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Internet Meme Culture and Political Radicalization

Interview Topic Guide

Internet memes have been seen by most people as and at worst, innocuous drivel. Yet recent acts of mass public violence and the proliferation of radical political ideologies have revealed that their power is not contained within the deep reaches of the internet. The ideas and ideologies that emerge and develop on both obscure and mainstream online social networks and image boards such as 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook have manifested themselves in physical ways, causing physical harm and destruction. In order to analyze and understand this phenomenon, we will be outlining a few different terms and topics to discuss with our interviewees. The subjects will be asked questions regarding their internet habits as a child and now, as adults, as well as t Afterwards, the interview will cover how the subjects define identity terms such as the *alt-right* and the *redpill*; how they associate themselves with these words; and also how they would apply these words and concepts to modern society. Furthermore, the subjects will be asked to describe their political beliefs and whether they believe their internet usage—specifically, their interaction with online meme culture—contributed to their formation and reinforcement of their ideologies. Finally, our interviewees will discuss their perceptions of the role the internet and memes have played in the recent proliferation of mass acts of violence and political radicalization, as well as who is responsible for preventing it.

Interview Transcript

Q: Can you tell me when you first started browsing the internet and what type of pages/websites would you visit?

A: Uh probably like since I could read like since I was like six maybe. Um my older cousins showed me Newgrounds and like uh some fucking flash game websites. So mostly it was like Newgrounds and then YouTube and then um in like fifth grade, like 4chan and other darker places.

Q: Did your parents have like any control or restrictions on the websites you visited? Did they supervise your online browsing habits?

A: No not at all.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about some of the content that you would see on the darker websites such as 4chan?

A: A lot of porn. (Subject takes a pause to think about it). That's kinda like most of it actually, just porn and like the beginning of memes, like Pepe the Frog. Back when it was a thing that people did unironically. Some fucked up shit as well, like uh gore videos and pictures from like crime scenes and warzones.

Q: What boards would you visit on 4chan?

A: Um, it was pretty much just /b/, that was it. I was never really super into like the political side of things just because everyone was like super toxic about it. And I was like ten, so I didn't really give a fuck at the time. By the time I started caring about politics, it was like uh, just a bunch of twelve-year-olds so like yeah.

Q: What is your political alignment?

A: I would say I'm probably more conservative than the average college student. I would not consider myself a Republican or a Democrat for sure. Umm I do hold some liberal views, mostly my conservative views are like uh first and second amendment, um, uh let's see... like anti-trusts and some stuff about banks. I'm very anti-usury and I disagree a lot with America's, like, interventionist kind of deal that they're doing. I don't think we should be spending so much money defending certain countries, at least that we defend with a lot of our money.

Q: How did your political identity form?

A: I think a lot of people would attribute it to like their parents, they're either like the same as their parents or the complete opposite. Uh my family like, um, has a diverse range of, of political views, like some of my family is very liberal, some of my family is very conservative. So, I kind of like, all my views are just kind of like, uh, self-developed through like, uh, reading and just like my own personal morals, I guess.

Q: Was there any specific events that contributed to the formation of your political identity?

A: Um, not like specific life events, definitely like my social group growing up, like the close friends I had probably helped shape that a lot. Definitely some like, like figures I looked up to from the internet and real life helped shape some of those as well. I think like the 2016 election probably also, just because that was like, uh, the first one I could vote in and that was like a very, uh, heated time. Especially on the internet, cause I used to spend a lot of time on it you know? Yeah.

Q: Are you familiar with the term "alt-right"? If so, how would you define it?

A: I am familiar with it. Um I think it's a little hard to define. I think a lot of people define it differently. Like the media, the media and the alt-right themselves definitely, like the way the

media defines the alt-right is pretty much just everybody on the internet who has a Pepe the Frog picture. Um, but I would define it more as uh a fringe group of like (clears throat) uh, they're kinda like extremely far right, like very nationalist. A lot of them have like ethnic, uh, what's the word, like motivations I guess, in terms of their political ideologies. (Brief pause). Yeah, just like a very, very far right like fringe kind of views.

Q: Do you consider yourself to be a member of this group?

