

THE MALICIOUS POWER OF MEMES

DECIPHERING VISUAL HATE
IN THE GERMAN EXTREMIST TELEGRAM SPHERE

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Introduction¹

Maik Fielitz is a social scientist and conflict researcher. He is currently the head of the research unit on right-wing extremism and digitalisation at the Jena Institute for Democracy and Civil Society and co-head of research at the German Federal Association for Countering Online Hate (bag-gegen-hass.net) as well as co-editor of the online magazine Machine Against the Rage (machine-vs-rage.net). His research examines the ways in which digital technologies and digital cultures influence the emergence and evolution of right-wing extremism, as well as the strategies employed by liberal democracies to counter authoritarian tendencies in online contexts.

Digitalisation has led to the emergence of new formats and dissemination strategies for extremist messages, which are particularly targeted at younger generations. With the advent of social media and the potential for building a large online audience, extremist actors have adopted communication methods that have the potential to go viral in online contexts. These include a shift towards visual and audio-visual propaganda, as well as the targeting of online-savvy milieus that congregate to attack individuals and marginalised groups. From these converging online milieus, far-right terrorists have been recruited, with their killing spree referencing anonymous online communities encouraged to produce memes.²

Memes have become an effective medium of extremist online propaganda, as well as a common way of expressing emotions and political ideas. Indeed, politics, social relations and public entertainment today are hardly imaginable without the usage of memes. As a pervasive digital phenomenon, they combine political messages with (moving) images from pop or everyday culture. In extremist contexts, memes have the potential to both radicalise and mainstream ideas. On the one hand, they mainstream extremist ideas by appealing to the habits of popular communication. On the other hand, they may have a radicalising effect on consumers as the massive spread of hatred may contribute to a cognitive opening towards violence.

In the context of identifying and banning extremist and terrorist content online, platforms and law enforcement agencies have largely focused on manifestos and violent propaganda. Due to them being semiotically open, image-based memes circumvent analogue and algorithmic content moderation. In fact, memes disseminated by notorious actors push moderation and criminal investigation practices to their limits as they often only contain implicit extremist messages and refrain from clearly expressing extremism. In light of this, research has examined the cross-platform circulation, the role of humour and irony, as well as the aesthetic features of extremist memes.³ However, a systematic analysis of the target audience of hate memes over a longer period of time and a comparison of the rhetoric and aesthetic means used to communicate group-based enmity has not yet been conducted.

¹ This piece is based on a research study for the German Federal Association for Countering Online Hate led by Lisa Bogerts, Wyn Brodersen, Christian Donner and Maik Fielitz. It was published in the online journal *Machine Against the Rage* (German only): <https://machine-vs-rage.bag-gegen-hass.net/five-shades-of-hate-gruppenbezogene-abwertung-in-zeiten-der-memifizierung/>

² Macklin, Graham (2019): The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age. In: *CTC Sentinel* 12 (6), p. 18-29.

³ Zannettou, Savvas; Finkelstein, Joel; Bradlyn, Barry; Blackburn, Jeremy (2020): A Quantitative Approach to Understanding Online Antisemitism: <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/7343>; Crawford, Blyth; Keen, Florence (2020): Memetic irony and the promotion of violence in chan cultures. Edited by Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. London; Bogerts, Lisa; Fielitz, Maik (2023): *Fashwave. The Alt-Right's Aestheticization of Politics and Violence*. In Sarah Hegenbart, Mara Kölmel (Eds.): *Dada Data. Contemporary art practice in the era of post-truth politics*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, pp. 230-245.

For the German-speaking context, we have analysed the memetic communication on a large scale. The focus was on identifying which groups are predominantly targeted through memetic hate and examining how the means of communication change in response to the devaluation of a specific group. Our findings indicate that there are significant differences in the way certain groups are depicted and a tendency to emphasise the trigger points of current polarised public debates. This paper presents the results in three steps. Firstly, the role of memes in extremist communication is introduced. Secondly, the methodology and results of our meme analysis are presented. Finally, the use of visual elements is discussed in greater depth, contextualising the findings.

