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It's Funny Because It's True: The Transmission of Explicit and Implicit Racism in Internet Memes

Tabitha Fairchild
Virginia Commonwealth University

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The Transmission of Explicit and Implicit Racism in
Internet Memes

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science,
Doctor of Philosophy, Master of Social Work) at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Tabitha Fairchild,
BS, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016

Director: Dr. Victor Chen
Assistant Professor, Sociology

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

IT'S FUNNY BECAUSE IT'S TRUE: THE TRANSMISSION OF EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT RACISM IN INTERNET MEMES

By Tabitha Fairchild, M.S.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Major Director: Victor Chen, Assistant Professor, Sociology

Video games are traditionally seen as the domain of heteronormative white males. The purpose of this study is to explore how racism is transmitted and reproduced within digital communities, and how humor is being used to frame racist discourse in virtual spaces. Digitally, internet memes are widely used rhetorical vehicles, reaching large and broad audiences. The roles these artifacts play in the reproduction and transmission of racist ideology is often obfuscated by the perception that internet memes are "just jokes." This study analyzes internet memes collected from 16 months of communication between members of Discord servers that self-identify as communities for those who are interested in gaming, gamers, memes, and shitposting. The analysis identified a number of ways in which racist messages are shared through visual and language content and the framing provided by their social contexts. Explicitly racist memes were common among the content disseminated among these gaming communities, while implicit racism was expectedly common, but in unique ways. I also highlight three primary types of content that were used to convey racist messages frequently and effectively within these spaces: embodied forms of racism, racial slurs (direct and indirect), and Nazi, Hitler, and World War II imagery.

Introduction

Memes act as mechanisms through which culture in its various forms is produced, disseminated, and reproduced. Digital spaces often function as mechanisms through which the culture of society at large is reproduced resulting in a digital world that mirrors the oppressions of the real world **(**Daniels, 2013; Nakamura, 2002). Digital social platforms create new spaces and methods for discourse where the stereotypes and racial biases of the physical world are often reified, an issue that may potentially be exacerbated as the divide between our digital and corporeal identities grows thinner.

Previous research has focused on the virtual social interactions experienced in multiplayer games' voice and text communication features (Gray, 2012); however, as digital communication evolves and new platforms are developed, it is important to consider the methods used to produce discourse within these new community types due to their popularity. One illustrative example of modern communication platforms is the voice over internet protocol (VOIP) application Discord, which has over 135 million users worldwide, with 19 million users accessing the platform each day (Fingas, 2018). Discord incorporates features that allow members of a community (referred to as a server) multiple methods for communicating and maintaining consistent contact through forum posting, voice interactivity, and sharing features similar to those used on social media platforms, many of which are visual (e.g., image sharing).

Communication in both the corporeal and digital worlds rely on our senses to convey messages between individuals (Lehdonvirta, 2010). However, digital communication deviates slightly by relying more heavily on visual artifacts. Rather than creating safe spaces for

minorities, the visual culture of the digital world transmogrifies the social issues of the corporeal world, complicating racial issues in new ways (Daniels, 2013; Nakamura, 2002). According to Nakamura (2019), gaming spaces are not post-racial spaces; racism is a common occurrence in these spaces. Both the creative and business sides of video game development are dominated by white men. This results in vocabulary that centers on white men in particular, which reinforces the perception that these spaces are the domain of middle and upper-class white males (Brock, 2009; Condis, 2018; Cote and Raz, 2015; Gray, 2012;).

Many white male gamers see games and the communities centered around them as spaces where the only true members are white males. Participation in these spheres by nonwhite nonmales is seen as an invasion, making white male members of these spaces disaffected and vulnerable to recruitment by white supremacist groups (Condis, 2018). These groups exploit the fear of erasure felt by white men to slowly inoculate them to increasingly extremist ideology (Condis, 2019). Discord has proven itself to be a useful tool for white supremacists to recruit members from servers centered around gaming communities. Alt-right groups then go on to utilize Discord as a space for the production and reproduction of culture, as well as a space to organize (Kamenetz, 2018).

Internet memes are often devalued as a form of discourse because of the way they are produced and the often humorous nature of their content; however, as digital artifacts, they are able to be distributed to large and broad audiences at a rate that may lead to quicker dissemination of ideology meaning they are an important source of modern discourse. If we consider internet memes as rhetorical devices used to share racist discourse within digital communities it becomes important to ask: What are the racist messages being shared? How is humor being used to frame racist discourse? And finally, is the racism implicit or explicit in

nature? This research investigates these questions while considering the mediating role of the platform in the production, reproduction, and dissemination of racist cultural scripts?

Internet Memes as Vehicles for Cultural Reproduction and Transmission

Internet memes are a manifestation of culture in the digital world; these digital artifacts have become a prolific form of discourse within digital communities. They are used to disseminate political, religious, and cultural ideologies, often using humor to convey their message. They function as a form of rhetoric that is often obscured or dismissed due to their humorous nature (Yoon, 2016).

While the concept of memes is not a new one, digital communication has had the effect of transforming memes themselves, and it is important to recognize that internet memes are their own distinct product (Dawkins, 2013). Internet memes commonly manifest in the form of videos, gifs, or images, and they use humor as their primary form of rhetoric (Shifman, 2013). Internet memes deviate from the original concept of a meme due to their unique position at the point where language, contemporary society, and communication in the digital era converge (Ross & Rivers, 2017). Rather than cultural phenomena that naturally mutate in the way of genes or memes, internet memes are purposefully evolved through the creativity of individuals.

Memes are always social in nature; they cannot exist or spread without human action and they are purposefully produced and shared by human actors. Their existence is wholly reliant on human agency (Shifman, 2014; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), and though they are often dismissed as a form of purposeful discourse due to their seemingly haphazard production and dissemination, internet memes are ultimately a product of communal coordination; their creators rely on the content of a meme resonating with those they are being shared with.

