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ABSTRACT

As a social media platform, Instagram has a strong influence on youth culture, identity, and perceptions of the world, with the application serving not only for youth to follow accounts that are aspirational but also for entertainment and identity building through memes. Meme accounts that are explicitly conservative and that espouse white supremacist, hateful ideology and subsequently, identity, are incredibly prevalent. Media serve as powerful institutions for the socialization of youth, and content on the platform reveals that memes are serving as building blocks of ideological meaning. This study conducted a discourse analysis of the memes and content circulated by the alt-right affiliate movement the 'Proud Boys,' which is being sold to young men as a fraternity-like organization to celebrate 'Western ideals'. Proud Boys operate on an ideology that consists of both symbolic and physical violence, and the popularity of these groups is growing. Using Bourdieu's work on language as a framework, this article is an exploration to their recruitment and world-building practices on Instagram using memes and will be necessary to understand the movement, and to gain further insight into how memes are being used as propaganda.

Introduction

The growth of digital technology and social media use among populations across the world has given rise to a new socializing institution for children, teenagers, and young adults (Alava, Frau-Meigs, and Hassan 2017; Couldry and Hepp 2016; McLeod 2000). These online platforms are places of civic engagement and political expression, particularly among youth, and thus have the potential to socialize youth into political ideologies and sensemaking processes of their worlds (Bennett et al. 2012; Edgerly et al. 2016). Internet memes are a key fixture of digital culture that have spread from the fringe corners of the web into mainstream culture with the shift to a more user-friendly web environment where production of content is a capability nearly anyone can learn. Memes are publicly and colloquially understood to be humorous images, videos, text, etc. that are copied and spread throughout the virtual sphere from person to person or community to community (Shifman 2014). The digital realm is now an institutionalized space of socialization, thus memes warrant critical analysis that exposes how they are a part of the larger socialization process online.

In particular, memes have become a means of spreading propaganda, and are bite sized nuggets of political ideology and culture that are easily digestible and spread by netizens. Thus, memes themselves are a form of political participation within larger social movements, and are an important facet

of identity and community building (Mina 2018; Nagle 2017; Shifman 2014), and they function as a user-generated art form despite their seemingly trivial veneer. Memes, then, serve as a vehicle to express either an individual or a collective voice. They are a reflection of the cultural spaces from which they emerge (Freund 2013; Nagle 2017; Paddock 2015), even resulting in 'meme culture wars' (Mina 2018; Nagle 2016) originating from 4chan and other digital communities to construct and reinforce group identity.

Harnessing the power of the networked public that exists on the Internet, the alt-right has emerged as a neo-conservative white supremacist movement that caters specifically to younger generations who feel that Western civilization is 'crumbling' due to immigration, globalism, multiculturalism, and finally, feminism (Armstrong 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). A faction of the alt-right who refer to themselves as The Proud Boys have emerged from this larger group by rejecting mainstream conservatism, which they often view as a failure, but still espouse nationalist, anti-feminist, and anti-globalist/anti-immigration views. The group is often viewed as a 'stepping stone' group to the more extremist alt-right, and branded in the greater far right sphere as 'alt-lite' (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017), although that does not mean they eschew violence. Group members presented themselves as 'bodyguards' and were even hired as security during demonstrations like the Charlottesville Rally and other alt-right gatherings; most notably the riots at Berkley that started due to Milo Yiannopoulos' speaking event at the university (Sommer 2017). Further, they regularly engage in street violence and have often been referred to as a far-right street gang (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.-a).

The group is distinct from other neo-conservative movements because of their heavy and strategic use of social media, and although other factions of the alt-right are known for their digital media savvy, the Proud Boys specifically use platforms like Facebook for recruitment and to strategize as a group (Hatmaker 2018). The purpose of this study will be to explore how a platform that is particularly prevalent and popular among youth (Instagram) is being used to spread and promulgate the Proud Boys organization and identity. Proud Boys members, like other groups of the alt-right, have harnessed the power of digital technologies and use Instagram (and other platforms) for recruitment, identity reinforcement, and visibility of members in the world. Using a variety of social media platforms and producing group-specific content from memes to t-shirts, the Proud Boys and the larger alt-right demonstrate how these new digital spaces are ripe for exploitation.

In essence, social media are serving a function in not only organization and recruitment, but serves as an educational and socialization space. Language is a key factor into being socialized into groups (Jacoby and Ochs 1995), and memes are an extension of spoken utterances through visual and digital means. Since social media are serving as socializing spaces for youth and young adults, these platforms and the subcultures they support are pieces in the construction of ideological sensemaking and as larger learning spaces for civic engagement (Couldry and Hepp 2016; Philip 2011). Looking at the symbology of the Proud Boys and their media ecosystem, the central question posed is: How are social media memes and content being used to construct, reinforce, and validate Proud Boys as a collective identity and as a social movement?

Theoretical framework

Using a theoretical lens based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1991) in how language is used by actors in and across various fields to build meaning, this paper aims to understand the symbols and their underlying meanings to gain insight to how far right groups are targeting and socializing youth and adults into their ideology. Because of the use of visual symbols, text-based hashtags, and many other factors, understanding from a discourse and linguistic level of what is being portrayed and built within this social media world can be best understood through Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* as well as the concept of which fields this content is operating in. Further, the use of violence (both symbolic and physical) pervades this group's ideology as well as that of the larger alt-right, and

gaining further insight into how memes are being used as vessels of indoctrination on social media platforms will help to understand how these groups function. The use of memes and hashtags on the Instagram platform then function as a way of not only gaining visibility within the larger movement and within the media ecosystem, but rather may be serving as a way of classifying and recreating a version of the world that they seek to change.

