often cited, well known academic concept. The concept has been used for a diverse amount of studies researching the connection between the fields of gender studies, environmentalism and feminism.

Bergman Rosamund and Davitti (2022) use petro-masculinity to research the connection between authoritarian movements, the political right and climate change denialism. Here they use the arguments behind petro-masculinity to explain how fossil fuel has supported white patriarchal rule in such a way that it created an environment in which authoritarian movements are keen to emerge. The authors argue how, according to Daggett’s reasoning, petro-culture has secured a way of thinking that turns to more conservative societal values and the rejection of science supporting climate change (p. 143). In this research the authors also

mention how feminist scholarship has demonstrated that women in the Global South are disproportionately affected by climate change, supporting the conclusion Moosa and Tuana (2014) (pp. 143-144).

The authors Sorman and Stock (2024) employ petro-masculinity to demonstrate how authoritarian populists like Erdoğan and Modi utilize solar megaprojects to consolidate political and energetic power, reinforcing ethnoreligious and patriarchal social orders. Daggett's (2018) reasoning that fossil fuel extraction and consumption reinforces a certain type of masculinity that entails traditional and conservative values and masculine characteristics is used to support this argumentation. This article concludes with that the researched solar parks are "the expression of authoritarian desire and the exercise of authoritarian power" (Sorman & Stock, 2024, p. 7). This conclusion further solidifies Daggett's (2018) connection between fossil fuel use and the traditional masculine identity. At the same time this paper adds how solar power can be seen as part of this discussion as well.

In addition to the study of Sorman and Stock (2024) multiple other studies come to the same conclusion that supports a strong connection between fossil fuel use and the traditional masculine identity and thus the connection between PM and TM (Verlie, 2024; Schmelzer & Büttner, 2024). A case study examining the online behaviour of white male fossil fuel workers from Alberta, Canada on Twitter also supports this connection by analysing Twitter accounts following accounts advocating for Canadian oil and gas. This research reveals how the analysed Twitter accounts exhibit a homogenous public profile, which finds pride in conservative gender roles and has a strong affiliation with extreme right-wing values (Letourneau et al, 2023, pp. 685, 689, 693). Another part of this public profile that was found online is the defence of fossil fuel use, further confirming the connection underlying PM. Consequently, this research demonstrates the presence of a petro-masculine identity in Twitter profiles, raising the question of whether this identity is also reflected in memes posted on 4chan.

Toxic masculinity

The origin of toxic masculinity lies in the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s created by the psychologist Sheperd Bliss. This movement existed of self-help activities and therapeutic workshops which had the purpose of letting its participants connect with their inner self or 'lost male identity'. Bliss formulated the term of toxic masculinity to describe "his father's militarized authoritarian masculinity" (Harrington, 2021, p. 347). In the 1990s and

early 2000s the term gained popularity and spread to policy and academic literature. A popular explanation for men who showed toxic masculine behaviour was the lack of a father figure or the lack of a healthy emotional bond between boys and fathers (Pittman, 1993; Biddulph, 1997). A stable relationship between a father and son will give boys the right kind of masculinity, something their mothers can not give them (Harrington, 2021). In the 2000s and 2010s the term was also picked up by popular culture which led to an intense increase in the use of the term.

As mentioned in the introduction, petro-masculinity can best be seen as a specific articulation of toxic masculinity. Because of this, the two concepts share many similarities. One of the similarities that is found in the literature on both toxic masculinity and petro-masculinity most often is one of the core attributes of the concepts: the practices and attitudes associated with traditional masculinity. This entails traditional gender norms, aggression, male dominance and disdain for male weakness (Waling, 2019; Parent et al., 2019; Harrington, 2021; Daggett, 2018). With regards to PM, Daggett (2018) argues how these are rooted in the cultural and economic structures of fossil fuel consumption. In addition to traditional masculine behaviour, certain fossil fuel specific behaviour arises from this, like rollin' coal or the mindset that working in the oil industry is the ultimate practice of masculinity (p. 32).

A second similarity is the resistance to change that is present in both concepts. Change can feel frightening when it endangers a certain lifestyle. For toxic masculinity this mainly applies to progressive changes that challenge traditional gender roles and conservative family values. This also applies to petro-masculinity, but threats to the current fossil fuel system adds an extra dimension to this. Because fossil fuel usage is so interwoven in the American lifestyle any threat to the current fossil fuel usage, like a transition to renewable energy sources, can be seen as a threat to the petro-culture and lifestyle. This will be addressed further in the theoretical framework (Harrington, 2021; Waling, 2019; Daggett, 2018).