Without social and cultural context to imbue a meme with meaning it cannot thrive or spread (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017). There are three main characteristics of successful memes: fidelity, fecundity, and longevity (Dawkins, 1976; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

Fidelity refers to the attributes that allow a meme to be easily copied and spread between individuals intact (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007)   Memes with high fidelity will resonate with particular members of a community due to the shared cultural meanings embedded in them. These meanings do not have to be grounded in reality, but rather the subjective social truths, or belief system of the community, where they are being disseminated (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017). As Hall (2001) notes, "There is no degree zero in language"; communication is built on shared history and socially constructed culture, and *meaningful* discourse requires the syntagmatic—sequential and related—encoding and decoding of sign vehicles that have a shared social context.

Fecundity is the rate at which a meme's content and message are replicated and spread. High fecundity correlates with a larger, and more sustained audience; which in turn allows a meme to be spread and disseminated at a greater rate, and to a wider audience (Brodie, 1996; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). An important aspect of fecundity is susceptibility, the conditions that impact how open or willing an audience is to receiving the meme's message or content (Brodie, 1996). Susceptibility directly relates to a meme's relevance to current events, and the interests and values of the people using the spaces where the meme is being shared (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

Susceptibility thrives in sequestered environments unhindered by conflicting ideologies or beliefs, a trait of many digital communities (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Due to the unique nature in which internet memes are created, shared, and manipulated; it is often impossible to pinpoint particular authorship. Creators benefit from both the anonymity afforded by participation in digital discourse, as well as the self-moderated nature of the platforms used. Content producers in digital communities are able to make assertions of truths, even when those truths are being proposed in the form of a joke, without accountability (Ross & Rivers, 2016).

Finally, a meme's longevity is its ability to spread, and remain relevant and replicated over a prolonged period of time (Dawkins, 1976; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Internet memes offer a unique challenge when measuring longevity, due to the way they are created and altered over time to reflect current events and the ever-changing cultural climate. While the longevity of internet memes may be difficult to measure, it is possible to consider the depth of a specific internet meme's ability to be altered to reflect changes in popular culture, as well as the political and social climate. In a society where colorblind ideology is the dominant racial ideology, it is highly likely that the rhetoric of racist internet memes serves to reinforce the dominant belief system.

Meaningful Discourse and Cultural Production

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communications provides a framework in which each step of the media communication process is considered as both individual moments as well as parts of a continuous circuit of production and distribution (Hall, 1973; Hall, 2001). Hall's model is based on Karl Marx's concept of commodity production, as discussed in works such as *Grundrisse* (Hall, 2007; Marx, 2005) and *Capital* (Marx, 1976). Distinct from the
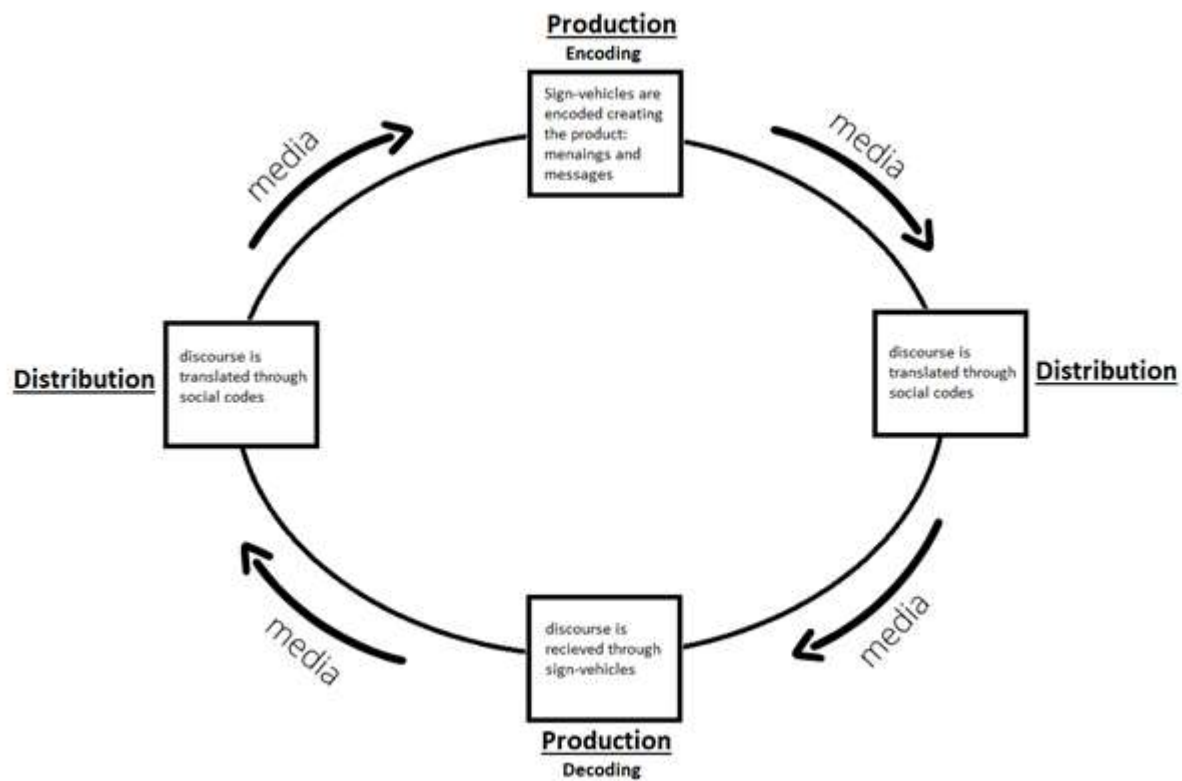
commodities produced in Marx's model, the products of communication are sign-vehicles (in the form of media) that produce socially coded messages (Hall, 1973). "Sign" is a semiotics term that simply refers to objects—images and words as well as things like sounds and smells—that only have meaning when that meaning is given to them by an interpreter or decoder (Peirce, 1932). When these sign-vehicles produce meanings and messages that are understood by the receiver, they create discourse.