The persuasive power of memes in extremist communication

The present age is characterised by the prevalence of memes. The meme genre encompasses a multitude of content tropes, such as the Grumpy Cat, sentimental superheroes and embarrassing dance challenges. Such memes are employed to convey the peculiarities of everyday life, which often defy verbal expression. Memes reflect the prevailing zeitgeist by simplifying the complexities of the world into a format that can be quickly consumed. Memes are an effective means of generating increased attention. It is therefore not surprising that memes are also employed strategically to achieve political objectives. The so-called ‘meme wars’ of the US alt-right, which broke out in the wake of Donald Trump’s election in 2016, provide a case in point. Since then, memes have served as a means of disseminating extremist ideas to the masses, often in a manner that is both contemporary and pop-cultural.

In this context, memes convey extreme messages in a seemingly innocuous manner, thereby creating their own unique viewing habits and dynamics. The use of humour and irony allows for the expression of extreme ideas in a deliberately ambiguous manner. They are semiotically open, as they communicate on different levels. This means that the messages conveyed in a meme are never fully understood by the recipients, given that the true origin of memes is often unclear. Consequently, it is challenging to ascertain the intention behind a meme. In a context in which information is fragmented and digital, the collapse of context contributes to the misuse and manipulation of information for strategic communication.

The power of memes is contingent upon their repetitive consumption. In contrast to text-based memes, image-based memes can be comprehended in a matter of seconds. In order to be created and understood, they require subcultural knowledge of the codes and aesthetic composition, as well as an understanding of the factors that contribute to the virality of online materials. These skills are disseminated and acquired in specific online forums, such as 4chan, which are renowned for generating some of the most popular internet trends, while also facilitating extremist communication. Consequently, despite the anonymity that memes grant to their creators, they have the potential to create a collective identity based on common ways of communication.

Many memes, not only in extremist contexts, share an edgy habit, referring to a rough net-cultural atmosphere that repeatedly targets minority groups for the sake of amusement. It should be noted, however, that the weaponisation of memes for the purpose of anti-pluralistic discourse is a particularly salient feature of extremist contexts. The objective here appears to be the harassment of vulnerable and less protected groups, with a view to amplifying the intensity and scope of the attacks they face. Nevertheless, the persuasive power of memes does not necessarily derive from ideological indoctrination, but also from sophisticated aesthetics, creative in-jokes, and the potential for virality.

A critical examination of the visual hate on Telegram

While the term ‘meme’ is used to describe a wide range of cultural phenomena, for the purposes of this empirical study we focused on a narrow understanding of memes as image-text combinations. The objective was to ascertain which groups have been subjected to visual discrimination and hate. A data set of 8.5 million images shared by 1 675 far-right, conspiracist and esoteric German-speaking channels on the platform Telegram was analysed. A representative sample of 40 728 images was taken, which were equally shared along ten different extremist submilieus.⁴