The difference between the two concepts lies mainly in the focus and scope of both masculinities. Toxic masculinity is a broader term encompassing a wide range of harmful masculine behaviours and attitudes (Harrington, 2021; Waling, 2019). While petro-masculinity, as an articulation of toxic masculinity, is more specific by combining these traditional masculine behaviours with fossil fuel consumption. This manifests in more petro-culture specific behaviour and attitudes that valorise fossil fuel consumption and reject environmental initiatives (Daggett, 2018). While the relationship between the two concepts

becomes clearer, PM can be seen as an articulation of TM, the similarities between the two concepts still causes the distinction between the two concepts to remain unclear.

Theoretical framework

Petro-masculinity

Daggett (2018) argues how the origins of petro-masculinity lie in the ethos of the United States, The American Dream. With the rise of this ethos, the idea was created that white patriarchal rule, the basis of society, is dependent on the consumption of fossil fuel. Due to the reliance of the country on fossil fuels for economic prosperity, most families in the middle or working class were dependent on jobs in the fossil fuel industry. Also, because of the unequal distribution of jobs and wages, working with fossil fuel became a symbol for power, white masculinity and sovereignty (Daggett, 2018, p. 32) This has resulted in fossil fuels being seen as a right to the American citizen. Any form of threat to energy supply can therefore be seen as a threat to the American dream, and the American society on the domestic stage as well as the international stage (Daggett, 2018, p. 32-33). Fossil fuel systems and white patriarchal rule have become so interconnected and reliant on each other that a threat to one of the two can be seen as a threat to both. This explains how, according to Daggett (2018), queer and feminist movements are seen as threats to hegemonic masculinity and the traditional family and therefore, the state.

Historically, the extraction of fossil fuels has been done in racist, violent and non-democratic ways to secure Western power. According to Daggett (2018), these three ways articulated themselves in authoritarian regimes, contributing to securing Western fossil rule (p. 30). Fossil rule is a system of governance that relies heavily on extensive fossil fuel consumption, both in physical terms and in psychological and political dimensions. Andreas Malm (2016) uses the term 'fossil capital' to describe the foundation of modern capitalism as being built on the notion of self-sustaining growth, intricately linked to the burning of fossil fuels (p. 284). Fossil capital depends on a continuous, low-cost supply of fossil fuels to accumulate wealth at the expense of others, necessitating authoritarian tactics at specific times and places (Daggett, 2018, p. 30).

The former two paragraphs describe how fossil fuels lie at the origin of the current international affairs of Western rule and the current social system of white patriarchal rule. The

perceived need to stop using fossil fuels is recognized by fossil fuel users as a threat to the highly valued, security providing status quo. According to Daggett (2018) this causes anxiety in the supporters of petro-masculinity and increases the desire for control to maintain the status quo. This anxiety expresses itself in gender and climate anxiety (p. 28). Concluding, petro-masculinity can be seen as the entanglement of fossil fuel use, hegemonic masculinity and white patriarchal rule, resulting in gender and climate anxiety and desires for control, dominance and authoritarianism.

Daggett (2018) speaks of petro-masculine behaviour manifesting itself in a petro-masculine identity (pp. 33-35). The example mentioned in the introduction, the practice of rollin' coal, can be seen as behaviour part of PM that among other things, serves the goal of promoting PM behaviour and the petro-masculine identity. Online methods of promoting petro-culture are not mentioned in Daggett's (2018) article, while they can serve as coded means of communication (King, 2021).