Language and symbolic power

Bourdieu's framework of how discourse and meaning are constructed between actors during interactions in various fields are helpful in understanding the use of Internet memes within the Proud Boys media ecosystem and beyond. Particularly, Bourdieu's (1991) work exemplifies how utterances in every linguistic interaction, no matter how mundane or everyday they may seem, is always injected with elements of the social structure that these interactions express as well as reproduce through their utterance. Thus, in every interaction, no matter the context or the content, is both reifying and reproducing the power held in culture and society. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* refers to the environment in which beings interact and serves as a reference in how to behave, speak, and interact with others. From this perspective, practices, no matter their banality, are always a product of the *habitus* and the field (i.e., the social and interactional context) in which they are occurring, and knowledge of existing in both the *habitus* and the field. It is not that action is taken in fields (or markets, used interchangeably) consciously calculated and acted out, but rather the *habitus* and the field dictate the very actions and linguistic utterances that occur outside of the person's control.

Because of this, knowledge of not only behavior but also appropriate language is what gains one capital and continued acceptance in any one *habitus,* in this case, the group. Effectively, there are social norms that dictate behavior and speech, and any transgression of these often results in the person being stigmatized and unaccepted within the group (Bourdieu 1991). Memes, with their element of culture through both the visual and text, embody social norms themselves depending on which community they are presented in.

Background & literature review

Online affordances for extremism

The rise of the extremist right on the Internet is not a new nor recent phenomenon. Numerous works brought attention to the utilization of the Internet and its functionalities to spread hate speech and ideological materials (Daniels 2013, 2018; Kimmel 2013; Schafer 2002). However, the specific brand of extremist ideology that has taken rise is prominent in web forums like 4chan, reddit, and many others that provided anonymity for its users and allowed for content creation and proliferation across platforms in multiple modalities (text, video, audio, etc.) to cater to people's information needs (Kimmel 2013; Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). Kimmel (2013) noted in his work of the reaction of many men that the world no longer has space for them, that the power structures that they were promised by their fathers and grandfathers have been disrupted, and the longing for a return to when white men were at the wheel, steering the ship to all they desired. This reactionary response to a shifting and evolving world that many men view is leaving them behind has been slowly simmering beneath the surface of societies that increasingly have given rights to sexual and racial minorities, particularly in the West (Coston and Kimmel 2012; Gotell and Dutton 2016; Messner 1998).

Because of this, the Proud Boys market themselves as a 'pro-West fraternal organization' and was started by the co-founder of *Vice* magazine Gavin McInnes (Southern Poverty Law Center 2017), and thus his knowledge of how to harness the power of mass communication to foster the growth and spread of the Proud Boys and the specific appeal to young men insert new actors into this networked social movement (Coutts 2017). Functioning similarly to religious dogma, McInnes acts as

the leader of the movement and a prophet of sorts, using YouTube and other means of spreading his ideology and organization to the masses (Sommer 2017).

The Proud Boys take their name from the song 'Proud of Your Boy' from the musical version of the Disney film *Aladdin* and have multiple 'degrees' of membership that involve a hazing-like ritual of being beaten by other Proud Boy members while naming five breakfast cereals (a 'cereal beating') and being tattooed with Proud Boy insignia and symbols (Sommer 2017). Further, they operate their organization under the belief that 'The West is the Best' but welcome non-white members as long as these members acknowledge that (1) Whiteness is not the problem in modern society and (2) That Western civilization is superior to all others (Sommer 2017). The organization is marketed to and targets young men specifically, and thus their use of social media platforms and social networking services like Facebook and Twitter have been instrumental in their recruitment strategies and group identity formation (Carissimo 2017; Nagle 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). The organization, like other alt-right movements, calls for a return to the past and invoke this nostalgia by being a man-only space with a shared Libertarian political ideology (Coutts 2017).

What the Proud Boys and other alt-right affiliated movements promise, then, is a space for 'pro-Western Chauvinism' men to have their views and beliefs supported, to mingle with like-minded others, and to hopefully shift the world back towards their favor. The proliferation of the Internet as a space of user-generated content has provided a platform for these organizations to spread their message in a more deliberate, directed way. Due to the Proud Boys' use of social media, analyzing the discourse and language being enacted in their posts leads to a fruitful analysis to help situate how similar groups are using the same modalities to organize, recruit, and spread their message (O'Callaghan et al. 2015; Southern Poverty Law Center 2017). Particularly, on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, the way to gain visibility within the platform is the use of hashtags so that the content becomes searchable and thus, discoverable, by others.

Previous research on hashtags noted how it was used a means of sharing social movement related information and how it gained virality on Twitter and thus helped shape the conversation around the event and awareness of it (Wang, Liu, and Gao 2016; Woods 2014) as well as the use of hashtags to gain visibility in order to enact social change (Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Kangere, Kemitare, and Michau 2017). Further, hashtags are a way of becoming visible and known in the digital public sphere (Bruns et al. 2016). Much of the literature about hashtags and how they function as symbolic forms of power and of visibility, however, focuses on the text-based platform Twitter – which, incorporates videos and images, but is different from Instagram in organizational structure.

Internet memes

Memes are an easy way of viewing how culture and behaviors spread, as well as attitudes (Shifman 2014). Internet memes are a way of establishing a shared culture on online communities, and they serve as a method of gaining and establishing cultural capital (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017) – however, even within these cultural spaces, the extent to which these memes serve as capital are constantly contested by community members themselves (Literat and van den Berg 2017). Memes are powerful in the construction of collective identity and for expressing and reinforcing political views, including resistance (Ask and Abidin 2018; Edgerly et al. 2016; Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016; Silvestri 2018).

Similar to how certain online communities have different 'accents' in terms of how they function linguistically with their own acronyms and ways of speaking, memes also serve this purpose in applying a 'texture' to the language of these groups (Posteguillo 2003). Memes function as a key linguistic element in how group members interact and share ideas, opinions, and thoughts. These memes are typically unique to each individual community and are created to mark the group as different from others in an easily identifiable fashion (Mina 2018; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Hashtags may also serve this purpose as being a collective linguistic marker that grants users visibility within the media ecosystem in which they are embedded and function as a form of literacy (Gleason 2016).