A: Definitely, definitely not.

Q: What about the term "redpill"?

A: I'm familiar with that yeah

Q: How do you define it?

A: I would, I would say it depends. Like the Reddit redpill is more like you're just aware of like social uh like social norms I guess? Uh especially regarding masculinity and uh just how people interact with one another. I think, I think uh like the alt-right form of it is um, just like knowing about um, certain uh, aspects of the media that like to lie and um, I think that to people who consider themselves redpilled it's like being aware of like, like (slight pause). I guess being aware is not the right word. Like they're convinced that they know the truth about the world is what I'm trying to say, whether or not they're correct.

Q: Would you consider yourself to be redpilled? And if so, why?

A: I think, in some ways, I would be considered that, just because like certain views I hold towards the media. I'm very distrusting of like uh the mainstream media, especially um, which is like one of their, one of the things that defines it, um, but I would never call myself that I guess.

Q: How do you think these movements became so popular? What do you think contributed to their growth and expansion?

A: (Subject drinks from his Wendy's cup, which at this point sounds empty). Definitely the internet. Like with social media, especially like 4chan was kind of the start of everything, I think. Maybe a little bit of Reddit too but not really. Twitter specifically like, a large group of like, a large concentration of anonymous Twitter accounts became very famous and they have a huge, a huge political social circle on Twitter and uh that gives them like um that gives them like an avatar for their, I guess right? Cause 4chan is anonymous, right, like you can, you can all be talking to each other but you have no like (taps table with fist) face to your uh to your views, but on Twitter and on Facebook and stuff and YouTube, you can say your political views and people can attach it to you and follow you and get consistent like information from you. Um so it's kinda like, kinda like the news in a way, you know, a lot of people I think get their uh get their news from like people they follow on the internet, um, and like sometimes that's a little skewed because people's personal like views, you know. They'll put spins on things happening around the world and leave out certain information and stuff. Definitely like, like comedy in general. Like the purpose of this, like your paper, like I definitely think memes helped. Cause it gives people kind of like uh an outlet. Like I think a lot of people growing up, uh especially in this age feel kind of like, they're powerless or something you know, like they want to be involved politically, they want to make changes in the world, a lot of people are really angry but they have like, they don't really know how to do that, you know? Like pretty much all you can do is vote, if you're not going to like, get violent or something and nobody really wants to do that unless they're crazy. (Coughs). So I think like these internet subcultures like the alt-right and redpilled are like a response to like, uh, discontent among like a large population of, of the youth and uh they can like connect with each

other online and then um, kind of like, when you have access to the whole world of everybody, you know, from the internet, it becomes really easy to like dive into these really like fringe uh like subcultures, because you just have access to it and you have like a bunch of like-minded individuals, kind of like exasperates uh like fringe political views, you know? Like you might have views like 'oh I think everybody of this certain group should, is evil' and then if everybody that you talk to online agrees with you, well then, you know, you're more inclined to feel that way as well.

Q: So do you think these subcultures create a sort of echo chamber?

A: Yeah and I think like, this is definitely not like unique to uh, the alt-right and stuff. Like Tumblr and like, 'Mom Facebook' and stuff, and like the anti-vax crowd like, all of it is just a bunch of people getting misinformed and then the misinformation gets exasperated and spread. Just the way the internet is, like, the way it works functionally and social media like, you're just exposed to misinformation all the time. And maybe it's not always misinformation but like, it's uh, it's just propaganda basically, you know, it's really easy to get propagandized.

Q: One of the things you mentioned previously was that these sorts of ideas went from being more anonymous on sites such as 4chan, to becoming more attached to with an actual name, an actual person, an actual following. What factors do you believe contributed to these ideas becoming more mainstream and acceptable?

A: I think once people realized that there was uh, like a population of people that were like open to these ideas, once there was a demand for content of this type, people who uh, like why does anybody do anything on social media? Like, meme accounts and stuff um. Once they, once people realizing 'oh I can have these views and talk about them on the internet and people will like it and

follow me that kind of creates like uh, like an incentive to do it I guess. Like attention, you know?

I think is how I would answer that.