Pepe the Frog

Pepe the Frog first appeared in Matt Furie's comic *Boys Club* in 2005 (Roy, 2016). In Furie's comics it becomes apparent how Pepe does not care about upholding society's expectations and instead acts as he wishes. This is especially evident in one of his most famous statements: "feels good man". Pepe responds with this statement to questions about his unusual behaviour. Due to this stance against society's standards Pepe slowly gained popularity and by 2015 he was one of the most popular memes on a number of social media platforms (Nuzzi, 2016). It was also at this point in time where he started to get more associated with the alt-right. Memes of Pepe dressed in a Nazi uniform with Swastika's and other Nazi symbols started to emerge on the social media platforms 4Chan and Reddit. This also happened to Pepe, who lost some of its fame due to its frequent use. According to the avowed white nationalist @JaredTSwift, the alt-right then attempted to "reclaim Pepe from normies" (Nuzzi, 2016). Although @JardedTSwift later admitted how he tried to spread and alt-right conspiracist plot, once his statements were published by the *Daily Beast* the association between Pepe and Nazism only became stronger and Pepe became a symbol for the alt-right movement (Woods & Hahner, 2019, p. 70). From then on Pepe was by supporters of the alt-right to mark themselves and recognize fellow alt-right supporters. In 2016, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) marked Pepe the Frog a hate symbol and the alt-right a hate group. This earned the alt-right media attention from mainstream media and fuelled general interest in the movement. This newfound attention to the alt-right, although negative, strengthened the resolve of

supporters and energized them in their attempts to troll and offend the left and mainstream media (pp. 71-73).

Since Pepe started to become a symbol of the alt-right, the attention the symbol received in the academic world increased. The frog has been subject to multiple studies researching its emergence, symbolism and power on social media platforms. Woods & Hahner (2019) studied the appropriation of Pepe by the alt-right and focussed specifically on the role of former US president Donald Trump in this process. In 2015 Trump retweeted a Pepe meme during his presidential campaign, gaining himself and his followers media attention and strengthening the sense of collective identity among Trump supporters (pp. 70-80). This meme depicted Trump as Pepe the Frog and was accompanied by the text “You can’t stump the Trump” (p. 73). This illustrates how memes can be employed to adapt to real-life events and therefore remain relevant (Woods & Hahner, 2019; Zannethou et al., 2018). King (2021) agrees with the notion of how memes are used to attract media attention and supports this by illustrating the role of Pepe in protests against feminists and LGBTQIA+ movements. Here Pepe was used in order to reclaim the rainbow flag from ‘woke’ movements, causing online confusion and upheaval (pp. 225-227).

Further research on Pepe includes a case study to the role of Twitter and 4chan in the spread of far-right ideologies before and after the insurrection of the US capitol. One of the main findings of this study shows how Pepe was not only used to spread an ideology, but also to recognize other like-minded people. Due to Pepe’s role as a symbol for the alt-right community, only posting a picture of Pepe without further context is enough to show someone’s position in a discussion. This creates a very strong feeling of a collective identity. Pepe was further used to depict racism and fascism, with an increase of Nazist and fascist memes after the Insurrection of the capitol. This shows how Pepe memes facilitated a gradual transition to a more radical fascist conversation (Kasimov et al., 2023, p. 14).

Methodology

For this thesis a data-driven, thematic analysis of Pepe the frog memes was conducted to add to research that explores petro-masculine identity. This method of analysis utilized a latent approach, to look beyond the semantic meaning of the collected memes and discover underlying ideology. This approach was chosen because memes are already both textually and visually rich in meaning and need a more in-depth interpretation that goes beyond semantic description (Kasimov et al., 2023; Shifman, 2014; Halperin & Heath, 2020). Secondly, Pepe

the frog is of such cultural significance for the /pol board on 4chan (Devries, 2021) that a certain level of interpretation is needed that goes beyond surface analysis (Kasimov et al., 2023, pp. 8-9).

The thematic research in this thesis was conducted with the guidance of the thematic analysis framework of Nowell et al. (2017). The process of the thematic analysis started with the familiarization of the author with the available data. At the same time, petro-masculinity was operationalized by developing a set of indicators (see *figure 8* in the appendix). This served the purpose of translating the themes of PM in detectable signs, to guide the author during the thematic analysis. The creation of a set of indicators was done to provide guidance to the researcher to systematically analyse the data. The set of indicators was formulated as a preliminary guide and was open to change throughout the coding process. By using a set of indicators instead of a more rigid approach, like a closed coding frame, the coding became a process of reflection which let the author interact with the data. This let the data speak for itself, while the researcher could still apply an ecofeminist approach that was guided by the concept of petro-masculinity (Nowell et al, 2017, pp. 4-11).

