On the Fringe:

An Analysis of Violent Discourse on Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism on Less-Regulated Social Media Platforms

by

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Abstract

Smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platforms are increasingly exploited and misused for sharing and communicating harmful and violent ideological grievances. In some instances, these platforms are used to facilitate and express support for real-world acts of violence inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremist (IMVE) grievances. These platforms provide unique user affordances, such as anonymity, that generates online environments for IMVE to flourish. The following paper aims to better understand the role of smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms in facilitating a hospitable environment for IMVE narratives, messaging, and activity. In particular, the paper investigates the trajectory of violent discourse to understand how and why online users radicalize to violence. To investigate this trajectory, the research is guided by three questions: (1) How does the trajectory of violent discourse manifest on smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platforms? (2) What is the level of user engagement (i.e., comments) with violent content inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremism? and, (3) How does the user engagement impact the trajectory of violent discourse on the platform? Using four original datasets built using open-source intelligence from 4chan’s /pol/ board, the paper provides analysis that better situates our understanding of the impact of online violent discourse in inciting and inspiring acts of real-world violence. The findings also identify the daily prevalence of hateful and violent rhetoric posted to 4chan and trends in user engagement with violent discourse. In doing so, the paper confirms an echo-chamber of violent discourse is constructed and fostered within the platform and presents a legitimate risk for inspiring or inciting real-world acts of violence.
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CHAPTER I: Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism & the Online Space

INTRODUCTION

“Well lads, it’s time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort post. I will carry out an attack against invaders, and will even live stream the attack via facebook. The facebook link is below, by the time you read this I should be going live. It’s been a long ride and despite all your rampant faggotry, fecklessness and degeneracy, you are all top blokes and the best bunch of cobblers a man could ask for. I have provided links to my writings below, please do your part by spreading my message, making memes and shitposting as you usually do. If I don’t survive the attack, goodbye, godbless and I will see you all in Valhalla.”

- Brenton Tarrant, 8chan post, Christchurch Attack

An individual can hear, read, and learn of ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) and affiliated attacks from across the globe. Exposure to violent and extreme content often triggers a radicalization to violence process whereby individuals, in extreme cases, carry out attacks on behalf of ideological grievances. Increasingly, smaller, less-regulated social media platforms are exploited and misused by sharing and communicating harmful and violent ideological grievances. In some instances, these platforms are used to facilitate and express support for real-world acts of violence inspired by IMVE grievances. The less-regulated platforms provide unique user affordances, such as anonymity, that generate online environments for IMVE to flourish. These online environments are exploited by violent extremists to gather and communicate, including express support for real-world violence, which poses a significant risk to individual and public safety.

The following paper aims to better understand the role of smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms in facilitating a hospitable environment for IMVE narratives, messaging, and activity. In particular, the paper investigates the trajectory of violent discourse to understand how and why online users radicalize to violence. To investigate this trajectory, the research is guided by three questions: (1) How does the trajectory of violent discourse materialize on smaller, less-regulated social media platforms? (2) What is the level of user engagement (i.e., comments) with violent content inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremism? and, (3) How does user engagement impact the trajectory of violent discourse on the platform? By analyzing open-source information and data, this paper will help better understand the impact of violent discourse online, and, more precisely, the likelihood and/or probability that it will incite and inspire acts of real-world violence. Specifically, the research will identify the daily prevalence of hateful and violent rhetoric posted to a smaller-scale, less-regulated platform, known as 4chan,

\[1\] To note, this paper uses ‘smaller’ online platforms to refer to the company size – number of employees – and capacity – financial, technological, or human – to moderate the platform. In many cases, these platforms are start-ups operated by a single person or a small team of employees; this distinction is made in comparison to mainstream platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. The ‘smaller’ label is also based on the amount of daily and/or monthly user engagement on these platforms in comparison to the mainstream social media sites. For example, in 2021, 4chan received approximately 20 million unique monthly visitors and 900,000 posts daily. In comparison, Facebook received 2.91 billion active users monthly and 350 million posts daily.
and analyze user engagement. In doing so, the paper seeks to explore how an echo-chamber of violent discourse is constructed and fostered within this platform. Ultimately, research findings will help illustrate the risk of 4chan’s /pol/ board has on inspiring or inciting real-world acts of violence.

In what follows, the research paper will lay out a theoretical frame to understand radicalization to violence on a smaller-scale, less-regulated platform; analyze open-source information to identify quantitative and qualitative trends in posting behaviour and user engagement with ideologically motivated violent extremist content; and contribute findings to conceptualizing the trajectory of violent discourse on inciting real-world acts of violence.

CONCEPTS

To achieve the objective, the paper first explores and assesses a set of fundamental theories and frameworks on the impact social media platforms have on inspiring or inciting violence. The focus of this paper is ideologically motivated violent extremists posting activity and user engagement on a less-regulated social media platform. The paper uses ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) to define the types of harmful and hateful grievances posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board. IMVE aligns with new terminology adopted by the Government of Canada and other allies. In doing so, the paper acknowledges the recent shift away from ‘right-wing extremism’ in official terminology to define a range of hateful grievances and ensure the papers’ findings are applicable to domestic and international threat landscapes. The following section defines IMVE, establishing a baseline for investigating the research questions. The definition and understanding of IMVE lacks uniformity amongst academics; it is therefore essential to specify its meaning at the onset of the paper.

International governments developed the term ‘ideologically motivated violent extremism’ to encompass a range of specific ideological grievances that can lead to extreme and, in some cases, violent behaviour. This shift in terminology aims to avoid the stigmatization of certain communities impacted by violent extremism. In particular, the paper selected IMVE as the formal term to reference ideological grievances (commonly considered right-wing extremist grievances) inspiring or inciting violence due to political considerations. The politicization of the term right-wing extremism poses challenges in analyzing associated acts of violence in an objective manner. References to right-wing extremism are often misinterpreted or misconstrued to suggest political parties or individuals that hold conservative, right-leaning ideologies are motivators of violence and hate. As such, the term fosters political and social polarization, which can result in accusations of unjustly demonizing individuals supporting conservative, right-leaning tenets. Further, the increasing prevalence of acts of violence inspired by “left-wing” extremism demonstrates the growing complexity of grievances impacting national security. As such, IMVE appropriately captures the complexity of motivations inspiring violent extremism by encompassing the broad range of ideological grievances.

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2 Specifically, Australia and New Zealand both use ‘ideologically motivated violent extremism’ to encompass grievances typically associated to right-wing extremism; also, the United Kingdom uses a variation of ideologically motivated violent extremism.
Similarly, to academic, IMVE is driven by hatred and fear and can be inspired by numerous types of grievances, including, but not limited to anti-government and anti-law enforcement sentiment, advocacy of white nationalism and racial separation, antisemitism and Islamophobia, anti-immigration, male supremacy (misogyny) and homophobia (Public Threat Report, 2020: 8; Perry & Scrivens, 2018: 170). Extreme interpretations of these grievances can trigger some forms of violence, resulting in criminal behaviour, including acts of terrorism. However, it is important to note, that an extreme interpretation of racism or misogyny, for example, does not inevitably lead to violence. Research suggests that individuals who commit acts of violence represent a small fraction of any community.

This paper understands IMVE to be inspired by a range of grievances across an ideological spectrum that constructs narratives capable of inciting, inspiring or mobilizing violence (CSIS Public Report, 2020: 13), which include: white nationalism or supremacy; antisemitism; violent misogyny; anti-authority; anti-immigration; homophobia; and Islamophobia. To note, this paper also acknowledges individuals can hold extreme, but not violent, interpretations of the above grievances. An extreme, non-violent interpretation of these grievances is referred to as ideologically motivated extremism (IME). This paper acknowledges potential challenges in appropriately categorizing or capturing all types of ideological grievances inspiring acts of violence. For example, ‘jihadism’ is both an ideological and violent grievance but is not captured under the existing four categories of IMVE. Rather, jihadism is considered a form of religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE), given RMVE ideologies encourage individuals to perceive success or salvation (i.e., spiritually, or physically) as being achieved through violence. Therefore, there are important distinctions in categorizing certain grievances as IMVE.

Ultimately, the conceptualization of IMVE considers radicalization to be caused by a combination of ideas inspired by a variety of sources, such as literature, online discussions, videos, and visual content. As such, this conceptualization of IMVE relies heavily on online user activity and exposure to information inciting or supporting relevant grievances facilitating a radicalization and, in some cases, radicalization to violence process.

**CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF EXISTING LITERATURE**

Against the backdrop of an increasing threat of ideologically motivated violent extremism, this paper aims to contribute to an evidence base for radicalization and radicalization to violence on smaller-scale social media platforms. To begin, the analysis of literature distinguishes between radicalization and radicalization to violence. Radicalization is a process, by which the mind rationalizes personal and external events to justify a growing hatred rooted in ideological grievances (Dzhekova and Stoynova, 2016). Comparatively, radicalization to violence is a process whereby individuals participate in acts of violence motivated by extremist ideologies that challenge social, political, or cultural elements (Khosrokhavar, 2014). Individuals radicalized to violence perceive violent acts as justifiable means to an end, the only solution to their ideological grievance. These two processes can occur both offline and online.

For the purposes of this paper, the literature analysis focusses on online radicalization or radicalization to violence. The role of online platforms in the radicalization process is outlined by van der Valk and Wagenaar (2010) who indicates that the internet strengthens and accelerates
the indoctrination processes but cannot be presumed as a causal factor of radicalization. Rather, the online space facilitates friendships, relationships, and the sharing of ideologies and ideas, which are essential factors to driving the radicalization process. Online platforms also facilitate certain functions, such as communication, recruitment, or propaganda, by providing specific affordances to users. As such, the introduction of social media platforms markedly enhanced the ability for IMVE actors to mobilize ideological beliefs and leverage acts of real-world violence. Notably, several academics attribute IMVE actors’ high engagement within online spaces to user affordances, such as user anonymity (Dobratz, 2001; Manivannan, 2012, 2013; Nagle, 2017), a lack of online constraints (Hier, 2000), a low cost of using and organizing communication networks (Wellman, et al., 1996), and the ability to construct a like-minded (virtual) community (Adams & Roscigno, 2005). These affordances are particularly common on smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms, which presents an appealing online environment to target audiences sympathetic to ideological grievances.

EVIDENCE BASE OF SMALLER-SCALE PLATFORMS

To date, experts on violent extremist and terrorist use of the internet suggest that harmful actors use smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platforms to bypass content moderation policies that usually exists on mainstream platforms, thereby protecting their anonymity (Dobratz, 2001; Manivannan, 2012, 2013; Nagle, 2017). The absence of content moderation ensures users can publish and consume more hateful and violent content; in some cases, the content posted is illegal. However, there is minimal evidence to support the assertion that harmful actors use smaller-scale platforms due to the lack of content moderation enforcement. The platforms are also used by actors to post violent and graphic content pertaining to acts of real-world violence, such as manifestos or links to livestream attacks. Most notably, the platforms 4chan and 8kun (previously known as 8chan) are popular online communities for harmful and violent activity. Academic literature on the violent culture of these platforms is scarce and lacks ethnographic insight. This thesis is an attempt to fill this particular gap in the literature.

Use of Smaller-Scale Platforms. Most of the research investigates violent extremists’ use of larger-scale, mainstream social media, such as Facebook (Ekman, 2018; Magdy et al., 2016; Nouri and Lorenzo-Dus, 2018; Stier et al., 2017), Twitter (Berger, 2016; Berger and Strathearn, 2013; Burnap and Williams, 2015; Graham, 2016), and YouTube (e.g., Ekman, 2014; O’Callaghan et al., 2014). A consensus has emerged that engagement on more mainstream platforms increases user exposure to extreme and hateful content to a broader audience and, therefore, is an effective tool for initial recruitment or information sharing. Some studies of mainstream platforms identify harmful actors that post information that ultimately leads users to smaller-scale, homogenized online forums, such as 4chan, 8kun, or Reddit. However, the existing research fails to investigate the impact of exposure to these homogenized online environments has on the radicalization and radicalization to violence processes. These alternative online “hubs” are less regulated and, therefore, primed for users to participate in hateful and violent discourse. This suggests a higher probability of radicalization and radicalization to violence attributed to these platforms given habitual exposure to more graphic and hateful

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3 The use of the smaller, less-regulated “fringe” platforms (4chan and 8chan) in the real-world ideologically motivated violent extremist attacks is explored in the Chapter II: Environmental Scan of Impact of Smaller, Less-Regulated Platforms on Real-World Violence.
content. The limited amount of empirical evidence to support such assertions presents a significant knowledge gap for understanding the impact of social media violence on users’ radicalization processes.

**Propagation of Hate.** Limited examples of research investigating the use and impact of 4chan on perpetuating hate and violence exist. Manivannan (2012) conducted ethnographic studies of 4chan that concluded the platforms “unique interface and culture” is dependent on “synchronicity, anonymity, and ephemerality.” Knuttila (2011) also conducted a study of 4chan’s /b/ board finding the platform is “a simple message board and a complex community”, relying heavily on anonymity and contingency. Manivannan (2013) and Knuttila (2011) identify anonymity is an appealing user affordance for violent extremists and facilitates an increased willingness to actively participate in violent discourse online. However, this research does not consider the impact of content moderation policies in facilitating hateful and violent discourse or activity within the online communities. This is an important consideration for understanding the trajectory of violence within smaller-scale online platforms given that most of these platforms are less regulated. Smaller-scale platforms often lack the financial, technological, and human resources required to conduct and enforce effective content moderation. In some instances, these smaller-scale platforms were created for the purpose of bypassing content moderation policies on other more mainstream platforms, such as Stormfront, Telegram, 4chan, and 8kun. Therefore, the lack of critical analysis of content moderation policies and their impact on fostering hate and violence online is a notable criticism of existing research.

**Prevalence of Hate.** Research further observes the pervasiveness of hateful rhetoric inspired by a range of ideological grievances on smaller-scale platforms. Manivannan (2012) asserts 4chan users struggle for “narrative control among manifold narratives competing for dominance” which suggests a high prevalence of grievances circulating within the online forum, thereby increasing user exposure to hate. Another study investigating violent misogyny on 4chan’s Random /b/ board illustrated that “anti-normative, egregious, and abusive dialogue” is encouraged within the online forum (Manivannan 2013:114), which can suggest 4chan users are proponents or supporters of hateful rhetoric. Knuttila (2011) suggested 4chan encourages “otherness, dissent, creativity, variation and plurality” that presents considerable risk of “political and ethical” consequences. Knuttila also confirms 4chan’s membership is comprised of individuals holding extreme interpretations and perceptions of reality but lacks “cohesion” in the online discourse amongst users (Knuttila, 2011), suggesting variance in the ideological grievances expressed on 4chan. Hine et al (2017) conducted a quantitative study of 4chan’s /pol/ board (“politically incorrect”) to analyze harassment and hate speech on the imageboard. The study determines /pol/ board users are geographically diverse and that there is a high prevalence of hate speech on the board itself. Zannettou et al (2018) also conducted a quantitative and comparative analysis of 4chan that determined a high prevalence of racist memes on the board. Lastly, Crawford et al (2020) conduct quantitative and ethnographic research across several Chan sites and boards to highlight how memetic irony promotes violence within Chan cultures. Their study concluded that “several [chan] boards appear to be facilitating the ‘in-group’ status centered around the shared consumption of extremist content” (2020: 5). Their study also suggests that the “modern pop-cultural aesthetics” of memes attracts youth and makes them increasingly more tolerant of violent extremist ideologies (2020:5). Ultimately, these studies help confirm that 4chan is a popular online hub for hateful and extremist discourse.
However, much of this research fails to analyze user engagement with the hateful and extreme content posted to 4chan or other smaller-scale platforms. The high prevalence of hate reasonably suggests users are exposed to extreme and hateful content; however, it does not provide evidence to outline how users engage with such content. For example, do users actively participate in conversations inspired by the content (i.e., comment or reply to a thread)? What is the level of user engagement with the hateful content (i.e., number of replies)? These are important considerations to understanding the impact of exposure to hateful rhetoric online and its resonance amongst 4chan users. Additionally, existing research only identifies a high prevalence of hateful and extreme content posted to smaller-scale platforms. These studies do not investigate or analyze the prevalence of violent content inspired by hateful and extreme grievances. This distinction is essential for understanding the risk posed by online engagement in smaller-scale platforms on the radicalization to violence process.

**Forms of Expressing Hate.** Increasingly, visual content is popular amongst IMVE actors as a form of spreading propaganda and promoting violence (Crawford et al., 2020). Research suggests IMVE memes express comedic and benign sentiments (Milner, 2013) and, as such, present minimal risk to radicalization to the average online user. However, users exposed to violent extremist grievances, literature, communities, or cultures are more likely to understand underlying humor or messaging in comedic and benign content (Lamerichs et al., 2018). As a result, the benign and comedic content poses a risk to radicalizing users in IMVE online hubs and, potentially, of inspiring violent engagement as a result. Based on these findings, Crawford et al. (2020) indicate that racial stereotypes are made more salient through the dissemination of memes, which indirectly strengthens the conviction of an individual’s belief system. Furthermore, Prisk (2017) suggests that memes convey IMVE norms to users and, by extension, helps weave and strengthen the cultural fabric of an online community.

Research findings indicate visual images and image-based memes can influence the radicalization to violence process by fostering the desensitization of individuals (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1965; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007; Huesmann, Moise, Podolski & Eron, 2003). Specifically, Nagle (2017) suggests memes contribute to the “online politics of transgression”, which hypothesizes that offensive content possesses countercultural value (Nagle, 2017: 20; Crawford et al., 2020: 12). The concept suggests individuals are drawn to extremist groups due to a promise of transgression, which is perceived as enjoyment or amusement for individuals. It encourages individuals to disregard the emotional, social, or mental impact of their behavior or words on others; acting cruel is considered humorous and fun (Nagle 2013). As such, Nagle (2013) suggests the comedic nature of memes promotes the normality of violence against an “out-group”, which results in desensitization to violence. Further, research indicates online users who have membership in IMVE online communities improve their status and legitimacy by posting explicit and graphic images (Hodge and Hallgrimsdottir, 2019). This further illustrates the countercultural value of memes that promote hate and violence within IMVE online communities; hateful or graphic memes earn their posters recognition. Ultimately, the current state of the academic literature suggests textual and visual content contributes to an online environment capable of escalating hateful and violent discourse. However, to date, research inadequately identifies how the trajectory of violent discourse materializes on social media platforms.
KNOWLEDGE GAP

To summarize, the analysis of this literature shows there is less research on smaller-scale, lightly regulated platforms that might facilitate IMVE violence. In particular, the current state of academic research does not include quantitative data or empirical analysis of the effects the prevalence of, and exposure to, IMVE on these platforms might have on users. In response, this thesis argues that it is near impossible to adequately define or conceptualize the threat posed by the exploitation of smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms without providing robust empirical analysis. In particular, a general lack of understanding the daily content environment of smaller-scale platforms, like 4chan, limits our ability to understand the likelihood and severity of users’ desensitization to and normalization of violence. Additionally, minimal research analyzes user engagement with harmful content, which is a fundamental factor to understanding the progression of violent discourse from hate to violence on social media platforms. Therefore, a significant research gap is understanding the trajectory of violent discourse within online spaces and how user engagement impacts the radicalization to violence process. As such, this paper will seek to address these problems and limitations by conducting quantitative analysis of the prevalence of, and user engagement with, violent content on 4chan.

