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"It's happening!" – memes as vehicle for online extremism based on an example of narratives from 4chan's /pol/ (politically incorrect) board in the wake of Christchurch terrorist attack

Abstract: Online spaces, discussion boards, social media or open forums provide currently active generations of netizens with places to openly discuss ways in which they perceive the world, from their views on entertainment to political sympathies. Memes play an important role in that process as symbolic representations of emotions, humour and supported or opposed values. However, they may also present often inappropriate content in accessible way, hidden under the guise of irony or innocent fun. This article presents a discourse analysis conducted on a sample of 40 discussion threads posted on 4chan's /pol/ board after the Christchurch terrorist attack. It aims to look into how through the use of memes and ironic posting such acts might be used to desensitize users to violence and extremist ideologies, while briefly covering core characteristics of memes and describing the notion of chan culture. It also touches on the matter whether such discourses, grounded in board users' linguistic practices and the socio-cultural environment of /pol/, could be (re)producing (symbolic) violence.

Keywords: memes, online extremism, chan culture, internet, virtual communities

Słowa kluczowe: memy, ekstremizm w internecie, kultura forów obrazkowych, internet, wirtualne społeczności

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Introduction

Social interactions in contemporary world rely on many symbolic systems that keep changing and evolving at a rapid pace. As a part of a wider context of net-based communication, memes are widely shared across social media sites, texting applications, posted on websites as a commentary to recent events or brought up in everyday conversations. As Julia DeCook (2018: 1) states, "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." From afar they might seem to be relatively harmless, humorous images, clips, texts etc., but their near omnipresence makes them also a desirable tool for marketing, political agitation, and propaganda.

It should then not come as a surprise that there are niches on the verges of the mainstream Web in which memes are used by far right, extremist movements and their sympathizers to facilitate the spread of racist, misogynistic or supremacist views.

In this article I am conducting an analysis of memes and narratives posted on 4chan's /pol/ (politically incorrect) imageboard in the aftermath of the terrorist attack carried out in Christchurch, New Zealand. The purpose of the study is to identify the main tropes that surfaced in those discussions, to uncover whether users' posting (linguistic, memetic) practices could be aiding in construction and spread of extremist ideas. I will briefly cover the ideas behind concept of memes and their evolution. I do believe that at this point memes are instinctively understood by the majority of mainstream and academic public, as they have been an object of various research for a good part of last two decades and remain an important part of contemporary communication styles, especially amongst younger generations. Their usage in internet spaces such as 4chan, especially in the wake of (online) extremist movements, strikes me as a subject that should be discussed more. I will also touch upon history of 4chan and associated with it notion of chan culture to properly present the context and specific digital environment of this site, before diving into examples of posting styles, memes and narratives that may reference extremist agendas, which were selected from a sample of 40 archived discussion threads.

Memes, 4chan, and chan culture

The concept of memes, presented as units of cultural transmission (or units of imitation) was firstly introduced by Richard Dawkins in 1976. Similarly to genes that build and shape our biological existence, memes would serve as building blocks in the cultural sphere. The longer such units (identified as songs, fashions styles, catchphrases etc.) exist and the more they are replicated, the bigger is their relevancy in the cultural sphere (Dawkins, 2006: 189–192). With the emergence of the internet and especially the participatory Web 2.0 model, Dawkins' ideas were reused and remixed to describe a new phenomenon – internet memes. In simple terms, these are artefacts (text, images, phrases etc.) existing in digital sphere that are "deliberately modified in ways designed to catch attention and be passed on and further modified" (Lankshear, Knobel, 2019: 43–44).

Internet as a medium enhances properties of memes that help with their spreading. As Limor Shifman (2014: 17) states, online transmission has a higher accuracy when compared to other media because it allows

for lossless transfer of information. Moreover, number of copies that can be delivered to various nodes is increased and longevity is also extended as data can be stored virtually indefinitely. From users' perspective, even though memes are commonly used, specific competencies have to be developed to understand and create them. Ryan Milner (2013a: 1) calls it a form of "'vernacular creativity', which balances the familiar and foreign, the collective and individual." One requires a certain proficiency in unravelling references and contexts that a meme is invoking in order to properly interpret it. Interrelationship between novelty and fixity is used by discourse to connect cultural precedents and individual expressions, which makes memes "media lingua franca" of modern age (Milner, 2013a: 2, 5).

There are various types of memes and their existence is not restricted to a specific format. The most common variety, however, is a captioned image, where object and text work in conjunction to rely a humorous message to the viewer (or are at odds with each other to the point that this disconnect can be seen as funny). Spread of this format can be attributed to LOLcats, a trend popular in the second part of 2000s, where users posted images of cats with quirky captions, and rise of sites with macro generators. These allowed people to craft a meme easily by choosing a template or uploading an image and adding text to from the level of their internet browser without a need for additional software.

Nowadays, as I already stated, memes are almost omnipresent. As Lanshkear and Knobel (2019: 47) summarize:

> Idea of what memes are became very tightly pegged to high-fidelity image macro memes in people's everyday understanding. Spreading out from LOLcats, the ubiquity and recognizability of image macros have generated numerous downstream industries, services, and big rewards for some – prefiguring the rise of today's Instagram and YouTube stars and influencers. […] Image macro memes have spawned commercial products ranging from coffee mugs, to greeting cards, to underwear – all emblazoned with a popular meme image. People dress as "memes" for Halloween, and Amazon.com sells books of memes and meme-based board games. Advertising agencies trade on memes and meme references in their campaigns. Even school textbooks include meme images. Memes today are not only mainstream, but big business, too.

