

# **Distrust, Conspiracy, and Hostility: Using Sentiment Analysis to Explore Right-Wing Extremism in a Canadian Subreddit**

**by  
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## Declaration of Committee

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## **Abstract**

Within the past five years, the Internet, particularly social media, has grown considerably in importance and ubiquity in the lives of Canadians. At the same time, the presence of right-wing extremism (RWE) in these online spaces has become an increasing concern. This study examined how RWE has moved from the fringe to the mainstream, combining Sentiment-Based Identification of Radical Authors (SIRA) with qualitative thematic analysis in order to understand how RWE beliefs exist on the Canadian subreddit r/Canada. The results of this study revealed three themes that demonstrated the presence of right-wing extremism in this non-extremist space and the manner in which these beliefs are perpetuated: distrust of the government and “the left,” the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, and the presence of overt and covert bigotry. These findings have suggestions for using SIRA as a research tool, as well as potential future directions in researching RWE in non-extremist spaces.

**Keywords:** Right-wing extremism; Reddit; sentiment analysis

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## List of Acronyms

RWE	Right-Wing Extremist or Right-Wing Extremism
POS	Parts of Speech
SIRA	Sentiment-Based Identification of Radical Authors
Incel	Involuntary Celibate
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
MMIW	Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women
IS	Islamic State
KKK	Ku Klux Klan

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

Within the past five years, Canadians have gotten uncomfortably familiar with right-wing extremism (RWE). Terrorist attacks perpetrated by RWE individuals and the increased visibility of RWE groups have contributed to an unprecedented shift towards far-right ideology (Perry & Scrivens, 2018).

Right-wing extremism in Canada is not a new phenomenon: from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the 1920s to the rise of neo-Nazi skinheads in the 1990s, RWE has existed in Canada for much of the country's history, and over 100 active RWE groups still exist in Canada as of 2016 (Parent & Ellis, 2016; Perry & Scrivens, 2016). Canadian RWE groups are characterized by being more individualistic and disconnected compared to the groups seen in the United States, making them easier to overlook (Parent & Ellis, 2016). However, Parent and Ellis (2016) identify how attacks on immigrants, attacks by anti-government adherents, and the possibility of lone wolf terrorist attacks should not be ignored, and that Canada should remain vigilant regarding the ways in which extremist movements in the US and beyond may affect Canada.

Parent and Ellis (2016) predicted four possible scenarios regarding the future of right-wing extremism in Canada, one of which being that Canada would continue to see episodic or random attacks as opposed to large scale attacks (p. 22). Since 2016, Canada has seen two notable RWE terrorist attacks motivated by Islamophobia. The attack on a Quebec City mosque in 2017, where six people were murdered and nineteen others were injured, led to a spike in anti-Muslim hate crime (Perreux & Freeze, 2017; Perry & Scrivens, 2018), and in 2021, a vehicular attack in London, Ontario resulted in the death of four people (Lamoureux, 2021). Looking at the number and type of right-wing extremist attacks in Canada since 2016, it appears that Parent and Ellis' prediction of episodic, random attacks was accurate. However, a related consideration remains of whether RWE is increasing in Canada.

Right-wing extremists in Canada attempt to legitimize their movement by making their rhetoric more palatable to the mainstream by running in municipal, provincial, or federal elections (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). For instance, the 2014 Ontario municipal

elections saw an increase in the number of RWE candidates (Perry & Scrivens, 2016), and during the 2019 federal elections, the newly-created People's Party of Canada (PPC) was accused of having considerable ties to the alt-right (Kamel et al., 2019). According to Perry and Scrivens (2016), the goal of entering the political sphere is to “[inject] a note of intolerance into political debate” (p. 826), regardless of whether any elections are won by RWE candidates. This means that although the PPC won zero seats in either the 2019 or 2021 federal elections, the party still managed to legitimize RWE views to at least *some* Canadians.

The Internet's role in the facilitation of right-wing extremism is a major concern to researchers (Conway, 2017; Scrivens et al., 2022). Notably, right-wing extremists in Canada are active in online spaces, using the Internet as a tool for exchanging beliefs and spreading fear (Public Safety Canada, 2019). In addition, the Internet is used as a tool for spreading misinformation—particularly through social media—which, in turn, is used for radicalization and recruitment.

As online spaces grow in importance and ubiquity in the lives of everyday Canadians, so too does RWE crawl into the mainstream. This study examined that process, aiming to understand how right-wing extremist beliefs are presented in mainstream online spaces by looking at the popular Canadian subreddit r/Canada. The results of this study revealed three themes that demonstrated not only the presence of right-wing extremism in non-extremist spaces, but also the manner in which these beliefs are spread.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Literature Review**

The following chapter begins by defining right-wing extremism with the help of previous scholarly work on the topic. Following this, the previous research and relevant theory on the use and impact of the Internet in spreading right-wing ideology is explored. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion on the importance of this type of research and of this study specifically.

#### **2.1. Defining Right-Wing Extremism**

Due to the tremendous variety of individuals and groups involved or associated with right-wing extremism (RWE), there is currently no consensus on a definition of RWE. As such, this study relies on previous scholarly work on the topic in order to form a working definition of “right-wing extremism”.

In defining right-wing extremism, it is vital to understand the dynamics of in-groups and out-groups, as group loyalty is a core concept of RWE (Berger, 2018a; Martin, 2010). Extremism requires the belief that one is a member of an “in-group,” and in order for the group to survive, they must engage in “hostile action against an out-group” (Berger, 2018a, p. 170). In the case of RWE, this in-group is typically white, male, heterosexual, and Christian; in other words, the in-group and out-group divide is defined using strict boundaries regarding race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion (Perry & Scrivens, 2018). However, there is a certain level of heterogeneity amidst the numerous groups that lean to the far-right or are associated with RWE: white supremacists, neo-Nazis, skinheads, the alt-right, militia groups, Christian Identity followers, and conspiracy theorists often have overlapping beliefs, yet each group can have a different primary focus or “hot button issue” (Gruenewald et al., 2013, p. 1014; Parent & Ellis, 2016). Despite the occasional clash in beliefs—such as with religious versus secular groups—the similarities in ideology, the use of violence, and in who is targeted outweighs the differences, making the term “right-wing extremist” an appropriate label (Bowman-Grieve, 2009).

Right-wing extremist groups differ in terms of certain beliefs, but the overlap lies in who is “othered” by these extremist groups; in other words, who is the target of bigotry and hate. Racism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and antisemitism are all commonly expressed beliefs by right-wing extremists. The presence of “in-group” versus “out-group” attitudes signify a deep-seated fear of those who are labeled the “out-group” or the “other”; a fear that manifests in conspiracy theories such as the “Great Replacement” and the term “white genocide” (Davey & Ebner, 2019, p. 7).

The assertion that there is currently a genocide happening against white people was popularized by white nationalist terrorist David Lane, who believed in the antisemitic and racist conspiracy that Jewish people and people of colour are responsible for the decline of white populations in the US (Davey & Ebner, 2019, p. 7). Right-wing extremist attacks such as the Charleston, South Carolina church shooting in 2015, the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania synagogue shooting in 2018, and the El Paso, Texas shooting in 2019 are all examples of white nationalist terrorism that targeted Black, Jewish, and Latino people (Palmer, 2019; Ware, 2019). In contrast, the “Great Replacement” conspiracy is European in origin, scapegoating Muslim immigrants as the reason for declining populations of white people (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Right-wing extremists encourage the characterization of Islam as a “religion of intolerance” in order to push this conspiracy (Hafez, 2014). The Christchurch, New Zealand Mosque shooting is one example of a right-wing extremist attack motivated by Islamophobia and the belief in the “Great Replacement” conspiracy (Macklin, 2019). Another example of an extremist attack motivated by this conspiracy is the 2011 shooting in Oslo, Norway (Davey & Ebner, 2019; Parent & Ellis, 2016).

Anti-feminism and misogyny are commonly held beliefs among both right-wing extremists and incels. A portmanteau for involuntary celibacy, “incel” beliefs manifest as hostility towards women and support for “traditional” gender roles (Hoffman et al., 2020; O’Malley et al., 2022). In 2014, six people were murdered in Isla Vista, California; the attack was motivated by misogyny and incel ideology that revealed a deep-seated hatred of women and entitlement towards women as objects (Baele et al., 2021; Hoffman et al., 2020). While research on incels has shown that they should not be strictly identified as members of the far-right, there is certainly ideological overlap; right-wing extremists often show support for incel violence, and anti-feminism and misogyny

are seen as “gateways” to white supremacist ideology (Hoffman et al., 2020; Romano, 2018).

Anti-LGBT views are another core belief of right-wing extremists, one which is directly connected to beliefs on gender and religion (Daniels, 2009; Perry & Scrivens, 2019; Scrivens et al., 2020). This particular facet of RWE can also be described as the “religious right,” characterized by Christian anti-abortion, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBT beliefs (Perry & Scrivens, 2019). Attacks on LGBT pride parades, such as the one in Belgrade, Serbia in 2010, demonstrate how right-wing extremists view LGBT people as “immoral” (Ejdus & Božović, 2017). In recent months, anti-LGBT rhetoric has spilled into the mainstream; in particular, the religious right’s attempt to characterize transgender people as “child groomers” has resulted in an increase of anti-LGBT legislation (Keveney, 2022).

The “in-group” versus “out-group” or “us” versus “them” rhetoric of right-wing extremism is also demonstrated via its opinions of the political left-wing. Leftist concepts such as progressivism and socialism clash against RWE rhetoric; in turn, right-wing extremists see the left as a direct threat to their movement (Gaudette et al., 2020). An example of RWE violence against the left is the 2017 Charlottesville, Virginia vehicular attack against a group of left-wing counter-protestors at a “Unite the Right” rally (Bliuc et al., 2019). One woman, Heather Heyer, was killed in the attack; in response, right-wing extremists celebrated her death, calling her a “drain on society” (Degrandpre, 2017).

It is critical to keep all of these elements of RWE in mind, as they are all deeply interconnected. For the purposes of this research, the definition provided in Perry and Scrivens (2018) is used here, as it acknowledges the heterogeneity of RWE movements:

We define RWE in Canada as a loose movement, characterized by a racially, ethnically and sexually defined nationalism. This nationalism is often framed in terms of white power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by such groups as non-Whites, Jews, immigrants, homosexuals and feminists (p. 171).

While this definition does mention the presence of xenophobia and anti-immigrant beliefs, it would be pertinent to explicitly mention the targeting of Muslims. In addition, rather than the word “homosexuals,” the entire LGBT community—especially transgender people—should be acknowledged as being targeted and “othered” by RWE.