Media is only able to become meaningful discourse when the audience is able to understand the meanings and messages being conveyed through social codes (Hall, 2001). A product is created—a movie, a book, a work of art, an internet meme—and within that product are socially coded cultural messages. Meaningful discourse does not have to contain objective truths as long as the messages are perceived by the audience as truth. Internet memes with high fidelity, those that are most often copied and shared, are successful because they contain meaningful discourse to those receiving them (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015; Ross & Rivers, 2017).

The issue of fidelity becomes particularly problematic when we consider how it relates to the aspect of Hall's encoding and decoding model. It is possible to speculate that as they are created and distributed by members of digital communities, internet memes are likely to become naturalized at a faster rate; due to the quickness through which they go through the circuitous production and distribution cycle. When codes are widely and frequently distributed, they become a part of a common language and begin to become naturalized—that is, seen as common sense or social truths. Frequency here relates to how often these messages complete

the production/encoding and distribution circuit (Figure 1). Through these concealed coding

practices, racist ideologies are able to be reproduced and reified.

Figure 1. Based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, this diagram shows the circuit through which media, in this example internet memes, is produced, disseminated, and reproduced. Each time an internet meme is sent and successfully received and decoded, the socially coded messages and meanings therein become more naturalized messages and meanings.

Production
Encoding

Sign-vehicles are encoded creating the product: menaings and messages

media

media

Distribution — discourse is translated through social codes

discourse is translated through social codes — **Distribution**

media

media

discourse is recieved through sign-vehicles

Production
Decoding

Digital Communities and the Reproduction of Racist Ideology

Cultural production in new forms of media is managed by both the technology used to

access and share media, as well as the activity of users within these spaces (Langlois 2014:

Bødker, 2016). Digital communities, like their non-digital counterparts, rely on shared interests

and experiences to strengthen bonds and create a shared culture. Digital technologies and

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spaces are how and where we conduct business, socialize, access information, data, and news. It is often where we educate and become educated, and is where we form our social relations (Gray & Huang, 2015). Socialization occurs within the virtual communities and groups centered around these social bonds (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003).

Digital communities are still constrained by the dominant ideological beliefs and values of modern society. In an American context, this equates to the reproduction of culture that centers affluent, white, middle-class males (Brock, 2009), marginalizing minorities within these spaces in much the same way that they are marginalized in offline society (Hall, 1997; Brock 2009). This transmission of the dominant ideological beliefs from the real to digital worlds and affluent white male framing may contribute to the difficulty many oppressed members of society have assimilating into the culture of particular digital communities (Daniels, 2013). Through othering, the oppressions of society are reproduced and reified within the digital world (Hall 1997; Daniels 2013). Mirroring society at large, the racism of the internet may also manifest in more covert ways related to colorblind ideology and the denial or minimizing of racial issues and racism through humor (Brock, 2009; Daniels, 2013).

Because digital spaces have evolved into the areas where much of our social lives happen, it follows that they have also become important to the dissemination and production of culture. It should be considered that the discourse being presented through the sharing of internet memes within digital communities may be particularly susceptible to the naturalization process because they are so often built around specific interests and have their own social codes and ideologies, allowing for meaningful discourse to develop without the issue of asymmetry and the resulting misunderstanding.

Discord servers provide an example of the types of digital spaces currently being utilized by modern human actors. Launched in 2015, Discord was initially conceived as an alternative to other VOIP programs such as TeamSpeak, Skype, and Mumble. Discord was created to be a platform primarily for PC gamers playing multiplayer games online, such as League of Legends or World of Warcraft. Since it was launched, groups from other online platforms, such as Reddit and 4Chan, have created servers on Discord. Servers are typically created around shared interests or commonalities; communities and organizations also create them as a way for members to stay in contact with one another, coordinate events, or simply and efficiently share information with one another.

Discord is unique in that it not only provides a platform for voice communication, but also allows messages to be pinned, has the ability to create multiple chat channels where conversations may evolve over a period of time, and offers image, video, and music-sharing capabilities. The Discord application functions similarly to social media platforms in that users have a social contacts list and public profile that may be linked to email addresses or other social media accounts, as well as direct message functionality, allowing users to interact on a personal basis with other users of the platform. Additionally, Discord may be accessed through a desktop app, a web-based app, or a phone app, all of which provide the same functionality. This functionality allows users to be constantly in contact with other members of their community. However, unlike many other platforms, Discord is self-moderated, allowing for the unfettered sharing of digital artifacts. This makes it an ideal platform for studying the dissemination of socially unacceptable internet memes, particularly those relating to the transmission, reproduction, and reification of racism.

Colorblind Racism and Humor

When it comes to discussions of race and racism in the United States, the dominant belief is that society has put the oppression and overt racism of the Jim Crow era behind it and has largely achieved a post-racial, colorblind reality. However, scholars argue that contemporary racism functions in more covert ways (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013; Bonilla-Silva, 2017). While it has become unacceptable to publicly discriminate against minorities, they argue that racism remains the foundation of modern society's institutions, social structures, and ideologies, and new colorblind mechanisms of racism have emerged that maintain racial inequalities through obfuscation, justification, and normalization (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2017). Colorblindness makes it difficult for people to acknowledge the significant role that race plays in social injustices and unequal outcomes (Rosenberg, 2004).