Politics is no exception. Ever since the presidential election in USA in 2008, in which candidates, especially Barack Obama, fully embraced digital means of communication with their supporters, every political action or event produces massive amounts of user-generated content. Shifman (2014: 122–123) suggests that political memes fulfil three functions, they: enable persuasion or political advocacy; facilitate grass-

roots action by empowering citizens; and serve as modes of expression in public discussion. However, if we take into account existence of extremist groups that are meme literate and combine that with some users' favourite pastime activity of trolling, we could arrive at conclusion that memes in cultural practices can also serve as divisive weapons that are designed to "sow hatred and violence between groups" (Lanshkear, Knobel, 2019: 50). One such example can be Pepe the Frog, image of cartoonish frog, popularized by 4chan and used at first to indicate reactions to various situations in neutral context, mainly happiness or sadness.

Figure 1. "Feels good man" version of Pepe the Frog
Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/feels-good-man, accessed 2.01.2023.

As Pepe grew in popularity amongst mainstream crowd, 4channers decided to "reclaim it" as their symbol and started posting more offensive versions of the meme to scare away the "normies" (ordinary internet users). During Donald Trump's election campaign and presidency Pepe was heavily used by right wing and alt-right supporters, cementing its mainstream perception as symbol of hatred (Lanshkear, Knobel, 2019: 50–51, "Pepe the Frog," 2023).
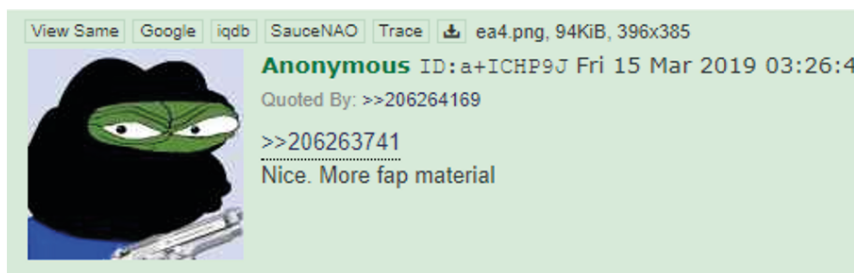

Figure 2. Angry Pepe with a gun, posted in a 4chan thread in the aftermath of Christchurch attack
Source: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206263741/, accessed 2.01.2023.

Moving onto the topic of 4chan, it can be shortly described as the world's largest anonymous imageboard (where users refer to each other as "anons") and one of the birthplaces of memes. It was created as an English-speaking, international counterpart to Japanese 2channel, an immensely popular imageboard in its own right, using its source code and design ("2channel," 2023; "4chan," 2023). The 4chan's characteristics that distinguish it from a standard internet forum, are its aforementioned anonymity, focus on freedom of speech and expression, as well as rather relaxed set of rules, which can be often pushed pretty far before any corrective actions, such as post deletion or bans, are introduced. This makes it an ideal place for the growth of nonconformist, niche groups and communities. Using 4chan requires no registration and it is accessible to mainstream public by simply running a google search. The site itself states:

> Since its creation in 2003, 4chan has grown to become one of the world's largest forums, serving approximately 680,000,000 page impressions to over 22,000,000 unique visitors per month […]. The website is mainly popular amongst young adults, and its imageboard format is based fully on user-generated content. Users post in a variety of interest-themed imageboards, including Video Games, Anime, Lifestyle and Technology. […] 4chan is credited with spawning a number of wildly popular internet memes, including LOLcats, the rapid rise to popularity of Tay "Chocolate Rain" Zonday, and "Rickrolling"—among many others. ("4chan Press," 2023)

4chan is said to be driven by the specific logic, logic of lulz, "amusement at others' distress" (Milner, 2013b: 66). Users of the site try to troll each other (as well as any outsiders or infrequent visitors) at almost all times, fishing for angry responses to their various provocations, commonly referred to as "baits." Such trolling can work as a cultural critique but it is often used in exclusionary fashion to target various minorities. Milner (2013b: 88–89) sees a chance for trolling to be productive, but only when combined with polyvocality and if certain balance between irony and earnestness can be achieved.

This all makes 4chan, as Lee Knutilla (2011: 17) puts it, "simultaneously a simple message board and a complex community." Different boards have their own, distinctive sets of memes, phrases or posting styles. Moreover, the way the site is designed adds to its distinctive feel. For example, threads on 4chan have a set "bump limit." When it is reached, a thread will no longer get moved to the top of the board after each reply, causing it to tumble down the pages until it is archived. This is a specific method of post-limiting that keeps content on the site fresh and ever-changing ("4chan FAQ," 2023). How 4chan is perceived can

then vary from user to user, depending on their browsing preferences, interests and times at which they access the site, making it unique and perhaps slightly chaotic to navigate. Knutilla (2011: 10) summarizes that in following words: "anonymous interface and culture operate together to form contingency, which in turn, cascades into discourse and streams back towards the user, reflecting a unique, virtual ontological experience."