Finally, the term “non-Whites” frames people of colour in terms of what they are not (i.e., white) instead of in terms of what they are (i.e., Black, Indigenous, Asian, etc.).

Therefore, this study will be expanding the definition to include: “such groups as people of colour, Jewish people, Muslims, immigrants, the LGBT community, and feminists.”

## **2.2. Right-Wing Extremism Online**

There is a considerable amount of discussion surrounding the social implications of the Internet and social media, especially in the context of RWE. In understanding the connection between RWE and the Internet, it is necessary to understand the Internet as a platform for social interaction. While it is true that the Internet has become a space on which to make meaningful connections, it can also be used as a tool for spreading hate. Since its inception, the ubiquitous nature of the Internet and its ability to connect people regardless of geography has made it an invaluable tool for right-wing extremists looking to spread their ideology and recruit others (Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Daniels, 2009; Perry & Scrivens, 2016).

Right-wing extremism has existed online in some form or another since the Internet’s infancy. Early research on white supremacist websites showed how these groups were largely decentralized and, at the time, isolated from mainstream right-wing political groups (Burris et al., 2000). In the 1980s, more than one bulletin board system (BBS) existed as a messaging hub for white supremacists (Berlet, 2001; Conway et al., 2019). By the 1990s, the World Wide Web saw the creation of numerous websites and forums dedicated to extremist communities; the most prominent example of this being Stormfront (Conway et al., 2019). While the BBS of the earlier decade remained local to the United States, these newer websites connected users internationally; a trend that continued in the advent of social media platforms (Conway et al., 2019; Daniels, 2009).

Early white supremacist websites were both a source of information and a means of communication, and the anonymity of the Internet allowed for users to participate risk-free in the movement (Futrell & Simi, 2004). Anonymity itself is crucial in recruiting new members and maintaining current membership of RWE groups (Futrell & Simi, 2004). The ability to control what kind and how much personal information is revealed about oneself while online is a unique characteristic of the Internet, and perceived anonymity can affect how people behave online. The term “perceived anonymity” is used, as

opposed to simply “anonymity,” to acknowledge the fact that a person’s identity can still be uncovered using IP addresses or other methods, meaning they are not truly anonymous. Internet users are more likely to engage in hostility towards others when they feel that their identity is hidden, and hostile behaviour online is often carried over into offline settings (Fox et al., 2015). Previous research argues that anonymity in an online setting enables hostile behaviour because it causes deindividuation and disinhibition (Fox & Tang, 2014; Lea & Spears, 1991; Postmes et al., 1998). In other words, if the online group one participates in is largely anonymous and engages in anti-social behaviours such as trolling and harassment, that group mentality will enable an individual to engage in those anti-social behaviours as well. In contrast, recent research suggests that rather than there being a difference between how someone acts online and offline, people who are hostile online are actually just as hostile offline (Bor & Petersen, 2022).

One way in which RWE rhetoric was pushed online prior to the emergence of social media was through the use of cloaked websites (Daniels, 2009). Cloaked websites are misinformation websites “published by individuals or groups who conceal authorship or intention in order to deliberately disguise a hidden political agenda” (Daniels, 2009, p. 118). An example of a cloaked website—which still exists as least as recently as 2018—is “www.martinlutherking.org,” hosted by white supremacist and creator of Stormfront, Don Black (Collins & Toomey, 2018). Daniels (2009) identifies how the danger posed by cloaked white supremacist propaganda websites is in the way they undermine values of racial equality by presenting an “alternative epistemology” (p. 119) of mis- and disinformation that would make the topic of racial equality “open for debate” (p. 119).

Today, social media—such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook—is often used as the main avenue of promotion of far-right propaganda (Davey & Ebner, 2019; Köhler & Ebner, 2019). In an effort to spread their ideological message, right-wing extremists implement tactics that make extensive use of social media website functions, such as algorithms and hashtags, in order to normalize far-right language (Köhler & Ebner, 2019). It should be noted that this usage of the Internet is not unique to RWE; other groups across the political spectrum also use social media as a means to promote ideas and recruit members. However, as this study’s focus is on RWE, this section will examine the online landscape solely from this context.

Twitter is used to connect a variety of right-wing audiences through the use of the hashtag and the retweet functions (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Graham, 2016). These functions make it easier to spread posts from one audience to another, whether it be internationally (Froio & Ganesh, 2019) or through mixing right-wing extremist ideologies in with the mainstream conservative discourse (Graham, 2016). This has led to criticism of Twitter for not taking the problem of right-wing extremist groups on the platform seriously (Hathaway, 2017). Recent studies on right-wing extremists' Twitter presence and usage of the microblogging platform have shown a number of overlapping themes, which included white nationalist beliefs, anti-immigration and anti-Muslim attitudes, as well as a general dedication to trolling, conspiracies, and fake news (Berger, 2018b). When prominent and influential figures use Twitter to spread hateful rhetoric, this leads to an increase in the same hate speech from other Twitter users; this is exemplified by Donald Trump's tweets about Islam resulting in an increase of Islamophobic tweets by his Twitter followers (Müller & Schwarz, 2020).

YouTube has similarly been criticized for not dealing with the prevalence of RWE content on their platform. Far-right YouTubers target mainstream viewers, encouraging the consumption and acceptance of extremist content (Ekman, 2014; Lewis, 2018). Additionally, it has been shown that the platform's recommender algorithm may be a contributing factor to RWE radicalization (O'Callaghan et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2019; Weill, 2018). When users click on videos containing extremist content, the algorithm is significantly more likely to recommend videos that pull the user further and further into an "extremist ideological bubble" (O'Callaghan et al., 2015, p. 473). While it is true that this is the algorithm's purpose as a recommender, the implications of the algorithm as a contributing factor in radicalizations remains.

Facebook is another social media platform used extensively by the far-right. In an analysis of the RWE Facebook group "Soldiers of Odin Sweden," Ekman (2018) found the discourse in this public group to be "toned down" compared to closed extremist Facebook groups. In non-public Soldiers of Odin Facebook groups, neo-Nazi discourse, extremely racist images, and calls for violence against immigrants and refugees are shared extensively between members (Röstlund & Wiman, 2016, as cited in Ekman, 2018). In contrast to the closed groups, the public Facebook group functioned primarily as a means to defend Soldiers of Odin's public image by producing counter-narratives claiming they are simply interested in "protecting" Sweden (Ekman, 2018).

Conway (2017) suggests that further research on the role of the Internet in extremism should be conducted; particularly to address whether it is possible for a person to be radicalized online, and what that process looks like (p. 82). Because social media is indeed social, in that its functions facilitate social interaction with other people, it is reasonable to assume that the Internet today plays a role in radicalization (Conway, 2017).

### **2.2.1. Right-Wing Extremism on Reddit**

Reddit is a popular social media content aggregation website where users can join smaller communities—called “subreddits”—for a vast variety of topics: news, television shows, hobbies, and everything in between. In addition to submitting content such as photos and videos, the bulk of Reddit’s appeal is in its capacity to facilitate discussion in the comments section of each post. In addition, users have the ability to score both submissions and comments through “upvotes” and “downvotes” to show their level of agreeance, support, or enthusiasm towards the content on the site. Posts and comments that are more highly upvoted receive higher visibility, which in turn affects what is considered popular on the website. However, as demonstrated by Carman et al. (2018), the voting algorithm can easily be manipulated using bots to artificially inflate or deflate a post or comment’s popularity.

Although Reddit’s official policy is to encourage each subreddit to foster a “sense of belonging” (*Reddit Content Policy*, n.d.), research shows that this is not always the case; many subreddits are fraught with issues. Humour subreddits often promote negative stereotypes based on race and gender, despite rules that forbid prejudice (Eschler & Menking, 2018). Individual subreddits are free to create their own rules on what behaviours are acceptable and unacceptable as long as the sitewide rules known as “Reddiquette” are followed. Indeed, while this can lead to politically homogenous subreddits of all types, the problem appears when unmoderated hate speech is allowed to flourish, creating what is known as a “toxic technoculture” (Massanari, 2017). These toxic technocultures push back against progressive thought, and exemplify “retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race” (Massanari, 2017, p. 333). The “hands off” moderation style common on Reddit is a major factor in allowing hate speech to go unchecked.

In their analysis of the highly-upvoted comments found on the pro-Trump subreddit *r/The\_Donald*, Gaudette et al. (2020) found right-wing extremist rhetoric present, indicating the existence of an echo chamber of RWE views. In particular, the members of *r/The\_Donald* upvoted comments that contained anti-Muslim sentiment and portrayed Muslims a threat (Gaudette et al., 2020, p. 11). They also found that Reddit's voting system facilitates an echo chamber: upvoting extremist views contributes to making said views more acceptable within the subreddit, leading to further agreement and support for extremism (Gaudette et al., 2020, p. 13).

### **2.2.2. Collective Identity**

The current literature on RWE online has primarily focused on the ways organized extremist communities and groups—such as Stormfront or Soldiers of Odin—function collectively. Online RWE communities are reactive to what happens in offline society, and often undergo changes in response to real-life events (Bliuc et al., 2019). For example, following the 2005 Cronulla race riots in Sydney, Australia, the Stormfront Downunder community experienced a change in group identity, becoming more overtly anti-Muslim and developing a stronger “in-group” versus “out-group” mentality (Bliuc et al., 2019). The “in-group” versus “out-group” divide is essential in understanding and defining RWE; this notion is expanded upon with the concept of a “collective identity” in online far-right communities. A collective identity is a shared sense of self among a group of individuals who identify as part of a larger whole; essentially, it is the “us versus them” attitude that is present in collective groups (Snow, 2001). Collective identities are ever-evolving, formed through shared experiences, values, beliefs, and norms that are generally centered around a common shared cause that motivates the group (Snow, 2001). Collective identities are fluid, overriding an individual's personal identity and becoming their most salient identity, shaping group behaviors and attitudes (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Snow, 2001). Collective identities rely on individuals being capable of embracing their collective identity as part of themselves (Snow, 2001).

The Internet adds an additional layer to collective identities in social movements, specifically creating a “social movement online community” (Caren et al., 2012). Because the Internet allows for wide-reaching connections among the members of an online social movement, it therefore allows these movements to quickly scale in number (Caren et al., 2012). In online RWE spaces, extremist views are reinforced rather than

challenged (Perry & Scrivens, 2016, p. 827). In addition, the presence of perceived anonymity on the Internet allows for individuals to feel safe in expressing beliefs they might not otherwise be able to in an offline setting (Caren et al., 2012). Of course, the framework of collective identities and social movement online communities can be used to describe any group with a shared sense of self, not just extremist groups. Still, this framework provides a deeper understanding of the manner in which far-right extremists define their identity, and how these definitions further contribute to the targeting or othering of out-groups (Berger, 2018a).