Racial ideologies are defined by the frames used by human actors to navigate and interpret racial information. Dominant racial frames utilize colorblind racism to misrepresent the world as one of their primary functions is maintaining systems of domination (Bonilla-Silva, 2017) and allowing for the reproduction of those same systems. Bonilla-Silva identifies four primary racial frames for colorblind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalism, cultural racism, and minimization of racism.

There are two aspects of abstract liberalism: political liberalism, which in essence is the idea that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed in modern society, and economic liberalism, which refers to the idea that individuals have access to the same choices. Abstract liberalism allows for moral positioning that rationalizes opposition to programs or policies that are perceived to disproportionately benefit minorities, such as affirmative action, by expressing

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that these policies undermine ideals of equal opportunity and meritocracy. Naturalism is the idea that racial tension is an inevitable and naturally occurring phenomenon due to inherent differences between races. Cultural racism is similar to naturalization, in that it subscribes to the idea that there are attributes that are inherent to particular races and that cultural deficiencies lead to inequalities between races. Finally, minimization of racism is the belief that racism is not as prevalent an issue as it was in the past, which allows for the dismissal of overt racism as an anomaly rather than representative of existing structural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2002).

While these frames are used to shape public discourse as it relates to racism, allowing white members of society to rationalize, justify, or avoid conversations about racially charged issues, researchers have shown that white members of society do still discuss race. These conversations are simply relegated to private conversations outside of the public sphere or discussed publicly using coded language (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). One way such language is coded is through humor (Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013).

When it comes to representations of the ideological standards of a society, we often look at sources considered authoritative or legitimate—for example, those within the political or religious spheres. However, it has been argued that the popular realm is where the social forces that reproduce and disseminate ideology are often found (Gramsci and Hoare, 1971; Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013). Much popular discourse online centers on humor, and internet memes are a pervasive vehicle for disseminating humorous discourse within digital spaces. While humor may often be considered ambiguous, the context in which jokes are framed shapes how individuals will create meaning from them (Weaver, 2011). Members of digital communities

are able to utilize these same mechanisms to reify colorblind ideologies by choosing to go along with the joke through upvotes or direct responses; identifying the racial messages as non-serious or "just jokes," minimizing their perceived impact; and softening the inherent racism through laughter. When a racialized joke is made verbally or visually, it has the potential to reinforce racial "truths" that support covert racist belief systems. Jokes, often seen as something innocuous, become a mechanism through which the current racial hierarchy and systems of domination are normalized and justified (Omi, 1989; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013).

Internet Memes: What is Their Role?

Internet memes are often dismissed as a form of purposeful discourse due to their seemingly haphazard production and dissemination and their non-serious nature. However, internet memes are a form of discourse that is easily produced and distributed to large and broad audiences, which in and of itself makes them an important area of study for sociologists in the digital and cultural fields, as well as researchers from cultural studies, media studies, and science, technology and society studies. Currently, much of the literature on internet memes is either theoretical or non-academic (Bødker, 2016; Nowak, 2016). Research based on empirical data is crucial to give us a more accurate picture of the cultural and social impact of internet memes. Furthermore, the way internet memes use humor as a vehicle for their rhetoric and a mechanism for the obfuscation of problematic messages is vital to understand how jokes have arguably become a critical space where racist cultural production, reproduction, and reification occurs through coded racialized language (Omi, 1989; Sue & Golash-Boza, 2013; Bonilla-Silva, 2017). These racist social codes position members of minority groups as the other, reify stereotypes, and justify and excuse racist beliefs and behaviors. Additionally, the communities

that these messages are shared in are often self-regulated, which may allow for more overt

racist messages to be disseminated and reinforced.

Methodology

This study analyzed content on Discord servers that were open to the public and self-

identified as focused around memes and gaming. I utilized two public Discord server listing

sites: Disboard and Discordme, filtering my searches with the tags "memes," "gaming," and

"shitposting," a colloquialism for the sharing of internet memes. I then selected servers that: a)

had 500 or more members (with the expectation that more members would equate to greater

member activity and therefore provide me with more robust chat logs); and b) had channels

devoted to memes or off-topic conversations (to guarantee there would be a sizable pool of

artifacts to analyze).

I created a unique Discord account for the collection of data for this study. Utilizing an

open-source program that allows for the exporting of Discord chat data, I collected data from

channels designated as "rules", "off topic," "memes," or some variation thereof. During the

collection of this data, I took steps to hide my personal information, including my location,

name, and other identifying details. Chat data were collected over a period from January 2017

to January 2020 and downloaded as HTML files. The duration of coverage for each server

varied based on how long the server had been operational: for example, servers created in late

2019 had data collected until January 2020, whereas for other servers, the data collection

stopped in December 2019. The aggregate of this data was reviewed to identify the themes used

to create the nine codesets used for this study: race and ethnicity, typology, slurs and language,

stereotypes, sexualization, geography, violence, politics and culture, and religion (see Table 1

below). Of these nine codesets, five were used in my final analysis: race and ethnicity, slurs and language, stereotypes, typology, and politics, and culture.

Two months of data from each server were randomly selected to be coded. I treated each server as an individual dataset for the purpose of sampling. Months in each set were assigned a number chronologically (e.g., a server with data from January 2017 to December 2019 would have a range of 1-36, whereas one that had data from July 2018 to December 2019 would have a range of 1-18). Research Randomizer, a free resource site, was used to generate two numbers from each set. From these 28 months of chat data, I selected sixteen to be coded based on the relatively manageable size of their chat logs (logs with over 2,500 messages were too large to analyze, based on the time constraints of the study) and the larger number of memes they contained (off-topic channels with few memes were dropped due to the lack of visual artifacts to analyze).