The analysis of literature also observed limited instances of ethnographic research, apart from Crawford et al. (2020), of smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms. In particular, the current evidence base investigates the prevalence of hateful rhetoric on social media platforms, including, in limited instances, smaller-scale platforms. The absence of ethnographic analysis of violence on smaller-scale platforms is a notable knowledge gap. Observation of the culture of smaller-scale platforms that are popular amongst ideologically motivated extremists is essential to understanding the type of community formed online (i.e., homogenized vs. divisive communities) and its impact on users. In response, this thesis aims to understand the violent culture on a smaller-scale platform and its impact on developing like-minded online communities by conducting ethnographic research of 4chan’s /pol/ board. The ethnographic research, alongside robust empirical analysis, will provide important findings to understand the prevalence of online violent discourse and the culture such content creates. In doing so, the research will contribute to the evidence base by proposing the risks posed by user engagement within smaller-scale platforms that are popular amongst violent extremists.

By extension, the current literature acknowledges the role social media platforms have in facilitating radicalization, referring to the adoption of extreme ideological beliefs. However, there is limited data to understand how social media platforms, specifically smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms, facilitate a radicalization to violence process. Radicalization does not inherently trigger violent engagement, and, therefore, research should investigate the impact of online platforms in promoting violent discourse or activity. Distinguishing between radicalization and radicalization to violence can assist researchers investigate the impact and effect of social media on IMVE actors. As such, this paper aims to better understand the radicalization to violence process on smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms and address this knowledge gap. In doing so, it contributes to the evidence base on online radicalization to violence, with a specific focus on empirically exploring smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms.
In particular, the above critical analysis of the literature identified several notable knowledge gaps requiring further investigation, including: (1) impact analysis of smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platforms on the normalization of hate and violence; (2) empirical and ethnographic analysis of ideologically motivated violent extremist content and user engagement with violent content; and (3) analysis of the impact real-world attacks have on an online communities’ progression of hateful discourse to violent discourse and acceptance of violence.

CHAPTER II: Environmental Scan of Smaller-Scale, Less-Regulated Platforms & Real-World Violence
EVIDENCE OF VIOLENCE INSPIRED BY EXPOSURE & ENGAGEMENT ON SMALLER-SCALE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Within the context of this paper, the environmental scan outlines the potential real-world threat posed by users’ exposure to hateful and violent content on smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms. The following section analyzes real-world cases of individuals exploiting smaller, less-regulated platforms to spread graphic and violent content inspired by IMVE grievances. The case studies are: (1) the Christchurch attack; (2) the Poway Synagogue and Escondido Mosque fire; (3) the El Paso shooting; and (4) the Bærum Mosque shooting. The environmental scan outlines each act of violence and demonstrates how social media platforms were exploited to inspire and incite violence. Ultimately, it highlights the interdependent relationship between the online space and violence, specifically how violent discourse and behaviour online can materialize into real-world violence.

THE CHRISTCHURCH ATTACK

On March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old male, carried out two mass-shootings targeting mosques, during Friday Prayer, in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people and injuring 49 others (Gelineau & Gambrell, 2019). Before the attack, Tarrant shared links to a self-authored manifesto titled “The Great Replacement”, articulating a variety of “white genocide” ideas and conspiracy theories, and claiming his mass-murder of Muslims prevents the “invaders” from outbreeding the white race (Evans, 2019). The manifesto expressed white nationalist and anti-immigration grievances by noting that white individuals of European descent are superior to people of other races and, therefore, rightfully can exert their dominance (Newkirk, 2017). The manifesto also referenced neo-Nazi symbols associated to IMVE, such as the Black Sun and Odin’s Cross (Lorenz, 2019; Evans, 2019).

The manifesto was disseminated by emailing links to more than 30 recipients, including several media outlets, and on Twitter and 8chan (Lorenz, 2019; Evans, 2019). The posting activity demonstrated an active and organized effort to share the manifesto with a broad range of online users. Tarrant selected a mainstream social media platform, Twitter, to ensure a wide reach in the audience types exposed to the violent content. It also ensured maximum viewership of the livestream and exposure to the manifesto. The smaller-scale, less-regulated platform, 8chan, ensured the content’s survival and relevancy amongst likeminded individuals. 8chan enforces minimal content moderation and, therefore, violent, and hateful content survives on the platform. It is also a popular platform for IMVE actors to communicate and engage with other like-minded individuals.

**Textual Content.** Brenton Tarrant also posted to 8chan’s /pol/ boards claiming, “time to stop shitposting and time to make a real-life effort” (Evans, 2019). The online post can read as a call to action by encouraging online users to spread his message to a broader base and incite acts of violence. Violence is encouraged by Tarrant’s statement: “If I don’t survive the attack, goodbye, godbless and I will see you all in Valhalla.” The term ‘Valhalla’ refers to the hall of the slain.

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4 It is important to note that Brenton Tarrant does not identify as a Nazi, but rather calls himself an “ethno-nationalist”, “eco-fascist”, and a “kebab removal” (Lorenz, 2019).
ruled by the god Odin, in which warriors killed in combat defending Asgard and its people travel to when they die (Kim, 2019). Membership to Valhalla is only granted to warriors who died in combat protecting their community and principles (Kim, 2019). To Tarrant, the Christchurch attack qualifies as a battle to gain membership into Valhalla and, as such, the statement “I will see you all in Valhalla” is an encouragement to others to carry out similar attacks inspired by anti-immigration, anti-Muslim or white supremacist grievances. As such, the paper reasonably considers the statement as an encouragement to other users to take steps to join the masses of slain warriors in the afterlife.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Brenton Tarrant’s post on 8chan prior to Christchurch attack (retrieved from Evans, 2019)

Visual Content (Video). Tarrant also posted a Facebook Live link to livestream the shooting on Twitter and 8chan. The attack was live streamed for 17 minutes until its detection and removal from the platform (Timberg et al., 2019). Hours after the attack, online users were uploading the livestream footage to YouTube and other online platforms, resulting in the footage’s virality. Members of online communities, specifically 8chan, were encouraging others to download the video before platforms could remove the content (Timberg et al., 2019). By the afternoon, individuals had edited the video to depict the fatal attacks as a video game, in which YouTube personalities were live streaming and providing commentary (Timberg et al., 2019). Several of these edited videos were named after quotes attributed to Tarrant, such as “Let’s get this party started” (Timberg et al., 2019).

RESPONSE & RIPPLE EFFECT

In the aftermath of the attack, 8chan members found levity and support in the choice of music that was played through the live streaming of the massacre. The music selection was a song called “Remove Kebab,” which was well-known amongst IMVE actors in online communities (Lorenz, 2019; Evans, 2019). Members of the 8chan /pol/ board provided statements, such as “HAHAHA HA PLAYED REMOVE KEBAB EN ROUTE! I’M DYIN’ OVER HERE!”

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5 The term ‘Valhalla’ originates in Norse mythology. The mythological term is referenced by an IMVE group called the ‘Soldiers of Odin,’ which espouses hatred and fear of immigrants and, in particular, Muslims (Kim, 2019). The anti-immigration organization aims to function as a vigilante group tasked with eliminating “Islamist intruders” and protecting communities against visible minorities.

6 The song originated in a propaganda music video made by Serb Army soldiers, as a tribute to the war criminal Radovan Karadižić (Lorenz, 2019; Evans, 2019).
(Evans, 2019). Tarrant purposefully made references to memes and music that would resonate with individuals with a proclivity for IMVE; he played to a targeted audience. The ability for online users to find humour in these references illustrate the effectiveness of Tarrant’s strategy of appealing to his intended audience.

**Figure 2**: Screenshot of 8chan /pol/ board member praising Brenton Tarrant (retrieved from Evans, 2019)

Brenton Tarrant was considered a saint to IMVE actors, with several anonymous users posting that “finally” one of their own had actually “done something” (Putrill, 2019). For example, six of the top seven 8chan boards or message rooms pertained to the massacre, including one called “Brenton Tarrant appreciation station” (Putrill, 2019). The demonstration of support and affirmation of the Christchurch attack is an indicator that violence was being considered a viable means to an end. In other words, the online response to the attack suggests that group radicalization processes have seemingly progressed to a point where individuals perceive violent acts as the solution to the crisis posed by out-groups (Berger, 2018; Beam, 1983). Additionally, individuals functioning within the online space could observe Tarrant’s popularity and praise for his attack, and seek a similar legacy as a “hero”. Accordingly, adherents to similar ideological grievances could perceive violence as a justifiable means to achieving the type of legacy Tarrant supposedly achieved.

**INCITEMENT AND INSPIRATION OF REAL-WORLD ACTS OF VIOLENCE**

**Poway Synagogue.** On April 27, 2019, John T. Earnest, a 19-year-old male, fired shots inside the Chabad of Poway Synagogue in Poway, California, killing one person and injuring three others (Paul & Mettler, 2019). Earnest also claimed responsibility for a previous mosque fire in Escondido, California (Collins & Blanstein, 2019). Prior to the attacks, Earnest published an antisemitic letter on 8chan’s /pol/ board stating the Jewish population had “meticulously planned genocide of the European race” (Paul & Mettler, 2019). The letter also expressed a common white supremacist conspiracy theory claiming that the white race faces the risk of genocide. Earnest also praises the actions of Brenton Tarrant and cites the Christchurch attack and its associated manifesto as the inspiration for the shooting (Paul & Mettler, 2019).

**El Paso shooting.** On August 3, 2019, Patrick Crusius, a 21-year-old male, killed 22 people and injured 24 others in a mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas (Lin, 2019). In a manifesto posted to 8chan’s /pol/ board, Crusius expressed support for Tarrant and attributes his own
inspiration to the Christchurch mosque shootings (Blankstein & Burke, 2019). Crusius’ manifesto, titled *The Inconvenient Truth*, cited similar grievances to the motivations of the Christchurch attack, such as “cultural and ethnic replacement”, “environmental degradation”, and “Hispanic invasion” (Blankstein & Burke, 2019).

**Bærum Mosque Shooting.** On August 10, 2019, Philip Manshaus, a 21-year-old male, attacked a mosque in Bærum, Norway, injuring one person (“Norway mosque shooting”, 2019). Manshaus attempted to livestream the shooting on Facebook, drawing his inspiration from Tarrant (Burke, 2019). Following the attack, Manshaus posted a statement to the online forum ‘EndChan’ – a copycat image board of 4chan and 8chan – stating “well cobbers it’s my time, i was elected by saint tarrant after all”. Through subsequent online messages and posts, this thesis paper reasonably infers that Manshaus was inspired to carry out a violent attack based on the actions of Brenton Tarrant.

**CONTEXTUALIZATION**

The series of IMVE-motivated acts of violence portrayed here relied on smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platforms as the primary source of exposure to inspirational content. In particular, the image board, 8chan, was the preferred platform for each perpetrator to post manifests, livestream links and other related content. This observation could suggest 8chan’s/pol/ board has a high membership of IMVE users and, therefore, was selected as the primary vehicle for disseminating violent content. Additionally, the colloquial and cordial language used by perpetrators of each attack in posts to 8chan, such as “…It’s been a long ride and despite all your rampant faggotry, fecklessness and degeneracy, you are all top blokes and the best bunch of cobblers a man could ask for…” suggests familiarity with members of the online forum. The language used implies that the perpetrators were active members of 8chan’s/pol/ board before conducting their attacks. The paper accordingly infers the platform’s popularity amongst IMVE actors.

The role of 8chan in inciting and inspiring violence in these cases makes it an ideal environment to conduct the proposed research project. However, in August 2019, 8chan was shut down following reports of its role in facilitating the El Paso shooting by allowing users to publish content that encourages others to carry out acts of violence. In November 2019, the platform was rebranded as 8kun and obtained new service providers to put it back online. However, 8kun is only accessible on the dark web, which means users need to use a software, such as Tor, to browse the internet anonymously and reach unindexed websites. This creates an obstacle to accessing the platform, which likely prevents users from entering/joining it. In addition, 8kun does not have a politically incorrect (/pol/) board, which had been the primary community used by IMVE actors to post content.

Following the takedown of 8chan, users migrated to the social media platform 4chan and other smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platforms, such as Telegram and EndChan. Specifically, 4chan experienced an uptake in user activity likely due to similarities to 8chan’s platform design and user affordances. Both platforms are image boards that do not require user profiles and, therefore, ensures user anonymity. Given the platform similarities, this paper uses

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7 The attempt to livestream the shooting in real-time was unsuccessful and, as a result, the attack was not publicized on open networks.
4chan’s /pol/ board as the platform to conduct ethnographic and qualitative research, including data collection, to better understand the trajectory of violent discourse and the process of radicalization to violence.

To summarize, the environmental scan builds the foundation for this paper: user engagement and membership in smaller-scale, less-regulated online communities have demonstrated a real-world impact in facilitating acts of violence. The scan confirms that online communities (i.e., 8chan and 4chan) are exploited by harmful actors to share hateful and violent information as means to inspire or incite future and subsequent acts of violence. As demonstrated by the ripple-effect in violent acts inspired by the Christchurch attack, these harmful actors are successful in achieving their objective to motivate real-world violence. However, to date, there is a lack of understanding of how and why individuals radicalize to violence within these online communities. The following research methodology establishes a framework to address this gap in understanding.

CHAPTER III: Research Project Development

DATA COLLECTION APPROACH

The environmental scan identified key questions regarding user engagement on smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms and its impact on real-world violence. In particular, the following paper
is guided by the research questions: How does the trajectory of violent discourse manifest itself on a smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platform? Specifically, what is the level of user engagement (i.e., comments and likes) with violent content that espouses ideologically motivated violent extremist grievances? To answer these questions, qualitative data was collected from the social media platform, 4chan, on its /pol/ board.

The study hypothesizes that violent content inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) will attract higher user engagement, thereby fostering increasingly violent discourse on smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms. The reason is that habitual exposure to and engagement with violent content desensitizes users to violence, which can increase their willingness to participate in violent discourse. The study deployed qualitative data collection methods and created four unique datasets designed to produce findings to support or disprove the hypothesis. Each unique dataset is designed to collect information to better understand the impact and trajectory of violent discourse. Given the complexity of the issue – identifying the trajectory of violent discourse – there are several individual factors required to give an accurate image of 4chan’s /pol/ board environment. Below I outline the qualitative methods, including the four datasets, used to answer the research questions.

**DATA COLLECTION**

The study deploys qualitative data methods across 4chan’s /pol/ board to determine the trajectory of violent discourse. 4chan is a popular hub for IMVE actors to communicate, socialize and be exposed to violent content. In particular, the online platform is easily accessible by means of the internet and does not require membership (i.e., user profile or engagement history) to participate in the online community. As such, 4chan is an overt and publicly available source for information. Therefore, the paper uses open-source material to establish, assess, and examine the trajectory of violent discourse and the impact on radicalization to violence. Specifically, the study focused on content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board between September 8, 2021, and October 8, 2021.

**4CHAN**

4chan is an anonymous image board, in which users create new threads by posting content that includes both an image and text. The platform’s primary form of user engagement is to reply to an original post and/or user comment. A user can select a specific imageboard to post content based on their interests, such as the /pol/ (politically incorrect) board, the /k/ (weapons) boards, technology board, or international board. Other users can respond to the original post with either textual content or images, including referring to previous posts by directly replying to a comment or quoting portions of the post. For example, a user can select grievances, language, or comments in the original post or replies to respond to by quoting the post; the quoted content appears in green text. The social media platform is unique as users cannot share or like content. The platform provides unique features that benefit users and supports the spread of violence within its online communities, such as anonymity and ephemerality (Hine et al., 2017).

8 The paper acknowledges the ethical concerns and implications for research regarding ‘open-source intelligence’ or ‘publicly available’ data on social media platforms. The paper discusses the specific implications in the ‘ethnography’ section of this chapter.
Users do not require an account to read or write posts on 4chan’s image boards. As such, 4chan’s /pol/ board users do not require usernames to post or reply to content on the imageboard, which protects user anonymity. The platform does utilize tripcodes, which are hashes of user-supplied passwords that link threads from the same user (Hine et al, 2017: 2). The /pol/ board utilizes poster IDs (identity and/or identification), in which each user receives a unique 8-digit code that appears along with their post in a specific thread (Hine et al, 2017:2). These codes are not reused in other threads on the same board. The poster IDs use a combination of cookies and IP tracking, as illustrated in the example below, to create the 8-digit code unique to each user (Hine et al., 2017: 2). The poster IDs allow users to identify content posted by a single user in a specific thread (i.e., several user replies in one thread) but cannot identify the user in other threads on the same imageboard. The goal of the poster IDs is to protect user anonymity.

Figure 3: Example of a poster ID (8 digits in blue circle)

Additionally, 4chan image boards provide ephemerality (Hine et al., 2017: 2), which ensures the impermanence of threads created on the social media platform. The user affordance of ephemerality provides assurance that hateful and/or violent content will be removed after a short period of time. As such, the posted content cannot be detected or traced to a specific user. Specifically, the threads are removed following a “bumping system” (Hine et al., 2017: 2), which guarantees that most recent threads or posts appear first on the image board and the least recent is removed when a new thread is published. A post in a thread, such as a user commenting on the original content, keeps the thread visible by bumping it up to the top of the image board (Hine et al., 2017: 2). However, to prevent a thread from never being removed, 4chan implements a bump and image limits system, which ensures the removal of content based on the number of bumps it receives or images posted (Hine et al., 2017: 2). For example, once a board-specific threshold for the number of times a post was bumped or had images posted to it, the content is no longer moved to the top of the imageboard resulting in its removal from the platform. An archive system was implemented for certain boards, including the /pol/ board, in which a thread is archived for a short period of time (seven days) to ensure users can still have access to its content (Manivannan, 2012). It is important to note that the bumping system enforced by 4chan presents challenges for data collection and analysis because the image board is constantly updating and deleting content.