With its size and popularity, 4chan needs to have a set of certain rules to make itself at least partially advertiser-friendly and avoid governmental interventions. Some of those rules state that racist, pornographic or grotesque content should not be posted outside /b/, place dedicated to "random" content, where almost anything goes; users should be over the age of 18; or that anything that may violate any laws should not be linked or discussed ("4chan," 2023). There is also a certain division in terms of content – boards that are hosted on 4channel.org domain are deemed "safe for work" and moderated more closely, while these available on 4chan.org domain remain less controlled. Over the years many similar sites were created, some supposedly offering more freedom or covering niche topics or interests that do not have a designated 4chan board. One such site was 8chan, which allowed users to create and moderate their own thematic boards. It was briefly shut down in 2019 after perpetrators of three distinctive shootings posted their manifestos on the site, and later re-emerged under the guise of 8kun ("Imageboard," 2023; "8chan," 2023).

While there might be substantial differences between distinctive chan sites, most of them operate based on the same layout, allow users to remain anonymous, share similar posting style and house niche, sometimes radical communities that stay on the outskirts of mainstream perception. They share parts of their userbases, with 4chan playing the most important role as it aggregates the most traffic. Whether that is enough to proclaim existence of specific chan culture could be debated but I believe such term can be used to describe a set of characteristics connected with using those sites, such as aforementioned anonymity, heavy reliance on memes as a mode of communication, mechanics of browsing and posting, as well as ever-present irony, logic of lulz.

In addition to that, I would like to bring attention to the report *Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures*, released in 2020 by the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, in which researchers took a look at how chan sites, through their visual culture, contribute to or encourage violent discourse. Key findings can be summarized in following points: chan sites and specific boards seem to be facilitating "in-group" status, which is critical in cultivating extremist views; their visual culture obscures radical content and implied meaning of certain messages to less-frequent users; some memes shared on

chans explicitly promote violence, while other require certain literacy to be understood – their connotations become apparent only when situated in wider radical context; memes are used primarily to target various minorities, Jews, women or LGBTQ+ community; antisemitic content is connected to various conspiratorial attitudes; Covid-19 pandemic, rise of Black Lives Matter movement and general global instability became centre of radical online narratives, with chan natives using these events to create social discords (Crawford, Keen, Suarez de-Tangil, 2020). Some of these observations align closely with my own (albeit mine are more specifically related to 4chan's /pol/ board) which we will discuss further in the conclusion section, however, it is important to recognize significance of this report, as it brings connection between violent discourses, memes, and chan sites to the forefront.

Language and symbolic violence in the digital age

Fragments of Pierre Bourdieu's theories and notions of habitus, social practice and symbolic violence (see Bourdieu, 1991) seem to fit well with the modes in which users of chan sites operate. For example, for Bourdieu (1991: 17) linguistic utterances or expressions "can be understood as the product of relation between linguistic habitus and a linguistic market." This habitus is composed of dispositions gained when learning the language in specific contexts, at school, with family, amongst friends and "these dispositions govern both the subsequent linguistic practices of an agent and the anticipation of the value that linguistic products will receive in other fields or markets" (Bourdieu, 1991: 17). Moreover, utterances are presupposed by set of social rules, relations or institutions that, in a way, grant an individual with an authority to speak and be understood by others (Bourdieu, 1991: 8–9). Therefore, I would argue that the same could be applied to "meme literacy" – memes are also a form of capital that is gained in the process of enculturation. To be accepted in the group (and in this case, on chan sites), one needs to learn their practices, no matter how banal they may seem. As DeCook (2018: 13) puts it, "memes, with their element of culture through both the visual and text, embody social norms themselves depending on which community they are presented in."

Moreover, Bourdieu sees symbolic violence as a way in which power is exercised and disguised by the established order. The group in control imposes its norms on its subordinates and that relation is often overlooked by all of the involved, "it enables those who benefit most from the system to convince themselves of their own intrinsic worthiness, while preventing those who benefit least from grasping the basis of their

own deprivation" (Bourdieu, 1991: 25). It has to be pointed out, however, that Bourdieu's concepts are not immune to criticism. In regards to symbolic violence, its categories of victim and perpetrator are somewhat ambiguous. If symbolic violence is attributed to a dominant group in society, then it begs the question how far back that violence goes, was it ever-present or if specific point of origin can be established, should previous generations be considered and to what degree? Furthermore, it may partially rob individuals of their agency – as symbolic violence is unrealised by its victims, even if they claim to voluntarily and consciously obey, adhere to or agree with certain social dogma, we might conclude that it is only their false conviction due to that unrealised pressure. Category of symbolic violence may then lack certain concrete criteria or characteristics that would help us distinguish whether it is actually present in communication act or situation, as we might only suppose it is for the sake of rhetorical arguments (see Stępnik, 2016: 183–186). With that in mind could it then be that memes, in their specific habitus, serve as symbols of power, tools of normalization for problematic behaviours and are *de facto* agents, incarnations of symbolic violence? I would argue that potentially yes, however only if we restrict it to said specific contexts and situations. Not every meme carries unrealized symbolic charge.