Q: In light of recent events such as the Christchurch shooting, or the election of Donald Trump, there has been kind of a clear proliferation and physical manifestation of the ideologies and the violence and stuff that is often discussed on the internet. There's like this whole idea of 'doing it for the lulz,' tying back to like old 4chan culture. What do you think about the incongruity between people who legitimately hold these fringe beliefs versus people who are just doing it ironically?

A: (Subject tries to take a sip out of his Wendy's cup, realizes it is empty). I think there's definitely like a group of people who, that would consider themselves like, that have like fringe political views ironically. I think partly they do kind of honestly believe this but not like, I think a lot of people would be like on the internet if you're anonymous it's really easy to be like 'oh hey, like, white nationalism, hooray' but a lot of people who have those views on the internet are either uncomfortable with having them in real life, or maybe they do actually think it's funny to say that kind of stuff but I think that in a lot of cases, irony is more of a cover. There's definitely, there's definitely some people who do it ironically I think, but the majority of them probably don't ironically hold those beliefs. I think that uh, another problem is like, if you're actually doing it ironically there's people who aren't going to notice that. There's a lot, like, for every person who is doing it ironically, there's another person who's not doing it ironically, and it just kind of, tying back to the echo chamber kind of thing, if somebody's ironically saying something that you agree with and you don't realize that cause it's the internet, then you're going to be like 'oh there's another person that agrees with me!' you know? And it's kind of like, going to... (searches for word).

Q: Snowball?

A: Yeah exactly. Like, if you're holding beliefs that like, a normal moral person would not hold, but you see other people on the internet ironically, it kind of proliferates the problem. Especially with mentally unstable individuals, like people who are suicidal and whatnot, they'll have like... in real life a lot of people are disgruntled with the state of the world and if you're like suicidal and mentally unstable and you think that the right thing to do is kill a bunch of people, and a bunch of people on the internet are like 'well here's this group that's evil' and then like you buy a gun and you're like 'well okay I'll just leave this manifesto on the internet and kill a bunch people and then people are going to read the manifesto cause I left it after I killed a bunch of people' and then like you get a bunch of media coverage, pretty much world-wide, um, which I think is also part of the problem is uh media coverage of these events uh. Like yes, these events should be covered because, because it's like it's a bad thing that happened and it's news, you know? But at the same time, this is exactly what the perpetrators want. They want the attention because that just like that exasperates the problem because not only do you have like the people who kind of agree with the things that you're saying but disagree with your actions, like they'll get access to like, like the Christchurch shooter, like his manifesto, like I think a lot of his, u, his points, I don't know what he wrote exactly but I know that part of it was he wanted the media to like, uh, comment on white nationalist terrorism or something, and kind of exacerbate like racial tensions, especially in America, he was like, part of it was he wanted to start a race war. Um, and so like the media covering his thing and like the response in New Zealand and stuff, um, it's kind of like exactly what he wanted.

Q: You mentioned that a lot of individuals are drawn to these movements and ideologies because of modern society. What factors in modern society have contributed to the proliferation of these movements and these memes?

A: Social media definitely. Like uh, just people being able to get attention at all times is like, uh, attention is like a drug, like you see these normal people become celebrities and then all of a sudden they go crazy and die of drug overdoses at 25 or a lot of them are like sexual deviants and pedophiles and stuff. Same thing can happen to somebody on the internet with like an anonymous like meme account. Like if you're only experience with other people is through the internet... I'm sorry what was the question again?

Q: What factors in modern society...?

A (regains train of thought) Oh okay. Also like with growing, like with populations being so large, it's really hard for you to feel like you have a voice in a political system like, and also with like the growing, um, I personally think the way that politics works right now is corrupt. Really the only way to get elected into anything is to have like a very wealthy backer to support you, in which case most of your like, more of your laws have to support *them*, or they're not going to pay for you to get reelected again. Like I think one of the only people that actually had like grassroots, uh like, that's in congress is like AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] and like, some other random senator from Milwaukee or some other area no body's heard about before. So a mix of feeling powerless, I think also like, uh, in like the bigger states, um, there's very high populations of like, liberal, there's like very liberal areas and they're very highly populated, but then there's like small communities of, that are like, that are more conservative just because that like, that kind of, like conservative policies are more morally in line with like their point of view. Like in northern California, everyone wants guns and stuff because they live in the middle of fucking nowhere. Like their closest neighbor is six miles away and there's like six bears that roam that property you know? But there's like, they're governed by the same guns laws that people that live in LA and San Francisco. And so there's kind of like this clash between rural America and like, the very