Lastly, 4chan does not enforce stringent content moderation policies, which results in a high prevalence of hate, racism, and violence on the platform. The platform employs ‘janitors’ to serve as content moderators for each 4chan image board. The ‘janitors’ are volunteer content moderators, which means the image boards are only monitored recreationally and intermittently. As such, the content moderators rarely identify and remove harmful content (i.e., overly violent, or gruesome). In the absence of formal and clear community guidelines, content moderation and enforcement decisions on 4chan are also heavily subjective. Specifically, image board users often criticize ‘janitors’ for subjective content flagging and removals; users claim content moderators only remove personally offensive content. However, despite 4chan’s /pol/ board...
mechanisms for content moderation, a large quantity of hateful and violent content circulates the online platform. The high prevalence of hateful and violent content suggests users accept this content and do not report it to content ‘janitors’. Alternatively, the high prevalence of harmful content suggests content moderators themselves have a proclivity for violence and hate. Ultimately, 4chan’s weak content moderation constructs a safe haven for IMVE actors. As such, online users migrate to 4chan creating an increasingly hateful and violent community on the platform.

Ultimately, the paper selected 4chan as the source of data based on its particular user affordances and functionalities that foster violence and hate. Moreover, 4chan’s /pol/ board demonstrated significant links to real-world acts of violence, as identified in the Environmental Scan of this paper.

**ETHNOGRAPHY**

Acknowledging the lack of ethnographic analysis of 4chan, this study pursued an experiential approach of observing or “lurking” on the targeted platform and associated /pol/ board. Observing the platform ensures accuracy in understanding the culture of 4chan’s /pol/ board community, including the technical specificities of the 4chan platform as it provides unique user offerings. Ethnographic observation is essential to this study because the language and culture of 4chan is uniquely designed to be inaccessible to new users. By observing the online community, the study was able to better understand the nuanced social norms and practices on each platform, and by extension, provide a more accurate analysis of the data.

The ethnographic research did not require or result in any engagement (i.e., communication) with other online users. All data collected remains in its original form; nor was it influenced by communicating or posting on the image boards itself. In other words, the study did not post or create any content on the /pol/ board, nor did it comment on any threads. Further, all content observed and collected was acquired from open sources, which means the content is itself accessible to any online user engaging on 4chan’s /pol/ board. As such, this research study did not seek membership into private or secure online communities. Finally, because 4chan does not require the creation of a user account to observe activity on the /pol/ board, this study did not require the creation of a false account in order to obtain and retrieve data. To note, the research study acknowledges, and is mindful of, the complexity of social data collection, research ethics, and the ethical research practices of the individual conducting the study for the purposes of this paper. In particular, the paper acknowledges 4chan’s /pol/ board users did not post content with the expectation of it being harvested for research purposes. Further, the content is being reproduced in the paper without seeking informed consent by the original poster. Careful consideration was given to these complexities. However, 4chan’s /pol/ board does not provide any personal identifiable information of a user and the harvesting and publication of posts does not violate their terms of services.

The study also utilized several reference resources to better understand the language, images, and culture of online forums. In particular, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) “Hate on Display Hate Symbols Database” was routinely consulted to identify and understand the contextual meaning behind references in posts and comments. Founded in 1913, the ADL is a leading anti-
hate organization tasked with addressing the escalating climate of antisemitism and bigotry. Today, the ADL fights all forms of hate by developing education programs and training law enforcement to address emerging threats. The “Hate on Display Hate Symbols Database” was developed to provide an overview of the symbols most frequently used by a variety of white supremacist groups and movements, as well as other types of hate groups. The database is routinely updated and depicts the symbols as extremists use them, such as on signs and clothing, graffiti, and jewelry, and on bodies as tattoos or brands. The database was a useful resource for interpreting and contextualizing the images and references made on the social media platform.

A second resource was an online database of memes and viral phenomena called “Know Your Meme”. The site was founded in 2008 with the purpose of researching and documenting Internet memes and viral phenomena. The platform contains a large database of memes and associated descriptions of the contents origins and context. The information on memes is compiled by independent researchers, editorial staff, and community members. The database was a useful supplementary resource and improved the contextual understanding of popular memes used by IMVE supporters.

**QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION**

To ensure consistency, the data was collected daily, for a 30-day period, between 16:00 to 20:00. This four-hour timeframe for data collection ensured high quantities of content for subsequent observation and analysis. In particular, the specific timeframe was selected to ensure that most user content would be posted and receive high levels of engagement. On average, research suggests social media use is highest between 9:00 to 14:00. Therefore, the study collected data after 14:00 to ensure more user content was available for collection, and a more accurate representation of the online /pol/ board environment was evident. This timeframe also aligned well with less content movement in 4chan’s bumping system, and higher levels of user engagement.

To confirm trends in user activity on 4chan, the paper consulted an online measurement tool for user engagement and activity, known as 4stats.io. The measurement tool collects data on user engagement for a range of social media platforms, including 4chan, and analyzes it by variables, such as day, time, month, or year. The tool provides the option for users to view platform-specific data, such as statistics and trends on user activity on 4chan’s /pol/ board. For example, the data indicated user activity and engagement on /pol/ board steadily grows from 9:00 AM and peaks, on average, by 17:00 PM. Based on this information, the study determined that the ideal window for data collection, considering the timeframe for peek user engagement, would be between 16:00 to 20:00. The time for data collection, including 30-days and timeframe, served as constant variables throughout the study.

**Figure 4:** Illustrates peak times for 4chan’s /pol/ board user activity for a 7-day period

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9 Chart produced by an online data collection and analysis tool for social media platforms: https://socialmediadata.com/best-times-to-post-on-social-media-in-2021/

10 Illustrates 4chan’s /pol/ board user activity for a 7-day period with peak times being: November 1 at 5:00 PM; November 2 at 5:00 PM; November 3 at 3:00 PM; November 4 at 5:00 PM; November 5 at 3:00 PM; November 6 at 4:00 PM; and November 7 at 12:00 PM.
Lastly, the study used a qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, to collect, store and organize the open-source data. The qualitative analysis software supported importing data from social media platforms, categorizing the data based on specific variables, and conducting analysis with visualization tools. The software downloaded a web browser extension allowing users to capture content quickly and easily, such as web pages, online pdfs, and posts to social media platforms. The NCapture extension stored an image of posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board, reflecting all comments and images posted to the specific thread. The storage of data in its original form allowed the study to revisit and analyze data following the data collection period. Ultimately, the ability to centralize all collected data over the course of 30 days was an essential element to the qualitative analysis of this study.

**DATASET 1: Prevalence of IME and IMVE content**

The first dataset illustrates the relative prevalence of ideologically motivated extremism (IME) and ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) on 4chan’s /pol/ board. To note, IME and IMVE are inspired by the same ideological grievances. The difference is that IME grievances materialize into hateful content, whereas IMVE materializes into violent content. The analysis considered references to one or more of the following ideological grievances to be IME or IMVE content: anti-authority, white nationalism or supremacy, antisemitism, anti-immigration, violent misogyny, and homophobia.

The dataset also identifies any type of violent content, regardless of whether it espouses IMVE grievances, posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board to accurately understand the amount of violent content to which users are exposed. This process was conducted in tandem while developing dataset 3 ‘references to violence.’ The dataset will help contextualize the impact of exposure to harmful online content on the radicalization to violence process. The data collected in the prevalence dataset illustrates the whole data sample for this project.

**DATASET 2: Grievances**

The second dataset identifies and assesses the relative prevalence of IME and IMVE motivations inspiring the content. All collected data is categorized by a relevant motivating grievance.
Specifically, based on the paper’s definition of IMVE, this study identified the following categories for relevant grievances:¹¹

1. **Anti-Authority:** The dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against the authority of the State.

2. **White Nationalism or Supremacy:** The dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against visible racial minorities. In particular, the grievance espouses the inferiority of individuals belonging to racial minorities. Notable examples of violence inspired by white nationalist or supremacist groups include Ku Klux Klan, neo-Confederate, neo-Nazi, racist Skinhead and Christian Identity.

3. **Antisemitism:** The dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against people who are Jewish.

4. **Islamophobia:** The dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against Muslims, including people who are perceived to be Muslim, and a fear or dislike of Islamic culture and Islam religion.

5. **Anti-Immigration:** The dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against people who are of immigrant origin, transnational or outside the dominant national identity or culture. It is important to note, for the purpose of this paper, other related sentiments and/or ideological grievances will include xenophobia, which illustrates a fear to anyone or anything that is perceived to be foreign or strange.

6. **Violent Misogyny:** The dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women, which can lead to violent discourse (including the incitement of rape). The violence is considered a response to fears of white men losing power in an evolving, multicultural landscape.

7. **Homophobia:** The dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and/or asexual, based on the belief that heterosexuality is the norm. This term often refers to a fear of anyone or anything that is perceived as part of the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ2+) community.

**DATASET 3: References to violence**

¹¹ The definitions of each ideologically motivated violent extremism grievances are based on Anti-Defamation League (ADL) interpretations of each grievance and/or ideology.
Following the identification of the grievance, the content was further categorized as violent (IMVE) or non-violent (IME) to determine the prevalence of violent discourse on 4chan’s /pol/ board. The classification of violence was determined on the basis of the following criteria:

1. **People:** The ‘people’ criteria refer to a post referencing notable IMVE leaders or members that have publicly incited violence, and/or notable individuals who carried out real-world acts of violence. For this study, examples of reference to individuals that would be considered ‘violent’ could include Tarrant (the perpetrator of Christchurch Attack), Elliot Rodgers (notable incel attacker), or Crusius (El Paso shooting). The references to individuals can be reasonably interpreted as violent discourse given their connections to real-world acts of violence.

2. **Event:** The ‘event’ criteria refer to a post referencing an act of real-world violence inspired by IMVE. For this study, an example of an ‘event’ could include the Christchurch attack, the Poway Synagogue shooting or the El Paso shooting. A post containing references to violent events inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremism would be reasonably interpreted as violent discourse.

3. **Language or Image:** The ‘language’ criteria refer to terminology that describes, promotes, and/or incites violence. Specifically, the language could refer to the graphic description of acts of violence against specific individuals or groups of people. Alternatively, the language could refer to the use of gamified terminology or statements about acts of violence, such as “beating a high score” or “increasing the body count”. This type of language perpetuates violence within online communities and has been linked to real-world acts of violence. Therefore, it is reasonable to interpret such language in posts as violent.

The “image” criteria include any visual depiction of violence, such as physical or sexual assaults, the use of weapons, or injuries left by an assault. Any graphic image that glorifies and/or depicts an act of violence would be included under this category.

4. **Literature:** The ‘literature’ criteria refer to posts referencing notable pieces of IMVE literature that outlines, promotes, or incites violence. For this paper, the literature references could include books that describe IMVE ideologies or movements (i.e., *The Great Replacement* or *Turner Diaries*) or manifestos, written by perpetrators of violent attacks (i.e., *My Twisted World*). These pieces of literature often serve as a source of inspiration for acts of violence against others and, therefore, it is reasonable to interpret references in posts as violent by nature.

5. **Other:** The ‘other’ criteria refer to posts that convey sentiments of violence, which is not encompassed in the above categories.

**DATASET 4: Engagement**
The fourth unique dataset identifies user engagement with non-violent and violent content. The analysis will categorize content based on the level of user engagement as determined by the number of replies in a thread. The dataset’s objective is to illustrate how users respond to violent content compared to non-violent content. For example, the dataset will make it possible to see whether violent content results in higher levels of user engagement and to determine the willingness of 4chan users to participate in violent discourse.

The categorization of content based on the number of user replies in a thread illustrates how violent content resonates in 4chan’s /pol/ board community. Specifically, the data collection process classifies the content based on the numerical ranges for user comments on violent and non-violent threads. The purpose is to identify what types of content received higher levels of user engagement, for both the type of grievance and violent or non-violent content. The numerical ranges for the number of replies, which were determined on the basis of the ethnographic research are illustrated in the table below.

**Table 1: User engagement categories by number of replies to a post or thread.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1-9</th>
<th>10-29</th>
<th>30-49</th>
<th>50-99</th>
<th>100-199</th>
<th>200 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Very High</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LIMITATIONS**

The first limitation lies in the one-month timeframe allocated for data collection. The paper’s findings and conclusions may not be representative of consistent, long-term user engagement or posting activity. Therefore, the findings for online user engagement or activity are not conclusive but rather outline preliminary trends that require longer-term analysis. A longer timeframe would be required to determine, conclusively, whether the findings and trends of this paper adequately define 4chan’s /pol/ boards environment and user engagement. Further, the use of time-series analysis would be beneficial to illustrate and understand how violent discourse changes over time and identify trends in this behaviour.

The second limitation refers to the number of available hours for data collection process and accessibility of data. The data collection required selecting and collating individual pieces of content. Specifically, the data collection relied on human resources – a single person – for the identification and collating of each piece of content. As such, the study could not feasibly collect content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board every day for 24 hours, during the data collection period. The lower capacity for data collection resulted in smaller amounts of data to analyze and, therefore, the study conducted a longer data collection period (i.e., one month). Further, the findings identified by analyzing the smaller datasets are likely to result in a narrower understanding of IMVE’s use of smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms. The accessibility to data was challenging given 4chan’s policy on routine content removal.

In addition, the data is only collected from one platform - 4chan - which does not accurately represent the entirety of smaller-scale, less-regulated online platforms. Therefore, the findings in this paper can provide a preliminary understanding of how IMVEs use a smaller-scale, less-
regulated platform, such as 4chan, and hypothesize similar behaviour on other platforms with similar affordances to users (i.e., anonymity). Future research should explore data from other platforms, such as Reddit or Gab, and conduct a similar analysis to better understand the overall landscape of violent discourse. This would provide more conclusive findings to support or disprove the conclusions drawn in this paper.

The third limitation refers to the inability to communicate with online users engaging with violent content given the ethical (and security/safety) implications and risks of skewing research findings. For this study, there was no engagement (i.e., commenting or posting) with online users or the online platforms as an effort to avoid tampering with the collected data and, by extension, the findings of this paper. However, as a result, it is challenging to accurately illustrate the trajectory of violent discourse if (a) relevant behaviour did not occur on the selected platforms during data collection; and (b) if the users do not receive comments that encourage further responses (i.e., a comment supporting or rejecting a user’s grievance). Engagement with users could provide an opportunity to better understand users’ personal grievances and perceptions of reality by encouraging discussions of specific points of contention. The ability to engage with users on the online platforms could provide an opportunity to better understand how users respond to content. However, engaging with online users presents several ethical concerns that would threaten the legitimacy of an academic research paper.

The fourth limitation refers to political, social, and economic environments. The study was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened numerous social, political, and economic grievances that pertain to IMVE. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic incited anti-authority, anti-immigration and xenophobic grievances that inspired a spike in real-world acts of violence. As a result of the global instability and civil unrest, the datasets could illustrate skewed trends or patterns in terms of the severity, prevalence, and engagement with violent discourse. Given the unpredictability of extraneous variables, such as a global pandemic, it is important to monitor social media platforms over a longer period of time to properly understand the impact of these external variables on the trajectory of violent discourse.

ETHICS OF REPRODUCING VIOLENT CONTENT & ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

To accurately outline the trajectory of violence on the platform, this analysis requires the inclusion of violent language and images including graphic depictions of violence targeting LGBTQ2+ individuals, racial or religious minorities, and women. Careful consideration was given to the images and text shared in the paper. In many instances, a simple description of the content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board would not accurately represent the impact and severity of violence depicted on the platform. Therefore, the inclusion of images of specific content was deemed necessary.

CHAPTER IV: Key Findings & Analysis
KEY FINDINGS & TRENDS

1. IMVE content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board is predominantly violent, with 76% of the total content identified and collated (1228 of 1608 posts).

2. White nationalism and supremacy are (a) the most prominent IMVE grievance on 4chan’s /pol/ board with 26% of total content (414 posts); and (b) the grievance with the highest number of individual pieces of violent content, at 294 pieces of content (71%).

3. Anti-authority grievances had the highest percentage of its total content being classified as violent (77%).

4. Specific ideological grievances (homophobia and Islamophobia) demonstrated an acute variance in the severity of graphic versus non-graphic violence depicted in content compared to other grievances.

5. Violent content received higher engagement; over 50% of violent content fell in the highest thresholds for user engagement (i.e., 50 replies or more).

ANALYSIS OF DATA

In approximately 120 hours over a full month, the data collection identified 1608 pieces of non-violent and violent content depicting or describing IMVE grievances. Of those 1228 pieces had violent content and 380 pieces non-violent content (Table 2 & Table 3). The larger quantity of violent content in comparison to non-violent suggests significantly higher user exposure to violence on 4chan’s /pol/ board. This finding also confirms the /pol/ board is an online community prone to violence. As such, the platform will provide a sufficient environment to observe to understand how online communities feed violent sentiment, normalize violent behaviour or beliefs, and impact the trajectory of violent discourse among users.

Table 2: Violent versus Non-Violent Percentage of Whole Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Violent (%)</th>
<th>Non-Violent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Nationalism or Supremacy</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisemitism</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 The quantitative values for violent and non-violent content are identified in the first two data columns (‘violent’ and ‘non-violent’). The third data column of Table 2 identifies the numerical values for total content, the sum of violent and non-violent content, for each grievance. The fourth and fifth data columns identify percentages for violent and non-violent content. The percentage was calculated by dividing the amount of violent content by the total amount of content, multiplied by a hundred; the same equation was used to determine the non-violent percentage. For example, the percentage of antisemetic violent content is determined by dividing total violent pieces of content (245) by the total pieces of content (358). These values are illustrated in the table below.
Table 3: Violent and Non-Violent Quantitative Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grievance</th>
<th>Pieces of Content</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>Non-Violent</td>
<td>Total (violent + non-violent)</td>
<td>Violent (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Nationalism or Supremacy</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisemitism</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Misogyny</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Authority</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Immigration</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamophobia</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobia</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To visualize the data above, Chart 1 uses a bar-graph to illustrate comparisons of violent versus non-violent content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board for each grievance. The chart shows significantly higher quantities of violent content than non-violent for each grievance. This finding suggests 4chan’s /pol/ board fosters a tolerant and supportive environment for users to post and engage with violent content.
**Chart 1:** Comparison of quantity of violent and non-violent content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board

**CLASSIFICATION OF VIOLENT & NON-VIOLENT CONTENT**

The classification of data presented challenges in singularly capturing content under one IME/IMVE grievance. A post can reference multiple grievances and, therefore, could not be appropriately categorized under a single category. As such, this required a small percentage of content to be copied and categorized under more than one grievance. By categorizing content under numerous grievances, the study was able to accurately understand what grievances were most “popular” amongst 4chan /pol/ users. Further, this decision reflects the reality of IME/IMVE, in which proponents are driven by a range of influences rather than a singular belief system. To ensure this overlap was accounted for in the data, the study marked the pieces of content categorized under more than one grievance, which also ensured that content would only be counted once for the prevalence dataset. As a result, the total pieces of content illustrated in this unique data set will be higher than the total in the prevalence dataset.
ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT & NON-VIOLENT CONTENT BY GRIEVANCES

1. PREVALENCE OF GRIEVANCES

The relative prevalence of IMVE (violent) and IME (non-violent) content helps determine if the manifestation of violent discourse online directly correlates to a user’s exposure to violent and graphic content. To determine the prevalence of each grievance, the analysis calculated the total number of violent and non-violent content for each of the seven grievances (Table 2). It found that white nationalism and supremacy content was the most prominent grievance, with 414 pieces of total content (violent and non-violent). The least prevalent grievance was anti-authority, with 53 pieces of total content (violent and non-violent). On a daily basis, users posted approximately 13 to 14 pieces of white nationalism or supremacy content per every 4-hours. Comparatively, only 1 to 2 pieces of anti-authority content was posted per 4 hours, which illustrates a significant difference in the daily posting of these grievances.