These memes and hashtags serve as markers into understanding the emotion and affect being expressed during certain events. Although many hashtags and memes contain elements that exhibit triviality, humor, irony, sarcasm, and other forms of satire (Milner 2013; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017; Shifman 2014), they are a vehicle for many disenfranchised groups who hold unpopular opinions on topics such as race, gender, and other political topics to find and share their voice (Milner 2013). Thus, under the guise of 'lulz' (a variation of the popular Internet acronym LOL), the flames of antagonistic extremist views are being fanned.

This study views memes as linguistic utterances within certain fields and a certain *habitus*, in this case, Instagram. These online spaces serve as realms of intense socialization into the organization through not only the personal bonds but also through the political ideology and identity that is cultivated (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016; Lee 2016; Mina 2018). They are learning spaces to acquaint members to not only the ideology, but to perform the identity with the appropriate linguistic markers in text and speech (Bourdieu 1991). Since memes are created by users of the community, they exhibit patterns of common knowledge and collective identity in their content. Politically, they function in the way that Bourdieu describes description and prescription:

> Specifically, political action is possible because agents, who are part of the social world, have a (more or less adequate) knowledge of this world and because one can act in the social world by acting on their knowledge of the world. This action aims to produce and impose representations (mental, verbal, visual or theatrical) of the social world which may be capable of acting on this world by acting on agents' representation of it. – (Bourdieu 1991, 127)

Memes and other social media content are a way to engage politically (Edgerly et al. 2016; Thorson et al. 2013), and are dripping with cultural knowledge that makes sense to members of one group but perhaps not another. The collective action being undertaken by those within the Proud Boys group on Instagram through the creation of memes then visually represent their ideas of the social world, or what they hope it to be, and imposes it upon others who come across their content and accept their message. In essence, it is not the memes that make the community, but rather the community that makes the memes – meaning that the community themselves use memes as signifiers to strengthen their own sense of an 'in-group' and collective identity (Ask and Abidin 2018; Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017). Thus, Internet memes are a way of validating and reaffirming cultural identity and cultural capital in a digital space (Literat and van den Berg 2017; Mina 2018). Memes serve as visual and mental representations of political ideology, and hashtags function as a mode of classification and categorization to ultimately impose a moral and social order that fits their views of the world (Bowker and Star 1999).

Through the use of memes, even within a platform like Instagram that has millions upon millions of posts, Proud Boys and other extremist groups represent the world in their own terms, and according to Bourdieu, may function as 'heretical subversion' which 'exploits the possibility of changing the social world by changing the representation of this world …' (Bourdieu 1991, 128). By building a world powered by the functionalities of the Internet, a yearning and reproduction of the idea of a utopia can occur, giving the group purpose and direction in their aims.

Methods

For three months in the fall of 2017, I collected data by following hashtags and accounts relevant to the Proud Boys and the larger alt-right movement. Using data collection methods in line with strategies used in digital ethnography (Boellstorff et al. 2012), I subsequently conducted a discourse analysis of the meme content guided by principles put forth by Bourdieu's conception of discourse (1991) and van Dijk in conducting a critical discourse analysis (van Dijk 1993). With these frameworks, I am attempting to understand how the Proud Boys are harnessing memes promulgated on platforms like Instagram to spread their identity and ideology. This media ecosystem that is

primarily visual in nature then provides a rich research environment to observe the ways in which this propaganda is functioning as a way of meaning-making through their symbolism.

Instagram is the most popular social media platform among teenagers and young adults (Parker 2016), and thus has a huge influence on youth culture, identity, and perceptions of society and the world at large. Instagram is a primarily visual-based platform and the premise of the application is to focus on photographs and short videos as opposed to more text-based content like web forums or platforms like Twitter. Accounts on Instagram belong to individual users, companies, and other organizations. A lot of them are dedicated to memes. Although the humor/entertainment meme accounts are the most widespread, there are several anti-globalist, conservative, White nationalist meme accounts that use that platform's functionalities in order to spread a violent ideology and identity. By looking at a group that positions itself as a less extreme counterpart to the alt-right (thus the terming of 'alt-lite'), their positioning may be a strategy to make themselves more attractive to potential members because they seem less pernicious, but nonetheless may be a 'stepping stone' as mentioned earlier in the manuscript.

The first step of the data collection process consisted of using an Instagram scraper which returned around 4000 posts.[1] The scraper did not account for all of the memes related to the movement, but provided an avenue to identify related hashtags worth searching for, thus I identified relevant hashtags using a snowballing method. I began by searching for the hashtag #proudboys for the initial Instagram scrape and made note of frequently co-occurring hashtags (returned in the metadata of each post collected) that pertained to the Proud Boys and which would be fruitful in providing more content by searching them.

An abbreviated list of the hashtags include: #proudboys #ProudOfYourBoy #BasedStickMan #MAGA #USA #America #kek #[frog face emoji] #Hitler #Traditionalism #UniteTheRight #Conservative #Nationalist #Fascist #RightWing #AmericaFirst #SaveEurope #WesternChauvinism #FashWave #Patriot #WesternCulture #DeusVult #AltKnight #FOAK (fraternal order of Alt Knights); #Uhuru (the Swahili word for freedom and a battecry for the Proud Boys); and variations of the 'proudboys' hashtag that included location, e.g., #ProudBoysVegas; among other states, cities, and countries. Data were only taken from accounts that appear in Instagram search results, which means that the account is public. Memes that were not about Proud Boys or related movement content were excluded (i.e., some posts were of parents posting photos of their sons *not* related to Proud Boys ['so proud of my boy!']; posts using #Uhuru about the African socialist movement; etc.).

In terms of the ethics involved in observing and following the social media posts of this organization, there are two sides to the idea of 'protection': one, protection for the researcher, because academics researching these groups have been the target of hate speech and threats; and two, because the posts are posted publicly. Further, the ethical issue of the content itself calling for a second civil war to 'cleanse' the nation and other acts of violence upon non-members puts this research in a sort of Catch-22: do we reveal the identities of people who are calling for violence if that means that their 'privacy' is invaded? Following ethical guidelines proposed by groups like the Association of Internet Researchers, however, I aim to do no harm and have elected to anonymize the data by blocking out usernames of individuals and other potentially identifying content (Markham and Buchanan 2012).