highly populated urban areas (brief pause) I think that adds to it as well. And then there's, there's definitely people who live in like the urban areas who are like, who are conservative and they probably feel ostracized just because of their like, political beliefs, right? Like you live in an urban, you live in like a, like say UCI [UC Irvine], right? If you're a conservative at UCI, you're like one of a few hundred or something, you know? And there's definitely like a lot of, uh, like emotional, I think especially in the 2016 election, there was like a lot of like, emotions tied with your political view. Pretty much if you like openly supported Trump and everybody, at this, on this campus pretty much would hate you, you know? People have been physically attacked for it in uh, other places like, but that's just conjecture, you know?

Q: Going back to the manifestation of online ideologies into physical violence, who's responsibility do you think it ultimately is to contain that? If it can be contained? In other words, is it more individual, is it more the family, or is it the government, or is it the social media networks themselves?

A: (Subject taps fingers on table for a few seconds while pondering the question). I think, that's kind of like a really touchy subject because ultimately it comes down to who's defining like what these, like, fringe groups are. Because like, there's fringe groups on both sides, but if you look at the way, the way it works right now, is pretty much just the far right that's getting like blocked on social media, like Alex Jones isn't even that fringe, you know? He's actually very popular, and he got banned from like the entire internet. Um. But like yeah, I don't, I don't know anybody who is like the Alex Jones of the left. If the government, or like corporations decide to do that, well corporations will go with whatever makes them the most money, you know? And the most people that use social media are like, urban dwelling people and those tend to be more liberal, so obviously they're going to focus more on like, on that crowd so they won't uh, they'll be more inclined to

like, block far right content creators I guess? And when like you let the government do it, then what's to stop the government from saying 'Oh! Anybody's who's pushing anything that's like against our like, point of view—like the government's right now is very pro-Israel, right? Um, so if they got to decide on like who got to say what on the internet, then they could just like block anybody who's saying 'Oh, maybe we shouldn't give money to Israel anymore'. They could be like 'Oh, that's antisemitic!' so you can't say that on the internet. I think it should be like an individual thing, like you as an individual person should be like 'Oh yeah, yeah I see the, uh, I disagree with a lot of the things that the world's doing, but maybe I shouldn't kill people,' but you know, there's crazy motherfuckers out there, and they're gonna, they're gonna think they should kill people, um, so it's kind of like a, uh, it's a hard-ended question to answer because, like, ultimately, yes, somebody should do something about it, but I don't think that keeping people from saying the thing they're saying is an answer. I think that probably, more access to like mental health stuff. I think that a lot of the people that do this stuff, I think a lot of the people that end up doing like these shootings, like I said before, they're suicidal, so they don't care that they're going to kill a bunch of people, they were going to kill themselves anyway. Um, and if they die during the shooting, then they martyr themselves for their internet community, you know? Um, so I think that like, the best way to solve the problem would be like to, like focusing on improving the mental health of like, the world as a whole I think, especially in America. I think, what is it? Like one in four children is suicidally depressed or something, you know, that's like, uh, that's like a crazy high number you know? And I don't think I've ever met a person in college who like, isn't depressed at some point, you know? Maybe not like everybody's clinically depressed all the time, but I've never met anybody who like did not go through, like, a point of depression in like, their developmental stages, you know?

Q: What do you see the future role of internet memes and social political discourse in America?