This research will focus specifically on Pepe the Frog memes posted on the platform 4chan. Firstly, memes were chosen as the recording unit of this thesis, because of their capacity to carry messages and spread ideologies (King, 2021; Shifman, 2014; Woods & Hahner, 2019; Manago, 2013). Moreover, the algorithms of social media are focused on increasing user engagement. Shocking or offensive content draws more attention than regular content and therefore algorithms are trained to recommend content that will keep users drawn to the social media platform (Adisa, 2023). Statements of conservative gender norms, white patriarchal values and the refusal to accept climate change combined with the legacy of Pepe the frog in a very easily spread meme make the perfect cocktail of offensive content that social media platforms thrive on.

For this thesis Shifman's definition (2012, 2014) of memes is employed. The author defines memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman, 2014, pp. 7-8). In addition, memes are also “dynamic entities that spread in response to technological, cultural and social choices made by people” (Shifman, 2012, p. 189).

To further narrow the scope of this thesis this research only focuses on memes posted on the platform 4Chan. 4Chan is an imageboard website that was created in 2003 and hosts 75 image boards (4chan.io, n.d.). Users can post images, share content and start threaded discussions, so-called threads (4chan.io, n.d.). The regulation of the website differs per board and every board has a volunteer to monitor the published content. Research has shown that these volunteers have used a hands-off mindset and let most of the content be (Arthur, 2020). Registration to participate on the platform is not required. Anonymous participation gives the users a feeling of security. The platform is known for its popularity among far-right ideologists (Colley & Moore, 2022) and recent studies have shown that it generates a higher volume of hate speech than similar websites (Zannettou et al., 2018). This was well reflected in the literature on Pepe memes, seen as multiple articles conducting research to Pepe the Frog extracted their data from 4chan (Woods & Hahner, 2019; Kasimov et al., 2023; Zannettou et al., 2018; King, 2021). For this research the focus will be extended to the /pol/ (politically incorrect) image board. This is mainly done for practical reasons; 4chan does not automatically archive all threads and posts. Only a few boards are archived on 4plebs.org and the politically incorrect boards is one of those (4plebs.org, n.d.). Furthermore, the politically incorrect board is the most active board of 4chan (4stats.io, n.d.).

To further refine the focus of this analysis only Pepe the Frog memes posted in the month April of 2024 were selected and analysed. In the current scholarship applying thematic analyses to memes multiple methods were used to focus the scope of the analysis. Kasimov et al. (2023) focused their data analysis on the January 6 insurrection of the United States capitol. The authors limited their data collection by focusing on a time period and only selecting memes posted one week before and one week after the capitol attack. Drakett et al. (2018) started their analysis by selecting the three most popular meme websites. Secondly, the authors selected the eighty most popular memes on those websites, resulting in a data sample of two hundred and forty memes. The date on which the memes were posted did not signify. Due to the practical limitations of this thesis the time period that was chosen to select the data was chosen randomly. The researcher has considered to design the methodology section of this thesis in a similar way as the research of Kasimov et al. (2023) was constructed. Only, when the researcher started to familiarize herself with the data surrounding the United States capitol attack it became clear that this approach was not suited for this thesis.

Analysis and discussion

By searching for Pepe memes posted in the month April 2024 4chan moderated five hundred and two results. These results included texts mentioning Pepe and memes of Pepe. Because this analysis focuses on memes, only the posts that included memes were analysed. Due to the practical limitations of this study and time constraints forty memes were selected for this analysis. The researcher wishes to add a content warning to this section of the thesis. The following part includes images and statements than can be experienced as offensive and upsetting.

Pepe the Frog as an icon of the alt-right

The first observation of this study supports the claim that states that Pepe the Frog has become a symbol of the alt-right (Woods & Hahner, 2019; Kasimov et al., 2023; King, 2021). Kasimov et al. (2023) highlight how memes are used by the alt-right to spot fellow supporters of the alt-right and to hide their ideologies in plain sight (p. 5). Pepe is particularly suitable for this because of his innocent looks and origins.

Most Pepe memes that were analysed were not drenched in hate speech or hate speech symbolism but were edited to add an extra dimension to a text. The meme in *figure 1* was posted in a thread discussing how young someone's 'dreamwife' could be and what age is appropriate for someone to participate in acts of sex. The Pepe in this meme has a neutral, although somewhat awkward facial expression and does not show any further signs or symbolism. The anonymous user posting this picture states how he does not care about the age of the women participating in sexual intercourse. The second offensive sentence sexualizes supporters of the feminist movement, showing the user's disdain over the movement. This post also shows the user's opinion on the role of women in life, mainly seeing them fit for their submissive role in sexual intercourse. Due to this misogynist, sexualizing expressions that confirm traditional gender norms, this post would fall under the themes of gender anxiety and white patriarchal rule. While the text of this post expressed hate speech, the Pepe meme that was attached to it did not. The user could have added the Pepe meme to show his support to the alt-right movement or to fit into the current way of communication on 4chan.