Findings

Proud western chauvinists

The hashtags used for the images are text-based, but can often be more telling of the ideology and identity as a whole than the visual elements of the meme or photograph posted: #DeusVult (God's Will); #WesternCulture; #AltKnight; #Fascist; #AmericaFirst; #SaveEurope; #WesternChauvinism; #MAGA are just a few of the hashtags that appear. Using these hashtags reveal, according to Bourdieu, a certain embodied knowledge of the kinds of speech acts that are acceptable and signal to broader ideology (Bourdieu 1991). For instance, the #DeusVult hashtag (supposedly) comes from

the war cry from The Crusades and is invoked to imply that there needs to be another holy war to fight against Islam, and may have emerged due to the popularity of a game called *Crusader Kings*. The mythology behind the term is that it was a battle cry during the actual crusades, thus its symbolic purpose is that it is establishing a divide between the 'Christian West' and the Muslim East, making it a signifier of virulent Islamaphobia and a modern day Orientalism (Said 1979; Ulaby 2017). The members speak of a white, Christian West that they feel has been invaded by immigrants, tainted by feminism and other progressive movements, and echoes extremist beliefs that led to mass killings in the cases of Anders Breivik and Dylann Roof (Teitelbaum 2015). The Proud Boys, in their first proclamation to be a part of the group, must refuse to apologize for 'creating the Western World,' (Sommer 2017), which officially socializes them into the group.

One key facet of the Proud Boys, however, is how they very much function like a fraternity or more accurately, a gang: their gatherings often involve heavy amounts of drinking and violence, there are rituals involved in gaining status in the group, and there is a uniform and agreed upon logo (including colors) to signify their group identity. Further, the use of the cartoon character Pepe (which was co-opted by the larger alt right as a symbol) is consistent with this group as well (Anti-Defamation League 2016). The Proud Boys incarnation of Pepe (shown in Figure 1), however, depicts Pepe wearing the Proud Boys uniform (black Fred Perry polo with gold trim) and flashing the OK hand symbol,[2] thus showing how the symbol of Pepe was manipulated and changed to fit in as a signifier for the Proud Boys.

Deus vult

'Symbols reflect social arrangements, but they also *affect* social arrangements,' (Nietz 1993, 93). Although not outwardly a religious organization, one of the key factors of the Proud Boys ideology is embracing Christianity because of its association with Western civilization, and the Proud Boys magazine also had an article denouncing atheists, stating that 'Christianity is the Western Religion,' (Press 2016). The ideology and the use of phrases like 'Deus Vult' point to this religious element of their group, as well as the fraternity-esque concepts of brotherhood. Thus, it is not necessarily a religious movement that is acting as a social movement, but rather one that is harnessing religion to

**Figure 1.** Pepe the Frog as used by the Proud Boys in the 'uniform'.

invoke nostalgia for the past, and as an element of their larger desire to impose a moral order. However, there are 'degrees' (like gangs or fraternities) that one must pass to truly become a full-fledged member of the Proud Boys – one of the required rituals is to abstain from masturbation (inspired by a popular internet subculture and movement that calls itself 'No Fap') as well as be subjected to a beating by other fellow Proud Boys.

The third degree is get a Proud Boys tattoo, and the fourth is to engage in violence in the form of physically harming a member of AntiFa (shorthand for 'anti-fascist') (Gilmour 2017). In effect, the Proud Boys adhere to a libertarian political ideology, and add elements of white nationalist thought (Sommer 2017). Their group mantra of 'West is the Best' is often used in their memes, their posts, and symbols of American masculinity – like the 'Uncle Sam' character from World War II recruitment posters and Jack Daniels whiskey – are used in recruitment memes, as seen in Figure 2 and in Figure 3.

The conversion process, however, may occur far before a member of the Proud Boys becomes engaged in the creation and sharing of memes on social media, however the symbology in the memes and the sharing of cultural symbols among group members is typical of that of those in religious movements (Nietz 1993). Previously, literature regarding the conversion process and the joining of cults attempted to identify what traits people had that led them to join cults – notably, Glock's (1964) theory of the five types of deprivation (economic, social, organismic [health], ethical, and psychical) although not able to account for all kinds of deprivation nor able to explain why some who are deprived of the same things do not join cults (Nietz 1993), may help to provide an explanatory framework for the Proud Boys appeal: the Proud Boys target men who feel that the modern world is lacking a space for them, and they equate themselves to previous 'men's' organizations like the Elk's Lodge, which were established in a similar response to growing progressive trends in society like voting rights being granted to women (Kimmel 2013). In essence, the religious aspect of their movement is merely a call back to a time when White, Christian men were in power and were not questioned,

Figure 2. Proud Boys propaganda.
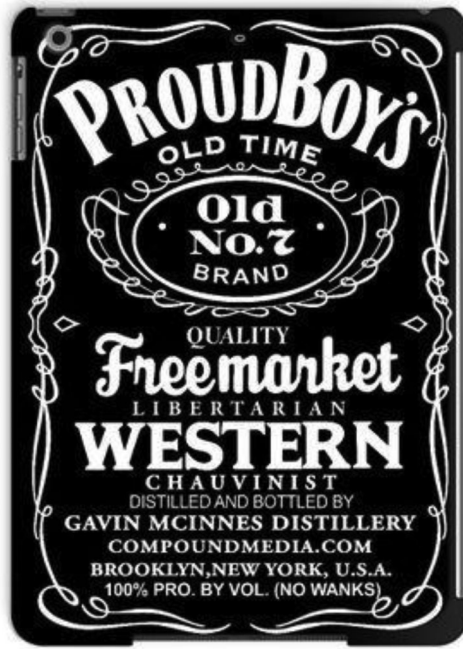
Figure 3. Proud Boys 'logo'.

and the establishment of 'men's groups' is indeed not a new phenomenon. This may be why they use 'traditional' emblems of national identity like Uncle Sam and other markers of nostalgic, stereotypical masculinity; reproducing a discursive system based on traditionalism for the purpose of engaging in political acts (Bourdieu 1991).