The high prevalence of white nationalism or supremacy content suggests users of 4chan’s /pol/ board are more sympathetic to such grievances. It also suggests the platform is predominately used by individuals holding these grievances and, by extension, serves as an online community or “safe haven” for hateful and violent grievances. However, the analysis determined the total amount of white nationalism or supremacy content versus the second most prevalent grievance, antisemitism, is not a statistically large enough difference to support 4chan’s /pol/ board functioning as a haven exclusively for adherents to white nationalism or supremacy. The study observed 358 pieces of antisemitic content, which, compared to white nationalism and supremacy content, only presents a difference of 56 posts. Therefore, the finding is statistically insignificant and cannot support an assertion that 4chan’s /pol/ board is used as a haven exclusively by white nationalists or supremacists. However, the data does support the general finding that the platform is used as a haven by individuals accepting of or sympathetic to all forms of ideologically motivated violent extremism. This paper proposes that longer-term data collection, including time-series analysis, would be required to properly prove or disprove this preliminary finding.

In contrast, the data identified a low prevalence of anti-authority content (0.7% of total posts). The limited anti-authority posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board could suggest proponents of the ideological grievance are less active or prevalent on the platform. However, this study does not provide sufficient evidence to prove or disprove this preliminary finding and, as such, requires longer-term data collection. The low prevalence suggests the grievance is less normalized amongst users and, therefore, not as prevalent in content posted by users. Further, this paper suggests anti-authority grievances are typically inspired by relevant real-world incidents or decisions involving authority organizations, such as government or law enforcement. For example, a significant amount of the anti-authority content referenced the confirmation of the 2021 United States Presidential election results and, by extension, the January 6th Capitol riot. This observation suggests anti-authority grievances were circumstantially posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board, as a response to real-world examples of authority’s exercise of power. Therefore, the analysis suggests users do not hold anti-authority grievances daily but rather adopt temporary grievances in response to a relevant real-world event.
Overall, the study determined violent content is significantly more prevalent than non-violent content. The analysis also shows that daily exposure to violent content is significantly higher than exposure to non-violent content. Specifically, approximately 31.5 pieces of violent content was posted by users daily in a 4-hour period versus 12 pieces of non-violent content. This result suggests a habitual exposure to violence, which could present a higher risk of users desensitizing to violence within the platform and influencing user aggression (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1965; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007; Huesmann, Moise, Podolski & Eron, 2003). Additionally, the high number of violent posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board could suggest users desensitized to violence are active participants within the online community. Individuals desensitized to violence would be more likely to post, and/or comment on, violent content shared on the platform, which would contribute to the high prevalence of violent posts observed on 4chan’s /pol/ board.

In addition, the analysis observed minimal variance in the percentage of content posted expressing specific grievances, regardless of being violent or non-violent. To be specific, both violent and non-violent content illustrated similar prevalence percentages per grievance. Of note, the content totals for violent and non-violent content present significant differences in the sample sizes. To visualize the similar prevalence percentages per grievance for violent and non-violent content refer to Chart 2 and 3. Specifically, white nationalism or supremacy grievances accounted for 31%, respectively, of violent content and 32% of non-violent content. Similarly, Islamophobia grievances accounted for 5% of both violent and non-violent content. This suggests consistent user posting activity of each ideologically motivated extremist grievance regardless of the depiction of violence or hate. Therefore, although there is significantly more violent content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board, the data identified consistency in the prevalence of each ideologically motivated extremist grievance, regardless of hateful or violent interpretations.

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13 Figure 2 illustrates percentages for violent content (945 pieces of content). Figure 3 illustrates percentages for non-violent content (380 pieces of content).
II. IDEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED EXTREMIST CONTENT (NON-VIOLENT)

To determine the prevalence of violence on 4chan’s /pol/ board, the study collected both ideologically motivated extremist content (IME) and ideologically motivated violent extremist (IMVE) content shared on the platform. As noted, ideologically motivated extremist content refers to material that is hateful but does not depict, describe, or incite violence. The study collected 380 pieces of IME content, which was responsible for 23% of the total content (i.e., posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board) collected during the data collection period. Therefore, approximately a quarter of the whole data sample (i.e., total content) was non-violent.

The non-violent content illustrated significantly high levels of hateful language or images that aim to demonize a perceived “out-group.” To accomplish this, the content uses derogatory, inflammatory, and hateful language to establish a divisive narrative that targets, for example, women’s behaviour, sexuality, appearance, or intellect. The hateful language used in non-violent content included socially unacceptable or offensive terms, such as n******, tranny, or k***. These terms seek to minimize certain individuals based on their religion, ethnicity, or sexuality and, ultimately, inspire or incite hateful perspectives towards their communities and/or beliefs. Hateful and derogatory language was used in all IME content identified during the data collection period.

The following analysis proposes the use of hateful language on 4chan’s /pol/ board attempts to create a hospitable online environment for extremist actors. The high prevalence of such language, in part, contributes to the construction of a hateful culture on the platform itself. The routine use of hateful, vulgar, and divisive language establishes an online environment that normalizes discourse that targets equity-seeking or deserving groups. The high prevalence of such language could increase users’ willingness to participate in hateful discourse and, over time, strengthen their convictions in grievances against a perceived out-group. However, the findings of this paper cannot confirm a possible cause and effect relationship. Ultimately, the observed high prevalence of hateful language contributes to a better understanding of how 4chan’s /pol/ board environment can lead to violence. The trajectory of hateful to violent discourse illustrates a very fine line, however, in which the high prevalence of hateful discourse could manifest into violence on 4chan’s /pol/ board.

III. PREVALENCE OF VIOLENT CONTENT

To understand the violent culture on 4chan’s /pol/ board, the analysis aims to identify and analyze the prevalence of violent content espousing IMVE grievances. The prevalence of violence per IMVE grievance is determined by the following equation:

\[
\text{Prevalence of Violence per IMVE Grievance} = \left( \frac{\text{Total Value of Violent Content for Grievance}}{\text{Non-Violent + Violent Content}} \right) \times 100
\]

14 Refer to ANNEX A for the quantitative data identifying the amount and prevalence of violent and non-violent ideologically motivated violent extremist content. Refer to ANNEX B for a visual representation of violent versus non-violent content prevalence based on specific ideologically motivated violent extremist grievances.
The percentage is a unit of measurement for the prevalence of violence for each IMVE grievance. The percentage is used to quantify and compare the prevalence of violent content and determine what grievances are more inclined to perpetuate violent discourse. Ultimately, the values can illustrate the inclination and/or predisposition of grievances to proliferate and escalate violent rhetoric or engagement on an average day-to-day basis. In the following section, the paper analyzes the prevalence and qualitative attributes of violent content posted by 4chan’s /pol/ board to identify trends and/or findings to contribute to a better understanding of IMVE actor’s use of the platform.

In calculating the prevalence of each IMVE grievance, the analysis determined the differences between the percentages present a statistically insignificant finding. The majority of content collected for each grievance described or depicted violence. Specifically, the analysis determined over 65% of all content collected for each grievance depicted or described violence. In fact, the variance range in the percentages of relative prevalence across all grievances was only a 9% gap; the lowest prevalence was 68% (antisemitism) and the highest was 77% (anti-authority). This illustrates a significantly high presence of ideologically motivated violent extremism on 4chan’s /pol/ board. As such, the paper suggests all seven grievances inspire violent content on the platform and, therefore, no single grievance demonstrates a higher impact on inspiring violent discourse on the /pol/ board.

ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT CONTENT PER GRIEVANCE

**WARNING:** The section below includes images of posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board and direct quotes depicting real-world acts of violence, including deadly assaults with a weapon, sexual assault, and other graphic depictions of violence. This content is very graphic and could be triggering to readers. This section will also not reproduce the terms ‘n*****’ or ‘k***’ given the racial violence attached to this language in historical and social contexts. Reader’s direction is advised.

**Anti-Authority**

Anti-authority content was the least prevalent grievance on the /pol/ board, however, the analysis determined that 77% of the total content (violent + non-violent) was violent. Based on the prevalence percentage, anti-authority content had the highest percentage for violent content across all seven IMVE grievances. The finding suggests users holding anti-authority grievances are inclined to depict or describe violence. Of note, the high prevalence of violent rhetoric could be linked to the international and political environment during the data collection period, in which political unrest was more prominent in society. Most violent anti-authority content expressed anti-law enforcement sentiments targeting, specifically, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). As previously noted, a large quantity of anti-authority content referenced the 2021 United States (U.S.) Capitol insurrection, in which crowds of protesters illegally entered the Capitol building to demonstrate discontent with the U.S. 2021 Presidential election results. Specifically, users claimed that undercover CIA agents were lurking and participating in online communities, such as 4chan’s /pol/ board, to identify individuals who participated in the insurrection. The conspiracy theory
was expressed by references to “glown******” or “glowie”\textsuperscript{15}. The terms are used to reference undercover agents posing as ordinary 4chan users to bait others to share incriminating information (Know Your Meme). The terms are also used to identify potential bait posts made by law enforcement agents. The terms were popular amongst /pol/ board users posting or commenting on anti-authority content.

The image below reproduces a post to 4chan’s /pol/ board, in which the term “glown******” was used in a violent manner. The reference to the acronym ‘BTFO’ - blown the fuck out - implies violent activity inspired by anti-authority grievances. Specifically, the acronym ‘BTFO’ is a vulgar reference to an individual being beaten or “blown out” by another individual in some form of competition. It is used to emphasize an extraordinary or embarrassing defeat, especially in a political argument. In the context of this post, the reference to ‘BTFO’ is implying undercover law enforcement officers were beaten up at the January 6th insurrection and suffer extreme humiliation.

**Figure 5:** Anti-authority post to 4chan’s /pol/ board, include reference to “Glown******”

The violence depicted in anti-authority content was primarily illustrated by images of individuals holding weapons. The images were often accompanied by hateful messages targeting institutions of state authority, such as government or law enforcement. These types of posts aim to incite violence against authority figures or violent behaviour in scenarios questioning authority. The user engagement included violent comments, such as “trigger happy”, “I hope the pigs [police officers] and rich fucks [white individuals] all get killed by n*****”, “Riot police fight like infantry in ancient times but also have projectile weapons. If they are threatened, they will aim for the eyes, throat, crotch with rubber bullets and tear gas canisters as a scare tactic. Wear protective equipment and find tactics to beat them assuming sufficient numbers. Or cave in like a little bitch. The rest of the world is next if this globohomo experiment in enforcing tyranny succeeds”. However, user engagement with anti-authority content did not consistently inspire violent discourse amongst users, such as comments on 4chan’s /pol/ board threads.

Overall, the violence depicted in anti-authority content was less severe and graphic compared to other IMVE grievances. It primarily depicted or encouraged non-lethal acts of physical violence,

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Glown******’ or ‘Glowies’ are specific terms used on 4chan’s /pol/ board to reference CIA or FBI agents. The term originated from computer programmer, Terry David, who claimed in 2017 that “CIA n***** glow in the dark” in a video posted to social media (Know Your Meme).
such as punching or kicking an individual. The analysis suggests the meager prevalence of graphic violence could weaken the impact of anti-authority content on sympathetic individuals and its ability to inspire real-world violence. The tempered references to, or expressions of violence might not resonate with 4chan’s /pol/ board users as they gravitate to graphic depictions of violence. As a result, the non-lethal or graphic references to violence might not gain traction (i.e., user engagement) on 4chan’s /pol/ board and instigate violent discourse amongst users. The low prevalence of anti-authoritarian content, in general, could support this conclusion as it was the least prevalent grievance, in terms of posts to 4chan, and did not depict any graphic violence. However, further research is required to appropriately confirm the strength of this finding.

Violent Misogyny

The second most prevalent IMVE grievance was violent misogyny, in which 74% of its total content - 163 pieces of content - was determined to depict or describe violence. Specifically, violent misogyny content used graphic language to describe acts of violence, including sexual and physical assaults. The most prevalent form of descriptive violence conveyed in violent misogynist’s content sought to encourage men to sexually and/or physically assault women. This content often included derogatory and hateful language, alongside violent terminology, to target women. The most prominent hateful and derogatory language used in violent posts included slut, whore, or bitch. Violent misogynist threads also included sarcastic, dismissive, or comedic content to diminish or trivialize the severity of acts of violence against women. The use of these terms, in conjunction with descriptive violent language, exacerbated the grievances expressed in the content. Ultimately, the use of violent and derogatory language established women as an “out-group” and men as the “in-group” by encouraging male superiority through the domination of and violence against women.

Similar trends were observed in user commenting on violent misogynist content. For example, comments on a thread discussing the “non-existent” rape culture in society included: “Oh no, rape! Lol.”, “rape or drunken sex”; “Based. Dumb whore wanted it”; and “RAPE RULES RAPE RAPE RAPE RRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAPE 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4chan’s /pol/ board, these self-identified incels believe violence against women is an appropriate response or solution to their grievances (Moonshot, 2021: 8-9). The exertion of male domination or superiority is conveyed by means of violence against women, which establishes men as the “in-group” in the content. Incel ideological sentiments were illustrated in cryptic posts threatening violence against men (Chads) and women (Stacy), such as “incels will being [be] mobilizing soon. Chads and Stacy’s watch out”. Some posts cited specific terminology or language associated to the incel ideology, such as “Immigration is literally killing chads”, “incel problem is a ticking time bomb”, “Was jack ripper an incel” and “Are bullies in school just teenage chads”.

**Figure 6:** Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board illustrating elements of the incel ideology

![Image of incel ideology elements](image)

Other posts included graphics illustrating and describing physical, personal, and emotional attributes of an incel or Chad. For example, several posts illustrated persona comparisons outlining a unique profile for a Chad and incel by creating character-like identities, such as the “Virgin Prepper” and “Chad Raider” or “Virgin Agriculturalist” and “Chad Pastoralist.” The profiles aim to outline emotional and physical differences between an incel and Chad by using specific language and visual representations. As illustrated in Figure 6, a “virgin agriculturalist” -
referring to an incel - is the product of a “matriarchal society” and is too “weak and feminized to run society like a man.” Further, the post describes an incel as an individual with a “pathetically small jaw caused by a grain based diet” and “supreme cuckhold - killed or enslaved by foreign invaders and his women taken for breeding.” These descriptions utilized specific terminology to convey the personality and physical attributes of an incel, such as virgin, weak, pathetic or cuckhold. These terms are commonly referred to by proponents of the incel movement.

In contrast, a “Chad Pastoralist” is the product of a “patriarchal society” and is the “maker of his own identity” suggesting Chad is a byproduct of the society to which they belong and support. Further, the post describes physical attributes of a Chad, which include “cold eyes that strike fear into swarthy manlets,” “powerful, masculine jaw…” and “strong body conditioned to the harsh nature of the steppe.” The post also illustrates the perceived sexist and violent nature of Chads by stating they “kill or enslave foreigners and take their women for breeding.” These descriptions of physical, emotional, and behavioral attributes illustrate a perception of Chads as authority or superior figures based on their ability to exert dominance, by using language such as kill or enslave, takes their women for breeding, powerful, strong body, and masculine. The profiles include images illustrating exaggerated depictions of an ‘incel’ – appears defeated by hunched shoulders and eyes looking down –  and ‘chad’ — appearing powerful and victorious, with their head held high and chest pushed outwards. In doing so, these cartoon images and descriptive profiles seek to establish ‘chads’ as dominant or powerful and ‘incels’ as weak or submissive.

Several posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board also depicted or described grievances loosely referencing the incel movement, without citing specific terminology associated to the ideology (i.e., incel, Chads or Stacys). Most notably, these described or expressed frustrations for an inability to have sexual relations with women. These sexual grievances manifested themselves in online encouragement or incitement of acts of violence against women and, in some cases, self-harm. For example, several posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board expressed a grievance against online dating apps and an inability to match or communicate with female users. For example, one post read “Wtf is going on seriously? Out of 400+ matches only 2 girls sent me some “come fuck me now” texts. The others would either not reply or the conversation led nowhere”. This post inspired a series of violent comments referencing fundamentals of the incel ideology, such as “women are whores and always be”, “its a platform that lets women prostitute themselves more easily. Avoid it like the plague”, “ Fucking kill yourself”, “What knife should I use to castrate myself?”. These comments further illustrate the use of hateful, derogatory, and violent terminology to target women. Additionally, the comments demonstrate encouragement and incitement of self-inflicted violence against men who are unable to date women. Comments of similar nature were observed on most posts inciting or expressing incel-type grievances against women.

Although, most of the violent misogynist content depicted violence using specific terminology, the analysis observed rare instances of visually graphic depictions of physical and/or sexual violence. For example, the images below reproduce posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board that depict graphic violence against women. Figure 8 is an image of a video link, originally posted to Twitter, that was shared on 4chan’s /pol/ board. The hyperlink guided users to a video depicting violent footage of a women being hit repeatedly with whips by a crowd of men17. In the video,

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17 To note, the use of whips to hit an individual is a form of flogging or flagellation, which is defined as the act of beating the human body with an object.
several male bystanders are watching and encouraging the gruesome act of violence, which further exemplifies violent misogynist grievances. The 4chan user that re-posted this content expressed their support for the brutal victimization of women.

Whereas Figure 9 reproduces a post depicting a sexual assault, in which a woman is being forced, illustrated by two different hands pushing a woman’s head downwards, to give a man oral sex. The post inspired abstract violent misogynist comments such as “Welcome to /pol/” which, in the context of the sexual assault, suggests 4chan’s /pol/ board elicits derision and hatred from its users. The reference to red pill suggests the platform will force users to be exposed to unsettling or life changing truths about women. Other comments included “respect the rights of women” and, in response, the post originator wrote “Just fucking kill yourself already. they already demand way too much.” The response illustrates hatred and violence against women and expresses frustrations pertaining to an unequal distribution of power between men and women. This type of content is important to illustrate how graphic violence plays an important role in desensitizing users to violence. Further, the posts depict real-world acts of violence which further impacts a user’s willingness to engage and support acts of violence against women.