From the sixteen months of data utilized in this study, I collected a total of 13,597 messages that included memes as well as conversational text. I tagged a total of 1,378 coded segments across all codesets. Messages were often tagged with segments from two or more codesets—for example, "black" from the race codeset, "stupidity" from the stereotypes codeset, and "embodied" from the type codeset (see Figure 2).

Table 1. *Analytical Codesets.*

Code set	Description	Codes	# of segments
Geography	Regional references including Africa, African countries, African people, Latin America, Latin American countries, middle east, middle eastern countries, nonspecific references to impoverished countries	third world, Latin America, Africa, Middle East	41
Politics and Culture	This set is used to designate memes that reference ideological beliefs- primarily this refers to WWII and Nazism, known white supremacist groups (ex KKK), or imagery (e.g. crusaders), and political party, as well as information presented as factual or educational	Hitler, Concentration camps, Nazism/WWII, white supremacy, trump, liberal, propaganda	202
Race and Ethnicity	demographic information, based on images or reference. References to Arabs and Indians are categorized together due to their interchangeable use by members of the communities.	black, Arab/Indian, Asian, Jewish, Latinx	446
Religion	any religion or religious iconography present	Christianity, Judaism. Islam	35
Sexualization	images of sex, sexual topics or media	rape, cleanliness, attractiveness, sex for money or goods, promiscuity, sex, hentai/anime	67
Slurs and Language	Comprised of two categories- Direct slurs, those that are explicitly offensive and aggressive (e.g. nigger); and indirect slurs- alternative spellings and words (e.g. nibber), and use of images or	indirect, direct	191
Stereotypes	Common racial stereotypes based on the initial review of the aggregate chat data.	violence, stupidity, overachievement, genitalia, diet, trustworthiness, greed/money, ISIS/Taliban, immigration, laziness, drugs, absentee father, crime/criminal, terrorism	142
Typology	Type of racism. Includes the four frames of colorblind racism outlined by Bonilla Silva and embodied racism- physical attributes, biological implications, and the use of images of black or brown people/bodies	embodied, abstract liberalism, minimization, cultural, naturalism	196
Violence	Includes references to police and school shootings.	police violence, school shooting	12
Total			1362

Figure 2. Example of a meme with several overlapping codes: black, violence, terrorism, drugs, cultural, crime/criminal, and Africa.

Findings

The analysis indicated that racialized discussion through memes or standard conversation is a regular occurrence within the discourse of these communities. In every month analyzed, there were several coded segments related to race or racism. Of the nine codesets, five—race and ethnicity, typology, politics and culture, stereotypes, and slurs and language—each accounted for ten percent or more of the 1,378 coded segments. The remaining four codesets—geography, religion, violence, and sexualization—accounted collectively for the remaining 11.2 percent of segments, and were consequently left out of my analysis.

Stereotyping and mentions of cultural and political issues by racial group

I categorized 446 segments within the race and ethnicity codeset, using five tags: black, Asian, Latinx, Jewish, and Arabic/Indian. Of these race and ethnicity codes, "black" was by far

the most prevalent: 69.5 percent (n = 310) of segments for the race set were coded as "black." The "black" code overlaps with 107 coded segments from the stereotype set, including the tags for violence, stupidity, genitalia, diet, trustworthiness, greed/money, Isis/Taliban, laziness, drugs, absentee father, crime/criminal, and terrorism—that is, all the codes in that set with the exception of "overachievement" and "immigration" (note that immigration had only a single coded segment). Of all race and ethnicity codes, the "black" code had the highest number of overlaps with all codes from the stereotype codeset with the exception of the "terrorism" and "ISIS/Taliban" tags.

In the majority of instances, the stereotype codes that overlapped with "black" were the "violence" and "stupidity" tags, which represented 31.8 and 22.4 percent, respectively, of the stereotype codes overlapping with "black." Additionally, while the "criminal" code does not occur as frequently as "violence" or "stupidity," it does overlap with "black" 93.3 percent of the times it does occur. When the "black" code overlapped with codes from other sets, the racism manifested in these memes tended to be quite explicit, as exemplified in Figure 3.

Figure 3. *Example of a black and stereotype (stupidity) coded meme.*

"Asian" was the second most prevalent race and ethnicity code, with 57 code segments (12.7 percent of race and ethnicity codes). Though Asian tags were more frequent than Arab/Indian, Jewish, and Latinx, many of these tags were not derogatory in the same overt manner as the other racial tags were. They were primarily focused on current events related to China or Japanese participation in World War II (see Figures 4 and 5). Occasionally, Asians were juxtaposed against black people—the perceived model minority, compared to the most denigrated racial group. However, 22.8 percent of the Asian code segments overlapped with the "hentai/anime" code, implying a perception of sexual deviance.

Figures 4 & 5. *Examples of Asian-coded memes.*

Latinx segments account for only 2 percent (n = 9) of the race tags. There was not enough data to be able to suggest any community-wide perception of Latin people, and no thematic ties appeared to exist between these messages. Despite the fact that the data were collected during a time period when the Trump administration's family separation

policy was enacted and often being discussed in the news and media, there was no overlap between the Latinx and immigration codes. Of the few items coded Latinx, the dominant theme was the attractiveness of Latinx women (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Example of a Latinx-coded meme.

Just slightly over 33 percent of the items tagged with the "Jewish" code was also tagged with the "Judaism" code. Judaism was referenced in visual ways, often through religious iconography or traditions—for example, images of menorahs, and kippahs. In several cases, memes related to Jewish people conveyed anti-Semitic propaganda (Figure 7).