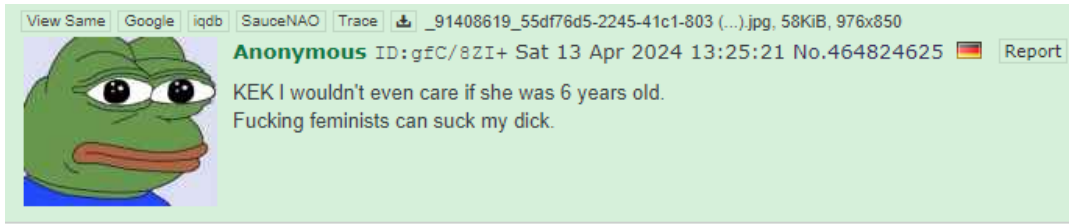


Figure 1

One of the ways in which Pepe is employed by the alt-right to show its disapproval of liberal and ‘woke’ movements is by the character of ‘Honkler’ (King, 2021, p. 224). This Pepe variant wears a rainbow-colored wig and a red nose as a reference to a clown. According to King (2021) this Pepe symbolizes “a world gone mad” (p. 224). Certain alt-right circles believed that liberals had taken over the media and spreading ‘Honkler’ memes was their way of protesting against the woke movement and cancel culture. The philosophy behind this figure was that it was better to laugh “at the absurdity of the world instead of living in a state of depressed apathy” (p. 225). Multiple ‘Honkler’ Pepe’s were found in the data (*see figure 2*). In this way of protesting a resistance to change can be recognized. In liberal woke movements and cancel culture, alt-right supporters can see changes that can have an enormous impact on their current lifestyle. For example, the rise of LGBTQIA+ and feminists movement online endangers the traditional gender norms and a strong masculine identity, both highly valued by petro-masculinity as well as toxic masculinity (Daggett, 2018; Harrington, 2021; Waling, 2019).



Figure 2

White supremacy and racism

Multiple memes in this analysis displayed racist behaviour, symbols or used racist language. One of the most striking posts can be found in *figure 3*. This meme shows Pepe in a tuxedo holding a glass of wine. He is surrounded by black women who appear to be naked while touching Pepe's face. The meme is accompanied by the text 'FUCK NIGGERS'. This post does not only display racism, but also sexualizes black women by portraying them naked. In addition, it shows the inferiority of black women as they stand behind Pepe caressing his face. This places them in a nurturing, submissive position towards a powerful man, further confirming conservative gender roles.