**Figure 8 & 9:** (8) Post containing accessible hyperlink to a video of a real-world flogging of a woman; (9) Post depicting a real-world sexual assault.

The violent and non-violent misogynistic content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board illustrated derogatory and hateful language targeting women. Misogynistic content exhibited a high level of antagonistic discourse targeting women. As such, the use of hateful language demonstrated in the content impacts the risk of users adopting hateful or violent misogynistic beliefs. Additionally, constant exposure to content depicting sexual or physical violence of women desensitizes individuals to these forms of violence, which can increase the risk of radicalization. An example of a user comment that facilitates a hateful interpretation capable of fostering an environment for radicalization, includes:

“30% of men under 30 are still virgins. Y’all are too picky then. Take it from any Chad, a hole is a hole. Oh wait, it’s the Russians that say that. Anyways, you ain’t fuckin’ a r bitch’s face, you’re fucking her hole. And you don’t know how good her hole is until your
The high prevalence of derogatory comments against women fosters an environment of negativity and hatred by which users become more confident and comfortable sharing their views on a public forum. As such, a user’s trajectory towards violence is more likely and severe. Therefore, given the observed high level of hateful and derogatory content targeting women, it can be reasonably inferred that this type of content influenced and fostered a welcoming environment for violence targeting women. The findings of this paper support this inference as high levels of violent content (74%) espousing misogynistic beliefs was identified and collected from 4chan’s /pol/ board. This study concluded the high level of hate and derogatory language contributed to the prevalence of violence, as it fertilized an online environment ripe for violence.

**Anti-Immigration**

The analysis also identified anti-immigration grievances inspired an equivalent percentage of violent content (74%) as violent misogynist grievances. The high percentage of violent content suggests users routinely expressed violent grievances against immigration. The violence expressed in anti-immigration content illustrated more graphic depictions of violence. In particular, the depiction of violence in anti-immigration content was primarily conveyed by references to anti-immigration literature, including content that espouses other grievances, and real-world images of violent acts. The references to literature describing anti-immigration grievances aimed to legitimize and justify violent interpretations amongst 4chan users. The literature used to target immigration overlapped with expressions of white nationalism or supremacy grievances. Anti-immigration grievances advocated for the survival and prosperity of “real” citizens of a country, which often coincided with protection of the white race. Therefore, the references to literature to depict and describe violence also expressed white nationalist or supremacist grievances.

Violent anti-immigration content overwhelmingly referenced the “Great Replacement” as literature used to inspire or incite violence against an out-group. 4chan’s /pol/ board users referenced immigration or mass-migration as a real-world manifestation of the Great Replacement. The analysis considered references to the Great Replacement as violent because (1) the literature describes violence to protect the indigenous European population; and (2) the literature is used to justify acts of real-world violence committed by IMVE actors. For example, the perpetrator of the Christchurch attack, Brenton Tarrant, titled his manifesto “The Great Replacement” and cited the original theory as inspiration. Specifically, the manifesto warned of a white genocide by suggesting: “show the invaders that our lands will never be their lands, our homelands are our own and that, as long as white man still lives, they will NEVER conquer our lands.” As such, the analysis considered the Great Replacement as violent references.

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18 The Great Replacement defines an ethno-nationalist theory outlining the cultural and demographic replacement of the white, European population by non-European immigrants. In 2012, the theory was popularized by French writer Renaud Camus in Le Grand Remplacement.
The anti-immigration content depicted or described violence by exploiting real-world acts of violence targeting immigrants. The content relied on imagery of real-world acts of violence. The primary source of inspiration for anti-immigration content was a US-Mexico border crisis, in which thousands of Haitian migrants gathered at the border to seek asylum into the United States (Alden & Tippet, 2021). The border crisis resulted in the apprehension or expulsion of nearly thirty-thousand Haitian migrants seeking asylum (Alden & Tippet, 2021). In the aftermath, images of United States border patrol agents on horseback attempting to prevent migrants from crossing the Rio Grande by means of whips were widely circulated and condemned for inhumane treatment of migrants (Alden & Tippet, 2021). Specifically, human rights activists cited the barbaric and animalistic treatment of migrants, referencing how the apprehension strategies mirrored the “herding of cattle.” Ultimately, modified versions of the widely circulated images were posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board to denote anti-immigration grievances.

The images of United States Border Patrol agents on horseback deploying violent tactics to prevent migrants from crossing the border were routinely shared on 4chan’s /pol/ board to inspire or incite violence against immigrants. In particular, the images depicted violence against immigrants by means of a weapon, specifically, a whip. The analysis determined users demonstrated violent engagement with the images, as illustrated by posting hateful and violent comments in relevant threads. Examples of the comments include “You should be gassed, k***” or threatening images of individuals holding a weapon, stating: “Now get off my lawn and take your hooknosed friends with you.” The comments also mocked the feebleness and fear expressed by the victims of violence in the image. The users appeared to find satisfaction and pleasure in the notion of migrants being afraid for their safety and violent treatment. Users trivialized of violence targeting immigrants.

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19 The migration of Haitians was triggered by long-term political instability and a series of natural disasters causing unprecedented levels of corruption, poverty, and violence in the country (Alden & Tippet, 2021). The social, political, and economic instability was heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased unemployment and triggered neighboring countries to enact restrictive immigration policies (Alden & Tippet, 2021). As a result, the quality of life for Haitians was poor and lacked minimal prospects for improvement and, therefore, thousands of Haitians sought refuge in the United States (Alden & Tippet, 2021).
Of note, the analysis observed anti-immigration content reflected the current political and international environment. In other words, the high prevalence of violent anti-immigration content coincided with an international event occurring during the data collection period, which was also observed in anti-authority content. The paper does not suggest the observed link to grievances in content and real-world global events is a finding of this research, as the limited length of the timeframe for data collection makes it impossible to prove. However, it is important to identify the observation as the real-time international environment could impact the prevalence of anti-immigration (and anti-authority) content. The analysis suggests the prevalence of these grievances might have been impacted (i.e., increased prevalence) in response to real-world global events pertaining to anti-immigration (or anti-authority).

**Antisemitism**

Antisemitic content had respectively 68% (245 of 385 posts) of its total depicting or describing violence. On average, antisemitic content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board depicted and described extremely hateful narratives. Antisemitic content depicting or describing violence was less graphic compared to other forms of IMVE. Violence in antisemitic content was depicted by means of memetic images and descriptive language. Most commonly, the memes aim to convey humour or sarcasm pertaining to cultural symbols, social ideas, or current events relevant to Judaism. In particular, the violent antisemitic content included popular memes altered to convey acts of violence targeting the Jewish community. For example, the most common meme shared by 4chan’s /pol/ board users espousing antisemitic grievances was a cartoon depiction of a Jewish man with a rope tied around his neck. The cartoon image illustrated exaggerated and derogatory facial features to suggest the victim was a Jewish man. Further, the image illustrated a cartoon figure with a broken neck caused by an implied hanging, with the victim’s tongue hanging outside his mouth. The illustration of a Jewish man being hung to cause death is a direct attempt to incite or inspire violence.

As noted, the memes included terminology that details violent acts, such as referencing weapons used or the impact of violence on victims. For example, the meme of a Jewish man being hung was posted by users alongside violent textual captions, such as “kill yourself k***”, “die k***”, etc.
“gas the k****” or “GAS GAS GAS”\textsuperscript{20}. The captions demonstrated a significant amount of violence targeting the Jewish community by using hateful language, such as “k****”, and referencing methods used to inflict pain or death, often associated with the Holocaust, such as “gas”. The high prevalence of variations of such violent and hateful phrases, both as captions to posts and user replies, suggest a significant desensitization and trivialization of antisemitic violence. In addition, the posts deploying graphic language to threaten Jewish peoples also included antisemitic symbols, such as the swastika. The inclusion of antisemitic symbols is another form of expressing violent grievances given real-world links to violence.

Antisemitic violence was also depicted through historical references to World War II, Nazism, and the Holocaust. Specifically, references to these historical events and ideologies included citing real-world acts of violence (i.e., concentration camps); literature inspiring relevant grievances (i.e., Mein Kampf); and high-profile figures that advocated or organized acts of violence (i.e., Adolf Hitler). This paper considered content depicting or describing these historical references as violent given the links to real-world violence against Jewish people. In particular, content that included references to Nazism, including people, places and things, were considered violent based on Nazism inspiring and facilitating the Holocaust\textsuperscript{21}. For example, many antisemitic posts and comments included images of high-profile Nazi figures responsible for acts of violence targeting Jews, such as Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, or Theodore Eicke. Further, a large subset of violent antisemitic content referenced specific acts of violence or strategies for committing acts of violence (i.e., extermination tactics) deployed during the Holocaust. The acts of violence refer to the killing of Jews by means of pogroms and mass shootings; extermination by labour in concentration camps; and gas chambers or gas vans at extermination camps. Therefore, references to the Holocaust and its facilitators or inspirations are reasonably considered violent.

Figure 12: Antisemitic post to 4chan’s /po/ board utilizing violent historical references and violent descriptive language.

The posting of violent antisemitic content on 4chan’s /pol/ board demonstrated a high level of organization and repetitiveness. The organized posting behaviour was observed by consistent re-posting of specific text encouraging 4chan users to create threads dedicated to “national socialism, the many types of racism, racial identity movements, antisemitism, aryan and traditional art”. The posts sought to provide information on national socialism and other related ideologies, such as antisemitism, by answering questions including: what is national socialism or

\textsuperscript{20} The term “k****” refers to a Jewish person in an offensive and derogatory manner.

\textsuperscript{21} The Holocaust was a genocide targeting European Jews during World War II, in which Nazi Germany and its collaborators systematically murdered some six million Jews across Europe.
are you new to national socialism? This demonstrated an organized effort to recruit individuals into adopting antisemitic grievances. Antisemitism grievances were further illustrated by expressing support for leaders of the Nazi party, as depicted by “Hail Hitler” statements; encouraging the removal of Jews from civilization by stating “Drive out Degeneracy”; and the inclusion of swastikas, a symbol of the Nazi party. Lastly, posts demonstrated organized advocacy for antisemitism by including recommended reading material and videos to further learn about relevant ideologies of grievances, which all encourage violence against Jews. These pieces of literature included Mein Kampf, The Third Position, or Goebbels’ essays and speeches. As demonstrated in this analysis, antisemitic violent content demonstrated more organized posting behaviour by repetitive posts instructing users on where to find literature on relevant ideologies. The inclusion of these materials illustrated an active attempt to recruit and radicalize individuals into adopting extreme and violent antisemitic views, which was not mirrored in other ideologically motivated violent extremist grievances.

Figure 13: Antisemitic posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board demonstrating organized posting behaviour; demonstrates a series of posts that share similar information.

Figure 14 & 15: Variations of antisemitic information sharing posts
Users posted information sharing content, such as the above posts, to 4chan’s /pol/ board daily, during the data collection period. Therefore, users were repeatedly exposed to antisemitic content, which can lead individuals to adopting more extreme interpretations of IMVE. Specifically, habitual exposure to content could make it easier for an individual to understand and/or adopt an extreme ideology, a critical component of the radicalization process. Further, frequent exposure to information, grievances and, in extreme cases, violence can result in an individual’s desensitization to extreme or violent ideologies making it easier to adopt the ideology. As such, the daily posting of consistent antisemitic information, including additional sources of information, further demonstrates an organized effort to promote a violent interpretation of antisemitism amongst 4chan users.

White Nationalism or Supremacy

The analysis determined 71% (294 of 414 posts) white nationalism or supremacy content depicted violence. The violent content included images, videos or quotes describing and/or depicting acts of violence. Specifically, the violent content utilized unique strategies for inspiring and inciting violence, including constructing posts to convey specific narratives that invoke fear and emotional responses amongst users. To do so, the content used a combination of images, text and links to articles that describe changing demographics, criminal activity, and real-world acts of violence. Despite the use of real-world events in posts the content did not include visual depictions of gore, blood or carnage as observed in the posting behaviour of other IMVE grievances.

A large amount of violent white nationalism or supremacy content expressed fear of the white population decreasing and, as a result, losing its perceived superiority or power. In this vein, the analysis determined three dimensions of how users expressed grievances pertaining to a threat of the white population decreasing: (1) users incited violence against black men to counter racial minorities; (2) users targeted pregnant white women for giving birth to racialized persons; and (3) users expressed fear of mass-migration threatening the prosperity and superiority of the white population. A large amount of white nationalism or supremacy content encouraged violence to defend the white population from ‘extermination,’ ‘genocide,’ or ‘becoming a minority’. These terms were popular amongst users in textual content expressing grievances against other racial
segments of the population (i.e., the black population). The grievances expressed fears of the black population increasing and surpassing the white population in numbers.

4chan’s /pol/ board users respond to a perceived threat against the defined “in-group” for white nationalism or supremacy by inciting violence against racial minorities. Specifically, the posts encourage users to use assault weapons, such as handguns or rifles, to murder members of racial minorities to ensure the survival and supremacy of the white population. For example, a post to 4chan’s /pol/ board included an image of a map with the caption “This region of the country has gone from 70% white to 20% white in just 30 years. How have things changed?” In response, users posted a series of violent comments expressing grievances through images and textual statements, which included: “I fucking hate spics so much bros” and an image of a Hispanic man shot in the head; “This is the nicest part of downtown LA” and an image of deceased bodies lying on pavement in an alley; and “What fucking lie. It’s not 20% White. HAHAHAHAHAHAHA. You chuds and your ridiculous claims. You couldn’t possibly be more wrong. Have being wrong. Loser. Fucking have sex, incel. It’s 23% White” and a cartoon image of a white man ripping the skin of a black man. These comments and images demonstrate contempt and violence against racial minorities and, in the context of the original post, suggests users pursue violence to decrease the population of racial minorities.

The fear of an increasingly racialized population was also expressed by targeting pregnant women. Specifically, users expressed contempt for white women who conceived a child with a racialized person (i.e., a person of colour) and, as a result, gave birth to a racialized child. The perception amongst users was that white women giving birth to non-white children had failed an obligation or duty to ensure the prosperity of the white race. The majority of these posts targeted pregnant white women and expressed fears of a decreasing white population due to race-mixing relationships. Users also expressed fear and anger against white women’s choice to conceive and deliver non-white children. As such, the grievance against women supports undertones of violent misogyny in white nationalism or supremacy content. The incitement of violence was observed in content targeting pregnant women by advocating for abortions or miscarriages of women pregnant with a racialized baby.

These posts included images of a pregnant white woman standing beside a non-white man, which provided visual representation of users’ grievances against biracial children. The posts encouraged abortions or miscarriages of a fetus. In some instances, users encouraged physical abuse of pregnant women to forcibly induce a miscarriage. Captions or comments encouraging such violence against women were often trivialized by using acronyms, such as ‘lol’ or ‘lmao.’ This demonstrates a lack of empathy and respect for women amongst users engaging in the threads. Further, the posts and comments demonstrate a direct correlation between women aborting racialized fetuses and the protection of the white race. Users recommended the sterilization of women who engage in biracial sexual relationships to ensure racialized persons are not born. For example, users posted the following comments: “didn’t she just miscarry?”; “congratulations on your second spontaneous abortion. Abby!”; “if the child is a girl /pol/ will want to fuck it”; “MUTT”; “Digits for another miscarriage”; “She’ll lose this one too, OR it will be a retard black-eyed baby”; “If she gets another miscarriage I will officially believe this to be a sterilizing shot, and I’ll tell everyone about the study showing the increase of miscarriages.” The comments also included violent images depicting real people and/or cartoon figures holding
weapons, which suggests a threat of violence against women pregnant with non-white fetuses, and graphic images of aborted fetuses.

White nationalism or supremacy grievances also encouraged violence against black men by posting images, comments, and links to real-world acts of violence committed against white people to exacerbate fear amongst users. Posts shared links to news articles describing real-world acts of violence against women or children that were perpetrated by black men. The content expressed white saviour sentiments, in which white men are considered the only solution to a perceived threat to their community or “in-group”. The selection of events targeting women and children described the responsibility of users belonging to the “in-group” (i.e., white males) to protect vulnerable peoples (i.e., women and children). Therefore, the use of real-world acts of violence and victims is likely to heighten the impact of the white saviour narrative and fear driven grievances.

**Figure 16:** White nationalism or supremacy post on 4chan’s /pol/ board aimed to incite violence against an out-group.

For example, the above post stated “WHITE PEOPLE DO NOTHING, WHITE MEN DON’T PROTECT THEIR CHILDREN, THEY DON’T PROTECT WHAT THEIR ANCESTORS BUILT. WE ARE LOST.” The post included an image depicting the faces of two black men, a young white girl, and overlaid text claiming “Beaten and strangled to death the animals dumped her dead body like a sack of garbage, while the whole community desperately searched for her.” Further, the overlaid text demonstrates a conscious effort to provoke emotional responses by using graphic language such as beaten, strangled, dumped and garbage. The language selection indicates efforts to magnify the violence committed by the perpetrators - as illustrated by beaten and strangled - and convey how the perpetrators viewed the victims as worthless or inferior - as illustrated by dumped and garbage. The terminology exacerbates racial tensions and grievances amongst 4chan’s /pol/ board users. In context of the post, the reference to a real-world act of violence committed by racialized persons against a young white female intensifies the resonance of a white saviour complex in users. The narrative is further intensified by criticizing white men for failing to act against the perceived threat posed by racialized persons. The use of ‘animals’ to depict two black men also establishes an out-group by describing racialized persons as sub-humans. In combination, the posts inciting a white saviour narrative are indirectly encouraging violence against black men to protect the white population.

The fear is exacerbated on 4chan’s /pol/ board given the prevalence of violent posts describing acts of violence committed by black men. The high prevalence of content illustrating real-world
acts of violence or criminality perpetrated by black men misrepresents the real-world environment and/or threat. In other words, 4chan’s /pol/ board constructs a virtual reality that does not accurately reflect the real-world landscape and, therefore, users’ grievances and fears are deliberately exacerbated by biased and misrepresented information. Ultimately, the fictitious threat environment creates an echo-chamber of content that demonizes racialized groups.

IV. GRAPHIC VIOLENCE

The analysis observed significant variance in the severity of violence depicted or described in content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board. Specifically, this paper identified certain IMVE grievances depicted more graphic violence and on a more consistent basis. This paper defines graphic violence as the depiction of vivid, brutal, and realistic acts of violence illustrated by images, videos, or language. It generally consists of explicit and uncensored depictions of real-world acts of violence, which can include an assault with a deadly weapon, accidents that result in death or severe injury, suicide, or torture. In isolated instances, graphic violence is depicted through animation and/or cartoon drawings, in which the images illustrate realistic acts of violence by including specific details or props to heighten the sense of realism, such as blood effects or weapons. However, the majority of images and videos depicted real-world acts of violence and its victims.