A: I think that uh, like, a lot of people refer to like the 2016 election as like, a meme war, um, and I think that just like, the way people's attention spans are shrinking, like nobody wants to read like a six-page article about like what, what does presidential candidate X wants to do. I think it's a lot easier for like, especially younger people, to ingest like jokes, you know? Like you see a meme on the internet and it's like 'Oh, this person believes this thing, ha ha, they're stupid'. It's a lot easier to uh, see that, so I think that um, that, that's probably, I think it's kinda already reached like, the peak of what it will be, I think that it's going to continue being like similar as the 2016 election, as long as people care about it. Like if there's a, in the United States there's a very big disconnected between left and right right now, like a lot of bad, uh, both sides just think the other side is evil or something you know? There's this like, there's this mentality where like if you disagree with me politically then you're like an evil person, and there couldn't be any like some sort of combination of life events or whatever that have you hold different viewpoints than me. They just assume that other people are like, misguided and like dumb and evil for holding their views and I think as long as that is the case, this sort of like, uh, people getting violent about their political beliefs and, and these fringe groups on either side developing through memes, it's definitely going to continue to grow I think. Especially as the years go on, like, these fringe views become less fringe because more and more people see it and they agree with it, like 'Yeah I agree with that, and the left is evil' or 'Yeah, the right is evil. I'm going to going this, this uh, I'll hold the same views as this, whatever fringe group fits my needs at the time,' you know?

Q: What steps can society take to combat misinformation and this extreme polarization? Can memes also be an answer to the problem?

Commented [JS1]: One of the qualities of a meme is that they are bite sized chunks that convey a much larger narrative based on social context and personal experience; this trait allows the proliferation of memes and their mutability

Commented [JS2]: Mental health, polarized political atmosphere

A: I think they could be. You need like a social movement that, uh, kind of tries to like, um, bridge the gap between people, I guess? Maybe, maybe in like ten years people are not twenty-year-olds and angry anymore, and so these fringe groups just shrink and go away. I mean it's happened in the past, you know, like political parties come up and go away, and nowadays there's just like two political parties but there's all sorts of different like subcultures on the internet that develop, I think. I think these like these, these little subcultures will develop, and people will get older and stop caring so much, and it's the internet, you know, maybe people get banned or whatever for saying stupid shit. And uh, these subcultures will come and go as time goes on and maybe um, and the next generation or something is more uh, more caring about like the actual outcome rather than like, what color you vote for.

Second Interview Summary

For our second interview, we chose a subject who had a different political background. The subject is 22 years old and also a student at UC Irvine. They were asked essentially the same questions, with a few different follow-up questions depending on their responses. When asked about their internet habits as a kid, they answered similarly to our first interviewee. Our second interviewee stated that they began browsing the internet at around the age of seven at school and around the age of nine on their home computer. They also did not have very much parental supervision. The subject recalls initially seeing a meme of 'Raptor Jesus' shared in the comments of a flash videogame website and after doing more research on it, travelled down what they called a 'dark rabbit hole'. They began visiting meme sites like Encyclopedia Dramatica and 4chan occasionally, which exposed them to pornography, violent graphic imagery, and radical sociopolitical views at a young age. The subject's reality, however, was different than that which they were exposed to on the internet, coming from a working-class immigrant family. They believe that these radical images and beliefs they were exposed to at this early age didn't explicitly shape their sociopolitical views due to the incongruity between the internet and their reality.

The subject was then asked questions about their political views and how they were formed. Their family was fairly apolitical, though traditionally Catholic, so the subject didn't feel much political influence from them. The subject replied that their political views began to form in middle school, around the time of the 2008 election. Their exposure to the internet had already previously sparked an interest in politics and controversial subjects such as genocide, religion, and abortion. This interest was fueled by a middle school teacher that would make groups of students debate each other on subjects such as these. They revealed that they remained politically literate throughout high school, but still considered themselves fairly 'traditional' and 'liberal' in their

political beliefs. During their time in high school, they even operated a politics and current events blog that they would write on monthly. They stated they did not become ‘radicalized’ until they had spent some time in college. and now consider themselves ‘an anarcho-communist drifting towards Marxist-Leninism’. The subject stated that the content they would cover and the books they would read in their college classes, as a political science major, really helped ‘open their eyes’ to the reality of the world and their position in it, further drawing him into the left.