The Internet has also facilitated the transnationalization of RWE, i.e., the spread of right-wing extremist ideologies regardless of geographic boundaries (Caiani & Kröll, 2015). Despite their ideological opposition to political globalization, right-wing extremists have no trouble globalizing their own movement, using the Internet as a tool to recruit beyond their own national borders (Caiani & Kröll, 2015). Right-wing extremists aim to unify a global identity by targeting a common enemy such as globalization and immigration (Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Froio & Ganesh, 2019).

### **2.2.3. Sentiment-Based Identification of Radical Authors**

Sentiment-Based Identification of Radical Authors, or SIRA, is an algorithm meant to detect and highlight radical or extremist sentiment in online spaces, originally developed by Scrivens et al. (2018, 2020). The tool was first used to examine radical Islamic forums, then subsequently to look at the evolution of radical behaviour on Stormfront Canada, a white supremacist forum. The SIRA algorithm uses keyword-based sentiment analysis to measure and calculate a radical score based on four main components: average sentiment score, volume of negative posts, severity of negative posts, and duration of negative posts (Scrivens et al., 2018, 2020).

In their examination of the radical trajectories of the members of the Stormfront Canada forums between 2001 and 2016, Scrivens et al. found that most users' scores increased steadily over time, indicating that prolonged participation in these types of discussion forums result in an increase of radical beliefs and polarized opinions (Scrivens et al., 2020). Additionally, Scrivens et al. points to this increase in radical beliefs as a "sign of the times" (2020, p. 227). In other words, social, cultural, and

political change—what they call “hot button” issues—can act as a major catalyst for the increase in extremist views (Scrivens et al., 2020).

### **2.3. Importance of This Study**

The aim of this paper is to use sentiment-based analysis to evaluate the subreddit r/Canada as a whole and identify whether there are any patterns of extremist beliefs and to use quantitative analysis to identify any themes that may exist in the data. By focusing on a community that was not originally created as a hub for RWE and that presents itself as a neutral space, this will help to expand the literature on whether sentiment analysis is a suitable tool for the identification of extremist beliefs in these types of online communities.

Even from the early days of the Internet in the late 90s and early 2000s, sociologists have implored that research on the Internet focus not just on individual users, but also on the social impact of the Internet and the way it is used by society (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Extremist movements that found their footing in online spaces have caused real and measurable effects offline. RWE rhetoric is now easier to find online than it is offline (Daniels, 2009), and this phenomenon is only becoming more pronounced as time goes on. In Canada in particular, more research must be done on RWE in online spaces in order to understand and respond to it. Much of the current literature on Canadian RWE online focuses on websites that are known to be extremist spaces (Stormfront Canada, for example), but the growing trend of far-right beliefs in mainstream spaces indicates a need for research in this area, especially since mainstream social media websites are known targets for extremist recruitment (Köhler & Ebner, 2019). A gap in the literature currently exists regarding mainstream Canadian online spaces; as such, this study will specifically be focusing on the subreddit r/Canada. Focusing on this subreddit has the additional benefit of doing research on another under-researched area: mainstream online spaces that are at risk of becoming a hub for right-wing extremism. Because the Internet is primarily used as a tool for recruitment, research that aids in halting recruitment is of great importance. Studies such as this one which focus on the evolution of neutral online communities may be capable of identifying the warning signs of a community shifting further toward the far-right.

In addition, as machine learning and the use of algorithms such as SentiStrength and SIRA become more commonplace in criminological research, it is essential to test the efficacy of these tools. Scrivens et al. (2018) provide a number of recommendations for evaluating the machine learning capabilities of the SIRA algorithm. First, researchers using the SIRA algorithm can change the keywords depending on the aim of their study; using more keywords would equal casting a wider net, while less keywords, or keyword lists based on themes (e.g. religion, politics, family) would result in a more precise study. Second, the four components of the SIRA calculation are normally weighed equally, but it is possible to reweigh the components, depending on the research aims. Third, researchers interested in looking at negative forum threads rather than negative forum users could potentially aggregate the data by thread level instead of author level and run SIRA to compare radical scores for entire discussion threads. This study would attempt to address some of these recommendations. First, the keyword choices were made from a combination of frequently used nouns that were also relevant to the research question, meaning the keyword list was based on themes of discussion. Second, while the first run-through of SIRA used data aggregated by user level and saw the components weighed equally, the second run-through used data aggregated by date rather than by username and reweighed the components of the SIRA algorithm. Finally, this study looks at a subreddit rather than at a traditional forum, broadening the usage of this machine learning algorithm to other data sources.

## Chapter 3.

### Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological approach to this study, walking through the step-by-step process in using Reddit as a source of data, using sentiment analysis as a data collection tool, and using NVivo to analyse the data. Lastly, this chapter covers ethical considerations relevant to this research.

This study's approach mixed sentiment analysis with qualitative content analysis. For sentiment analysis, this study followed the blueprint outlined in Scrivens et al. (2018), who developed an algorithm known as *Sentiment-based Identification of Radical Authors* (SIRA) to identify extremism in online spaces. The SIRA algorithm was first used in Scrivens et al. (2018) to identify Islamic extremism on web forums, and was expanded on by Scrivens et al. (2020) in their analysis of a white supremacist forum, Stormfront Canada.

#### 3.1. Step One: Sample Selection

The first step involved choosing the source from which the study data would originate. The subreddit r/Canada, a fairly popular subreddit with over 1.5 million members at the time of writing, was selected as the source of the sample for this study. The rationale behind choosing r/Canada was to focus on a community not originally created as a hub for extremism; in other words, a mainstream subreddit. This subreddit was originally created to house general discussions related to Canadian events, as the current description of the subreddit explains how "this is the place to engage on all things Canada" (r/Canada, n.d.).

With over a million and a half subscribers, r/Canada is home to a wide variety of posts and discussions from across the political spectrum; however, there is evidence of a growing RWE movement in the subreddit. In 2018, screenshots were leaked that revealed that one of the (now former) moderators of r/Canada supported white supremacist beliefs (Milton, 2018). In addition, two of the current moderators of the subreddit previously moderated the alt-right subreddit r/metacanada (Milton, 2018). This evidence brought forth concerns of a growing alt-right presence on r/Canada, hence its

selection as the focus of this study. Choosing a subreddit that claims to be politically neutral allows the SIRA algorithm's efficacy as a research tool to be tested. Following that, finding signs of RWE in a mainstream online space such as r/Canada would have different implications than finding RWE in a place one might expect to find it. Demographic information for the sample, such as gender, ethnicity, and age of the users is not available due to the fact that Reddit provides a certain amount of anonymity to its users by not collecting this information.

To gather the data from Reddit, a dataset of archived Reddit posts from the subreddit r/Canada was pulled by a web crawler using the date range of January 2014 to December 2019 from an online repository of all available Reddit data, which is made available on the website GitHub (<https://github.com/reddit-archive/reddit>). Using keywords to narrow down the specified subreddit and date range, the archived data is downloaded as a .csv file that indicates the body of the post, the username, the date of the post, the voting score, and the URL. The large size of the .csv dataset meant that the file needed to be opened using EmEditor, a text editing program geared towards the editing of large files (*EmEditor*, n.d.), instead of Microsoft Excel. The intent behind choosing this particular date range was to look at the evolution of the subreddit over time, from well before the 2016 American presidential election to the most recently available archived data from before the Covid-19 pandemic. After pulling all of the Reddit data between January 2014 and December 2019, the dataset totaled over ten million lines, requiring a further purposive sample in order to reduce the data to a manageable size for the purposes of this study. First, all "deleted" posts (i.e., empty posts that contained only the placeholder text [deleted]) were removed from the dataset. Next, a random sample of 100,000 posts for each year was taken, resulting in a final sample of 600,000 posts.

With a sample size of 600,000, traditional qualitative methods of analysis would be impossible without some manner of properly sorting through the veritable garden of data. In order to find the most interesting and noteworthy posts related to the possible presence of RWE in the subreddit, an algorithmic tool known as "SIRA" was used.

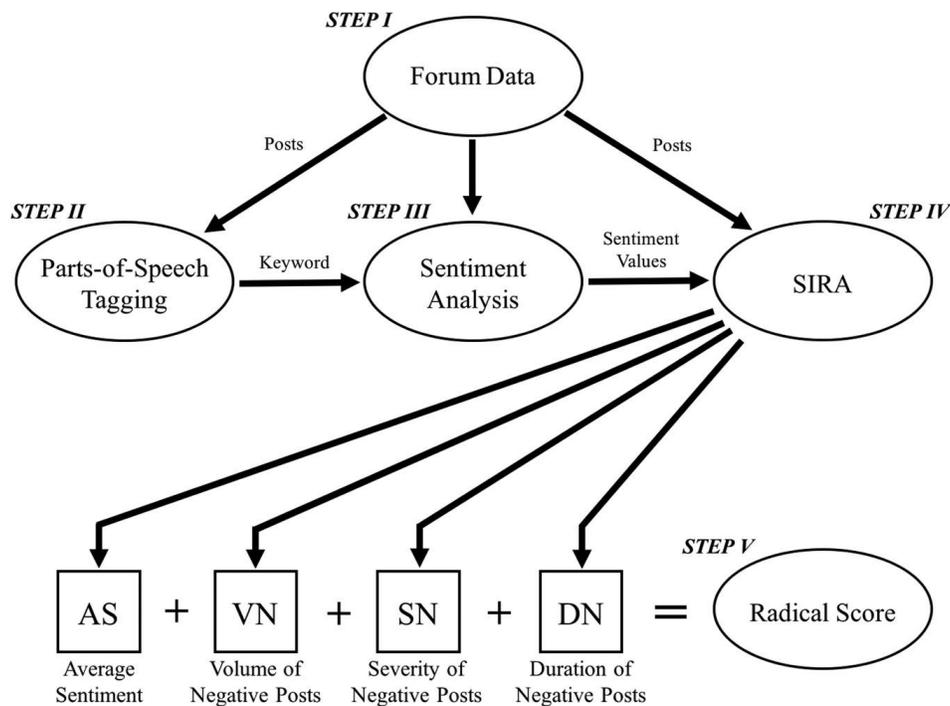
## **3.2. Step Two: Sentiment Identification of Radical Authors**

If the 600,000-post sample is to be seen as a garden of data, then SIRA is the gardening tool. Originally developed by Scrivens et al. in 2018, Sentiment-based Identification of Radical Authors, or SIRA, is an algorithm meant to identify extremism in online spaces. It can be used to sort through vast collections of data (Scrivens et al., 2018, 2020), thus making it the perfect tool for this study. SIRA is a multi-step process, beginning with keyword selection, followed by sentiment scoring, and finally finishing with the SIRA algorithm itself.