Homophobia

The analysis identified 71% (98 of 139 posts) of homophobic content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board depicted or described violence. Of this percentage, the lion’s share of violent homophobic content depicted or described graphic violence in images, videos, and language. To achieve a visceral response, graphically violent content depicted real-world footage or imagery showing (1) bodily fluids, such as blood; (2) corpses with massive injuries, such as severed limbs; and (3) physical attacks, immolation, torture, corpses, protests or riots, or other such scenarios. Of note, homophobic content did not utilize cartoons to depict violence. Ultimately, the depiction of real-world acts of violence inspired by homophobia expressed tailored grievances targeting members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and/or Queer, and Two-Spirited (LGBTQ2+) community.

Violent homophobic content targeted the transgender community and the use of “they/them” pronouns. Specifically, 56% of violent homophobic content targeted individuals identifying as transgender, which illustrates a staggering amount of hate and violence expressed by users. In contrast, only 29% of non-violent homophonic content targeted transgenderism. This suggests a disproportionate amount of violent homophobic content posted by 4chan’s /pol/ board users.

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22 Many variations of the term occur. For the purposes of this paper, the official term used is LGBTQ2+, referring to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and/or queer, and two-spirited. In Canada, the ‘2’ represents two-spirited, as a representation of Indigenous cultural identities related to sexuality and gender.

23 To note, the percentage of violence targeting transgenderism was determined by identifying any homophobic content expressing grievances against the specific subset of the LGBTQ+ community as the primary inspiration. As such, content expressing ambiguous or infrequent references to violence against transgenders is not captured in the percentage value.
targets transgender peoples. The findings suggest users publish and gravitate to content depicting acts of violence against transgender individuals.

**Figure 17**: Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board depicting violence against individuals identifying as transgender by repeatedly typing “TRANNIES GET THE ROPE!”

Of particular interest, over 80% of the violent content targeting transgenderism was graphic. For example, Figure 18 reproduces a post depicting four men holding assault weapons with overlaid text stating “…All LGBTQIA new pronouns was/were”. In this context, the use of “was/were” implies the killing of members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA)24 community. This narrative is strengthened by the inclusion of assault weapons, implying the individuals carrying weapons will commit acts of violence against LGBTQIA members. The post is considered a form of graphic violence given the depiction and incitement of a realistic threat targeting members of the LGBTQ2+ community by the selection of terminology and inclusion of weapons (i.e., assault rifles). The reference to the Taliban is also a notable indicator of violence as the organization enforces strict laws, based in sharia law, that limit the rights and fundamental freedoms of LGBTQ2+ individuals. This includes the banning of homosexuality by punishment of prison and, in extreme cases, stoning the individuals (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Specifically, members of the LGBTQ2+ community in Afghanistan have reported an increase in violence, gang-rape, and death threats since the Taliban assumed power in August 2021 (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

**Figure 18**: Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board depicting realistic threat against LGBTQ2+ community

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24 For the analysis of this specific post, the paper uses the term LGBTQIA because of its specific appearance and use in the post being discussed.
Violent homophobic content also included imagery or footage of victims of real-world acts of violence suffering from massive injuries or loss of bodily fluids to incite and inspire acts of violence against the LGBTQ2+ community. A sum of violent posts to 4chan’s /pol/ board depicted real-world victims of acts of violence, including physical and sexual assaults, to encourage others to commit similar attacks. The depiction of gore-like wounds and injuries inflicted on victims of violence normalizes the graphic acts and content. Graphic real-world content is also a source of inspiration by providing examples of how others can address their grievances in a “meaningful” way.

For example, a user commented to a violent and homophobic post with an image of a victim of hydrogen cyanide poisoning, including a caption stating: “Give me one reason why this shouldn’t be mandatory in all civilized nations.” The thread was dedicated to homophobia and, therefore, the paper reasonably infers the caption is encouraging cyanide poisoning as a means of violence against LGBTQ2+ peoples. The user reply appeared in a homophobic thread encouraging violence against LGBTQ2+ peoples. As such, by stating “Give me one reason why this shouldn’t be mandatory in all civilized nations” the user is expressing sentiments targeting individuals identifying as members of the LGBTQ2+ community, including: (1) incitement and acceptance of the fatal poisoning of individuals based on sexual preferences or identity; and (2) homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism is not condoned or accepted in civilized society. The narratives expressed in the post, as illustrated by Figure 19, is an apparent effort to incite and inspire violence against members of the LGBTQ2+ community.

Figure 19: Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board of individual suffering from cyanide poisoning

Bystander footage of real-world acts of violence against members of the LGBTQ2+ community is also used. The video footage depicting homophobic-inspired violence illustrated particularly gruesome and painful acts of violence. The sadistic nature of violence targeting LGBTQ2+

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25 To note, the paper is unable to confirm imagery of real-world acts of violence and victims were motivated by homophobic grievances. The images could depict victims of violent acts inspired by a range of ideologically motivated violent extremism grievances or other ideologies. The analysis determined the content is expressing homophobic grievances based on the textual content accompanying the images.

26 For reference, Figure 22 illustrates a graphic visualization of a victim of cyanide poisoning, which is responsible for the body turning a shiny, bright red colour that appears like severely burned skin. The reference to Zyklon B, which was the main poison used in Nazi gas chambers, suggests the post expresses antisemitism and homophobic grievances.
peoples depicted in content illustrates acts of violence that inflict long-term pain and suffering for victims. The other IMVE grievances did not demonstrate similar forms of violent acts or appetite amongst users for content depicting torturous deaths. Other IMVE grievances primarily shared video footage of murders with a deadly weapon, specifically, a handgun or rifle, which presumably results in close to immediate death. However, violent homophobic content used video footage depicting vivid and unique forms of fatal violence. For example, one post included an image and link to a video depicting a real-world self-immolation of a transgender individual. The video footage was posted by several users over the data collection period. The violent real-world incident occurred in a public setting, specifically, inside a retail store located in Berlin, Germany. The post included an image depicting heavy smoke seeping out of the doors and window of a store, which was accompanied with a statement “Tranny sets himself on fire in Berlin” and a link to the video footage. A snapshot image, as identified below, was used to entice users to click on the full video link.

Figure 20: Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board of video depicting a transgender being burned in a store

As noted, the graphic footage was accompanied by statements specifying the attack details, such as “Tranny sets himself on fire,” and illustrated support for the actions of the individual. The use of derogatory and offensive terms, such as “tranny,” aims to delegitimize transgender individuals and position them as inferior to the public. It further aims to desensitize acts of violence against transgender individuals. In response, user comments illustrated three commonalities: (1) contempt for transgender individuals; (2) incitement of other transgender individuals to commit self-harm; and (3) the use of hateful and violent discourse. In particular, the analysis determined the posting of this specific video footage consistently received high user engagement amongst 4chan’s /pol/ board users, with over 50 replies on each individual post. This demonstrates many users were comfortable engaging with such violent content.

The user engagement demonstrated a high level of desensitization to a graphic violence depicting excruciating pain and cruelty inflicted on a victim. In particular, the comments express humour in self-immolation further highlighting a desensitization to violence. For example, user comments included “Her pronouns were whoosh/were,” “she identifies as a bonfire” or “that’s one flaming faggot.” The comments illustrate the use of comedic strategies by means of language, such as puns and double entendres, as a way of minimizing the severity of the act of violence (e.g., Burnlin). Comparatively, other comments demonstrated a callous attitude toward the suffering and pain inflicted on a victim of self-immolation. These comments included “we
must donate gasoline to trannys,” “lol did they put him out before he died so he would suffer more?” or "probably raped by a turk and wanted to burn the stink off.” The indifference and insensitivity exhibited by users towards a vulnerable person was illustrated by levity directed to violent footage. For example, the use of “lol” or the offer to donate gasoline so others can commit similar acts of violence illustrates a lack of appropriate seriousness or earnestness. Ultimately, the humour and callousness found in torturous acts of violence could exemplify a desensitization to violence amongst /pol/ board users and contempt for the LGBTQ2+ community.

Of note, most of the violent comments posted on violent homophobic threads originated from different users27 (i.e., different 8-digit poster IDs), which suggests a high number of users engage in violent discourse. The observation identifies a sizeable community of homophobic users on 4chan’s /pol/ board and invalidates claims that single users are responsible for majority of violent discourse on a platform. As such, user engagement with violent content illustrated a desensitization to real-world violence.

There is a high prevalence of graphic homophobic content by means of images and videos of real-world acts of violence committed against members of the LGBTQ2+ community circulates 4chan’s /pol/ board. In particular, the graphic content depicts victims subjected to excruciating acts of violence as punishment for their sexual identity. The high prevalence suggests users’ proclivity for content inflicting long-term pain and suffering on members of the LGBTQ2+ community. The analysis also observed a high level of user engagement with such violent content by responding with messages of support, affirmation, and humour, which illustrated a concerning level of desensitization to graphic violence.

**Islamophobia**

The analysis determined 73% (48 of 66 posts) of Islamophobic content depicted or described violence. In particular, there is a high prevalence of graphic violence in Islamophobic content by means of videos, imagery and descriptive language showing real-world acts of violence. The content included graphic depictions of blood and carnage, which mirrored the posting strategy used for homophobic content. The use of images and videos depicting graphic violence eliminate an opportunity for users to imagine acts of violence based on descriptive language. The inability for users to imagine the violent acts removes an opportunity for users to downplay the severity of violence. Therefore, the use of video footage and imagery depicting real-world acts of violence forces users to witness the intended severity of graphic violence. Ultimately, the depiction of graphic violence to convey Islamophobic grievances forced users’ exposure to real-world acts of violence that seek to desensitize users to the expression and physical act of violence.

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27 Although 4chan grants anonymity to users, the platform does identify whether different users are commenting on a post by the user identification value, an 8-digit combination of numerical and letter values, such as Sk9yqD5t.
Figure 21: Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board aimed to deprecate Islam and incite fear amongst users

![Image of post](image.png)

The violent content spread fictitious narratives that demonized and deprecated the Islamic faith. In particular, the violent content depicted Islam as a vehicle driving violence against society by means of barbaric and primitive forms of assault. For example, Figure 21 illustrates a repurposed post that depicts a range of acts of violence considered to be part of Islam, as communicated by 4chan’s /pol/ board users, such as honour killings, slavery, female genital mutilation, burning people alive, rape, beheadings, and pedophilia. The post suggests that Islam encourages these gruesome acts of violence.

Imagery and footage of real-world instances of the acts of violence, identified in Figure 21, were shared on 4chan’s /pol/ board to express grievances targeting Islam and the Muslim community. Specifically, the depiction of these real-world acts of violence aimed to capitalize on the foundational tenets of Islamophobic grievances. For example, three separate users posted video footage of an execution by shooting committed by members of a terrorist organization. The inclusion of the ISIS flag in the upper right corner of each video suggests that the footage was produced by the terrorist organization, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The original poster of each video also included language that expressed grievances against Muslims, which is detailed in the following discussion. Based on these factors, including those outlined the preceding analysis, the paper reasonably infers the posts are expressing Islamophobia-based grievances.

28 The videos depicted an individual - the victim - on their knees, with their hands tied behind their back, facing the video camera used to capture the act of violence. Behind the victim, an individual is standing holding an assault rifle (appears to be an AK-47) directed at the victim’s head. In each video, the perpetrators of the execution all wear similar styles of camouflage and earth tone clothing. Further, each perpetrator is wearing a face covering presumably to avoid detection and identification by law enforcement or national security actors. The executions occurred outside, in broad daylight, which ensured viewer visibility of the act of violence.
The real-world footage vividly illustrates an execution-style murder, which means a perpetrator kills, at close range, a conscious victim under complete physical control and has no course of resistance or escape. Additionally, in some cases, these videos were modified to show the execution in slow motion and/or looping the violent footage\textsuperscript{29}, which magnifies the gore element of the video and increases the exposure to the violent act. In particular, the modified video footage specifically looped the content to repeatedly depict the killing of the individual. The footage also included verbal threats against individuals in the West and warns of imminent harm to others. Lastly, it is important to note, the videos depicted executions of different victims, which illustrates the accessibility of graphic and violent content online. The repetitive posting of the execution footage on 4chan’s /pol/ board could suggest the appeal of graphic violence amongst users. This finding speaks to the trajectory of users’ radicalization to violence process, whereby several users demonstrated a high-level of comfort in engaging with or viewing graphically violent content. In addition, an overwhelming number of users demonstrated a willingness or desire to respond to violent content with more violence, as observed in the user comments. Users responded to the graphic violent footage by encouraging physical violence and, in extreme cases, the killing of Muslims. As such, it is likely these users view real-world violence as a reasonable and justified means to addressing their ideological grievances.

The accompanying language to the violent footage warned of the inevitability of violence, inspired by Islam, targeting individuals living in the West. To do so, the footage and language did not depict graphic violence against the “out-group” which is the most common means to inciting or inspiring ideologically motivated violent extremism grievance. Rather, the content illustrated the out-group (Muslims) committing acts of violence against the in-group (non-Muslims). The content exacerbated users’ perception of a legitimate threat to the in-group by including well-known symbols of a prolific terrorist organization, such as the ISIS flag, which are motivated by grievances against the West. As such, the symbol aims to exacerbate fear.

\textsuperscript{29} Video footage that is “looped” refers to the modification of recorded content to ensure it continuously repeats. The content can be modified to repeat the full footage or specific segments of the footage, such as a more violent act in the footage. To note, ISIS often released execution videos in slow motion and, therefore, the paper acknowledges this visual effect was likely included by the developers. However, the looping was more likely the product of users sharing the videos.
amongst users by associating Islam to a terrorist organization responsible for violent mass-atrocities around the world. Ultimately, the content strengthened the perception of an “in-group” (non-Muslims) and “out-group” (Muslims) by implying a legitimate threat of violence to the in-group. Further, the inclusion of graphic footage and language implying imminent harm sought to inspire a visceral response amongst the perceived “in-group”. This was a unique strategy, in comparison to other IMVE grievances, deployed in the graphic Islamophobic content acquired during the data collection period.

Users also shared content depicting acts of violence that used primitive weapons. For example, a video depicting a public stoning was shared with the caption “be muslim, get stoned to death”, referring to a method of capital punishment whereby a group throws stones at a person to cause death by blunt trauma. Users responded to the footage by replying “he had it coming”, “Sharia Law is perfect you kafir. That was probably an adulterer or a thief who deserved it.”, “I think this is the perfect way to kill someone, everyone takes a bit of the responsibility to kill him, instead in the capital execution leaves all the burden to an entity”, “they are soft rocks he will be fine”, “the bigger joke is trying to apply western humanistic jurisdiction to subhumans. […] this is perfectly appropriate for “people” like these.” These comments demonstrate a violent and hateful perception of Muslims and, further, glorifies the graphic violence depicted in the video footage.

Specifically, the above comments illustrate users’ superiority complex regarding Muslims, as illustrated by “the bigger joke is trying to apply western humanistic jurisdiction to subhumans. […] this is perfectly appropriate for “people” like these”. The use of quotation marks around people is a subtle strategy to paint Muslims as an inferior subset of the population. Specifically, the function of air quotes or, in this case, quotation marks is to express satire, sarcasm, irony or euphemism. As such, the quotation marks around people suggests the author does not consider it an appropriate or justified term of reference for Muslims. Therefore, the comment is understood to imply Muslims should not be afforded the same rights and freedoms as non-Muslims. Importantly, the user comments also demonstrate the progression of engagement on graphic content, in which comments increasingly express violence and contempt, ranging between direct incitement of violent against Muslims to justifying acts of violence.

The depiction of barbaric and primitive forms of violence illustrates how users, possessing Islamophobic grievances, perceive and understand the Muslim culture and faith. Specifically, individuals holding Islamophobic grievances consider the religion of Islam as an inspiration and motivator for violence against the West or “non-believers”. Further, the grievances often perceive the religion of Islam, its associated culture, and the Muslim community as primitive and sexist. This perception amongst 4chan’s /pol/ board users is reflected in the types of violence depicted in the content. Further, the fictitious statements posted by users regarding the Muslim culture, community, and religion convey messages of incitement or inspiration for pre-emptive violence to defend their in-group (non-Muslims). This is a response to narratives of Muslims committing acts of violence against non-Muslims, which constructs a perceived threat against an

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30 For reference, the Quran does not mention stoning nor prescribe the acts as a punishment. However, Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), often described as the human understanding and practices of Sharia, imposes stoning as a Sharia-prescribed punishment (hadd) for certain illicit sexual acts based on the teachings and practices of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.
“in-group”. As such, the violence depicted in Islamophobic content seeks to inspire fear and paint Muslims as dangerous outliers to the rest of society.

V. OTHER VIOLENT GRIEVANCES

The analysis also observed a high prevalence (23%) of violent content inspired by grievances beyond the scope of ideologically motivated violent extremism. The violent content depicted and described graphic violence. Of importance, the analysis observed some content classified as ‘other’ did include benign, or in passing, references (visual or textual) to IMVE grievances. In these cases, the content was categorized purely into the ‘other’ category as the primary (or dominant) ideological motivation was beyond the IMVE scope. Therefore, the analysis was able to determine the range of motivations for violent content on 4chan’s /pol/ board, while also acknowledging the complexity of violent content and grievances circulating the online space. This decision ensures a more accurate analysis of the violent culture on 4chan’s /pol/ board.

The percentage of violent content beyond the scope of IMVE confirms IMVE grievances are the primary motivation for violent content and discourse on 4chan’s /pol/ board. However, approximately a quarter of all violent content (284 posts) collected did express alternative violent grievances, which is significant. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic inspired a significant amount of violent discourse on 4chan’s /pol/ board, specifically, pertaining to the development and distribution of vaccines. Content referenced and/or depicted violence targeting the implementation and enforcement of vaccination mandates, including individuals responsible for overseeing these processes, and those who received vaccinations. As such, a considerable amount of violent content targeted government officials, journalists and news anchors, health care providers, small business and restaurant owners, school board officials and educators, and many more. In addition, several violent posts expressed grievances against the enforcement of masking policies as a prevention effort against the spread of COVID-19.

Figure 23: Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board illustrating violent COVID-19 grievances

Like other grievances, the violent COVID-19 content exhibited variance in levels of severity, ranging between minimal violence to graphic violence. However, a large majority of violent content inspired by COVID-19 depicted vivid and, in many cases, real-world acts of violence. For example, several posts encouraged the beating or, in more extreme cases, the killing of
individuals wearing masks, those who received vaccinations and store owners or employees who enforced vaccination or masking policies. For example, one popular meme, as identified above, illustrated a customer at a Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) shooting an employee who was refusing service until they had proof of vaccination.