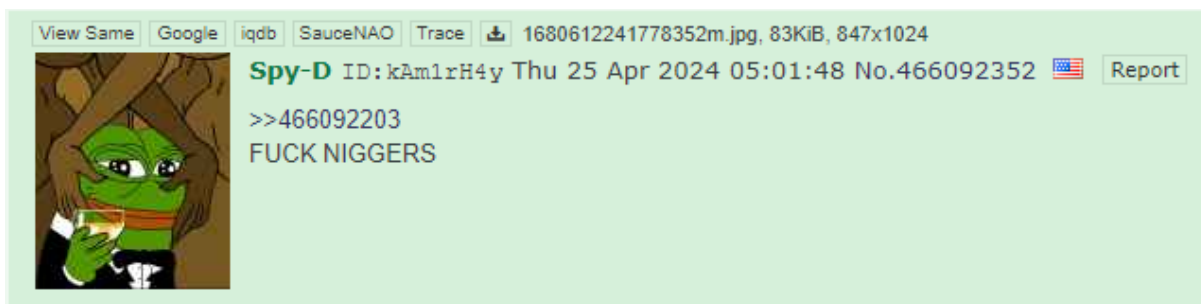


Figure 3

The word 'nigger' returned often in the coded memes. Another racist slur that occurred multiple times was the word 'Pajeet'. Pajeet is a term to refer to Indian men in a derogatory manner. It is associated with the belief that Indians are unhygienic and inferior humans (Sharma, 2024). Multiple posts in the data included references of Indian people as 'subhumans'. Racism plays a role in both toxic and petro-masculinity. With regards to PM, racism plays a role in the continuing of the exclusionary, hierarchical, and environmentally damaging practices associated with fossil fuel consumption. In addition, Daggett (2018) sketches the image of the globalised world being divided into two camps. One side houses the people profiting from fossil fuel consumption, while the other side houses the people suffering from it (pp. 27, 31). Seen as toxic masculinity is such a broad encompassing term, suffering from conceptual unclarity the role racism plays in it is not always clear (Harrington, 2021, p. 347). With regards to race, a 2013 study found how race is connected to the perception of masculinity. A result of this study was that Asian-American man were viewed as less masculine than white or Black American man (Wong et al., 2013, pp. 460-463).

There was also much concern within the data for the replacement of white people by people of colour. One anonymous user expressed this as "the browning of the white world". A meme displaying white supremacy can be found in *figure 4*. In this meme Pepe sits in a chair placed on a black man lying on the ground. Pepe is laughing in a sadist manner, enjoying that

the man is in pain. In her article Daggett (2018) mentions sadism as an impulse of “the fossil-inflected authoritarian personality”, arguing how it is connected with fossil fuel use (p. 36). White supremacy is mentioned in literature on both toxic masculinity as well as petro-masculinity. Whereas for PM white supremacy plays a big role due to the colonial origins of fossil fuel usage (pp. 1, 25), the role it plays in toxic masculinity is more subtle (Harrington, 2021).

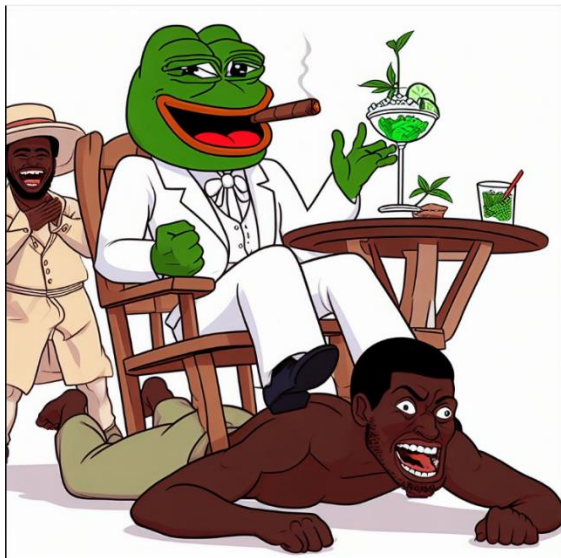


Figure 4

Feminism and women

In the data women were portrayed in incredibly negative and offensive ways. One way in which this was done was by the sexualization of women. Multiple memes showed Pepe pushing his head in the bosom of a woman, while the woman appears to enjoy it. In one of these pictures Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, an American left-wing politician and activist, occurs while giving an interview (See *figure 5*). Pepe the Frog was edited in the picture while sexually touching her and pushing his head in her bosom. The picture displays the sexualization of women in power, mocking the idea of women in powerful positions. This meme can be seen as a signal to show someone’s favour of traditional gender norms instead of more liberal gender norms. Secondly, it can be seen as a protest against the societal progress providing women with powerful jobs, showing signs of a reluctance to change. Instead of accepting the possibility of women working in powerful positions, Ocasio-Cortez is ridiculed and sexualized. Traditional gender norms, reluctance to change and misogyny occur in both toxic masculinity as well as petro-masculinity (Daggett, 2018; Harrington, 2021; Waling, 2019).



Figure 5

Hegemonic masculinity

Another trend that was found in the literature was that of memes setting standards for masculine behaviour. The memes below show Pepe in a tuxedo surrounded by women who are admiring him (*see figure 6*). Images like these confirm traditional gender roles of women in submissive positions admiring men in powerful positions. They also set the standard that men can only be successful when they receive female attention and behave and dress according to a certain style. Other items of meme culture were also included in these memes (*see figure 7*). In this meme Pepe is once again shown as a man of style, wearing a tuxedo and holding a glass of wine. Next to him is a man referred to in popular culture as ‘Chad’. This character is seen as the ultimate alpha male constantly receiving female attention (Burton, 2021, p. 23). The call for a strong dominant male figure that suppresses his emotions recurs in both petro-masculinity and toxic masculinity (Daggett, 2018; Harrington, 2021; Waling, 2019).