The first step taken in analysing the subreddit data was keyword selection. The use of keywords is essential in completing the next step, and the keyword search helps determine which topics of discussion within the subreddit should be measured. Keyword selection was done automatically with the help of a Parts of Speech (POS) tagging program, which separates each word into categories for each different part of speech, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Nouns were selected as they are more likely to be surrounded by relevant sentiment terms (Scrivens et al., 2018). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it was decided not to rely solely on the most frequent nouns found by the POS tagger. Rather, keywords were selected by looking at nouns that were both frequently used in the subreddit and related to what the literature revealed as common topics of discussion for far-right spaces. This resulted in a final list of 266 keywords, covering a variety of topics including politics, race, immigration, religion, gender roles, sexuality, and economics (see Appendix).

After creating the keyword list, the next step in the process was to use SentiStrength to gather the sentiment scores for each post. SentiStrength uses the keywords from the previous step to determine the sentiment occurring near that keyword, resulting in a score that corresponds to positive or negative sentiment found in each post. This process resulted in a matrix of 600,000 posts by 266 keywords, with sentiment scores for each keyword for each post. Following this, the sentiment scores for each of the 600,000 posts were averaged in Excel. On their own, the averaged sentiment scores provide a glimpse into the overall positivity or negativity present in the subreddit.

Sentiment Identification of Radical Authors, or SIRA, is an algorithm that uses SentiStrength scores, along with the volume, duration, and severity of negative posts, to assign each user a radical score (Scrivens et al., 2018). The first component of the radical score calculation is the *average sentiment score percentile (AS)*, which compares an individual’s sentiment scores to the average sentiment scores of the whole subreddit (Scrivens et al., 2018, p. 45). The next component is the *volume of negative posts (VN)*, which looks at both the total number of negative posts and the proportion of negative post for each individual (Scrivens et al., 2018, p. 45). The next component is the *severity of negative posts (SN)*, which considers the number and severity of an individual’s posts that are considered to be “very negative,” i.e., had extremely high sentiment scores (Scrivens et al., 2018, p. 46). The last component is the *duration of negative posts (DN)*, which looked at the date range between an individual’s first and last negative posts (Scrivens et al., 2018, p. 46). Each of these components used percentile scores which were then converted into a value out of 10, which are then added together to obtain a final radical score out of 40. According to SIRA, an author can be considered extreme if their online posting behaviour shows a high volume, high severity, and longer duration of posts containing a negative sentiment (Scrivens et al., 2018, 2020).



**Figure 2.1: Process of text analysis and the creation of the radical score.**  
 Source: Scrivens et al., 2018.

To illustrate the SIRA calculation process, take for example the following user (Author ID: 38994), who posted a total of 1692 times between January 2014 and December 2019, with an average sentiment score of -0.64. During this time, this user made a total of 590 “negative” posts and 29 “very negative” posts. To first calculate *average sentiment score percentile (AS)*, SIRA converted the average score of -0.64 to a percentile score of 49.73, meaning that 49.73% of all r/Canada users in the dataset had an average sentiment score equal to or less than this user’s score. This percentile score was then divided by 10 to obtain a final score of 4.973 out of 10.

The calculation of *volume of negative posts (VN)* was done in two parts. First, SIRA converted the count of 590 negative posts to a percentile score of 11.43, meaning that 11.43% of all users in the dataset had the same or fewer negative posts than this user. This percentile score was divided by 20 to obtain a score of 0.572 out of 5. Second, SIRA divided the number of 590 negative posts by the 1692 total posts to calculate the proportion of this user’s negative posts, which was then converted into a percentile score of 34.87, meaning that 34.87% of all users had a proportion of negative posts equal to or less than this user. This percentile score was divided by 20 to obtain a score of 1.744 out of 5. The scores of these two sub-components were added together to obtain a final score of 2.316 out of 10.

The calculation *severity of negative posts (SN)* was also calculated in two parts. First, SIRA converted the count of 29 very negative posts to a percentile score of 9.06, meaning that 9.06% of all users in the dataset had the same or fewer negative posts than this user. This percentile score was divided by 20 to obtain a score of 0.453 out of 5. Second, SIRA divided the number of 29 very negative posts by the 1692 total posts to calculate the proportion of this user’s very negative posts, which was then converted into a percentile score of 1.71, meaning that 1.71% of all users had a proportion of negative posts equal to or less than this user. This percentile score was divided by 20 to obtain a score of 0.086 out of 5. The scores of these two sub-components were added together to obtain a final score of 0.539 out of 10.

Finally, to calculate the *duration of negative posts (DN)*, it was first necessary to identify the date of this user’s earliest negative post and most recent negative post, which were January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014, and December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019, respectively. The difference between these two dates were calculated as the duration, and this score was converted

into a percentile score of 98.90, meaning 98.90% of all other r/Canada users had a duration of negative posts equal to or less than this user had. This percentile score was divided by 10 to obtain a final score of 9.89 out of 10. The final step in the SIRA calculation is to add up the percentile scores for each of the four components: (AS) + (VN) + (SN) + (DN). This calculation,  $4.973 + 2.316 + 0.539 + 9.89$ , equals a final SIRA score of 17.718 out of 40, or 17.72 when rounding to two decimal places.

The SIRA algorithm was run using the previously created post-keyword matrix, producing a final radical score for each of the 85,804 individual authors in the r/Canada 2014-2019 dataset. The SIRA scores were calculated out of 40, with an average score of 4.87. The highest score for an individual user was 26.49.

In addition to the user-centric results, a separate test was run in order to examine the data from a date-centric perspective. This was done by separating the data by month and year rather than by username, creating a total of 72 radical scores for each month in the dataset (e.g., January 2014, February 2014, and so on). By treating each month as an “individual” in the context of SIRA, new insights could be made into whether there were any increases over time in radical scores. In addition, the date-centric search made it easier to examine popular or controversial topics that followed current events.

The weights of each component of the SIRA calculation had to be adjusted slightly to account for the fact that the duration of negative posts would be equal for each “individual,” i.e., they would all be exactly one month long. Because of this, the duration of negative posts (DN) component was removed, meaning the date-centric results were scored out of a total of 30 instead of 40. The average radical score was 13.78. The month with highest SIRA score was November 2015 with a score of 27.43. The second highest was October 2014 with a score of 26.54. The third highest August 2017 with a score of 25.54. Overall, this alternative method of running the SIRA algorithm served as a point of triangulation of the data.

The SIRA scores provide an understanding of the most noteworthy topics of discussion within the subreddit as well as context for discussing the efficacy of SIRA as a research tool for this subreddit. The months with the highest SIRA scores were examined in order to see what the most controversial topics of discussion were for these time periods. Various topics appeared, but there were a few repeated topics that

illustrated a pattern. Being a Canadian subreddit, most topics of discussion were about Canadian news, politics, and other similar concerns, but there were a few international news stories that captured r/Canada's attention in these months.

November 2015 had the highest SIRA score. As this was the month following the federal election of Justin Trudeau as Prime Minister, there was much discussion found surrounding the Liberal party's election promises, including the issue of cannabis legalization and first-past-the-post voting. Other topics of interest that brought out RWE rhetoric included the blood donation ban for gay men, gun control laws, foreign buyers in the housing market, and the inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). The two biggest topics this month, however, were the Syrian refugee crisis and the Islamic terrorist attack that occurred in Paris, France (Chow & Kostov, 2015). The second highest SIRA score came from October 2014, where a few major news topics dominated the negative sentiment. First was the legal battle between Trinity Western University (TWU) and the Law Society of British Columbia (McElroy, 2014). Another major topic of discussion was CBC's firing of Jian Ghomeshi due to sexual harassment (Bradshaw & McArthur, 2014). Other repeated topics included medically-assisted suicide and the blood donation ban for gay men. The biggest topic during this month by far, however, was the Islamic terrorist shootings that happened at Parliament Hill in Ottawa (CBC News, 2014). The third highest SIRA score was August 2017. During this month, the topic that drew the most discussion was by far the Unite the Right rally that resulted in the death of Heather Heyer (Degrandpre, 2017). It is important to understand that these were the topics that appeared in the months with the highest SIRA scores, meaning these events drew the most negative radical scores from r/Canada users at the time.

### **3.3. Step Three: Qualitative Analysis**

After using SIRA as the "gardening tool" to sort through the large dataset, the third step involved the use of NVivo to analyse the data. Qualitative research is often used to explore and describe aspects of social life in order to understand the meaning behind people's thoughts and beliefs (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this study, qualitative analysis was used in order to gain more insight into and a better understanding of the discussions happening on r/Canada and the beliefs of its users. More specifically, thematic analysis was used as a way to "zoom in" on the most

negative discussions and the users with the highest radical scores. By looking at the context of the discussions that contained the highest radical scores, it was possible to discern important characteristics of the community of r/Canada. While the literature is able to illustrate what RWE might look like in an online environment, it was important to keep an open mind as to what might be present in the discussions on r/Canada.

Both the user-centric and date-centric analyses were used for the qualitative step. After SIRA was run for the user-centric analysis, the users were first sorted by highest to lowest radical score, as only the highest radical scores were of interest. The top twenty users with both the highest (i.e., most negative) radical scores and at least twenty total posts in the dataset were chosen for examination, totalling 1,560 posts from the user-centric analysis. Following this, after SIRA was run for the date-centric analysis, the months were sorted from highest to lowest radical score and the three highest months (November 2015, October 2014, and August 2017) were examined, totalling 8,082 posts from the date-centric analysis. By tackling a large dataset from multiple angles in this manner, more information was able to be uncovered.

After isolating the 9,642 posts with the highest radical scores for examination, the data were coded in NVivo. NVivo is a program that facilitates qualitative coding and analysis of data. As this was an exploratory study, with consideration for the existing literature on RWE, thematic analysis was the approach taken (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes in data, similar to grounded theory but without the aim of theoretical generation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of thematic analysis is divided into six steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and finally the write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Each of these steps were carefully followed in performing a thematic analysis on the data.

In order to become familiarized with the data, it was important to carefully read through each of the posts that were chosen to be included in the NVivo analysis. This was done during the process of sorting the user-centric and date-centric SIRA results by highest score. Following the recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006), a journal was used to keep track of potential themes and notable topics of discussion during this step in the analysis. This ensured familiarity with the content for when it came time to generate initial codes in NVivo.