The use of violence to protest masking mandates was also illustrated in several posts. A considerable amount of this violent content depicted a real-world incident, in which a man entered a variety store with an assault weapon, intending to use the weapon if asked to wear a mask. Live footage and images of the incident were widely shared online and modified to express anti-masking grievances through textual statements. The use of these images implied a vivid and legitimate threat of violence against individuals enforcing mask mandates. This content received high amounts of violent user engagement that encouraged violence against individuals wearing masks and store owners enforcing the mandates. The accompanying captions further incited or implied violence, such as “My Mask? Sure it’s in the car let me just run out and get it…”. In context, this suggests the individual is going outside to collect a weapon to use against the store clerk. As such, the post depicts graphic violence by the incitement of a realistic threat of violence against a specific group of the population, those that wear masks or enforce the mandates.

Figure 24: Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board inciting violence against mask mandates

The analysis also observed violence targeting individuals of Asian descent by depicting victims of assaults with a deadly weapon. Hateful and xenophobic rhetoric targeting Asians was popularized and widely shared online in response to the conception of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hateful rhetoric placed blame on the Asian community for developing and spreading the lethal virus. For example, several posts included images of an assault with a deadly weapon and,

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31 A variety store refers to a retail store that sells general merchandise, such as apparel, dry goods or a range of groceries.

32 The first identified case of COVID-19 was in Wuhan, China, and as the disease spread rapidly causing life-threatening illnesses in healthy individuals, it triggered fear amongst the global population. The fear triggered a significant increase in xenophobic and/or Sinophobia acts of violence, discrimination, and racism against individuals of East Asian and Southeast Asian descent. The hateful and violent acts were a means to place blame for the virus’ devastating impact on human life. These hateful and racist sentiments were corroborated by the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, who referenced the COVID-19 virus as the ‘Chinese virus.’ The reference to the ‘Chinese virus’ triggered an exponential increase in anti-Asian rhetoric and, in extreme cases, acts of violence.
more specifically, a mass shooting of Asians who were restrained with their hands tied behind their backs. The images depict a real-world incident and include the visual gore-like elements, such as bullet wounds, blood, dead bodies, and assault weapons. Further, the image includes a before and after depiction of the assault with a deadly weapon, in which the first image illustrates the individual kneeling with the assault weapon pointed at the victim’s head; and, the second image depicts two victims lying on the ground, both appear deceased, with visible gunshot wounds. The inclusion of the before and after images of the deadly assault emphasizes the violence of the real-world incident. The post also includes a textual statement that reads “Soon all vaxxies will meet this fate,” which incites direct violence against individuals who received COVID-19 vaccinations. Contextually, this statement is inciting the execution of individuals vaccinated against COVID-19. As such, the images and statements expressed support and intent to commit extreme acts of violence against individuals of Asian descent and those vaccinated against COVID-19.

Figure 25: Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board depicting graphic violence targeting Asian community

![Post to 4chan’s /pol/ board depicting graphic violence targeting Asian community](image)

There was a high prevalence of violent user engagement with COVID-19 content. Comments included descriptive violence regarding committing assaults with a deadly weapon against vaccinated individuals. Users posted comments such as “I walk around with a loaded gun. At some point someone is going to ask me if I’m vaxxed and bang. Murder suicide hahaha why go alone,” “In America it is perfectly legal to shoot someone for this [for being vaccinated],” or “this would be an awesome job [killing vaccinated individuals] where do I apply?”. These comments provide a glimpse into the type of violence expressed through user comments to

against Asians. Therefore, racist, hateful, and violent rhetoric translated to the online space. As such, content espousing violence against individuals of Asian descent was a common form of violent content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board.
content pertaining to COVID-19. It further exhibits the level of civil discontent regarding the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

IV. EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

The findings illustrate a significant amount of ideologically motivated violent extremist content (1228 of 1608 posts) posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board. In particular, the study observed more graphically violent content for homophobic and Islamophobic grievances, including visual footage and images of real-world acts of lethal abuse. The high prevalence of violence leads to the assertion that individuals cannot regularly engage on the platform without being exposed to violence, including IMVE violence. The paper reasonably infers that the culture on 4chan’s /pol/ board, as experienced by any user, is violent. As such, the paper warns of a risk of habitual (or repetitive) exposure to content depicting violence impacting users’ desensitization to violence.

The high prevalence of violent content illustrates the capacity of 4chan’s /pol/ board to facilitate habitual exposure. In addition, the duplication of violent content (i.e., reposting of images or videos) or analogous violent content (i.e., videos of murder by execution but of different victims) illustrates repetitive exposure to gruesome acts of violence. For example, 4chan's /pol/ board had numerous videos and images posted depicting separate instances of executions by assault weapons, in which users were repeatedly exposed to identical forms of violence. Research suggests this normalization of acts of real-world violence impacts the willingness and capacity for an individual to participate in violent discourse or activity (Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007; Murray 2008). Specifically, research indicates that habitual exposure to violent content results in greater pleasant arousal to violence and increased aggressiveness (Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007; Murray 2008). It follows that repetitive and constant exposure to graphic violence increases an individual’s aggressive responses to one’s surroundings and beliefs.

Research also suggests that more shocking and emotional violent images directly impacts an individual’s willingness to adopt a belief in violence. The exposure and adoption of violence is often referenced as a “contagion effect”, in which greater exposure to violence results in higher levels of aggression (Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007; Murray 2008). As such, exposure to violence and, more specifically, real-world violence can create a ripple effect of violent acts inspired by exposure to this type of content. Therefore, the high prevalence of violent content and, in some cases, content depicting graphic violence could accelerate an individual’s radicalization to violence process. However, existing research supports that online engagement cannot independently radicalize individuals but, rather also requires a range of offline factors (i.e., risk factors) to be present. As such, the study does not provide sufficient data to claim 4chan’s /pol/ board radicalizes, including to violence, all users. Rather, this paper suggests that individuals presenting with risk factors for radicalization and radicalization to violence are at greater risk of triggering or accelerating these processes when engaged with 4chan’s /pol/ board.

The constant exposure to violence on the platform presents a hazardous environment for users at-risk of radicalization or radicalization to violence. To date, experts propose several risk factors for an individual radicalizing or radicalizing to violence, which include: experiencing an identity conflict or trauma, perception of a threat or crisis, individual curiosity, wanting to belong,
adopting an “us versus them” perception, exposure to violent extremist narratives or individuals, and economic or social stressors (i.e., losing a job or death of a family member) (Berger, 2018: 124-126; Tore Bjørgo, 1997; van der Valk and Wagenaar, 2010). These risk factors create a higher probability of an individual adopting extremist beliefs or participating in extremist behaviour. Research also indicates the exposure to violent extremist content could result in changes to an individual’s belief systems, including the tolerance for, or adoption of, more extreme and violent grievances (Koehler, 2014; Von Behr et al., 2013; Wojcieszak, 2010). Evidence also suggests online engagement in like-minded communities can strengthen and enflame extremist beliefs (Wojcieszak, 2010). This study’s findings suggest 4chan’s /pol/ board is a homogenized online community of ideologically motivated violent extremism and, therefore, presents a risk of strengthening or enflaming grievances amongst at-risk users. Further, Gill et al. (2017) presented evidence of a link between exposure to extremist content online and real-world violence, indicating that half of convicted UK-based terrorists learned how to carry out acts of violence through information online. Therefore, there is some evidence to suggest exposure to extremist content links to the adoption of extremist beliefs or participation in real-world acts of violence. As such, the daily presence of IMVE content on the /pol/ board constructs an online community that believes in violence as a legitimate tool for addressing ideological grievances. It also can justify and legitimize violent extremism for individuals at-risk of radicalization to violence.

The large amount of content depicting violence suggests a strong probability that 4chan /pol/ board users are continuously exposed to shocking and emotional images, videos, or language. This suggests /pol/ board users cannot participate on the platform without being exposed to a substantial amount of often graphic violence. As such, the analysis concludes 4chan’s /pol/ board facilitates an online environment that increases the probability of a user experiencing higher levels of aggression and exposure to violence. In particular, the paper suggests that if an individual is at-risk of radicalization to violence, and engages on 4chan’s /pol/ board, then the risk of radicalizing to violence increases. Based on this paper’s findings, the at-risk user will inevitably be exposed to violent content depicting or describing ideological grievances. Further, the prevalence of ideological grievances presents a strong probability the at-risk user will be exposed to content that reinforces their extremist and/or violent belief systems. This exposure could result in changes to the individual’s perception of reality and lead to an increased tolerance of acts of violence (Koehler, 2014; Von Behr et al., 2013; Wojcieszak, 2010). Therefore, the paper can reasonably infer engagement on 4chan’s /pol/ board presents a hazardous environment for individuals at-risk of both radicalization and radicalization to violence by facilitating exposure and desensitization to ideologically motivated violent extremist content.

ANALYSIS OF CONTENT ENGAGEMENT

The analysis of user engagement with IMVE content aims to answer two of the research questions: (1) What is the level of user engagement (i.e., replies) with violent content inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremism? and (2) How does user engagement impact the trajectory of violent discourse? To answer these questions, the analysis outlines quantitative data illustrating the frequency of user engagement with ideologically motivated violent extremist content (IMVE) and ideologically motivated extremist content (IME) posted to 4chan’s /pol/
board. In addition, the analysis outlines qualitative trends and characteristics of user engagement with violent and non-violent content.

**Table 4: Categorization of user engagement on IMVE and IME content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0 replies</th>
<th>1-29 replies</th>
<th>30-99 replies</th>
<th>100 or more replies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No engagement</td>
<td>Low Engagement</td>
<td>Moderately High Engagement</td>
<td>High Engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**VII. CONTENT ENGAGEMENT**

The research shows that violent content receives significantly higher amounts of user engagement (53% of threads had 50 or more replies). The paper considers that replying to specific threads on 4chan’s /pol/ board is indicative of a conscious and deliberate decision to engage with violent or non-violent content. As such, user engagement exhibits an individual’s support or lack thereof for IMVE or IME. The threshold for user engagement on content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board is outlined in Table 4. The data analysis observed 53% of violent content had 50 or more comments posted to a thread on the /pol/ board. Of this percentage, 63% (416 threads) of the posts had 100 or more comments, which is considered high user engagement based on the thresholds identified for this paper. As such, the analysis determined that a majority of violent content had high user engagement (100 or more replies). In comparison, only 12% (46 of 480 posts) of IME (non-violent) content had 100 or more replies, which illustrates a stark contrast in the level of user engagement compared to violent content. The low user engagement observed for non-violent content suggests that users are more enticed by violent discourse. As such, the data confirm that 4chan’s /pol/ board users gravitate to violent content and, in turn, violent content is more likely to receive higher levels of user engagement. Further, the high level of user engagement on violent content could suggest the normalization of violence and, by extension, facilitate an ideal online environment for users to actively participate in violent discourse.
Chart 4: Illustrates user engagement on non-violent and violent content.

Table 5 outlines the empirical data for user engagement by number of replies to IMVE (violent) and IME (non-violent) content on 4chan’s /pol/ board. The data identifies over 50% of violent content had 50 replies or more. This is considered moderately high user engagement. The study also calculated the percentages for total violent content receiving high user engagement (100 or more replies), which are: white nationalism or supremacy (55%); antisemitic (56%); violent misogyny (51%); anti-immigration (54%); and homophobia (57%). The exceptions to this trend are anti-authority (36%) and Islamophobia (35%). These percentages illustrate that the majority of IMVE content receives higher levels of user engagement.

Table 5: Table illustrating number of replies to violent content
In comparison, Table 6 identifies the number of replies to IME (non-violent) content. The empirical data outlines that a majority (68%) of non-violent content only had 0-29 user replies. This represents none to low user engagement with non-violent content. As such, the data identified 4chan users as engaging less with non-violent content, which suggests the content itself did not resonate amongst community members. This finding reinforces the violent culture present on 4chan’s /pol/ board. The study calculated the percentages for non-violent content per grievance that received none to low user engagement (0-29 replies). The percentages are: white nationalism or supremacy (61%); antisemitism (68%); violent misogyny (54%); anti-authority (75%); anti-immigration (68%); Islamophobia (56%); and homophobia (85%). These percentages per grievance illustrate that most non-violent content received none to low user engagement, which is a stark comparison to findings illustrating that most violent content received very high user engagement.

Table 6: Table illustrating number of replies to ideologically motivated extremist (non-violent) content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Replies to Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism Content on 4chan’s /pol/ board</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1-9</th>
<th>10-29</th>
<th>30-49</th>
<th>50-99</th>
<th>100-199</th>
<th>200 or more</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violent Content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Immigration</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>6 (11%)</td>
<td>14 (25%)</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
<td>12 (22%)</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamophobia</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>6 (13%)</td>
<td>19 (40%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
<td>8 (17%)</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobia</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>8 (8%)</td>
<td>21 (21%)</td>
<td>13 (13%)</td>
<td>21 (21%)</td>
<td>22 (22%)</td>
<td>13 (13%)</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2 (0.7%)</td>
<td>37 (13%)</td>
<td>57 (20%)</td>
<td>35 (12%)</td>
<td>53 (19%)</td>
<td>53 (19%)</td>
<td>47 (17%)</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Violent Content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Nationalism or Supremacy</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>37 (31%)</td>
<td>35 (29%)</td>
<td>13 (11%)</td>
<td>16 (13%)</td>
<td>10 (8%)</td>
<td>7 (6%)</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisemitism</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>42 (37%)</td>
<td>32 (28%)</td>
<td>8 (7%)</td>
<td>15 (13%)</td>
<td>7 (6%)</td>
<td>6 (5%)</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Misogyny</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>11 (19%)</td>
<td>19 (33%)</td>
<td>9 (16%)</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Authority</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>6 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (16%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The analysis of user engagement confirms the paper’s hypothesis that violent content receives higher levels of engagement amongst 4chan’s /pol/ board users. This finding suggests that the material incites a visceral response capable of motivating users to engage with the content (i.e., reply in a thread). In particular, the analysis hypothesizes /pol/ board users could observe others’ propensity for violence by identifying contrast in user engagement with violent versus non-violent content. If a user wanted to facilitate discussion and user engagement, the most effective strategy would be to post content inciting or inspiring violence. The evidence suggests users gravitate to violent content and are more active within violent threads (i.e., by replying to content). The engagement trends for violent content facilitates a ripple effect of violent user engagement, in which users could observe the tendency of others to engage with violent content and, in turn, post similar types of content. However, this cannot be confirmed by the existing evidence base alone, and, therefore, further analysis of user engagement with violent content is required. Ultimately, this paper affirms the high levels of violent content and engagement with violent content reasonably implies /pol/ board users accept and prefer violent content.

As discussed previously, exposure to violent media, such as video games, movies, television, images, and more, can increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior (Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007; Murray 2008) and desensitization to violence (Bandura, 1973; Berkowitz, 1965; Huesmann & Kirwil, 2007; Huesmann, Moise, Podolski & Eron, 2003). The paper observed violent content depicted acts of domination and expressed superiority over a defined “in-group”. For example, IMVE content encouraged or depicted acts of violence that required physical domination of victims (i.e., sexual abuse or torture). The captions linked to the visual depictions or user replies expressed such acts of violence as a rewarding and enjoyable experience for the perpetrator. The use of physical violence is a common form of exerting one’s dominance over another. The analysis observed users posted violent content targeting, in particular, equity deserving communities as a means of domination and affirmation of their superiority. This content often depicted or described physical acts of violence being committed by a defined “in-group”, such as white males. IMVE actors advocate grievances based on specific groups of individuals defined by race, gender, religion
and/or culture. In doing so, individuals supporting these grievances aim to strengthen a hierarchal system, in which an “in-group” is deemed superior to an “out-group”. As such, this paper suggests a contributing factor to the appeal of violent content is its role in facilitating a sense of domination or superiority.

VIII. CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

The qualitative data analysis of user replies to violent content observed factors that could help better understand the violent culture on 4chan’s /pol/ board. These included: (1) the use of hateful and violent language to exacerbate grievances; (2) homogenization of violent ideological grievances; (3) immediacy in posting activity; and (4) users responding to violence with more explicit content or language. This paper suggests these factors play a role in facilitating violent culture on 4chan’s /pol/ board, including better understanding the prevalence of violence. The factors reduce barriers to participate in violent discourse, trigger agitation or aggression, homogenize the violent online community, and foster a hateful environment that normalizes extremist behaviour. Together, these factors, in part, facilitate an online environment ripe for violent discourse and engagement amongst users.

Threats of Violence

The analysis of user engagement on violent /pol/ board threads identified a high prevalence of hateful and violent language used to threaten users identifying with a defined out-group. In particular, derogatory, offensive, and hateful terminology was routinely used in threats of violence against equity-seeking groups. These threats of violence also deployed descriptive language to exemplify more gory and realistic acts of violence. The parallel use of hateful and violent language exacerbated the perception of a threat of violence. In particular, the types of threats routinely posted by 4chan’s /pol/ board users include “die n*****,” “hang yourself, kek,” or “gas the k***.” In many cases, users posted variations of these most common threats, such as “die n***** die” or “hang yourself n*****.” The paper suggests users tailored the hateful references (i.e., n***** or kek) to convey their personal grievances. For example, if a user held antisemitic grievances the threats would use the term “k***” or “kek”. Overall, the analysis determined that these combinations of language and threats were the most prominent replies to violent content on 4chan’s /pol/ board.

The analysis suggests that a high prevalence of threats of violence using hateful and graphic language suggests a desensitization and normalization to this type of discourse. In particular, the frequency of users posting hateful and graphic threats implies a benign perception or impact of using hateful terms amongst 4chan users. The use of hateful and graphic terminology is used as colloquial and everyday language on 4chan’s /pol/ board and illustrates a desensitization amongst 4chan’s /pol/ board users. Specifically, over 95% of violent content included at least one reference to the hateful term’s n*****, tranny, whore, fag, and k***. Further, most of the violent content receiving high user engagement referenced one of these terms in almost every reply, often alongside violent language. The high frequency of hateful and graphic language indicates a considerable desensitization amongst 4chan’s /pol/ board users regarding their engagement with violent content.
The use of hateful terms on 4chan’s /pol/ board provides insights into how the online platform fosters an inclusive environment for individuals expressing violence. In particular, the high prevalence of hateful and graphic language suggests that a large segment of active 4chan /pol/ board users share similar grievances and desire to respond violently. Therefore, the frequent and colloquial use of hateful or graphic language illustrates the impact of users engaging with like-minded individuals, in which a homogeneous community fosters a hospitable environment for expressing violent grievances. In addition, popular language used on 4chan’s /pol/ board (i.e., k*** or n******) are not socially acceptable in offline engagement and, therefore, 4chan’s /pol/ board creates a safe space for users to express their opinions and grievances. The analysis suggests that the anonymous nature of 4chan’s /pol/ board guarantees users protection from social suppression or consequences. The veil of anonymity protects 4chan users from real-world identification or accountability. As a result, 4chan’s /pol/ board reduces the social costs of hateful and violent engagement and, therefore, users are willing to actively participate in violent discourse.