One also has to be wary of presupposing that every human action is motivated by their pursuit of symbolic capital and profits in the field in which they exist. Kyung-Man Kim (2004: 369) argues that "individuals struggling for the increase of symbolic capital do not exist and cannot be observed outside of the conceptual network that Bourdieu set up" as it coheres with itself – human motivation and their observed actions seem to be tightly mashed up together in circular and mutually reinforcing way. As Kim demonstrates (2004: 371–372), Bourdieu tried to dismiss potential criticism of his works by using psychoanalysis and pointing out that social agents exist in axiological state of *illusio*, which is presupposed and produced by fields in which their operate. This would indicate that whatever criticism they might have, it simply is a result of limitations imposed on them by their field and their inability to escape its shackles – however, that same logic could be applied to philosopher himself. If social agents remain unconvinced by Bourdieu's take on social reality in which they exist in never-ending struggle against one another, "there is no way for Bourdieu to coerce them to accept his narrative, because a point-by-point verification of his theory is not available" (Kim, 2004: 371–372; cf. also Kyung-Man Kim's 2023: *Bourdieu's Philosophy and Sociology of Science: A Critical Appraisal*).

Therefore, I would like to emphasize that I am using above-mentioned concepts as a certain guideposts for the sake of critical analysis of gathered material, while realising their potential shortcomings.

Christchurch attack – a brief overview

On March 15, 2019 in Christchurch, New Zealand, two mosques came under attack by Brenton Tarrant, an Australian male, 28 years old at the time. The perpetrator moved by car, wore military clothing and carried several firearms, additional magazines, and a knife. Locations for this act were chosen months in advance, while perpetrator trained himself in using guns effectively. Tarrant was apprehended when heading to his final destination, a third mosque on his list. As a result of his actions, 51 people were killed and 40 more injured. As stated by the man himself during the trial, he intended to kill as many people as possible (Bayer, Leask, 2020).

There are some details that make this event profound when discussing the phenomena of memes and their usage. Brenton was well versed in memes and chan culture as he frequently visited those sites. He posted his final message to 8chan right before the attack, sharing links to a Facebook stream, which showed the event live, and a self-written manifesto, "The Great Replacement," whose title seems to be rather straightforward reference to Renaud Camus's *Le Grand Remplacement* – a book that serves as a cornerstone to white nationalist conspiracy theory, which claims that European populations, with help of their elites, are being replaced by non-white people. The 74-page-long Brenton's manifesto contained a number of anti-immigrant and ethnonational sentiments that could be treated as an indication of attacker's values (especially since he quoted Andres Breivik, his actions and writings as one of main inspirations), but in a large part it was also an attempt to troll people that are not familiar with chan sites and their characteristics. It included references to popular memes and linguistic tropes – for example, perpetrator described himself as "part-time kebab removalist" (which alludes to anti-Muslim meme song known as "remove kebab") and poked fun at the notion of video games turning people violent, sarcastically stating that *Fortnite* (free to play shooter) taught him how to kill (Groll, 2019; Keen, 2020; Kupfer, 2019; Lorenz, 2019).

Trenton's behaviour and elements of his attire also alluded to ironic or meme content. He played songs that could be seen as anti-Muslim while driving ("remove kebab" included) and encouraged his viewers to "subscribe to PewDiePie" (the most subscribed YouTuber at the time, who has been previously criticized for including right-wing-esque references in his videos). Guns that he carried were inscribed with historic dates of events where Muslims suffered defeats and names of historic figures famous for fighting against Islamic forces (Coalson, 2019; Doyle, 2019; Koziol, 2019).

Moreover, since the attack was streamed live, it quickly gained traction online, with discussions moving from relatively low profile 8chan to bigger forums and image boards, such as Reddit and 4chan. Recording of the act, along with shorter clips showing the most brutal fragments, started to circulate, giving users' rare opportunity to view raw, uncensored and unedited by media outlets footage. Mainstream media coverage soon followed but in this instance, it was the citizens of the web (mainly right-wing leaning or ironic crowd of chan sites) who got the news first.

Research context, methodology, and sample

As it happens, I also encountered the news of Christchurch attack on March 15, 2019 while casually browsing 4chan's /pol/ board. I have been using the site since early 2011, it was and still is part of my daily routine – it allows me to take a look at comments and reflections I am very unlikely to encounter in my social group, amongst friends or family. As users from all around the world post on the broad, it provides one with an opportunity to come across events that are rarely reported by major news outlets. It is also an exercise in reaching outside the echo chamber that social media algorithms put us in. Up to the point of the attack, I had often treated it as a source of mild amusement due to over-the-top, ironic content presented therein. That changed on the day of the shooting – I have seen gruesome imagery on 4chan before, but it was usually related to "freak" accidents and felt impersonal or detached from everyday reality. This situation felt different, real and surreal at the same time – majority of threads active in that moment were dedicated to this event and, in usual 4chan fashion, fragments of the recorded shooting were already being re-mixed, edited, and turned into memes. Some parts of it can only be described as sickening, however, this prompted me to start saving the content I was viewing to my hard drive for the sake of further analysis. I felt that I could not properly review it in the moment but it appeared important to revisit at a later date and this article is the result of that exercise.

From methodological point of view, my research stays in line with the idea of netnography, as described by Robert Kozinets (see 2012). It is an approach that adapts participant observation procedures to virtual fields as its main tool, where internet-based communication is used a source of data to analyze social and cultural phenomena. The distinction between ethnographic and netnographic research lie mainly in four characteristics of CMC (computer-mediated communication): alteration – one has to adapt to interactions that can be asymmetric

and asynchronous, as well as learn their technical and linguistic conventions; anonymity – which allows users to express themselves freely, in ways that could be otherwise limited by social norms; accessibility – granting instant access to various virtual communities, groups, and netplaces in a way that is impossible offline; and archiving – presence and communication online leaves traces that are not easily covered, as most of the content gets archived automatically by various sites or services, creating possibly everlasting digital footprint (Kozinets, 2012: 105–109). All of these are important in the research of 4chan as a site and virtual community – it is anonymous, easily accessible, possesses its own, specific style of interaction as well as language conventions and its content is well preserved (even when not directly available on the site itself, there are many online archives that keep it).