Once the data was sorted by highest score, it was imported into NVivo in order to begin the inductive coding process. The initial coding process involved reading through each post systematically and coding relevant segments of data in NVivo as a “node”; the intention was to gain new insights through immersion in the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This was an open-ended process, so no pre-set codes were used; instead, codes developed as coding progressed. As per Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recommendation to code the surrounding data in order to preserve context, the entirety of the post was included when saving a node in NVivo.

After finalizing the long list of codes in NVivo, the next step in the thematic analysis was to begin searching for initial themes. The NVivo nodes were reviewed, re-reading the content in order to determine areas of overlap as well as other patterns. During this phase, Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend the use of visual representations to aid in the organization of potential themes. Following this suggestion, both journals and post-it notes were used extensively throughout this phase to create visual maps to connect ideas and potential themes. After this, themes were reviewed and revised. This phase was helped partially through the review of relevant literature, to determine if the finalized themes were in line with known literature on the topic. In addition, by stepping away from the data and coming back after a period of rest, it was possible to have fresh eyes on the initial themes. The use of visual maps was again useful in finalizing the themes, considering how the themes relate to one another, and choosing how to report them in the data. In all, a total of three overarching themes were developed from this data.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations**

Although ethics approval is not required for the use of publicly accessible archived data, there are still ethical considerations to be made when conducting research using the Internet as the source of data. The main ethical considerations to address are the issues of confidentiality and informed consent. In addition, Massanari (2018) highlights a number of concerns that are present when doing research on far-right communities. Namely, the question of anonymity of participants and the protection of the researcher’s identity are some of the biggest concerns for researchers in this area. First, in regards to anonymity, the concern lies in whether or not to entirely anonymize the participant data—from the usernames to the website title (Massanari, 2018). Second,

the bigger ethical challenge is the risk inherent in researching right-wing extremist groups and whether the researcher will become a target for the communities being researched (Massanari, 2018).

Informed consent is generally not required when conducting research using public Internet data (Sugiura et al., 2017). Still, considerations should be made regarding the level of accessibility and the level of perceived privacy of the online community in question (King, 1996). In regard to the question of accessibility, a Reddit account is not required to read public subreddits, and r/Canada is a public subreddit. Because the users of r/Canada posted to a publicly accessible forum, it is not unreasonable to expect that anyone, including a researcher, could read the posts. Reddit itself encourages public discussion through its upvote/downvote feature, meaning the perceived privacy of a public subreddit such as r/Canada is low. These considerations indicate that the subreddit users did not need to be informed about their involvement in a research study that looked at already-published archived data.

Due to the perceived anonymity associated with online spaces, people are better able to freely and unselfconsciously express themselves, allowing researchers to gain a greater amount of insight on sensitive topics compared to what someone would be willing to reveal in an interview (Hookway, 2008; Robinson, 2001; Seale et al., 2010). Because of this, privacy and confidentiality are still of great importance when conducting research using publicly available online content (Sugiura et al., 2017). Compared to other social media websites that encourage users to reveal their full name, Reddit uses usernames and allows its users to reveal as much or as little personal information as they choose. Despite the use of pseudonymous usernames on Reddit, this study does not reveal that information in the final report; instead replacing the username with a numerical ID. This also addresses Massanari's (2018) first concern regarding the anonymization of user data.

Finally, the question of bias must be addressed, as there will always be subjectivity in qualitative research (Hennink et al., 2019). This is especially true in the case of research on right-wing extremism, where it is imperative to both acknowledge biases and take care not to let those biases cloud the analysis, particularly as a researcher coming from the opposite side of the political spectrum. Reflexivity is the process of self-reflection by which a researcher aims to recognize how their own

personal background, beliefs, and assumptions influence their research (Hennink et al., 2019; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). To this note, reflexive journaling and note-taking was practiced extensively throughout the thematic analysis and in the interpretation of results.

## Chapter 4.

### Results

In this chapter, the themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data will be discussed. The data were reviewed from both a user-centric and date-centric perspective in order to ensure a deeper understanding of the discussions occurring within r/Canada; with that in mind, these results showcase both the individual users with high radical scores as well as the months with high scores. Being that this study looked at a mainstream rather than a far-right online space, it would neither be fair nor accurate to characterize the whole subreddit with the same language one may characterize a website such as Stormfront. SIRA is designed to highlight any form of extremism, not just exclusively the right-wing variety. However, no examples of other forms of extremism—such as left-wing or Islamic extremism—was found within the data. This could be in part due to the keywords chosen for the analysis, but the fact that the majority of the radical posts leaned toward the far-right highlights the prevalence of this type of extremism in this community. As there is no way of knowing whether a particular Reddit user actually identifies as a right-wing extremist, or if they are simply conservative, the discussions flagged by the SIRA algorithm tended to fall on a wide spectrum of beliefs. Because of Reddit's content policies forbidding hate speech and violence, this study did not expect to find outright hostile extremism on r/Canada. Instead, the major area of concern was with views that leaned towards or aligned with RWE, and what their existence implies for the normalization of harmful rhetoric in mainstream spaces.

There were three overarching patterns found in the analysis that reflected the presence of far-right sentiment in the r/Canada subreddit. First was the presence of a high level of government distrust and opposition to left-wing politics. Second, the “Great Replacement” theory was a major and frequently-repeated belief, showcasing a high level of anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Third was the notable amount of both subtle and overt bigotry toward such groups as people of colour, Jewish people, Muslims, immigrants, the LGBT community, and feminists. These themes reflect not only prominent narratives within r/Canada's most radical discussions, but also the

manner in which far-right beliefs are asserted in mainstream spaces and the tactics used that encouraged the formation of a collective far-right identity.

Overall, the negative sentiment that was found was often more subtle in nature rather than overtly hostile; this was exemplified by the presence of rhetoric that suggested users were “just asking questions” rather than explicitly identifying their own beliefs or opinions as being far-right or RWE. Most posts showed some effort in not breaking the subreddit rules against overt bigotry, thereby remaining within the bounds of acceptability the rules enforced. This means that these negative posts were often framed as being a discussion—since discussion and debate is encouraged on Reddit—and were not (always) harshly inflammatory. Exceptions existed, but this was often seen in the posts written by a deleted user. When the content of a post remains, but the username appears as “deleted,” this means that the original Reddit account was deleted, as the website replaces their original username with the [deleted] placeholder.

In addition, not all of the posts with high SIRA scores contained right-wing extremist sentiment. In fact, a fair amount of discussion labeled by the algorithm as “negative” came from users arguing against right-wing rhetoric. Being such a large subreddit, it was not surprising to find dissenting opinions pushing back against the far-right rhetoric in r/Canada. However, these examples were fewer and farther between compared to the far-right sentiment observed.

These results will be presented through the use of quotes in order to provide a detailed understanding and description of the evolution of RWE in r/Canada. In order to preserve the original tone of the posts, any direct quotes taken from the subreddit will be presented word-for-word, with any spelling mistakes, grammatical errors, or other errata left in original form.

#### **4.1. Distrust the Government and Oppose the Left**

The first overarching theme was the distrust of the Canadian government combined with hostility toward anyone or anything that could be considered left-wing. Anti-government beliefs are common among right-wing extremists, often being reactionary to any government actions seen as contrary to the extreme right (Parent & Ellis, 2016). This, combined with a marked level of hostility toward “the Left,” resulted in

a pattern of radical r/Canada users asserting a narrative that presented the extreme right as the “better” or “more logical” option.

#### **4.1.1. Justin Trudeau**

One of the biggest targets of anti-government sentiment was Justin Trudeau. Despite being the leader of the Liberal Party, a centrist political party, Trudeau is often categorized by the far-right as a member of “the Left.” On r/Canada, the news of the 2015 federal elections resulted in expressions of hostility toward the newly elected Prime Minister. This hostility ranged from simple insults and dismissal of Trudeau’s abilities as a leader: “he’s the PM because his dad was a famous PM. That’s all” (Author ID: 31165, December 2015), to outright assertions that the Prime Minister is a traitor. Discussions about Trudeau were often framed in terms of who he is and what he does, rather than acknowledging that these are merely opinions of him. This tactic of making assertions framed as fact rather than opinion is present throughout all other themes in the data. Posts made immediately following the election often compared Trudeau to previous Prime Minister Stephen Harper, painting Harper as a more competent politician:

I for one can't wait for Russia to attack Canada, just so we can prove how pathetic our “Prime Minister” really is. Stephen Harper would have personally lead the troops and punched Putin in the face. (Author ID: 54606, November 2015).

In the years following the 2015 federal election, posts of this category focused more on Trudeau’s policy decisions. Of particular note was the topic of Canada’s part in the Syrian refugee crisis, which brought out a notable level of anger and criticism. Comments such as “Trudeau is literally an ISIS sympathizer” (Author ID: 31165, February 2018) attempted to paint the Prime Minister as a traitor to Canada, categorizing him as enemy because of his acceptance of Syrian refugees.

While criticism of the Prime Minister is not an indication of far-right beliefs by any means, it is possible to differentiate the ways in which far-right discussions of Trudeau manifest. Discussions referring to Trudeau as “effeminate” (Author ID: 31165, August 2017) or using the name “Justina” (Author ID: 16394, October 2014) showcase an attempt to exclude Trudeau from the in-group category of “straight male.”

### 4.1.2. The Left

Appearing hand in hand with the criticism and distrust of Trudeau was hostile opposition to “the Left” as a whole. Many groups could be considered part of the Left; leftists, anti-fascists, “Liberals” or “Libs,” centrist political parties such as the Liberal Party of Canada, and politicians Justin Trudeau, were often included as part of the amalgam. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) was also included here, often in assertions of the CBC being a left-wing propaganda tool, such as with one comment that states, “I’m criticizing the LPC and their media arm (the CBC) for using the refugees as propaganda tools” (Author ID: 31165, May 2016).

Some posts aimed to portray left-wing groups as oppressive, especially in discussions of racism or xenophobia. Take the following comment, for example:

Now you're being intolerant of their intolerance. That makes you a xenophobe! Don't you know you have to commute your liberal principles if/when the perpetrators of ultra-conservative, illiberal practices happen to be ethnic minorities? Holding everyone to a moral standard is racist! Canadian gender equality principles are racist! Liberalism means diversity, and diversity includes draconian ultra conservatism (unless a white person does it, then it should be condemned viciously)! #progressiveologic (Author ID: 31165, December 2015).