Aesthetics of fascism

The memes and the content circulating on Instagram under the umbrella hashtags of 'Proud Boys' as well as the many others mentioned earlier in this manuscript point to an anesthetization of politics as previously described by Walter Benjamin in his critique of art being harnessed by fascist governments (Benjamin 1936; Paddock 2015; Wander 1983). In this scenario, the mass production of user-generated content in the form of memes and other forms of social media content serve as the venue in which fascist aesthetics can flourish through these linguistic signifiers. The tattoos, the use of Pepe and of emojis like the glass of milk, the uniforms and other goods, are among many of the dimensions of how the Proud Boys and other extremist movements grant an aesthetic quality to their ideology. Of note, however, is the extent to which anybody can create and contribute to the larger media ecosystem within which it exists. This, then, in turn simultaneously contains the self as completely independent (capitalist logic) and yet erases the individual (fascism) (Benjamin 1936). We see this in Figure 4, we see the coopting of the Gadsden flag, which in recent times was used by Libertarians and the Tea Party movement as a symbol of their ideology and is currently a symbol associated with the larger far right (Walker 2016), with Pepe placed as the snake's head and the 'me' being replaced by the word 'memes.'

As with other fascist aesthetics, the Proud Boys use clothing and branding in order to cement their group membership and to make visible to the rest of the world their political and ideological affiliation. Figure 5 is a post meant to market the Proud Boys store, and in this particular one there is the announcement of 2017 being 'The Year of the Proud Boy' and new merchandise being added to the

Figure 4. Don't tread on memes.

inventory. The stores themselves as well as many logos created for the Proud Boys appeared to be made not only by actual members, but managed by a woman – a 'Proud Boys' Girl' – who seems to have embraced her role in providing branding and clothing to the group. Thus, fashion was relegated to the realm of women, although it did appear in the analysis that men were actively also contributing to the 'brand's' symbolism through the use of memes, logos, and the like. Both men and women appeared to adhere to Level 3 of the Proud Boys doctrine – receiving tattoos, as seen in
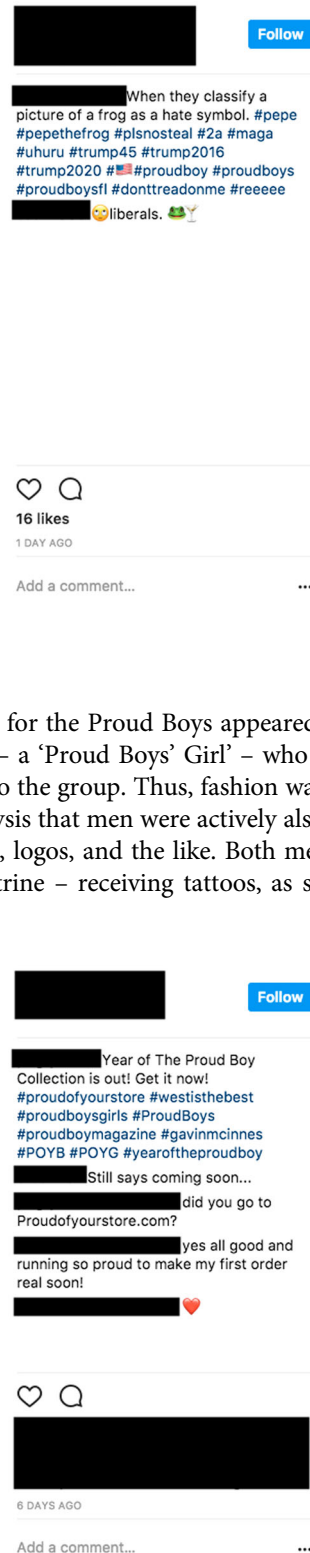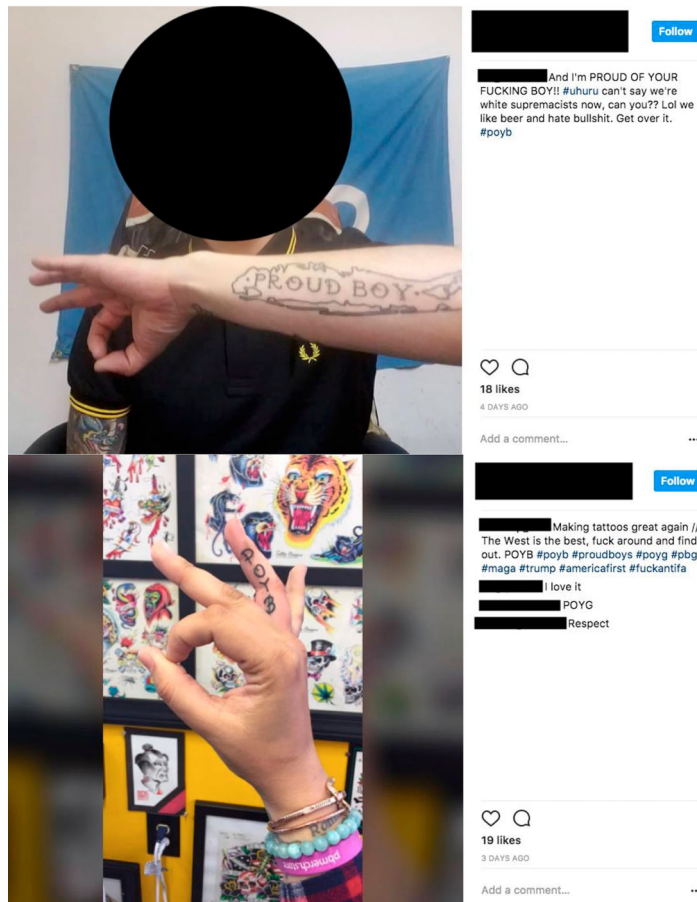

Figure 5. Advertisement for a Proud Boys store on Instagram.

Figure 6. Proud Boys tattoos.