Moreover, my status as a /pol/ "insider" cannot be overlooked. It introduces elements of autoethnography, as my experiences, browsing preferences, my digital self, act as lenses through which the world of 4chan memes is explored. Ethnographies that deal with the virtual environment cannot detach themselves from autoethnography. Researchers are looking for balance between *emic* and *etic* elements in narratives and ultimately place the relation between subject and object of the research in the centre, legitimizing the approach by bringing forth their additional ethnographic competences that other members of explored community do not have. After all, there are no "true" natives of the internet, only users that have been there longer and, at given point, might be more proficient in navigating those spaces (Kamińska 2014: 177–179). Furthermore, I feel that self-reflective details need to be included especially when dealing with anonymous communities, where detailed, one-on-one interviews are not possible.

In regards to the data sample, thanks to the content I saved and internet archives, I managed to collect and review 40 threads from /pol/ board, posted between the 15th and 17th of March 2019, when discussions were at their most heated point. Obviously, there were many more threads posted within and outside of that timeframe but I decided to focus on these with high volume of replies in the period of initial reaction to the attack. Breakdown of the sample can be found in the appendix to the present article.[1] Links to archived threads are given should anyone wish to take a look at narratives based on higher number of examples

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1 To indicate source of a quote when referencing specific posts from 4chan in the next section, I am providing assigned number of a thread in superscript, followed by post id, for example: "based kiwi"[1:206268249].

Posts are quoted in their original form. To clarify, whenever the ">" sign on 4chan is used, it is done to either quote parts of other users' messages, to imply irony or to tell stories. Text placed after ">" is coded to turn green and is therefore referred to as "greentext."

than I will be providing. That may be beneficial in understanding posting styles, interactions, and technical aspects of 4chan, however, I must issue a warning that these contain quite disturbing content. Altogether the sample sums up to the number of 13,980 messages and 2,576 images (mostly memes) or, on average, about 350 posts and 64 images per thread, delivered by around 197 individual users (counted by separate IP addresses).

Main discussion tropes and associated memes

Based on the collected data, I identify and group the messages posted into five main conversation tropes: "It's happening" – initial reaction to the attack and spread of the news amongst users; praises and support; condemning and critique; conspiracy theories; manifesto and political discussions. I will be presenting associated memes and narratives divided into those sections in paragraphs below. In regards to the memes used by /pol/ users, these could be very generally divided into two types: pre-existing reactionary memes (on 4chan simply called "reaction images"), used to show the emotional state of the poster or referring to the wider context of discussed topic; user-generated memes, created in the aftermath of the attack, mainly by re-mixing parts of the footage, manifesto or content provided by perpetrator in his final posts on 8chan and his social media. It has to be noted that as time progressed, newly created memes started to be used as reaction images.

Important political events, natural disasters or acts of terror usually fare well on /pol/ board and gain a lot of traction. Users refer to them as "happenings," awaiting the next big thing to happen so they could discuss and ridicule it. Terrorist attack on this scale, carried out by a perpetrator who was quickly identified as a fellow "shitposter," user of chans, threw /pol/ board into a frenzy.

Figure 3. Post starting one of the threads, with link to Youtube restream of the attack

Source: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206263265/, accessed 3.01.2023.

Emotions and excitement could be seen in the amount of threads being created at the same time, heavy use of capital letters and general lack of care for grammatical correctness in posted messages. To provide examples, users wrote: "oh my god, the happening has arrived. HE'S IN THIS FOR THE LONG HAUL BOYS, HE'S NOT GOING DOWN UNTIL THE SAS GETS HIM"[5:206267009], " >There are reports of casualties. HERE WE GO LADS"[2:206261345] or "IT IS MOTHER FUCKING HAPPENING. HOLY SHIT BROS SOCIAL MEDIA IS GOING TO BE INSANE. FIRE UP YOUR TWITTER ACCOUNTS. HEIL HITLER, WHITE GLOBALISM"[9:206273659]. This was accompanied by many posts with standard buzzwords and acronyms that serve rather as a confirmation of poster's presence in the thread than a meaningful commentary ("lol," "based," "wtf"). Messages that were dismissive of the attack also appeared very early, mainly calling it a "false flag" operation by government agencies, prepared to further restrict gun laws ("fake news! False flag! The only benefit of staging an attack like this is to take away gun rights! That is the point! This is bullshit staged by the NZ police. Look up Operation Northwoods"[2:206262599]). Others would express opinions that such attack will bring too much attention to chan sites and mean the end of them (">confirmed /pol/ack. >confirmed white nationalist. It's over"[4:206262268]).

Significant effort was dedicated to providing fellow board members with active links to the shooting, mass media coverages of the story or the latest developments and interesting details (like screenshots from perpetrator's Facebook from months prior to the attack, when he travelled to Pakistan, images of guns and magazines that he posted on twitter or various information with his implied connections to extremist movements). As /pol/ is a board with minimal moderation, many alleged and unconfirmed details kept being reposted at least up to the point of Tarrant's arrest (e.g. he was acting alone yet a rumour was spreading that there were multiple attackers involved).