This user decries the concept of diversity, sarcastically calling out the Left for being tolerant of “ultra-conservative” ethnic minorities (most likely this user is referring to Muslims) while being intolerant of white conservatives. Other posts portray multiculturalism and diversity as bad for Canada. For example, the following comment paints multiculturalism and diversity as factually irrational:

Multiculturalism isn't rational either. In fact we now know it's harmful to civic life. (People volunteer less, vote less, socialize less, are less engaged in their community, and are less trustful of others even with members of their same group, even when you take a wide variety of social and economic variables into account). This kind of social withdrawal is strongly correlated with mental health issues. It's great to want to treat everyone fairly on an individual level but diversity as official social policy is extremely costly and based on political ideology rather than rationality. Statistically it's the true common factor of a lot of social ills we tend to blame on “modern” or “urban” lifestyles. (Author ID: 50649, November 2015).

Many comments used a similar style of argument, presenting opinions as facts and referring to statistics in order to claim why multiculturalism and diversity are bad for society.

Going even further, many discussions aimed to portray progressivism as violent, radical, and dangerous. This type of conversation was most apparent in the data collected from August 2017, immediately following the murder of counter-protester Heather Heyer at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. One comment describes the counter-protesters as such:

They are not “anti-fascist.” They are far-left terrorists and they should be labelled as such. The media never allows groups on the right to choose our own labels. We are always “neo-nazis” and “white supremacists.” Why do they call far-left terrorist groups by their chosen label instead of a defamatory name chosen by their enemies? (Author ID: 63613, August 2017).

In addition to categorizing the Left as “terrorists,” this comment’s use of “we” confirms this user’s identification with the far-right. This comment exemplifies the in-group and out-group divide perpetuated by right-wing extremists. Other comments attempted to point the finger at the Left for other acts of violence, such as “so you’re just going to ignore months of left wing rioters attacking groups at Berkley? You’re just going to ignore when BLM went out and killed cops in Texas (Author ID: 16206, August 2017), likely as an attempt to derail the conversation from Heyer’s murder.

Simultaneously, some of the more radical users took careful effort to distance themselves from ties to RWE groups as well as downplay the connection between RWE and fascism or Neo-Nazism. For example, one user says “Buddy Neo Nazis are not Nazis. Do you also think AB [Aryan Brotherhood] are Nazis?” (Author ID: 40745, August 2017), while another claims “There are no Nazis today. The National Socialist German Worker’s Party has been defunct since 1945” (Author ID: 31165, August 2017). While the second half of user ID 31165’s statement is correct, the purpose behind this comment is to derail the discussion. In addition, distancing themselves from these more serious or harmful labels helps legitimize what they say to any non-extremists reading their comments. This act of distancing was most prominent in the August 2017 data, where much discussion revolved around denying the ideology had any responsibility for Heyer’s death. One comment, describing the Charlottesville rally, states:

Most of the participants were from a broad coalition of the right. There were a few “nazis” just like there are a few commies at most leftist events. The whole thing was set up to incite a confrontation between the right with a permit to be there and antifa radical without one. (Author ID: 04119, August 2017).

This comment attempts to create distance between different members of the far-right, implying that the majority of the participants in Charlottesville were not fringe extremists. In addition, mentioning how the rally-goers had a permit to be there while the counter-protesters did not aims to delegitimize the counter-protesters actions, and perhaps even blame them for Heyer’s death. Overall, anti-Left discussion on r/Canada continually framed assertions of opinion as fact. The depiction of “the Left” as a common enemy formed a foundation of what right-wing extremism on r/Canada looked like, which carried through the rest of the analysis.

## **4.2. The “Great Replacement” Conspiracy Theory**

The second overarching theme was the undeniable presence of the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, or the belief that non-white immigrants and refugees are replacing white Canadians (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Islamophobia, anti-immigrant, and anti-refugee sentiment—all contributing factors of the conspiracy theory—were by far the most prevalent patterns in the data. The “Great Replacement” theory has become a major tenet of right-wing extremism, and its presence was notable in r/Canada among the discussions containing high radical SIRA scores. While the conspiracy theory was never outright named, it was clearly alluded to.

### **4.2.1. Islamophobia**

The presence of Islamophobia was particularly noticeable in the date-centric dataset, where contentious topics of discussion, the two Islamic terrorist attacks on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in 2014 and in Paris, France in 2015, fueled much of the anti-Muslim rhetoric in the subreddit. Often, this rhetoric was justified by separating Islamophobia from other forms of bigotry and presenting it instead as a so-called “critique” of the religion in order to skirt the subreddit rules forbidding racism, such as by saying “islam ins’t a race” (Author ID: 31165, January 2018) and “You can’t be racist against a religion you stupid fuck” (Author ID: 23579, November 2015). Refusal to define

Islamophobia as racism was not due to an obsession with being pedantic, but rather a tactic to derail discussion.

Being that this is Reddit and not a fringe RWE website, posts with the highest SIRA scores were not as overtly bigoted or hateful in comparison. Instead of making this comparison, it should be understood that the tactics used on r/Canada are meant to make the topic “open for discussion” and to sow seeds of distrust towards Muslims in order to shift mainstream discourse about Islam further to the right. Asserting that Islam is intolerant toward women by referring to wearing a Niqab as “anti-social behavior”:

I don't know if I would consider the Niqab “peaceful”. It is a physical barrier and hostile demonstration of religious piety. I think it would be good if governments, at the very least, stopped celebrating this anti-social behavior. (Author ID: 21369, August 2017),

or referring to Islam as a whole as intolerant toward the LGBT community by highlighting countries where homosexuality is a crime:

In an Islamic country where women are treated less than human, gays are executed and religious minorities are persecuted. Don't let that stop Trudeaus Muslim-Pride unionship though. (Author ID: 16206, August 2017),

are both examples showing how Muslims are categorized as an “out-group” on the subreddit. In addition, there was often overlap with anti-progressive attitudes. One user, for example, states:

Don't confuse “Wear niqabs by choice” with “Said they wear niqabs by choice”. These are people who are in controlling, abusive relationships with men who make them cover themselves head to toe. Taking those responses at face value is about as naive as believing the beaten wife when she tells you she walked into a door. But whatever. Believe whatever you want to believe if it helps you sleep at night. You've demonstrated your multicultural tolerance and inclusiveness to the internet today. Give yourself a pat on the back. (Author ID: 31165, December 2015).

Dismissing the concepts of tolerance and multiculturalism as being misguided furthers the anti-Left narrative pushed by right-wing extremists.

## 4.2.2. Anti-Refugees

The arrival of Syrian refugees in Canada led to a large amount of anti-refugee sentiment in r/Canada. Much of this discussion was centered around who should or should not be “allowed” to live in Canada, further defining refugees as members of an “out-group.” One user stated how “it's ridiculous that we get called racists for being apprehensive about letting in 25 thousand refugees” (Author ID: 30259, November 2015). The use of “we” exemplifies collective identity formation and how this topic of discussion contributed to the definition of an “in-group” as well.

There was a pervasive theme of concern over there being “too many” refugees in Canada and that refugees and immigrants were violent or had the potential to be criminals. For example, one user states, “we do know that immigrants from certain countries do tend to contribute more to gang activity than others” (Author ID: 72817, November 2015). This is an example of the tactic of presenting something as a fact (whether or not it is factually correct) in a manner that aims to allow other readers to “draw their own conclusions” about the supposed danger of refugees. The following is another example of painting refugees as inherently violent:

The refugee or migration crisis that causes community clashes and fear is different. Your nice view doesn't really hold water in mass migration floods where communities are overwhelmed by a flood of people with cultural and societal values opposite of the community they are moving into rapidly. This is called an invasion a of community, and of course cultural clashes, crime waves occur rapidly. The local host community is threatened by the violence and insecurity caused by a flood of people they cannot manage in multiple ways. This is what is happening in any villages and cities in Europe, Europeans did not become racist intolerant assholes overnight, they are overwhelmed by a mass migration of illegals in the millions, in less than 2 years. (Author ID: 75146, July 2017).

This comment not only refers to a “mass migration flood,” an “invasion,” and a “crime wave” of refugees, but also places the blame on the refugees themselves for any racism they may experience living in the new country. In addition, by pointing to a supposed crisis in Europe caused by refugees, the underlying message is then about the potential for this happening in Canada, and how it must be stopped.

### 4.2.3. The “Great Replacement”

Discussions of Muslims and refugees culminated in numerous allusions to the “Great Replacement” that characterized the “us” versus “them” attitudes present in the subreddit. Though the theory was never outright named, there were many comments that came close, such as this one:

I don't know that conspiracy is the correct term but there is clearly collusion among the governments of the western world (especially the EU) to ramp up immigration to a level that will rapidly transform the demographics of those countries over the next century. (Author ID: 00001; August 2017).

Radical users and radical posts that purported the existence of a “Great Replacement” presented the same general ideas. The first of these ideas is that immigrants and refugees are replacing “real” Canadians, and that this is being orchestrated purposefully. For example, one comment states:

The elitists have figured out that they can control people by appealing to their desire to be “a nice person”, feelings get in the way of reasoning. Someone who is logical by definition has to “an inconsiderate asshole”. Using this false dichotomy they can flood the western world with immigrants furthering the collapse of the middle class. (Author ID: 83367; August 2017).

This comment suggests that not only are “the elites” attempting to cause a “collapse of the middle class,” but that the choice to use immigrants hinges on progressivism and acceptance. Take the following comment as well which immediately asserts its truthfulness:

Sounds crazy but it is entirely true. They have this vision and everything they are doing is steps towards it. Destroying traditional families because they are the strongest. Getting people depending on the government, easy disability/welfare, etc. Your support for the government is bolstered when they supply you and support you. Killing jobs to force people to depend on government. This limits procreation too, same goal as trying to destroy traditional families by mocking them, or not calling them diverse enough, etc... “People are not having kids and buying houses anymore” fake cries of 'what is happening?!' when they know what is happening. You may have also noticed the attempt/process to mainstream pedophilia. Destroying all these countries unique cultures by plaguing them all with the same garbage while crying “diversity!!” when in the end it creates the same shit in every country. No unique cultures will exist. (Author ID: 39484, August 2017).

Referring to an unknown “they,” this user mentions a number of fears related to the “Great Replacement,” including the limiting of procreation, the breakdown of traditional families, and the destruction of culture.

The second of these ideas is that these immigrants and refugees will never be and have no intention of becoming Canadian. Discussions include assertions that “Muslims cannot assimilate into western society and will often refuse to even integrate” (Author ID: 19966, November 2015), or that:

they are not coming here to be Canadian, they are coming to Canada or where ever else to be Syrian or who ever they may be in another country. I don't give a single fuck if we are all people. They are people who don't want learn and grow. They bring their shit with them and demand demand demand. I've been following this for a while now and everything these refugees do is disgusting, they are ungrateful, and cause more harm than good. (Author ID: 55607, November 2015).