Figure 6. These linguistic acts as well as visual symbols dominate much of the Proud Boys content on Instagram – many of the posts are of Proud Boys logos, members' tattoos, and other gatherings; although meant for recruitment and branding purposes, the symbols themselves are a large part of the linguistic *habitus* for the Proud Boys organization (Bourdieu 1991).

The aestheticization of the political ideology takes a step further with the usage of tattoos in order to signify a hierarchical order within the organization as well as a way of expressing allegiance. The tattoos, although varying in design, typically always have the words 'Proud Boys' or 'POYB' (Proud Of Your Boy) in some form as well as often a visual image to accompany the text. The tattoos, then, symbolize not only a progression in rank into the organization (thus perhaps being the most tangible symbol of indoctrination into the group), but also function as an aesthetic quality along with the uniforms, the hashtags used to gain visibility online, as well as their other symbols. It is not only symbols, however, that are present in the memes or the social media content that lend themselves to an aestheticization quality, but also the militaristic symbols that are used in the content itself that further function similarly to Benjamin's conception of the fascist aesthetic. Wander stated that ' … fascism never achieved status as either a philosophical or political system. It is, properly speaking, a political aesthetic – a vision of all-powerful authority that seeks to secure … a given moral, psychological, economic, or social structure,' (Wander 1983, 70). Indeed, the alt right and the Proud Boys are a modern-day incarnation of fascism, and the power of user generated content has allowed them to further their aesthetic and to use it to spread their ideology.

A key fascist aesthetic is the militaristic, violence-gesturing content in the form of posts of guns, knives, and Proud Boys members in military uniforms (Figure 7). Further, the Proud Boys established a separate group, Fraternal Order of the Alt Knights (FOAK), in order to provide 'muscle' at protests and other events. Kyle Chapman, who founded the group and was arrested after the protests at Berkeley in 2017, uses the Internet meme and identity of 'Based Stickman' due to his use of a blunt bludgeoning baton – i.e., a stick (Southern Poverty Law Center n.d.-b). The organization is partnered with the Proud Boys, and is often used in hashtags (#FOAK) as well as #BasedStickman in far right, Proud Boys content on Instagram. By positioning the Proud Boys and the FOAK as 'security' at pro-Trump rallies or at alt-right protests, they justify the violence that they are partaking in, seeing it as being necessary to protect 'liberty'. In November 2017, there was a conspiracy theory circulating in far-right circles about the possibility of an 'AntiFa civil war' and many posts were shared in anticipation of or to mock the fact that 'AntiFa didn't show up,' (Figures 7 and 8).

Calls to 'murder AntiFa' and memes jokingly posting 'AntiFa hunting permits' also circulated around this time, further alluding and calling for violent acts to eradicate what the group views as their political opponents – and particularly, a group that they view as terrorists and not 'true patriots,' (Figures 9 and 10). AntiFa themselves have many things that mirror other social movements – a political ideology they base their membership around, a uniform, and their own memes, however the Proud Boys and other organizations in the alt right position them as the true enemy of the Christian, white ethnonationalist west because of their embrace of socialism and multiculturalism. By positioning them as the enemy, the solidification of an 'out-group' strengthens the 'in-group' identity (Tajfel 1978). These linguistic moves, the calls for explicit violence, and the unique language and symbol use by the Proud Boys and the alt-right demonstrate the ways that language acts on social media serve to lay claim to power – in the present and for in the future (Bourdieu 1991).

'Take back our future'

Of particular note is the use of memes that use an aesthetic typical of that of the 1980s ('Vapor Wave Aesthetic') as well as memes that transpose future events onto content and is then released in the present. The Vapor Wave aesthetic features text and colors that are reminiscent of what is typically considered 1980s qualities (bright neon, etc.) and the considerable number of 'Fash Wave' (Fascist Nu-Wave) music on YouTube and other websites also invoke this nostalgia for the past – specifically, 1980s consumer culture, with early Internet and technological qualities. Originating online in the early 2010s on websites like reddit and 4chan, vapor wave itself is a kind of meme (Minor 2016)
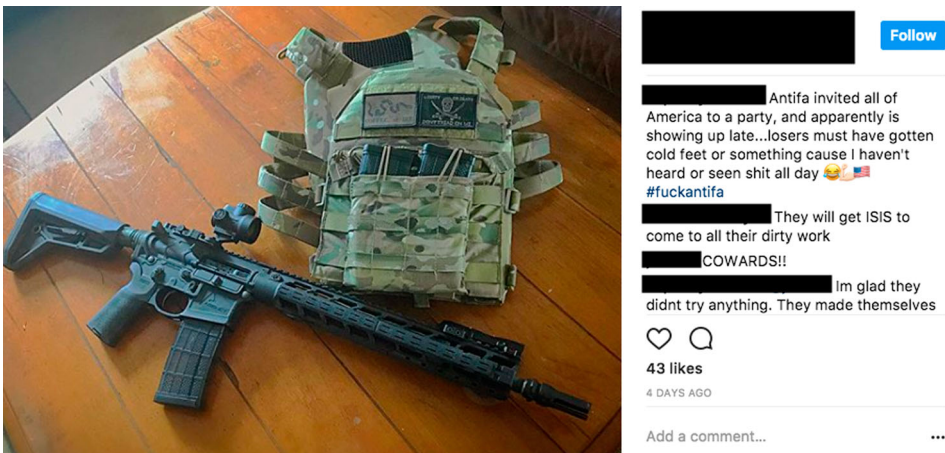
Figure 7. AntiFa civil war.

Figure 8. AntiFa Riots.

and is now often associated with the alt right, with the cooptation of the music through the repackaging of Vapor Wave to Fash Wave (Bullock and Kerry 2017). Thus, the aesthetic quality of their politics transcends the visual, and includes an audial element as well.