Putting that aside, the shooting itself received a lot of support from anons. The leading narrative was that the victims, Muslims, simply deserved it. It was seen as a payback for previous attacks carried out by Islamic extremists and an act taken against the progressing immigration to Western countries ("Muslims are antagonistic assholes who think they are betterthen [sic] us and actively seek power to bring sharia law. I am glad he did it. The poop needs to stay in the desert"[28:206377177], "I'm glad he did it for all the peace trucks, concert shootings and acid attacks and rapes"[28:206397802]).

Memes were posted *en masse* as a supplement to that train of thought, as visible in Figure 4, which shows "Donald Trump" Pepe, armed with assault rifle and caption "checked," which indicates approval. Many variations of Pepe and other characters (such as crusaders) were posted – usually they were presented as laughing, crying with joy or preparing for additional violent actions. Plenty new memes were created to show support for perpetrator's actions, to sow discord or simply as source of amusement at the expense of victims. I will provide a few examples.

Figure 4. "Donald Trump" Pepe with automatic rifle
Source: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206377177/, accessed 4.01.2023.

The image reproduced in Figure 5 presents a character of "Australian shitposter" (which takes its name from popular assumption that Australian users are responsible for the majority of low quality posts; incidentally, Tarrant used one variant of this meme as his avatar on Twitter) drawn with a gun that has inscriptions inspired by perpetrator's weapon and demeanour ("kebab remover," "shitpost4life"), as well as "Allakhu Akbar" phrase. It can quite easily be seen as mocking and fits well into presented narrative.

Figure 5. "Australian shitposter" character with details referencing Christchurch attack

Source: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206260489/, accessed: 4.01.2023.

As I mentioned previously, fragments of recording from the shooting were quickly appropriated by 4chan users. Still frame presented in Figure 6 comes from the very onset of the attack, when perpetrator was only approaching the Mosque and just started to aim his weapon. User that posted it likely put it through a simple online picture editor, applied purple filter and added the caption. As this is a frame that can be considered "safe for work" (shooting has not started yet and poor quality of the image fogs the context of what we are seeing), many versions of it were created and distributed. Some had motivational captions added, other were more heavily edited, like one where an interface of *DOOM* video game (in which the player character is fighting against demons) was edited in on the top of the image. Motif of turning fragments of the shooting into video game edits was pretty popular. There are clips lasting several dozen seconds with demons superimposed on silhouettes of people that are being shot at, which is very disturbing, but proves a certain wicked thoughtfulness of such design. Clips edited in that fashion are more likely to stay unnoticed for a longer period of time by moderation of various sites when compared to unedited footage. It also dehumanizes victims, creating a notion that Muslims are not people but demons and should not be lamented over.

Figure 6. Edited still frame from the recording of the attack posted as a meme
Source: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206589064/, accessed: 4.01.2023.

Lastly, we have another simple but telling edit (Figure 7). The photograph presents Tarrant, who is showing an "ok" gesture (which at some point, thanks to 4chan's trolls, got turned into a symbol of "white power"), guarded by two policemen. Changes made to it are pretty straight forward and boil down to added captions and image filter. Their meaning and implications are transparent – white people will not be replaced, "we" should resist as the attacker did, follow in his footsteps and those who stop "us" are traitors. Political or extremist messaging in /pol/ memes is usually pretty barefaced – their structure and connotations may prove challenging to be fully unravelled by "uninitiated" users, yet the main idea, the core of it, should be getting across – they are meant to troll the public after all.

Figure 7. Edited photograph from court posted as a meme
Source: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206689910/, accessed: 4.01.2023.

Although, as presented above, the attack gathered substantial support and positive, in /pol/ terms, attention, there were also users that tried to criticize it and start meaningful conversations. Such approaches were met mainly with disdain and trolling. For instance, self-described as a Muslim anon started a thread, asking following questions:

> We're heartbroken. Why do you guys hate us so much? We don't hate white people, we just want to live our lives. We're not trying to instill Sharia Law, or take over the world. Muslim politicians like Ilhan Omar are Rashida Tlaib are protecting the interests of America. What else do we have to prove to you guys? I used to like all white people before 2015 but now I feel really insecure around you guys; because you could either be friendly and non prejudiced or full on neo-Nazis[31:206417214].

It got several dozen replies in line with the following examples: ">We're heartbroken. That's great! I love that!"[31:206417479]; "i would cheerfully gas every single one of you. burn you book and erase you from history. hitler just choose the wrong people"[31:206423206]; or "If you live in your own land and don't colonize ours we have zero problem with you"[31:206420853]. This further proves that /pol/ is not an inclusive space that would welcome voices and opinions that are not aligned to board's central set of beliefs. In fact, even users that tried to argue that the attack will reflect poorly on right-wing and white nationalist movements in general, expressing concern for their politics, were called out for not being radical or strong-willed enough to embrace it (">it set back pro-white discourse years. no it didn't, it's limp wrist fags like you who disavow that set things back. that was a shitpost masterpiece, revel in it"[14:206288862]).

Posts that simply expressed sadness or shock were also present and met with ridicule. Feelings, other than amusement at someone's expense, excitement or "rightful anger" are simply not welcomed.