*Figure 7. Example of Jewish-coded meme (propaganda).*
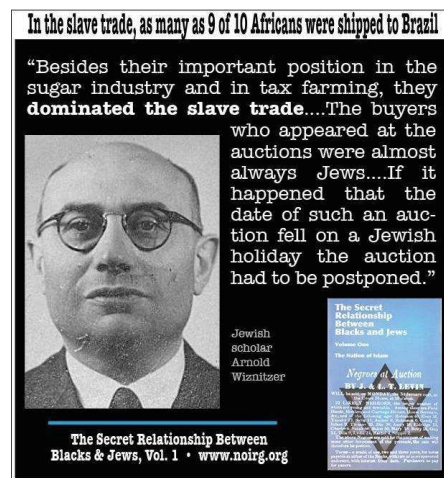
When forum participants posted jokes related to Jewish people, the content was primarily related to the Holocaust, Hitler, Nazism, and concentration camps. "Holocaust" was one of the most used codes in the politics and culture codeset, accounting for 10.2 percent of the set's 140 coded segments. Messages in these categories often referenced the gas chambers utilized by Germany during World War II or mixed Nazi imagery with pop culture imagery. In these segments as well as the 51 segments coded "Hitler," the content was presented in a more traditional joke format (akin to "dad jokes"), utilizing pop culture references in a seemingly light-hearted manner (see Figures 8 and 9). In particular, memes referencing Hitler used wordplay to lighten the horrific nature of his actions during World War II (see Figures 10 and 11).

Figures 8 & 9. *Examples of Nazi/World War II coded memes.*
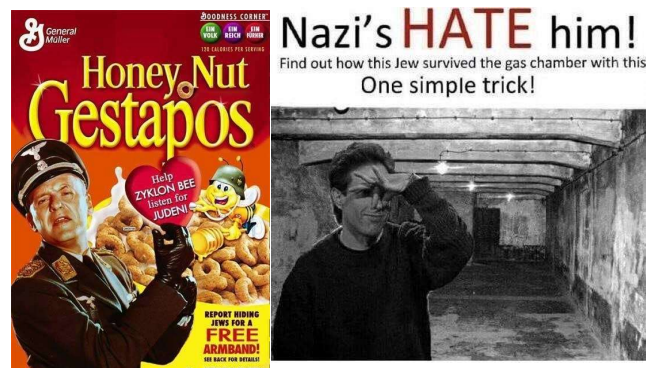
Figures 10 and 11. *Examples of Hitler coded memes.*
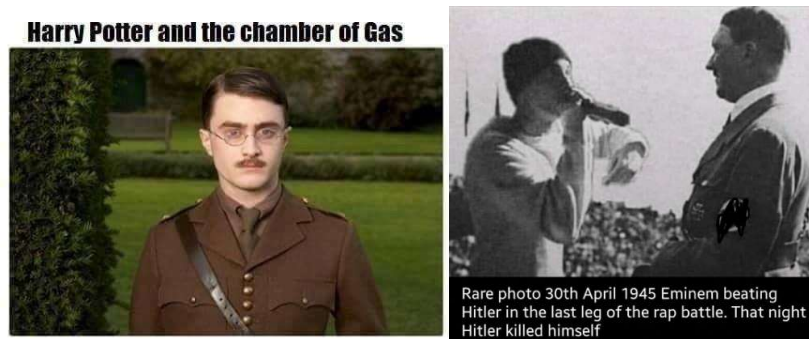
Server participants did not distinguish between Indian and Arabic people, occasionally using images of Indians when referencing Arabs. There was negligible mention of Indian people themselves; nowhere did forum participants mention common media stereotypes of Indian men and women. Nearly all the items under the "Arabic/Indian" tag relate to terrorism, covering topics ranging from suicide bombers, ISIS, and other extremist organizations to warfare in the Middle East (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. *Example of an Arabic/Indian-coded meme.*

Types of racism expressed in online content

The typology codeset includes codes for each of Bonilla-Silva's four frames of colorblind racism—cultural, abstract liberalism, naturalism, and minimization—as well as a fifth category based on Weaver's work, embodied racism. The first four codes refer to instances of implicit racism manifesting within the discourse of these communities through the use of colorblind framing; embodied racism, in contrast, uses black and brown bodies as the backdrop to the memes themselves.

Of the 196 segments coded under the typology codeset, only 20 (10.3 percent) were tagged with one of the four frames of colorblind racism codes; the remaining 176 (89.7 percent) were coded as embodied racism. While colorblind racism is implicit by nature, embodied racism within the discourse of these communities may be either implicit or explicit. These memes were often reaction memes, both with and without added text. Using images of exaggerated expressions and mannerisms, and relying on social contexts that associate blackness with negative social and personal characteristics, many of these memes were able to reinforce and reproduce racist messages and beliefs without directly stating these messages. In memes coded as "embodied," explicit racism would be manifested as mockery and attacks on the physical characteristics of minorities (see Figures 13, 14, 15, and 16).

Figures 13, 14, 15, and 16. *Examples of memes coded as embodied racism.*

Direct and Indirect Slurs

In addition to the "typology" codeset, the "slurs" codeset also provided details about the specific ways that racist thoughts were expressed in these online communities. In my analysis, I differentiated between *indirect* and *direct* slurs. Direct slurs refer to those terms that are universally recognized as offensive and aggressive (e.g., "nigger") (Figures 17 and 18). Indirect slurs include *fraternal slurs*, the use of "nigga" as a term of camaraderie, or colloquial references to individuals or groups (Figures 19 and 20). Other indirect slurs can be described as *softened slurs*, words used within online communities to circumvent rules related to slurs—from slightly *altered* forms of the words (e.g., "nibba" or "niggachu") (Figures 21 and 22) to *wordplay* that hints at the derogatory terms (Figures 23 and 24).