We questioned the subject about their knowledge of the alt-right and the red pill. Their response varied slightly from that of subject one. Subject two defined the alt-right as a fringe far-right, proto-fascist group that rose from the failures of neoliberalism and perceived social threats to their position on the social hierarchy. They then defined the redpill as a term used to define people who believe they know the reality of how society works, but this includes extremely sexist, racist, homophobic, and antisemitic views of the world. Rather than ask about subject two about their affiliation with the alt-right, we asked them about their affiliation with the ‘alt-left’ and the antifa movement. They thought about it for a few seconds and replied yes and that ‘of course’ they are anti-fascist, but do not belong to any particular antifa group, nor have they participated in significant civil disobedience. The subject added that they do belong to and participate in a few far-left internet groups, including several pro-second amendment, gardening, and communist meme pages on Facebook and Twitter. Subject two continued that the memes they are exposed to reaffirm their beliefs, but also spark the search for new knowledge. They stated that many of the memes they were exposed to early on were proto-alt-right memes and that they felt disillusioned by the trite and coarse nature of these memes; they felt like the memes and the people who made or shared them often just did it ‘ironically’ for the shock value, giving little regard to the actual validity of the content matter within the meme itself. This was another theme also touched upon

by our first subject. The second subject is not just a consumer of memes, but they are also a propagator of memes. They often make politically-based memes to share on their university's Facebook meme page, or on their own personal social media pages. They are also members of radical leftist political groups on Facebook and Twitter, but also say that they often go through alt-right and conservative internet circles in order to, in their words, 'better know their enemy' and 'keep themselves sharp'.

Our second subject reaffirmed some of the views towards memes held by our first subject, specifically that memes are effective means of dispersing information and persuading others into accepting or at least listening to radical views. They went on to say that memes spread much like a virus, making it hard to contain as it is constantly mutating and growing resistant to eradication efforts. Our second subject displayed his knowledge of memetics, talking about the fledging field of academic research going into studying internet memes. They discussed the factors in society that have led to the popularity of memes and social media in shaping people's political views, alluding to many of the same points as our first subject, such as a desire to have a voice, a corrupt political system, and the simplicity and exchangeability of memes. Subject two went on to blame the system of capitalism for creating the conditions for radicalization via internet memes, stating that misinformation is often purposefully spread to keep people divided and angry at all the wrong sources. They highlighted examples of government bodies using internet memes and other forms of social engineering to undermine a society's structure and well-being.

We concluded our second interview with questions about responsibility and what society can do to curb this online radicalization and physical violent manifestations. Our second subject agreed with When asked about who should be responsible, they had a hard time answering the question directly. They placed some of the blame on websites and social media networks like

Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit for allowing this type of radical, violent content and behavior to continue unabated on their platforms. They also expressed that a lot of parents have failed to properly monitor the internet usage of their children, or outright enable toxic beliefs themselves. Yet they also touched on the personal aspect of things, saying that people should have some autonomy in deciding which ideologies are valid and which are hateful. Much like subject one, subject two worried that if the government or private corporations were able to define which ideologies are allowed and which are not, they will be able to censor all views that are critical of them. Despite holding what would be considered radical beliefs by modern American political standards, they heavily stressed that they would not carry out acts of violence against society. They clarified that their position as an undocumented immigrant and his relatively stable life dissuade him from doing so, though they could see what circumstances would drive a person to do so.

Our second interviewee expressed their concerns that the future of memes in political discourse will be a double-edged sword. They agreed with our first interviewee's thoughts that politics is increasingly becoming a 'meme war' with both conservatives and liberals vying for a share of the public's diminishing attention span, stating that often times the objective 'truth' was obscured behind subjective appeals to emotion. They felt that though internet memes and subcultures were a great way to spread awareness and involvement on a sociopolitical issue, they are often weaponized for nefarious purposes and often create an echo chamber which is largely imperceptible to those within it. They then said that this reaffirmation leads to polarization within the group as well as the spread of misinformation. They only saw the problem as growing worse, fearing that it might boil over into a full-scale civil war within a decade or two. However, they also saw memes as a potential source for good and unification, but could not really elaborate how.