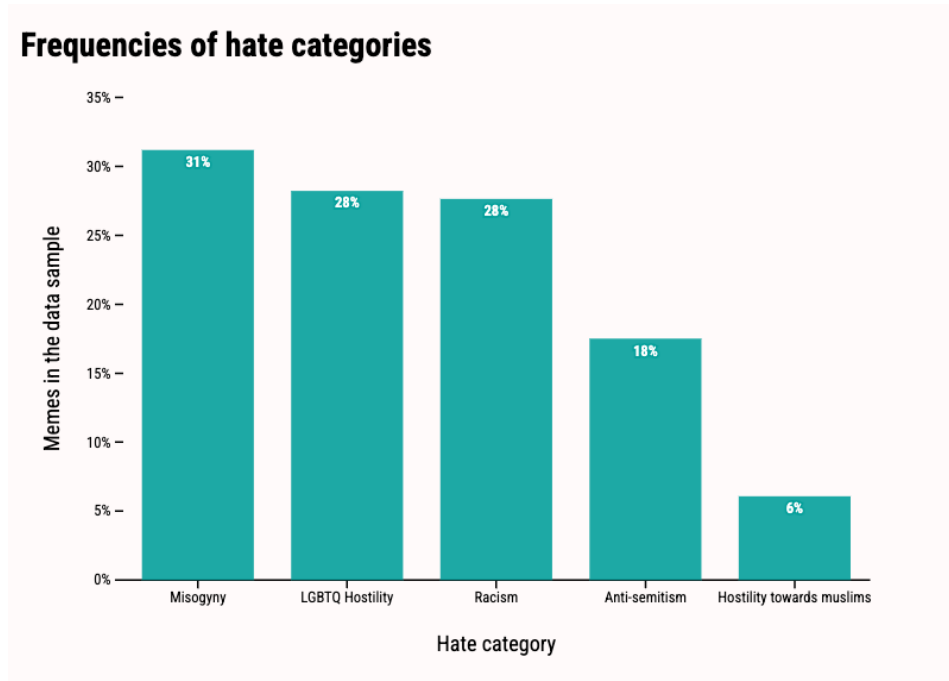


Figure 1: Frequencies of group-based visual discrimination

In our theoretical approach, we were guided by the concept of group-focused enmity.⁵ This approach is based on the devaluation of individuals due to their membership in a particular group, which is justified by an ideology of inequality. These are prejudiced attitudes that rationalise social inequalities. Structural problems are attributed to inferior characteristics of certain groups, and these are thus held responsible for their own marginalisation or subordination. Different categories of devaluation can reinforce each other in this context. In a preliminary examination of our meme data sample, we identified five categories of group-focused enmity as especially prevalent. These were initially defined and operationalised, and then subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis. The categories include the following phenomena of group-related devaluation: misogyny, homo- and transphobia, antisemitism, racism and islamophobia.

⁴ The multi-stage filtering process including an AI-based clustering of image categories is based on the permanent Telegram monitoring by the research unit of the Federal Association for Countering Online Hate (BAG »Gegen Hass im Netz«). In Germany, Telegram plays a crucial role for mobilising against liberal democracy and for organising within extremist scenes. For more information on the methods see here: <https://machine-vs-rage.bag-gegen-hass.net/meth-odischer-annex-05/>.

⁵ Zick, Andreas; Wolf, Carina; Küpper, Beate; Davidov, Eldad; Schmidt, Peter; Heitmeyer, Wilhelm (2008): The Syndrome of Group-Focused Enmity: The Interrelation of Prejudices Tested with Multiple Cross-Sectional and Panel Data. In Journal of Social Issues 64 (2), pp. 363–383.

A manual coding process revealed that 2 158 potentially discriminatory memes were identified in the 40 728 image sample between January 2022 and June 2023. Upon further analysis, it was found that the majority of discriminatory memes fell into the misogyny category, with the remaining memes being distributed across the other categories. A total of 31 percent of the memes were identified as misogynistic. This figure is not unexpected, given the high prevalence of digital hate directed at women. As will be demonstrated subsequently, misogyny frequently manifests in the form of gender-specific stereotyping. The second most prevalent affected group has been the LGBTQ community. 28 percent of the memes contain elements that indicate prejudice or hostility towards individuals based on their transgender identity and, in some cases, their sexual orientation. A significant proportion of these memes can be understood as both a criticism of gender and identity politics and as a devaluation of the people to whom these politics apply. The ambiguity or diversity of interpretation enables multiple trigger points to be activated in an emotionally charged debate, particularly around the right to gender self-determination.

It can be observed that 28 percent of the memes contain aspects that can be read as racist devaluation. The focus of this analysis is on the portrayal of Black people and those categorised as Arab, with instances of Turkish representation also observed. On the one hand, these individuals are accused of having a tendency towards criminal behaviour. On the other hand, they are portrayed as the most significant and dangerous cohort of individuals who are perceived to be foreign infiltrators. Similar devaluations and rejections can also be found in the context of Islamophobia, which at six percent is the smallest in our data sample. However, this may also be attributed to temporal cycles. For instance, the number of debates about Islam in the period under analysis was notably lower than in previous periods or even afterwards, particularly in the context of the recently intensified conflict in the Middle East. This is also not included in the final category, that of antisemitism. A total of 18 percent of the memes were found to contain corresponding stereotypes, stylistic figures and hostility. Images of Jewish omnipotence are frequently employed, often in conjunction with conspiracy theories such as the Great Reset.