Figure 8. User expressing his shock over watched recording of the shooting
Source: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206287685/, accessed 5.01.2023.

In this case (Figure 8) the bulk of replies consisted of calling the Original Poster names, such as "wimp" or "pussy," as well as telling him to "go back to reddit," which is a usual meme reply used by anons to indicate that someone does not fit in with /pol/ crowd and should move to more user-friendly, "normie" environment, such as mentioned Reddit (which is, in fact, more strictly moderated). This shows that a certain pressure is constantly applied on anons, pressure to comply with even the most gruesome events and their never-ending *memefication* on the board. It creates an environment run by fear of "not belonging," with subconscious (or only partially realized) influence of majority's symbolic power (symbolic violence) on the community.

What was freely and openly discussed instead? Conspiracy theories of various kinds, mainly circling around involvement of governments in the attack. As Tarrant visited Pakistan few months back, users theorized that he was recruited and trained by Mosad and that the attack was a staged operation to further the interest of Jews, like "world control" or creating a distraction from Gaza bombings ("This must be glowsemites. Way to overly memed, overly equipped, spoop shit"[7:206267986]). The users of /pol/ hold rather antisemitic views in regards to world affairs and what fuelled speculations in this case further was the fact that perpetrator stated in his manifesto that he holds no ill will against this ethnic group, as long as they keep to themselves and bring no harm to "his people" ("*>/pol/ack >white nationalist >doesnt mention jews.* false flag"[4:206271883]; "*>okay with the jews.* Ya something fishy is going on"[4:206278943]). Alternatively, as already mentioned when discussing initial reaction, it was presented as New Zealand authorities' ploy to introduce more restrictive gun laws in the aftermath of the attack – which was, incidentally, what attacker hoped would happen according to his manifesto, as one user accurately brings up – "he explained everything in his manifesto. He wants gov't to try to use him to take away gun rights and he wants those that own guns to stand up for their rights instead of turning their asshole forward to get penetrated further"[14:206291513]. Calling out "false flag" operations, conducted by "glowies" (federal agents who "glow in the dark," that is, are easily identifiable by their behaviour) is commonly used tactic. Some /pol/ users resort to it to discredit posters and actions they deem suspicious and that is a very wide net of possible events – basically any real world affair can be treated as such.

Finally, the manifesto itself got a fair share of attention. Not only were meme references quickly noticed and praised but its more serious fragments got screenshot and shared by users that did not think of Tarrant as a "glowie operative". Once again, his actions, and in this case, his writing, was regarded as something worth replicating and worthy of respect. One of the users stated:

I finished reading it ten minutes ago myself. The Tarrant Testament reminded me of first reading The Unabomber Manifesto – expected rabid gibberish, found something clear, logical, comprehensive and even witty. (Blames Fortnite for his habit of flossing[2] over the corpses of his victims. My God, imagine if he'd actually done that.) Like the Unabomber, once you accept Tarrant's premise, that the White race must survive, then everything else follows. The attack, the testament, the video, everything. Any White who reads that testament will be stirred by it. He's a genius, but he will only be free in 27 years if we all are, and we all know it[38:206694370].

That kind of sentiment can prove to be extremely dangerous, especially after repeated exposure to similar views over prolonged periods of time. This was not a singular post. Comparably collected and, in a way, analytical messages, albeit slightly obstructed by many just overly-excited voices, appeared in many threads. "Politically incorrect" board, or 4chan in general, might not be a place where an extremist movement hoping to prepare a real-life event or attack of some sort would necessarily organize itself. That would be too inconvenient from the technical standpoint, but the site does not really try to restrict its users from posting links or propaganda and could easily be used for recruitment. Posts advertising a /pol/ discord server (popular application for chatting, with built-in voice and streaming options), offering streamlined communication with fellows anons and promising "fun" were pretty common. Moreover, as a mechanism of defence against any accusations of political extremism, /pol/ users employ two standard buzzword responses. First is to simply call it "a board of peace" and refusing to elaborate further, while the other is to present every post as a "a satire," which should not be taken seriously. To a question asking whether /pol/ should be considered a terrorist group after the attack, user replied: "What? No! We are a board of peace. A small number of radicals just commit atrocious acts. The real victims are the poor poltards who will be villainized by the polophobic media"[29:206402610].

I believe I presented a rather detailed descriptive account of behaviours, posting styles and linguistic preferences of /pol/ users in the context of Christchurch attack. Many more examples could be given but this should suffice as a support of my conclusions, reached not only based on the material given here, but also years of participation in the life of this site.

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2 "Flossing" refers to a popular dance move that can be performed by players in the *Fortnite* shooter game.

Conclusions and further questions

Earlier in the article I mentioned that my approach to /pol/ changed on the day of the attack. What I previously saw as a site with inappropriate (although sometimes amusing) memes that I did not treat very seriously, became a source of almost physical discomfort, something that I did not want to be associated with or use. As evident, I have since came back as a user but now whenever I visit /pol/ and 4chan, there is a part of me that analyses it critically, takes notes, saves ideas or content for possible future projects. In any case, I must admit that it was mentally exhausting to come back to this topic but I do believe it is worth presenting as a warning about certain types of online activity.