A common thread in these discussions is the way Muslims, immigrants, and refugees are not treated as individuals, but rather as a collective that thinks and behaves the exact same. Generalizing these groups in this way contributes to othering them and defining them as members of the “out-group.”

The third of these ideas is that their beliefs are inherently violent and antithetical to Canadian society, and therefore there is guaranteed to be violence. For example, one comment describes Islam as “fundamentally incompatible with our way of life” (Author ID: 55177, October 2014), while another emphasizes that “there WILL be attacks in Canada done by some of those refugees if we let them inside and anyone arguing against that is not being realistic” (Author ID: 17840; November 2015). Not only does this comment emphasize the inevitability of violence if refugees are allowed into Canada, but by framing the argument in terms of “being realistic,” the comment is able to suggest what the logical answer to the supposed problem should be, without outright stating it. Another comment asserts:

Islam stands for many ideas and behaviours that are, in very fundamental ways, highly toxic to modern Western secular ideals - ideals that have been developed over more than a thousand years of both progressive thought \*and\* object lessons about the perils of harbouring extremism within our midst in the name of “freedom”. When somewhere around one in seven Muslims has jihadist leanings (some authorities say one in four), and when we accept such a large contingent of believers from such a troubled region

\*en masse\*, so quickly and without due caution, the odds of us being lethally stung by the scorpions among them rise to 100% - simply because of the way extremism, violence and theocratic revolution is embedded in the very \*nature\* of so many common schools and sects of Islamic thought. (Author ID: 74179; November 2015).

This comment describes Islam as fundamentally “toxic” to Western society by providing supposed statistics about the number of Muslims with extremist beliefs, and by claiming there is a 100% chance of violence if they are allowed to come to Canada. Comments like this attempt to inspire fear by using supposed facts; one comment exemplifying this is as follows:

consider the possibility that ISIS, and all muslim extremists, actually want us to 'not be afraid', and continue our insane policy of letting into our countries massive numbers of muslims. consider that if canada were ever majority muslim, then it would be a muslim nation under law. consider that even 10% muslim will create massive problems for non muslims, as at ~10% the muslim population becomes emboldened by their numbers. consider that a lot of muslims consider non muslims trash, and violence, physical and sexual, against non muslims will be high. how many times do we have to hear some muslim preacher/politician/etc talk about how they will conquer the west not with swords, but through immigration and fertility, before we take note? islam is completely incompatible with our values. keep muslims out. unfortunately trudeau is a SJW, who cannot even stand up against bad ideas. and islam is one of the worst ideas. (Author ID: 52751, November 2015).

Overall, these discussions show a clear pattern of asserting opinion as fact as a tactic for radicalization. Creating fear of a violent “out-group” that intends on destroying or replacing an “in-group” has the effect of pushing the “Great Replacement” narrative from the fringe into the mainstream. Just as the left is posited as an internal threat and common enemy, Muslim immigrants and refugees are framed as external threats to Canada (Gaudette et al., 2020).

#### **4.2.4. Antisemitism**

The final piece of the conspiracy puzzle, one that cannot be ignored, is the presence of antisemitism. The belief that Jewish people are the so-called “real” masterminds of the “Great Replacement” is frequent in RWE spaces (Davey & Ebner, 2019), and hints of this can be seen on r/Canada in subtle references to the elites or “elitists” (Author ID: 83367; August 2017). as well as in overt references to a “global Jewish conspiracy” (Author ID: 35050, August 2017).

Another subtle form of antisemitism is the use of “dogwhistles”; seemingly innocuous phrases used to refer to a particular minority group that are not meant to be immediately recognizable (Haney López, 2015). Dogwhistles by nature are not meant to be obvious or outright forms of bigotry; instead, they are meant to be used as an undetectable signal to say what the conversation is actually about (Henderson & McCready, 2018). A commonly used dogwhistle for Jewish people is the term “globalist,” and this word appeared a few times throughout the data. Take the following comment, for example:

I'd throw the globalists that want to dismantle national borders and governments in the same boat along with these Islamists and the Nazis. Nutjobs that want to destroy our democracy and replace it with their own version of batshittery. (Author ID: 60766, November 2015).

Not only does this comment reinforce the “Great Replacement” theory through the fear of the destruction of national borders and democracy, using the dogwhistle “globalists” implies that it is actually Jewish people who are behind the conspiracy.

Simultaneously, however, right-wing extremists seem to use antisemitism as a sort of scapegoat to justify Islamophobia, asserting that Muslims will be the cause of an increase in antisemitic hate crime in Canada. Take the following comment, for example:

Soon Canadian Jews will have to flee the country like they're fleeing Europe right now, thanks to the left's “tolerance” of rabid antisemitism. Europe's case is especially ridiculous when you consider that this is how they're trying to atone for the holocaust - by flooding the continent with people who hate the Jews even more than the Nazis did. Well done Europe. \*Golf clap\*. (Author ID: 31165, May 2017).

It should be noted that this comment was posted by the user ID 31165, a particularly prolific user whose posts frequently appear in the data and are referenced multiple times in this study. Despite the fact that this is only one user, their presence in r/Canada is a sign of the more overt right-wing extremism being posted in the subreddit.

### **4.3. Overt and Covert Bigotry**

The third and final overarching theme was the manner in which radical r/Canada users espoused discriminatory or bigoted beliefs about people of colour, the LGBT community, and feminists. These three categories are grouped together here in order to

demonstrate the ways right-wing extremists use both overt and covert bigotry. Because Muslims, immigrants, refugees, and Jewish people were already mentioned in the previous section, those examples will not be repeated here. Overt bigotry was less common than covert due to the rules of the subreddit prohibiting hate speech, though it was still present. Covert bigotry was often displayed through playing “devil’s advocate” and other similar tactics that allowed radical r/Canada users to distance themselves from potential accusations of bigotry. Concerns about freedom of speech were of greater importance to radical posters than the consequences of hate speech, and thus led to posts calling for tolerance of bigotry. For example, take a look at the following:

Who gives a fuck if they spout hate? We have hate speech laws for a reason. If you're so fucking worried about their ideas you're free to express your own, better, ideas. Stop being such a fucking scared little bitch about some noises some racists makes with their mouth. Tolerating them also means ignoring them. When you add suppression all that does is feed the flames. Listen I get it, you're worried that people will listen to this shit and take it seriously like pre-nazi Germany did. I'm telling you as a society we just don't have the necessary ingredients for that shit to happen here. Not in the near future not even in the foreseeable future. It would take a catastrophe to happen to Canada for us to want to collectively, as a whole country, to want to erase decades of social progress. Let the bigots speak, and then let us have a discourse about how their full of shit. When you suppress one you suppress the other. (Author ID: 62950, August 2017).

This comment is an example of another tactic used to normalize far-right beliefs, by calling for tolerance—usually on the basis of freedom of speech.

### **4.3.1. Anti-Feminism**

Anti-feminism was a persistent theme throughout the negative posts examined. Being that Reddit is known for being hostile towards women (Massanari, 2017), these were almost entirely depictions of overt anti-feminism. Most anti-feminist rhetoric tended to be centered around the refutation of the concepts of patriarchy and rape culture, such as “please fuck off with your patriarchy nonsense, it doesn't exist” (Author ID: 37039, February 2015). One of the major topics of discussion was the firing of Jian Ghomeshi from the CBC due to alleged sexual harassment, and there were many posts either defending Ghomeshi, referring to the allegations as false, or disbelieving the victims: “hearing Ghomeshi was fired from the CBC and reading his defense, I thought, ‘What

bullshit! That unproven, anonymous charges against a guy can destroy his career (and life) like this!” (Author ID: 15518, October 2014).

This topic led into further discussions of the concept of rape culture, with many comments expressing a disbelief in the concept, as well as the assertion that false rape accusations were a much more common, and worse problem, than sexual assault itself: “rape is bad period. Using the accusation of rape to ruin someone's life is equally as awful” (Author ID: 26183, August 2017). Many users also argued that false rape accusations should lead to harsh penalties, such as criminal charges: “false rape allegations ruin lives, families and careers. I am of the mind that anyone making a false rape allegation should serve the sentence that would have been given to the defendants had they been found guilty” (Author ID: 67975, August 2017), or expulsion:

In schools male teachers are at a lot of risk, this is why policies were changed that focused on female students to make sure a female teacher is in the room with the male teacher when a female student is in the room. Policies need to change to punish students for doing false accusations, which would mean expulsion if the charges are proven false. We need proper investigations into crimes sure but there needs to be consequences cause no student should accuse someone and walk away with impunity. (Author ID: 37039, September 2014).

While anti-feminism is not exclusively a RWE belief, it is still a notable aspect of it and is included in many definitions of RWE (Perry & Scrivens, 2018)

### **4.3.2. Racism**

Overt racism was not seen as frequently in the data as overt Islamophobia, but there were still quite a few covert racist themes and patterns on r/Canada that aligned with RWE. One of these themes was the implied belief that it is worse to be accused of being racist than it is to experience racism. Other beliefs included the idea that racism was not an issue in society anymore, as well as the notion of wanted to be “uncensored,” or openly racist, without repercussion.

Racism against Indigenous people was common in r/Canada. The following comment is one example of the way Indigenous people were talked about in the subreddit:

Pointing out anecdotal evidence to support claims that some natives live disgusting horrible lives is no different than pointing out white trash who do the same but the second someone points that stuff put about a minority group they are labeled as racist bigots. (Author ID: 30893, October 2014).

Notably, this user's complaint about being "labeled as racist" reflects a pattern among discussions of racism within the subreddit.

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) Inquiry (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019) was a notable topic that frequently led to both racist and misogynist discussions of Indigenous women. Discussions frequently attempted to downplay the gendered aspect of the inquiry by asking "what about the men?", as seen in this comment:

This isn't an oppression olympics. The point isn't to show that aboriginal men suffer more (though they \*do\*). Nor is it to say that advocacy groups arguing for women are doing a wrong thing. The point is that if an \*Official Inquiry\* is convened, it should look at \*all aboriginals\*, both male and female, in its investigation, \*because both are suffering\*. The link is not at all on a different topic. It's absolutely on point. More aboriginal men are being murdered than women. (Author ID: 54329, October 2014).

Another key topic was the 2016 murder of Colten Boushie in Saskatchewan and the subsequent acquittal of Gerald Stanley, a story that drew national attention and debate surrounding racism and discrimination in Saskatchewan (Hill, 2018), and on r/Canada, discussions of the case centred around that debate:

This is only a racial issue if you believe the reason Stanley shot Boushie was because he's a racist. And if you assume Stanley was a racist for no other reason than he's white, I'm afraid it's \*you\* who's the racist. (Author ID: 31165, February 2018).