Figure 6



Figure 7

Absence of fossil fuel culture

Throughout the sample of memes analysed for this study one important component of petro-masculinity remains absent: fossil fuel consumption. While all the themes found in the analysis are also recognized by Daggett (2018) as part of petro-masculinity, all these themes are mentioned as part of petro-masculine behaviour and a fossil fuelled lifestyle. A fitting example here is the theme reluctance to change. This theme is present in both PM and TM and was found in the analysed data. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the two concepts in what underlies this theme. Toxic masculinity generally resists progressive changes that challenge traditional gender roles and behaviours (Harrington, 2021; Waling, 2019). With regards to PM, this resistance emerges from changes threatening the fossil fuelled lifestyle and certain norms and values emerging from it (Dagget, 2018, pp. 28-29).

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to analyse whether petro-masculinity is not only an offline phenomenon, but is also mirrored to the online sphere. After a thematic analysis of forty memes posted on the platform 4chan in the month of April 2024 the following answer to the research question can be presented. While the themes of racism, white supremacy and traditional gender roles could be found in the data, the themes of climate anxieties and fossil fuel consumption were not present. In other words, the environmental aspect that is combined in a unique way with white patriarchal rule and toxic masculinity by petro-masculinity is not present. Therefore, it can be stated that the analysed memes do express themes of toxic masculinity, but not of petro-masculinity.

This study attempted to further illuminate the depths of the concept of petro-masculinity. While the concept's popularity has increased since its emergence in 2018, the concept has not been completely studied yet. Furthermore, this study pursued to untangle the ambiguity surrounding the relationship between petro-masculinity and toxic masculinity. After a literature study to both concepts the relationship between both became clear. Petro-masculinity can be seen as a specific articulation of toxic masculinity. Both concepts entail the themes of conservative gender norms, glorification of a strong masculine identity, disdain for masculine weakness and a resistance to change. The main difference between the two concepts is how PM includes the cultural and economic structures of fossil fuel use in these themes. The two concepts also differ in scope and focus. Toxic masculinity has a broader more encompassing focus, while petro-masculinity as an articulation of TM is more specific. The main reason for the ambiguity surrounding both concepts is the conceptual unclarity of toxic masculinity (Harrington, 2021; Waling, 2019). While studying petro-masculinity in Pepe the frog memes this study actually came across toxic masculinity. By analysing this finding the study contributed to research on toxic masculinity and thus to the relationship between this concept and petro-masculinity.

The following limitations must be taken into account when social media platforms like 4chan are analysed. The use of sarcasm and irony and the fast changing and evolving terminology on the platform may create challenges for the interpretation of the data. While the moderators on 4chan are not very active or strict, posts can be removed by the user who posted the content or after a request is filed. The final limitation of this research is the number of memes that was analysed. Other studies conducting a thematic analysis to memes used bigger

data sets and using a bigger data set would have also made the claims of this thesis stronger. The researcher of this thesis chose to not do this, due to the practical limitations of this bachelor thesis.

This study can be seen as a case study to the articulation of petro-masculinity online. The conclusion that the memes express themes of toxic masculinity rather than petro-masculinity opens ways for future research to further explore the close relationship between both concepts. It encourages scholars to investigate where and how petro-masculinity might be more explicitly articulated in the online sphere.

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Appendix

Figure 8

| Themes | Indicators |
|--------|------------|
|--------|------------|

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| White patriarchal rule | <p>Gender roles: men in dominant roles, women in nurturing or submissive roles</p> <p>Use of symbols associated with white supremacy</p> <p>Racist language or symbols</p> <p>Misogyny</p> <p>Desire for control</p> <p>Desire for authoritarianism</p> |
| Fossil fuel lifestyle | <p>Associations with labour in fossil fuel industries</p> <p>Fossil fuel iconography: use of symbols associated with fossil fuel use like oil rigs, coal, gas pumps, big trucks</p> <p>Connections between fossil fuel use and masculinity</p> |
| Gender anxiety | <p>Misogyny</p> <p>Display of traditional gender roles</p> <p>Display of strong men and weak women in need of protection</p> <p>Expressions of disdain over feminist and queer movements</p> |
| Defiance of environmentalism | <p>Mocking of sustainable ways of energy use</p> |