First, I conclude that mass production and spreading of user-generated content (memes) can give voice and venue to individuals and groups that spread extremist views, especially in places like Politically Incorrect board. Supremacist aesthetics flourish in those environments and are not only accepted but also celebrated. It demonstrates inclinations of users to downplay tragedies and turn situations into vehicles for their own purposes – mainly trolling and humorous (at least in their perception) political agitation. This normalizes violence and lowers resistance to propaganda.

Second, graphic, disturbing content (or one referencing such contexts) turned into memes can invoke painful memories and emotions in audiences, producing and re-producing structures of symbolic power (symbolic violence) in communities native to the internet. This is more pronounced here, in virtual spaces such as chan sites, which are characterized by their ever-present acts of trolling that purposefully (consciously) target minorities and victim groups. It goes beyond symbolic relations and becomes inscribed (verbal) violence. Acts of opposition are ignored or downplayed and "problematic" users are silenced.

Finally, users that are just entering said spaces and acquiring levels of digital (meme) literacy are subject to what I would describe as symbolic subversion. There are signifiers and symbols (again, memes in particular) that promote not only specific chan identity (or identities) but also linguistic and performative practices connected with the techno-cultural complex of sites themselves. These are not immanently negative but have potential to subvert sets of values that users held previously. This is also what makes them challenging to accurately analyze and vivisect.

Further research and actions are required. Authors of CREST report (Crawford, Keen, Suarez de Tangil, 2020) recommend enhancing literacy in visual and digital cultures, especially amongst young people and researchers, developing databases of hateful memes and content, as well

as promoting cooperation between academia and governmental bodies to set up better policies and further the understanding of online radicalization. These are fair points, to which I would like to add two sets of research questions, that I feel should be undertaken in near future.

First of all, we should investigate what effect described and similar content can have on users, especially teenagers or young adults, in a longer time-frame. At what point shocking stops being shocking and their perception of violence changes (or how much, and to what extent, it does). Second, we should scrutinize how frequently similar patterns and mechanism surface on other site and forums? Would those be more profound in trans-national environments like 4chan or Reddit (thanks to safety net that anonymity and pseudonymity provide) or in local, ethnic spaces, where chances to de-virtualize developed parasocial relations are much higher? As political and social discourses seem to be becoming increasingly more polarizing, answering those questions might help to develop proper educational strategies and counter-actions to issues arising from digital cultures and memes.

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Appendix

Breakdown of research sample

No.	Date of creation (Polish time)	Number of posts	Number of images posted	Number of individual posters	Link to internet archive
1.	15.03.2019, 02:41:05	443	88	224	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206259258/
2.	15.03.2019, 02:54:06	601	104	268	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206260489/
3.	15.03.2019, 02:58:21	383	73	204	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206260970/
4.	15.03.2019, 03:10:54	361	59	187	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206262268/
5.	15.03.2019, 03:19:31	513	94	229	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206263265/
6.	15.03.2019, 03:23:29	247	35	134	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206263741/

7.	15.03.2019, 03:39:29	410	64	210	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206265587/
8.	15.03.2019, 03:40:49	387	59	193	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206265761/
9.	15.03.2019, 03:44:22	377	72	206	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206266243/
10.	15.03.2019, 04:30:26	323	66	160	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206273567/
11.	15.03.2019, 04:31:27	334	47	207	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206273742/
12.	15.03.2019, 04:33:52	361	79	233	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206274131/
13.	15.03.2019, 04:58:37	321	43	215	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206278714/
14.	15.03.2019, 05:23:09	329	42	131	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206283330/
15.	15.03.2019, 05:23:43	352	68	232	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206283437/
16.	15.03.2019, 05:41:03	388	74	226	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206286628/
17.	15.03.2019, 05:46:35	362	64	228	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206287522/
18.	15.03.2019, 05:47:28	321	67	236	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206287685/
19.	15.03.2019, 06:57:16	368	72	214	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206299607/
20.	15.03.2019, 07:59:45	339	43	172	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206309290/
21.	15.03.2019, 08:20:35	337	59	222	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206312397/
22.	15.03.2019, 08:41:09	266	34	157	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206315231/
23.	15.03.2019, 08:45:51	334	60	154	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206315833/
24.	15.03.2019, 09:59:45	317	75	216	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206325619/
25.	15.03.2019, 11:03:44	309	38	151	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206333625/
26.	15.03.2019, 11:54:14	313	60	240	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206339700/
27.	15.03.2019, 12:17:27	340	60	240	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206342604/
28.	15.03.2019, 16:21:10	316	46	189	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206377177/

29.	15.03.2019, 17:57:44	321	78	208	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206393548/
30.	15.03.2019, 18:33:59	330	56	218	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206400019/
31.	15.03.2019, 20:17:36	363	66	225	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206417214/
32.	16.03.2019, 02:40:26	327	75	247	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206475703/
33.	16.03.2019, 20:07:40	317	118	202	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206589064/
34.	16.03.2019, 23:08:20	333	81	106	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206611752/
35.	17.03.2019, 05:06:09	298	56	113	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206653176/
36.	17.03.2019, 08:50:56	327	68	204	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206672841/
37.	17.03.2019, 10:28:13	331	63	149	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206680146/
38.	17.03.2019, 12:38:26	320	55	176	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206689841/
39.	17.03.2019, 12:39:05	303	53	230	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206689910/
40.	17.03.2019, 15:14:44	358	62	136	https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/206702970/