Figures 17 and 18. *Examples of direct slur coded memes.*

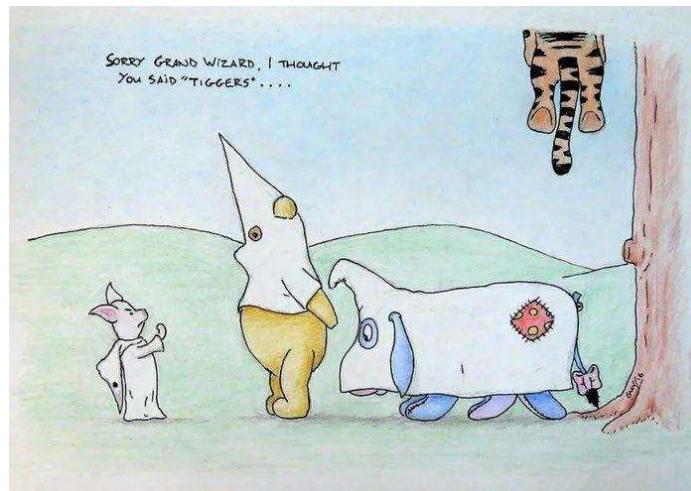*Figure 19 and 20.* Indirect slur coded memes (fraternal).

Figure 21 and 22. Indirect slur (softened, altered).

Figures 23 and 24. Indirect slur (softened, wordplay).

Rules of the platform and servers

In addition to the content of the messaging, it is also important to consider the response of the audiences to those messages—specifically (as discussed in the literature review), how it may shape expectations about what sorts of messages can be challenged. While the time constraints of this study precluded a thorough investigation of community responses within Discord chats to the racist memes identified, I was able to explore some aspects of this phenomenon by reviewing the rules for each Discord server.

Among the servers studied here, the focus of their rules was often on the utilization or exploitation of the Discord application itself. Across the servers, there were rules that prohibited actions on a large scale (such as mass pinging or spamming) and included sanctions against advertising yourself or other groups. Other rules related to server organization and maintenance, including procedures for labeling or posting in the appropriate channels. Content that was explicitly forbidden on many of the servers

included sharing images of gore, child pornography, or discussion of pedophilia and hebephilia.

These rules mirrored Discord's Terms of Service (TOS) and Rules of Conduct as Usage, often referring users to them. Discord's TOS primarily focuses on the misuse of the application and Discord's lack of responsibility in regards to offensive content; it does specifically forbid content related to violence against animals, gore, or pedophilia. Anything beyond those topics is managed by the users themselves. Discord's terms of service explicitly state that users are "solely responsible for their interaction with other users" or any "other parties you come in contact with" while using their service. Discord's TOS also advises that users may be exposed to material they find "offensive or objectionable"; users must agree that the company will not be liable under any circumstances for any user content and that it has "no obligation" to monitor communication channels.

While many of the servers have rules related to how members interact with each other within the chat—for instance, forbidding not-safe-for-work content, racism, or hate speech—the rules are often vaguely worded and allow for the use of hate speech or offensive discussion under the condition that it is being used in a satirical way, or protected under "free speech." For example, the rules for one server backtrack on their own rules regarding hate speech, terrorism, and self-harm, by stating that while "Unironic/serious "content is not allowed, "Civil discourse and satire about such topics is protected under free speech." Another server states that "No legitimately offensive content" is allowed, with no explanation of what is considered "legitimately offensive."

Furthermore, the rules of these servers often include warnings about offensive content even as they imply that being offended will exclude you from the community—as one server's rules state, "If you can't handle different people with different personalities and opinions then get out!" Another server requires that new members understand that by joining the server they are acknowledging that they "may be called all sorts of horrible names, subject to extreme opinions" and that newer members of the community "must earn their rights and respect" to fully assimilate.

Many servers have punishment and reward systems based on the quality of the memes and individual posts. Posting "low tier" or "utter shite" memes will get you kicked from the server, or at the very least muted. Popular memes or those deemed good will earn promotions to different ranks of membership on the server, with access to more content or privileges. Good memes are often associated with being counter-"normie," a term that refers to members of society who adhere to social mores. In some instances, these communities have been created to act as sanctuaries for groups that have been removed from Reddit due to their toxicity; they aim to be places where "you can act autistic and insult anyone you want without fear of getting banned by fagnut SJW mods." This indicates that sharing memes that are offensive are may operate as a form of social capital for the members of these groups.

This desire to encourage edgy content created contradictions within server rules. For example, one server's rules admonished users to "try to respect staff and each other" and "Don't purposely offend others. This includes race (and) religion"; nevertheless, the rules went on to dismiss these previous provisions, arguing that the moderators want to "make a community they can be proud of."

Discussion

I conducted this study with two particular questions in mind: How is humor being used to frame racist discourse, and does racist discourse in these communities manifest in primarily explicit or implicit ways? I hypothesized the racist discourse collected would primarily be framed within the four frames of colorblind racism, meaning that covert, implicit racist messages would be more prevalent than their overt counterparts. What I found, however, was that explicit and implicit forms of racist discourse both occur regularly within these communities, though they were utilized in very different ways. In the communities analyzed for this research, explicit, overt racism primarily manifests in language as direct slurs and visually through the mockery of the physical characteristics of minorities and through the use of Nazi and World War II imagery. Implicit forms of racism commonly include both softened slurs (altered and wordplay) and fraternal slurs, as well as the use of black and brown bodies to frame negative discourse and humor, an approach that relies heavily on preexisting negative cultural beliefs and stereotypes.