Figure 2: Five prototypical memes with multiple devaluations and wide reach

Discrimination may be targeted at several groups simultaneously. In nine percent of the images, multiple devaluations were identified, indicating that different groups were affected. The memes above illustrate such instances, which frequently occur in conjunction with disparate image elements (Figure 2). It is of particular interest to ascertain which devaluations occur more frequently together, as this also reveals implicit patterns. These include how group devaluations overlap and groups are even played off against each other. The close connection between racism and hostility towards Muslims, as well as hostility towards women and homosexual and transgender persons, is hardly surprising, given that both pairs are phenomenologically close. It is also notable that racism and misogyny are relatively closely linked. Although the utilisation

of women's rights for racist exclusion is already well documented, the connections observed in the data set are more complex. A common image motif is that women in particular are perceived as naive or hysterical when it comes to their anti-racist positions. Similar meme elements have already been identified within the alt-right. In addition, Ukrainian refugees are devalued in racist terms and also as sexual objects. In contrast to the other devaluation categories, antisemitism is much more isolated.

The complexity of extremist meme circulation

Although Telegram is perceived to be a platform conducive to the dissemination of violent extremist material, our dataset finds a different phenomenon: chauvinistic humour for the masses. This is distinct from exclusive hate cultures that feed off digital subcultures. Consequently, the depiction of violence is rare in our meme dataset, which must be viewed in the context of a strict penal code in Germany. For this reason, our analysis has concentrated on the unconscious mechanisms of visual discrimination.

To gain a deeper understanding of the resonance of memes, we have coded individual visual elements, including people, objects, animals and symbols. This approach enables us to describe images in the most descriptive and objective manner possible, which in turn can help contextualise visual carriers of devaluation and identify implicit patterns of persuasion.

For instance, antisemitic memes frequently portray individuals from *civil society* and *business*, whereas this is not the case in other pejorative imagery. This fixation on influential positions and the insinuation of power is a well-known feature of antisemitic imagery, and it is also evident in the memes through the use of *brand logos* associated with an assumed Jewish world conspiracy. In contrast to the often presuppositional elements of antisemitic imagery, memes that devalue women are relatively simple. These memes often depict *indeterminate people* (especially white women) in connection with nudity, but also means of transport and food. The underlying stereotypes of the bad driver or the housekeeper are obvious. In contrast, *weapons* are most frequently found in racist memes, which is unsurprising given the depiction of people with a different skin colour as criminals. Similarly, religious symbols are most frequently depicted in anti-Muslim memes.

Animals are a frequently occurring element in LGBTQ contexts, often in combination with the narrative that it goes against nature and biology to change one's gender. Another common element is *children*. Such content can be found in racist memes and even more often in memes with (LGB)TQ discrimination. Rather than being primarily driven by open resentment, these memes allow for ambiguous associations that can trigger such resentment, as they can also address politically controversial topics. Consequently, memes can generate different impact across different types of recipients.

Contextualising the results

Telegram is not particularly renowned as a platform for memetic creativity. This is partly because the platform is less relevant for young people, who are more inclined towards meme subcultures on platforms such as 4chan, Instagram and TikTok. It is also partly due to the fact that the public communication of Telegram is strongly orientated towards one-to-many communication. Also, messages are not sorted algorithmically, so that visual content is not favoured over text-only content as on other mainstream platforms. Instead, Telegram users make eclectic use of other sources, such as the image board 4Chan, which suggests a more strategic and less organic meme production.

Furthermore, the memes in the groups we analysed demonstrate that the visual language is less oriented towards digital subcultures and more towards chauvinistic everyday humour.

As the memes are based on current events, our findings only offer insights into one episode of memetic communication on a specific platform. A similar snapshot of other platforms would presumably be different. Telegram – with its chronologically ordered feed – facilitates massive posting behaviour that encourages the DIY mentality that is inherent to participatory forms of image production. This makes it difficult for practitioners to identify hotbeds of extremist communication on this specific platform.