**Devil’s Advocate Strategy**

The analysis observed expressions of counter- or alternative narratives to the primary ideological grievance (as per specific threads) fostered violent discourse on the platform. In many cases, the counter- or alternative narratives deployed violent language targeting the defined in-group, which exacerbated the violent culture on 4chan’s /pol/ board. Primarily, users embodied a devil’s advocate role to protest the IMVE grievances expressed by other users. The analysis did observe that this strategy of countering a motivating grievance escalated the severity of violence in user engagement. In particular, a devil’s advocate role was observed in two forms: (1) sharing alternative viewpoints or denouncing violence; and (2) inciting violence against the defined “in-group”. Both strategies demonstrated the conception of violence within 4chan’s /pol/ board.

In some cases, users expressed alternative viewpoints by denouncing the violence or ideology depicted in a post. Other users cited information to delegitimize or counter the IMVE grievance. For example, several posts cited mis- or disinformation to incite and inspire violence and, in some instances, other users replied by highlighting the inaccuracies in the post’s information. Research suggests that individuals can be dissuaded from adopting IMVE grievances by means of alternative or counter narratives, which include debunking false information (Awan et al., 2019; Berger, 2016; Braddock, 2020; Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Briggs & Feve, 2013, 2014). Alternative, or counter narratives disrupt a radicalization process by encouraging an individual to question their ideological beliefs. The premise of alternative or counter narratives is to encourage rational decision-making amongst individuals inundated by propaganda content. However, the analysis determined that these isolated instances of users posting an alternative viewpoint failed to de-escalate violent discourse. Users who posted opposing viewpoints were victimized by 4chan users for failing to support their perceived “in-group,” as defined by specific IMVE grievances. In addition, the expression of alternative or counter viewpoints triggered an intensification of users’ violent engagement on 4chan’s /pol/ board, such as posting hateful and graphic threats of violence directed at the individual user or “out-group”. 
Some users also responded to others expressing violence by threatening violence against the defined “in-group”. In this particular case, the devil’s advocate incited violence against users expressing IMVE grievances or users belonging to a defined “in-group.” For example, one user commented “Kill all nazis, racists, nationalists and fascists,” in response to an antisemitic post, which only exacerbated the violent discourse. The perception of the “in-group” being targeted strengthened users’ convictions in their ideological beliefs and need to exert dominance over the defined “out-group”. In other words, the “in-group” responded with violence against the “out-group” to illustrate their dominance and perceived superiority. Ultimately, the use of violence to counter violence intensified the convictions of users expressing IMVE grievances.

The analysis suggests that users who disapprove of violent engagement on 4chan’s /pol/ board are alienated and victimized for failing to adhere to the dominant views expressed on the board. In response, these users migrate to alternative platforms and 4chan’s /pol/ board further devolves into a like-minded online community of adherents to ideologically motivated violent extremism. This homogenization of 4chan’s /pol/ board creates an environment ripe for violent discourse intended to inspire and incite real-world violence.

**Diminished Capacity for Rational Decision-Making**

The analysis observed a diminished capacity for 4chan’s /pol/ board users to participate in rational decision-making to filter their engagement and behaviour. The lack of rational decision-making executed by /pol/ board users could impact users’ expression of violence. In particular, the analysis observed frequent occurrences of spelling errors and incomprehensible sentences in violent replies posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board. Specifically, the analysis observed violent user replies often misspelled common, simple words, such as the, boy, girl or need. The analysis suggests the high prevalence of spelling errors is likely a result of users responding quickly, in real-time, to violent content or replies. The rapid response time and immediacy in expressing grievances implies minimal opportunity for rational decision making. Therefore, the ability to consider the short-term or long-term impact of your decision to post content is weakened, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of a user actively participating in violent discourse.

To date, research suggests that the development of online communication platforms shrinks time and space, as individuals can communicate or share information in real-time (Lule, 2012). As such, online communication platforms have introduced a level of immediacy in communication and interaction that has never existed on a global scale (Weimann, 2004; Saltman, 2016; Zakaria, 2014). The quick response time and presence of spelling errors observed in violent posting activity suggests a possible vulnerability for individuals’ decision-making processes; individuals are less likely to filter any hateful or violent sentiments. Users are likely to post unfiltered opinions provoked by increased exposure to violent content, including posts or user replies. Therefore, the diminished capacity to filter user engagement on 4chan’s /pol/ board heightens the risk of violent discourse. As a result, the platform is at greater risk for fostering a violent culture by means of increasing the prevalence of violent content or replies.

In conclusion, the paper suggests 4chan’s /pol/ fosters a violent culture by the prevalence of violent content and patterns in user engagement. The culture of violence vindicates ideological grievances and encourages a belief in violence as a legitimate tool to solving such grievances. In
turn, the platform’s culture increases the confidence of users to post violent content, which creates a circular pattern of fostering violence on the /pol/ board. The comfort user’s have to express violent or hateful grievances increases due to the lack of social judgement or consequences. Users are not ostracized or expelled from 4chan’s /pol/ board for posting violent or hateful content. In fact, the high prevalence of violence and hate inspired by IMVE, as illustrated in this analysis, is more likely to cause the migration of users who do not maintain such views. This increases the homogenization of 4chan’s /pol/ board to comprise of users possessing extremist and violent beliefs. Lastly, the analysis suggests that habitual exposure to violent content, including threads and user replies, normalizes and desensitizes 4chan users to online and offline violence. Arguably, participation and exposure to violent content or user engagement increases the likelihood of others adopting or posting violent content. As a result, 4chan’s /pol/ board increasingly becomes more inundated with, and tolerant of, violence.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The foundation of this research is built on three questions centered on better understanding the prevalence, culture and progression of violent discourse inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremism (IMVE) on 4chan’s /pol/ board, including its impact on radicalizing users to violence. The questions are: (1) How does the trajectory of violent discourse manifest itself on 4chan’s /pol/ board? (2) What is the level of user engagement (i.e., comments) with violent content inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremism? and, (3) Is 4chan’s /pol/ board a risk for radicalization to violence and, by extension, real-world violence? The research questions contribute to our understanding of the impact of social media platforms to inspire and incite violence to respond to IMVE grievances. Specifically, the paper aims to illuminate the role of smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms in constructing an environment for IMVE narratives, messaging, and activity to flourish.

How does the trajectory of violent discourse manifest itself on smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platforms?

The paper concludes that 4chan’s /pol/ board is a haven for adherents of IMVE to express violent grievances and engage with like-minded individuals. Specifically, 76% (1228 of 1608 posts) of all collected content was considered ideologically motivated violent extremism. The high prevalence of IMVE content suggests the platform is dominated by extremists. As such, online users provoke and engage in violent discourse. The qualitative analysis of violent content posted to 4chan’s /pol/ board aimed to identify trends in the expressions of violence. It distinguished variance in the severity of violence depicted in IMVE content, ranging between benign to graphic violent references. The graphic references included imagery, footage and language showing vivid or gory acts of real-world violence, which conveys a realistic threat of violence to specific equity-seeking groups. Therefore, the analysis concludes that habitual or incessant exposure to violent content poses a significant risk of users’ desensitization to violence. Specifically, the depiction of real-world acts of violence intensifies the impact of desensitization by (1) demonstrating an act of violence targeting an in-group, expect in the case of anti-
immigration in which violence targeted out-groups; (2) illustrating a realistic act of violence; and (3) increases the ability to minimize the severity of violence in their mind. Ultimately, exposure to real-world acts of violence increases the risk of desensitization amongst 4chan users.

Further, the high prevalence of violent content, regardless of its motivating grievance, suggests users are exposed to graphic violence on a daily basis. 4chan’s /pol/ board users are not able to view content specific to their preferences; as a result users are exposed to all content posted to the imageboard. This exposure to all forms of violence plays a role in facilitating the adoption of violent grievances by normalizing and desensitizing users to violence. Therefore, the paper concludes exposure to any form of graphic violence facilitates a normalization and desensitization to violence.

Overall, the paper suggests a high prevalence of violent content on 4chan’s /pol/ board could be, in part, a byproduct of minimal content moderation. Voluntary enforcement of content moderation policies is an inadequate means to ensure the safety of 4chan’s /pol/ board users, given the homogenous nature of users sympathetic to IMVE. In particular, the high percentage of users likely desensitized to violence suggests an impairment to appropriate content moderation. In other words, the /pol/ board ‘janitors’ are unlikely to identify and remove harmful content as it resonates with their personal ideological beliefs. As such, employing desensitized online users as ‘janitors’ risks content moderation decisions being based on a distorted sense of reality. Ultimately, the paper establishes an evidence base to confirm an ineffective or inadequate content moderation of 4chan’s /pol/ board. Therefore, the lack of content moderation constructs a haven for IMVE actors whereby users migrate to the platform to circumvent the enforcement of content moderation on mainstream platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter. In conclusion, 4chan’s /pol/ board does not enforce stringent content moderation policies and, as a result, it fosters a high level of hate, racism and violence that escalates the trajectory of violent discourse amongst users.

The evidence presented in this paper confirms that 4chan’s /pol/ board constructs a homogenous online community of IMVE actors with a proclivity for violent and graphic posting activity. The like-minded online community creates a space for users to interact, communicate and inflame violent grievances. The homogenous engagement triggers an escalation in the severity of violent discourse amongst users, in response to the affirmation and legitimization of violent grievances received by like-minded users. As a result, the aggression and confidence of /pol/ board users increases, which heightens the risk of participating in violent online activity or engagement. User exposure to violent and graphic content and homogenous engagement leads to the development of an online echo-chamber on 4chan’s /pol/ board. Ultimately, users undergo incessant exposure to violence that impact posting activity and user engagement. These findings confirm 4chan’s /pol/ board’s daily culture is violent.

What is the level of user engagement (i.e., replies) with violent content that espouses ideologically motivated violent extremism grievances?

The desensitization and normalization of violence creates a psyche that significantly impacts a user’s willingness to engage with violent content. The analysis showed that violent content received higher user engagement; over 50% of violent content had high user engagement (100 or
more replies). The high user engagement with violent content suggests users’ comfort and willingness to view, read, build on, and regurgitate violence on 4chan’s /pol/ board. The findings reinforce the conclusion that 4chan’s /pol/ board is an echo-chamber of violence providing reinforcement, affirmation, and confidence in grievances held by users, and increasing the homogenization of its users’ ideological beliefs and perceptions of the world.

By observing content and user engagement, the analysis determined factors that facilitate a violent culture on 4chan’s /pol/ board, which include: (1) the use of hateful and violent language to exacerbate grievances; (2) homogenization of violent ideological grievances; (3) immediacy in posting activity; and (4) users responding to violence with more explicit content or language. In particular, the use of hateful terms on 4chan’s /pol/ board provides insights into how the online platform fosters an inclusive environment for individuals expressing violence. The high prevalence of hateful and graphic language suggests a large segment of active 4chan /pol/ board users share similar grievances and desire to respond violently. Therefore, the frequent and colloquial use of such language illustrates the impact of users engaging with like-minded individuals, in which a homogeneous community fosters a hospitable environment for expressing violent grievances. In addition, popular language used on 4chan’s /pol/ board (i.e., k*** or n******) are not socially acceptable in offline engagement and, therefore, 4chan’s /pol/ board creates a safe space for users to express their opinions and grievances. The paper suggests the anonymous nature of 4chan’s /pol/ board guarantees users’ protection from social suppression or consequences. In isolated instances, users also embodied a devil’s advocate role to protest the IMVE grievance expressed in the content, in which other users responded to with violent rhetoric.

Lastly, user replies demonstrated quick response times and a high presence of spelling errors, which could suggest a possible vulnerability for individuals’ decision-making processes. The immediacy of online communication reduces a window of opportunity for rational decision-making, including self-filtering of one’s thoughts and responses. As such, users are more likely to respond emotionally to violent content, which can increase the likelihood of users expressing violence or hate. Ultimately, the analysis of content and user engagement illustrated 4chan’s /pol/ board fosters a violent culture, which presents a risk of increasing the severity and prevalence of violence in threads. The escalation in severity and frequency of violent content exacerbates the habitual and incessant exposure to violence.

Is 4chan’s /pol/ board a risk for radicalization to violence and, by extension, real-world violence?

The paper concludes 4chan’s /pol/ board poses concerns for the inspiration or incitement of real-world acts of violence. The high prevalence of graphic violence, including imagery or footage of real-world acts of violence, triggers causal factors for the radicalization to violence process. Specifically, the habitual exposure of users causes a desensitization to real-world acts of violence. These findings can be broadly applied to understanding the role of smaller-scale, less-regulated social media platforms to spread, inspire and incite violence. As illustrated, smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms function as fringe communities cultivating IMVE grievances. Individuals with a proclivity for violence or hate inspired by ideologically motivated violent extremist grievances gravitate to smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms for acceptance,
indulgences, and impunity. The inadequate content moderation of these platforms creates a safe space for users to express violent grievances and communicate with likeminded users. Ultimately, the platform’s propensity for hate and violence forces a migration of disapproving or uncomfortable users to mainstream platforms. The mainstream platforms construct a more positive and safer online environment for these users due to content moderation and enforcement of community guidelines or terms of service. Therefore, the membership of smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms is primarily comprised of users espousing hate and violence. In response, the paper suggests smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms inadequate content moderation and user affordances, such as anonymity, foster an online environment ripe for violent discourse.

Through this lens, the paper confirms the role of a smaller-scale, less-regulated platform, 4chan, in fostering an environment capable of grooming at-risk individuals to participate in, or support, IMVE acts of real-world violence. As previously noted, the Christchurch attack gained notoriety for inspiring a series of deadly ideologically motivated acts of violence, all of which cited material posted by Brenton Tarrant. In particular, the content posted by Tarrant inspired the Poway Synagogue and Escondido Mosque fire, the El Paso shooting and, the Bærum Mosque shooting. Each perpetrator of these acts of violence also posted propaganda material on smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms, including 4chan and 8chan’s /pol/ boards. As such, user engagement with content associated to these acts of real-world violence likely mirrored trends and findings in this paper. In other words, the habitual exposure to graphic and violent content, the desensitization to violence, and the functionalities of smaller-scale, less-regulated platforms, including minimal content moderation and anonymity, assisted in the facilitation of the perpetrators’ radicalization to violence process.

Ultimately, this paper confirms 4chan’s /pol/ board’s functionality as an echo-chamber of violence. The online community further presents a hazardous community for individuals at-risk of radicalization to violence based on the high prevalence of violent content. Users are inundated with violence inspired by IMVE grievances, in which the quality and quantity of content triggers a desensitization to violence. As a result, 4chan’s /pol/ board users are at high-risk for radicalizing to violence whereby users translate online violence and aggression to real-world acts of violence. In closing, the paper concludes 4chan’s /pol/ board cultivates an online environment capable of facilitating violent discourse that progressively increases in severity and frequency. In doing so, individuals face a significant risk of adopting IMVE grievances and considering violence as a justifiable means to an end. Therefore, 4chan’s /pol/ board users are on the fringe of radicalizing to violence.
REFERENCES


Putrill, J. (15 March 2019). Fuelled by a toxic, alt-right echo chamber, Christchurch shooter’s views were celebrated online. *ABC News*. https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/christchurch-shooters-views-were-celebrated-online/10907056.


APPENDICES
## ANNEX A: QUANTITATIVE DATA AMOUNT OF VIOLENT & NON-VIOLENT CONTENT

Amount & Percentage of Violent and Non-Violent Content Posted to 4chan’s /pol/ Board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Violent</th>
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<th>Non-Violent</th>
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<th>Total (Violent + Non-Violent)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Number</td>
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<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
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<td>119</td>
<td>29%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>57</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>48</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobia</td>
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<td>71%</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antisemitism</td>
<td>245</td>
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<td>113</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>358</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anti-Immigration</td>
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<td>Anti-Authority</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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ANNEX B: CHARTS ILLUSTRATING VIOLENT & NON-VIOLENT CONTENT PER GRIEVANCE

Chart A: White Nationalism or Supremacy

- Violent: 71%
- Non-Violent: 29%

Chart B: Antisemitism

- Violent: 68%
- Non-Violent: 32%

Chart C: Violent Misogyny

- Violent: 74%
- Non-Violent: 26%

Chart D: Anti-Authority

- Violent: 77%
- Non-Violent: 23%
Chart E: Anti-Immigration

- Violent: 74%
- Non-Violent: 26%

Chart F: Islamophobia

- Violent: 73%
- Non-Violent: 27%

Chart G: Homophobia

- Violent: 71%
- Non-Violent: 29%
ANNEX C: QUANTITATIVE DATA FOR USER ENGAGEMENT

1. Number of Replies to White Nationalism or Supremacy Content on 4chan

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2. Number of Replies to Violent Misogyny Content on 4chan

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### 4. Number of Replies to Homophobic Content on 4chan

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<td>53</td>
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ANNEX D: CHARTS ILLUSTRATING VIOLENT & NON-VIOLENT CONTENT ENGAGEMENT PER GRIEVANCE

Chart A: White Nationalism or Supremacy

Chart B: Antisemitism
**Chart C: Violent Misogyny**

Number of Replies to Violent Misogyny Content on 4chan’s /pol/ Board

**Chart D: Anti-Authority**

Number of Replies to Anti-Authority Content on 4chan’s /pol/ Board
**Chart E: Anti-Immigration**

Number of Replies to Anti-Immigration Content on 4chan’s /pol/ Board

**Chart F: Islamophobia**

Number of Replies to Islamophobia Content on 4chan’s /pol/ Board
Chart G: Homophobia

Number of Replies to Homophobia Content on 4chan’s /pol/ Board

- Violent Content
- Non-Violent Content
ANNEX E: USER ENGAGEMENT WITH IMVE CONTENT

Number of Replies to IMVE Content on 4chan’s /pol/ Board

- Homophobia (Violent)
- Homophobia (Non-Violent)
- Anti-Semitism (Violent)
- Anti-Semitism (Non-Violent)
- Anti-Authority (Violent)
- Anti-Authority (Non-Violent)
- Islamophobia (Violent)
- Non-Violent Content
- White N/S (Violent)
- White N/S (Non-Violent)
- Violent Misogyny (Violent)
- Violent Misogyny (Non-Violent)
- Anti-Immigration (Violent)
- Non-Violent Content