Explicit forms of racism are mechanisms through which minorities are excluded within these communities and presented as the other. Members of these communities appear to value memes that contain offensive content, equating offensiveness with the exercising of one's right to free speech. The perceived quality of memes is tied directly to the promotion of ideas that fall outside the realm of social acceptability. Racist, sexist, and homophobic content earn members rewards and privileges, in the form of expanded access to features of the Discord server, such as exclusive channels, titles, and emotes, or in some cases, promotion to higher ranks within the community, granting them power

and authority over other members. Exclusionary and racist rhetoric becomes seen as not only the standard but the community ideal.

Considered through the lens of Hall's encoding/decoding model, the incentivizing of sharing artifacts with racist messaging has the potential to accelerate the naturalization of these ideals, by increasing the frequency through which these coded racial scripts are encoded and decoded by members of these groups. These messages become commonsense truths, making members of these communities particularly susceptible to recruitment by white supremacist groups. Such groups can take advantage of belief of these online communities in messaging that enforces the inferiority of minorities as well as their tendency to be comprised of white male gamers seeking to set themselves apart from "normie" culture. Due to the manner in which memes are produced and distributed anonymously, the potential exists for these groups to dominate both the content and evolution of messaging within these spaces, as well as the rate at which racist rhetoric appears and becomes naturalized.

One of the most explicitly racist themes throughout this project was the use of Nazi and World War II imagery. What I found most interesting here was that many of the memes that fell within this and its related "Hitler" codeset used more of a traditional setup for the jokes. In many Hitler memes, for example, the content suggested behaviors that subverted the historical portrayal of him as a cruel and sadistic leader. One possibility is that the attempts to be humorous here are grounded in the concept of fidelity, a meme's ability to succeed based on the presence of shared cultural meaning. Hitler is a figure that is well-known to most members of Western society, and World War II and the atrocities related to it are political events that most teens and adults would have

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at least some knowledge of. This knowledge serves as the lens through which the audience is unpacking the meanings and messages of this content.

Overt forms of embodied racism often draw parallels between minorities and animals—for example, using apes to represent or juxtapose black individuals or groups. This is a practice rooted in biological racism, a long-standing approach used to prove white superiority by asserting that other races are savage or less human. With language, explicitly racist rhetoric relies on the use of direct slurs—derogatory and aggressive terminology. Within this study, the only example encountered of a direct slur was the word "nigger," which was used by the members of these communities to denigrate black people at times when they were the center of discussion. In these virtual spaces, the use of direct slurs may also be used to signal that minorities are unwelcome in virtual spaces, just as they are used to do the same in physical spaces.

Rather than operating as a mechanism for the denial or obfuscation of racism, or implying that modern society is post-racial, the implicit racism found in these communities is used as a frame for humorous discourse, relying on shared cultural understandings that are rooted in colonialism and the exploitation of minorities. The use of images of black and brown bodies and the appropriation of the terminology used colloquially between members of minority groups are ways of exerting control over the bodies and language of these groups, reinforcing the idea that their role in society is one of subservience. Such imagery and language are not seen as conventionally offensive because like forms of colorblind racism, they do not fall into any of the common tropes of racism, such as the use of direct slurs. Because of their lack of explicitness, the possibility exists that these forms of racist internet memes may be distributed more

widely, reaching communities that are not comprised primarily of white males. In this way, they may ultimately have a greater impact than more explicit messages do on the reproduction of ideologies that reinforce racism.

Conclusion

One of the primary limitations of this project was the representativeness of the sample. The analysis utilized only five percent of the data collected; more time would allow for a larger amount of data to be analyzed, potentially resulting in a more representative portrait of the behaviors across these servers. Another issue was that many of the communities observed had chat logs with significantly more messages shared over the course of a month than other servers did; however, issues with the conversion of the chat logs into the format best suited for the software used required that the months with the greatest amount of discourse had to be removed from the population that the sample was drawn from. This may have skewed the results by overrepresenting findings from smaller servers that may have had more marginal or extreme subcultures.

Servers were selected using Disboard and Discordme, sites that function as a place for communities to promote themselves. While I did search using tags relevant to gaming and gamers, the types of communities that promote themselves may differ from gaming communities that do not; the latter may, for example, be even more open to the dissemination of offensive content. Data were only collected from channels specifically designated for memes or off-topic content, which may have affected the type of artifacts being shared; this approach also meant that the artifacts themselves did not generate a lot of conversation. Future analysis of memes shared in more chat-heavy channels may shed more light on how the memes themselves are shaping, or being shaped by, the

surrounding conversation, and how the messages and meanings of the memes are being decoded, and then re-encoded and distributed. One feasible approach to capture more of this context would be to conduct an in-depth case study of one community, accessing and analyzing several years of chat logs from all channels available on a server—or alternatively, performing a virtual ethnography where a researcher immerses themselves in the community. Both of these longitudinal strategies may provide a better picture of the social dynamics of these groups.

While race was a prevalent topic within these communities, much of the discourse related to gender and sexual orientation. This study focused on race and racism, but there was clearly enough data related to other minority groups to merit a similar analysis of issues relating to their identities. For instance, how are women and LGBTQIA represented through internet memes? What mechanisms are being used to exclude these groups and reproduce oppressions, and how do they compare to those used in relation to race?

Likewise, it would be good to compare how the communities observed in this study compare to those centered around interests beyond games and gaming, or those that are not dominated heteronormative white males (as many Discord gaming servers are). Would similar racial memes appear in other types of virtual communities? It would also be useful for scholars to specifically investigate the chat history of Discord servers belonging to white supremacist groups, as well as those promoting themselves as focused on political discourse. This could be expanded to include Discord servers that are associated, officially or unofficially, with particular political parties or politicians. As this study suggests, there is great potential for research that explores the breadth of internet

communities available, with the purpose of comparing how these different subcultures produce, reproduce, and distribute ideologies, including racist messaging.

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