The Vapor Wave trend itself is a product of meme culture, however the use of the phrase 'Take Back Our Future' (Figure 10) using an aesthetic reminiscent of the past (perhaps before the age of the 'modern world' that many members live in stripped them of their power) straddles this strange concept of futurity that is actually the past. Waxing nostalgic of the 1950s – before the civil rights and feminist movement became mainstream – was also common, as presented in the meme in Figure 11, the 1950s aesthetic combined with reference to futuristic shows like *Star Trek* and a specific answer that 'because it's the future son' point to this forward–backward use of time and futurity of the group. Further, the 'taking back' a future as well as the statement made by the father to the son of there being no Muslims in the future implies violence – i.e., the meme implies that Muslims have been eliminated from the world, thus why there are none in Star Trek, which further implies part of the far-right's goals in participating in ethnic and religious genocide. This subtlety, the implying rather
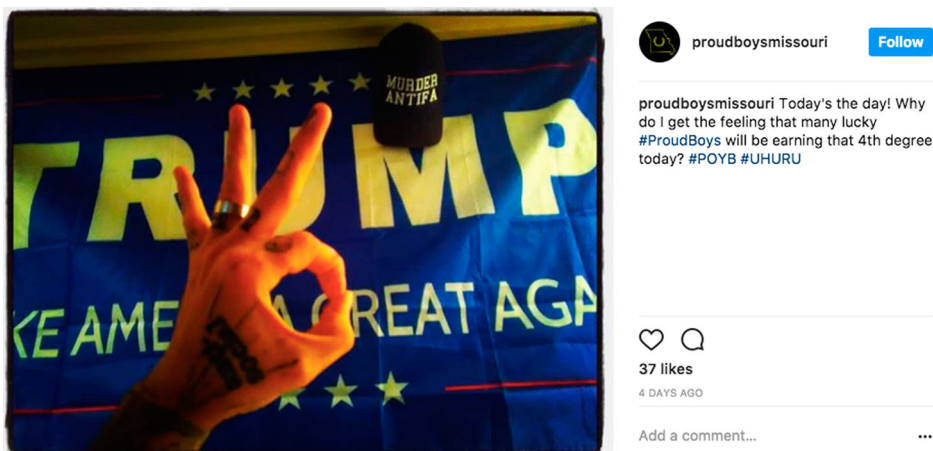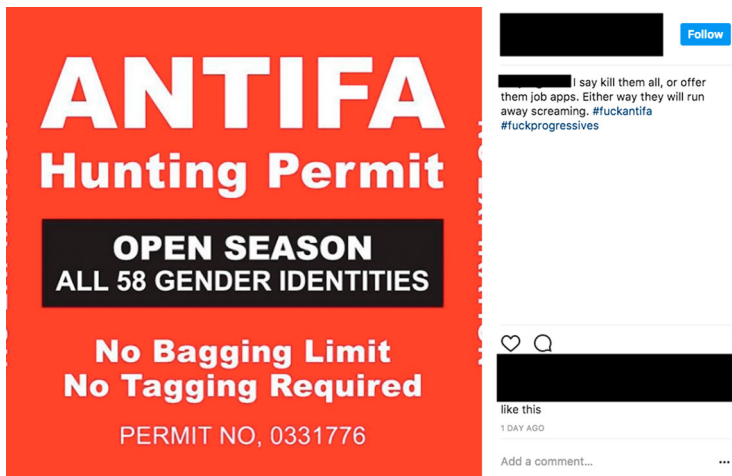

Figure 9. Murder AntiFa.

Figure 10. AntiFa hunting permit.

than outright saying, is typical of dog-whistle politics and rhetoric used by the far-right and other previous fascist governments (Caffier 2017).

By calling for a future that is not necessarily 'future' in its conception but rather is a future that is in fact a return to the past, the Proud Boys venerate traditional gender norms and firmly patriarchal social structures, however the women they choose as their partners also support and buy in to the ideology (Kelly 2018). Thus the establishment of the Proud Boys' Girls – notably, the apostrophe denoting ownership at the end of 'Boys' signifies a pattern during data collection, signaling already a certain ideology of gender (Bourdieu 1991) – many of the women in the movement are the romantic partners of male members in the group. The exclusion of women from this organization's meetings are telling of the larger extremist movement that contends that feminism has 'infected' Western society, but establishing a separate group for women is are similar to how the Ku Klux Klan's women had a group to *support* the larger organization (Blee 2008). These intersections in enacting similar practices to prior organizations that privileged whiteness above all else, as well as men over
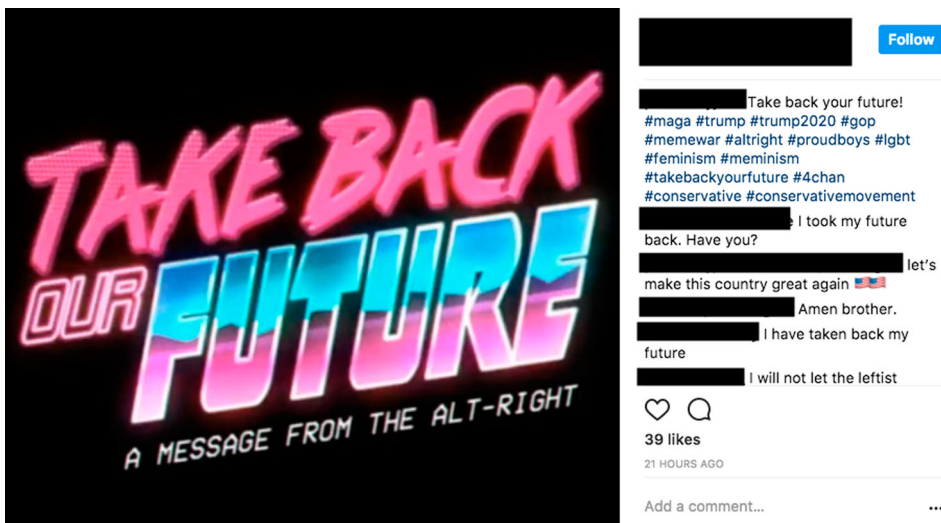

Figure 11. Take back our future.

women, help to situate the practices of this group and positions women merely as extensions of men as traditional wives (Kelly 2018), thus upholding hegemonic patriarchal notions of masculinity and gender roles. Further, one of the key tenets of The Proud Boys is to ultimately settle down and have a family to *continue* Western civilization, thus the encouragement of indoctrinating children into the ideology. Often, sexualized posts like the one presented in Figure 12 would appear, with the women wearing Proud Boys merchandise (Figure 13).