Analysis

The information that was gathered from both the interviews fit in nicely with the topics of interest we outlined at the onset of this paper, which included habits, identity, political ideologies, and perceptions. Both subjects are both fairly engrossed in internet and meme culture and were excited to share their thoughts on these topics. Our questions gauged the subjects' familiarity and experience with the internet subcultures and memes as well as their political ideologies and their formation in order to establish a baseline level of comparison. Given the responses and attitudes of our subjects, it is clear that internet subcultures and memes have a role in influencing and radicalizing political ideologies, but the extent of which varies on external factors such as family background, personal experiences.

Our two subjects were not necessarily completely representative of the full range of political ideologies found within the United States. Both of them were young adults in college who used the internet frequently and who held what are considered to be radical political ideologies. Despite this, we can use coding categories such as personal identity (race, social class), internet usage habits (light, moderate, or heavy), perceptions of memes and society (influential or inconsequential, positive or negative), and political beliefs (left-wing or right-wing, mainstream or radical) to classify them. The coding categories allow us to gain a clearer perspective on the factors which influence political radicalization the most.

Through our questioning of both subjects, we were able to determine what social types they are categorized into. We classify our first subject as a white, middle class, radical right-winger, and a heavy internet user with negative perceptions of society, who also sees memes as influential. Our second subject is classified as a Latino, working class, radical leftist, and also a heavy internet user with negative perceptions of society. Their responses in terms of personal background and

political ideology diverged but their internet usage habits as well as their perceptions of memes and society converged. Both subjects felt disillusioned by modern society, but differed in the reasons why due to their backgrounds and personal experiences. Despite being diametrically opposed in terms of left-right politics, both were fairly radical in their beliefs but did not engage in violence.

We decided to choose a person on the left side of the spectrum for our second subject in order to get a better point of comparison with our initial test subject. Yet this clearly does not accurately represent the vast plethora of prominent political ideologies which exist in the United States today. To create a more robust and thorough analysis of the effects of internet memes on political radicalization, we would need to interview an even wider range of subjects to gather a wider range of social types to compare to one another. Our theoretical pool of subjects would consist of people of different ages, family backgrounds, identities (race, gender, religion, and social class), internet usage habits, and political ideologies. For example, by interviewing participants with radical political beliefs but who don't frequent the internet or interact with memes as much or at all, we can determine alternative ways in which people are radicalized politically, to what extent this occurs compared to a similar subject who *does* frequent the internet, and whether they are more likely to manifest these ideologies into real-life action, such as politically-motivated violence or civil disobedience, than similar agents which are radicalized primarily online. We could also examine the effects of different *types* of internet memes on political radicalization by interviewing individuals who are more politically moderate and also participate in meme culture, albeit perhaps a more mainstream and 'normie' one. Simply put, a wider sample of individuals to interview would produce a clearer picture on the role internet meme subcultures play in political radicalization.

Our observations from our coupled with current events, such as the rise of alt-right populism in western countries, the evocation of alt-right sentiments in mass shootings, the proliferation of anti-fascist groups, and also the resurgence of socialism in the United States, hint that there is indeed a relationship between participation in fringe internet meme subcultures and political radicalization. However, it is important to note that there are also other factors such as family background and mental illness contribute to this process, often in conjunction with memes. Memes have a more pronounced effect on individuals who are considered more impressionable due to their identities, their family backgrounds, and their personal experiences. Both of our subjects spend much of their time engrossed in internet subcultures that proliferate radical ideologies primarily through the usage of memes and the internet. Yet the subcultures both frequented were not nearly as radical as those visited by recent perpetrators of mass shootings, such as 8chan, Infowars, Breitbart, the defunct social media site Gab, or the white nationalist website Stormfront. Though both subjects held critical and generally negative views of society, both also came from relatively stable, apolitical families and both considered themselves fairly mentally fit. Thus, the scope of this study is limited due to the small sample size, so it is difficult to draw definite conclusions between participation in internet meme culture and political radicalization. This study simply aims to advocate for future study on the role of memes on political formation and radicalization in the age of the internet, a topic which has yet to warrant serious discussion from the academic community. However, we can still create a tentative theory based on our observations. Heavy participation in fringe online meme subcultures can lead to political radicalization; under certain personal and social factors, the beliefs fermented and fomented by these subcultures can manifest themselves into real-life action and violence.