'We are not alt right'

After a number of media outlets started publishing exposes on the Proud Boys organization following the Charlottesville rally, as well as other protests and clashes that have occurred over the year of 2017, a number of posts as well as other official content vehemently denied that the Proud Boys were alt-right. Particularly, the Proud Boys organization claims to allow members of any race and sexuality (but only on the gay or straight spectrum, trans individuals and genderqueer individuals are often mocked), as long as they recognize that 'The West is the Best.' However, the usage of the term 'alt-knights' and the frequent appearances of Proud Boys members at alt-right events as well as the political ideologies being intertwined seems to prove otherwise. The attempt to distance their organization from the alt-right may be an intentional, image-saving move in order to remain appealing to the larger public and to attract more members. These strategies are a way for the Proud Boys to adapt to their wider audience's views of the organization (Bourdieu 1991), but despite their explicit denial of their affiliation as well as highlighting their non-White members, they still reproduce certain social structures with these linguistic moves (Figure 14).

This 'saving face' move also occurred on Instagram, with posts with memes and text denying the association with the alt-right appearing. Often, posts on the 'official Proud Boys magazine' website were made to help Proud Boys members to identify possible 'alt-righters' attempting to infiltrate the group. Further, often the Proud Boys would equate Nazis and the Klan with groups like AntiFA and Black Lives Matter, further adding to the group's ideology that they were in no way similar to the alt-right and Nazism, however aiding the belief of the group that AntiFa and Black Lives Matter were

Figure 12. 'Because it's the future son'.

Figure 13. Proud Boys' girl.

terrorist organizations that needed to be condemned. In this way, they were positioning themselves as 'the good guys' (imposing a moral order) in comparison to not only the larger alt-right, but other groups as well (Figure 15).

Discussion and conclusion

The Proud Boys and the larger alt-right are determined to return to a time where they felt that society was more pure (i.e., white and Christian), and will justify any necessary acts of violence to do so – similar to fascist ideology and movements of the past (Wander 1983). The yearning for a future where the world is 'corrected' according to the 'way things were', they bring to attention similar moves of fascist propaganda that used similar nostalgic futurity to indoctrinate citizens, which has evolved into memes and other forms of social media content among the Proud Boys and alt right. Language and its use have always held a place in politics and the negotiation of cultural

Figure 14. We are not alt-right.

Figure 15. Condemn all hate groups.

norms (Bourdieu 1991), and in today's media environment memes are powerful linguistic acts that express and reproduce often violent social structures.

Using the same hashtags serves as a linguistic element to cement a cultural bond between members, and serves as a language shared between group members to strengthen their group identity and socialize members into the group. Memes serve the same function here as they did in other web forums in terms of their collective identity building purpose (Gal, Shifman, and Kampf 2016; Mina 2018), but perhaps the move to Instagram is an intentional one to gain a wider audience who may not participate in web forums like 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit due to Instagram's popularity and reach among youth. Further, Instagram's primarily visual-based platform aids in the spread of memes due to the high prevalence of dedicated meme accounts.

Further, the conception of memes and meme culture and user-generated content as *art* in the context of understanding the fascist aesthetics present as well as seeking to understand the meaning behind symbols (Bourdieu 1991) may serve as powerful theoretical frameworks to view the extremist right. Fascism has re-emerged as a powerful political aesthetic and social movement in our modern world, and has rebranded itself as the alt-right and its affiliated movements. Particularly, the Proud Boys' efforts to distance themselves from the alt-right may be an attempt to portray the group as 'less objectionable' form of fascism and to hide their deeper purpose, much like how previous art forms – and particularly cinema – did as well (Wander 1983).

The performance of politics and the ideology embedded within the political discourse that the alt-right and the Proud Boys are trying to bring to the forefront of the social imaginary, does not follow the classic ideals of rational discourse in the public sphere (Paddock 2015), and attempts to disrupt it through their use of irony and esoteric use of symbols in their memes, hashtags, and other aesthetics. In a way, these memes function in their own form of logic, and despite the absurdity that they seem to present, behind the absurdist façade lies a powerful form of propaganda – an indoctrination that is subconscious, invisible, and violate our very understanding of logic and rational thought. Memes are a political aesthetic, and have inserted themselves into social media feeds not only for pleasure but as digital propaganda. The use of social media for the propagation of extremist ideology demonstrates the competence of the users in the social media field and its linguistic market, and they are able to harness its powers to pursue their own interests (Bourdieu 1991).

Conclusion

This article aimed to discover how memes and other forms of Instagram content were being created and circulated on the Instagram platform by the alt-right affiliated group The Proud Boys, due to the platform's popularity among youth and of the Proud Boys purpose in being an organization mainly devoted to boys and young men. In this process, findings indicate that there are a number of symbols and signifiers that are aiding in the construction of a Proud Boys identity and acculturation into the group consists of being socialized to these performative and linguistic practices. Social media are a socializing institution for youth (Alava, Frau-Meigs, and Hassan 2017; Couldry and Hepp 2016), thus analyzing the use of social media platforms and in particular the use of memes may reveal the strategies used and identities being constructed by far-right groups. Knowing the discursive forms of the symbols being used within these organizations give further insight into an otherwise esoteric language system. With the re-emergence of populist fascism, understanding how youth are being targeted and socialized into these ideologies is critical to develop counter strategies to fight against indoctrination into extremist political thought.

Notes

1. https://github.com/rarcega/instagram-scraper; this scraper no longer works after changes to Instagram's API in 2018.
2. The "OK" hand symbol being a symbol of the alt right and the Proud Boys began as a "prank" on the web forum 4chan to convince the mainstream media that it was now a hate symbol in order to prove the gullibility of the media and the left, and has now been adopted a legitimate symbol of the group (Anti-Defamation League n.d.).

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Notes on contributor

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