Anti-Asian racism also appeared frequently in the data. The fear of a "cultural takeover" of Canada by Chinese people was a common pattern, and often overlapped with anti-immigrant sentiments. Take the following comment that discusses Chinese tourists, for example:

I'm going to play devil's advocate here. So you're saying we should tolerate Chinese tourists when they fail to follow rules, behave rudely, excrete matter on public streets, and think they're above everyone else because they have money? This is a cultural and educational issue within China. Would it be okay if I went over to your house, disregarded your house rules, talk rudely to you, and excreted on your carpet? I wouldn't be welcomed at all. This isn't about embracing multiculturalism or cultural tolerance, it's

about behaving appropriately in a given environment. (Author ID: 00417, October 2014).

This user paints these hypothetical tourists with a broad brush, using the “devil’s advocate” tactic to promote intolerance and decry multiculturalism.

Racism targeting Black people was not seen as frequently in the data as other forms of racism, but it was still present. Rather than outright hate speech (like one might see on a fringe alt-right or white supremacist website), discussions portrayed anti-racist groups and progressive movements as harmful, usually in the context of attempting to compare the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement to white supremacist groups. As one user states, “the BLM movement (in my opinion) has done way more harm to set them back than the good they claim they want” (Author ID: 30378, August 2017). A separate comment says:

The majority of BLM protests end as riots, and they assault counter-protesters. The founders of BLM are black supremacists who call for the death of whites and the death of police, and regularly make public tweets calling for both. (Author ID: 71718, August 2017).

Discussions of race often framed racism in a way that sarcastically dismissed it as a legitimate issue, frequently suggesting that being called a racist was just as bad as experiencing racism. This is related to the far-right’s overall dismissal of diversity and progressive thought. Take the following comment, for example:

the current narrative is that white people invented slavery and are the only race born so inherently evil that they would do it, and that they are just as evil today as they were hundreds of years ago and that will never change no matter what (Author ID: 12401, August 2017)

This claim of a narrative calling white people “inherently evil” is an example of how the far-right sees themselves as a victim—in this case, a victim of being accused of being evil—which is part of the formation of an in-group and a collective identity.

### **4.3.3. Anti-LGBT**

Canadian society is seen to be more tolerant of LGBT people, and as such, there were less overt instances of anti-LGBT sentiment in the examined r/Canada posts. However, some themes of homophobia and transphobia were certainly still present. One comment referred to drag queens as “perverts” (Author ID: 31165, June 2017), and that

“sex (indeed deviant sex) is integral to their drag-queen personas” (Author ID: 31165, June 2017).

Refusal to accept or respect gender identity and pronouns was common, as was the notion that trans people are given “special treatment” in society, as seen in this comment: “now we have to pretend that a man is actually a woman because he's transgendered and call him a her. I'm not going to do that, I live in reality and I don't plan on suspending that because someone's feelings are at stake” (Author ID: 43450, August 2017). Some posts intended to craft fear and distrust of transgender people through “just asking questions” and bringing up “concerns,” such as “letting men into women's washrooms” (Author ID: 39882, October 2014).

#### **4.4. Overlapping Themes**

To wrap up this analysis, three overarching themes were found in r/Canada posts with high radical SIRA scores: distrust of the government and “the Left,” the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, and the presence of overt and covert bigotry. Rather than seeing these as three distinct, mutually exclusive themes, it should be noted that these themes overlapped and connected extensively with each other. Hostility toward diversity and multiculturalism was connected with anti-left views, racism, and anti-LGBT views. Anti-immigrant sentiment frequently crossed over with racism. Distrust of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was connected with the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory through the assertion that he is an ISIS sympathizer.

Because this study looked at a mainstream rather than a far-right online space, finding outright hostile extremism was not the expectation. What was found instead was views that leaned in the direction of RWE, but because there is generally no way of knowing if the users of r/Canada with high SIRA scores actually identify as RWE, the emphasis in these results is not on labelling these Reddit users as extremists. Rather, the emphasis should be on the implication of the existence of these views in terms of normalization of harmful rhetoric in mainstream spaces, as well as understanding the tactics used that encouraged the formation of a collective far-right identity.

The tactics seen in this study include: making repeated and clear definitions of the in-group (“us”) and the out-group (“them”); asserting opinions as facts, framing

beliefs in terms of being a “concerned citizen,” “just asking questions,” or being a devil’s advocate; justifying harmful assertions through freedom of speech; and distancing themselves from or re-defining labels related to RWE.

## Chapter 5.

### Discussion

This chapter discusses the implications of this study's results, drawing connections to literature and theory. Following that, the use of the SIRA algorithm as a research tool is evaluated. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

#### 5.1. Implications

The Internet's role in the proliferation of right-wing extremism has been a crucial question to researchers in recent years. The focus, however, has often remained on the most obvious of extremist spaces. This study was an exploratory look into the potential existence of RWE in neutral or mainstream online spaces. These results show that far-right views can and do exist in mainstream settings, or settings where one does not expect to see extremism. In this case the mainstream subreddit *r/Canada* was found to contain a noteworthy amount of far-right sentiment. Even though the language used in these discussions is not as strongly inflammatory as compared to known RWE spaces, this study highlights the manner in which far-right beliefs can be normalized and the tactics used to shift mainstream opinions.

This study took both a user-centric as well as a date-centric approach to using Sentiment-Based Identification of Radical Authors, which allowed for greater insight into the 600,000-post dataset. The date-centric approach, which treated each month as if it were an individual user, highlighted a particular trend in the subreddit's negative posts: the months that had the highest SIRA scores were the ones that contained discussions of highly newsworthy events. In *r/Canada*, a major focus of discussion—and an example of a “hot button issue” (Scrivens et al., 2020)—was the two Islamic terrorist attacks that happened in 2014 and 2015. Both events became catalysts for RWE rhetoric about Muslims and immigrants, using the fear of terrorism as a means to deliver harmful misinformation and paint these groups as a target. Using hot button issues to catalyze extremism in mainstream online spaces should be considered a tactic for radicalization,

and its use in r/Canada suggests it may continue to be used in this or other mainstream spaces.

Additionally, it is important to show how far-right opinions and viewpoints may influence the opinions of other members of the community. The subreddit r/Canada in particular, which is seemingly a community encouraging the discussion of Canadian news and politics, has potentially become a subreddit where intolerance is permitted to spread. In this sense, r/Canada could be seen as a “toxic technoculture” (Massanari, 2017), or at least on its way to becoming one. The growth and spread of the toxic culture of anti-feminism, Islamophobia, racism, and anti-LGBT sentiment has brought up worrying implications of the future of the subreddit, especially if the subreddit keeps its appearance as a welcoming, mainstream space for Canadians to discuss their country. Just as cloaked websites (Daniels, 2009) are a tactic to spread misinformation through a seemingly-legitimate disguise, cloaked subreddits may one day be used for the same purposes.

As the subreddit becomes more and more homogenous as a toxic technoculture, the collective identity of the members of the subreddit change as well (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Gaudette et al., 2020). Prolonged participation in RWE spaces are shown to impact people’s opinions, increasing radical beliefs and polarized opinions (Scrivens et al., 2020). The main demographic of Reddit is the same as the main demographic at risk of becoming radicalized; that is, young people (Köhler & Ebner, 2019). The push towards a collective identity that is specifically defined by RWE should be considered another tactic for radicalization. By altering the definitions of the in-group and out-group, members of the subreddit who fit the definition of the in-group become further entrenched in the collective identity, while members who do not fit the definition of the in-group are driven out, or give up on interacting in the subreddit, reducing the amount of pushback to any far-right rhetoric. While it was clear that r/Canada was not at this stage, the repeated definitions of “us” (in-group) and definitions of “them” (out-group) suggests the subreddit may be at risk of this.

## **5.2. Using SIRA as a Research Tool**

While it is important to confirm the existence of RWE in spaces like r/Canada, a discussion must also be had on the use of SIRA as a research tool. Without a qualitative

analysis of the data, it would have been impossible to confirm the existence of right-wing extremism in this subreddit, as it was found that SIRA alone is not a perfect tool.

Using SIRA reveals posts that are negative, but not necessarily always *extremist*. The algorithm relies on SentiStrength, which is not adept at recognizing sarcasm, and often labels any use of strong language or curse words as “negative”. These types of issues lead to a lack of accuracy in the final SIRA scores. For example, someone may be passionately arguing for or against a particular cause or issue, but if their tone is perceived as “negative” (by SentiStrength), they are scored higher by SIRA. This was seen frequently in this dataset, and indicates a strong need for a qualitative review of the data; if every user with a high SIRA score was deemed to be radical, this would greatly skew what the subreddit actually looks like. SIRA also relies on the researcher’s selection of keywords from the Parts-of-Speech tagger. The keyword selection is important; a completely exploratory study could use only the keywords provided by the POS tagger (see Perry & Scrivens, 2018), while another study could use entirely a list of keywords provided by previous literature on the topic (see Scrivens et al., 2020). Once again, this shows the importance of the human element; a researcher’s choice of keywords could drastically change the outcome of the study.

Algorithms are imperfect. They should not be used alone in detecting extremism—the human element is important in the analysis of the data, especially when dissenting opinions are present, like they were in this study. Sentiment analysis, SIRA, and other algorithm-based analyses may therefore function better if the researcher is already aware of the general beliefs and attitudes of the entire group being analysed, and if it is mostly homogenous. For example, Scrivens et al. (2020) chose to look at Stormfront Canada, a known white supremacist group, where it would be guaranteed that none of the posts being sampled contained any sentiment that was arguing against Stormfront’s ideology.

Despite these limitations, sentiment analysis and SIRA are still useful to exploratory researchers, especially when working with a high volume of data. By pointing to contentions topics of discussion, researchers can conduct a qualitative review of the posts with the highest SIRA scores in order to see not only what is being discussed, but how it is being discussed.

### 5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

There are a few limitations surrounding the use of Reddit as a source of data for research. Posts that have been deleted will not show the original message when Reddit data is pulled and instead appear as “[deleted],” so these posts could not be included in the analysis. Posts are typically deleted by Reddit moderators for breaking subreddit rules, so something exceptionally inflammatory or hostile is likely to have been removed by subreddit moderators.

Another issue is related to the formatting of Reddit posts. When posts are compiled by the web crawler, no differentiations are made between original responses and quotes. If a Reddit user quotes another user in order to respond to a specific statement they made, the quote is included in the user’s post with special formatting to show other Reddit users that it is a quote. The web crawler does not differentiate between quotes and original comments, so it is not immediately obvious to the researcher what is a quote and what is not. More importantly, no distinction between quotes and original comments is made at all by SentiStrength, so if the quote contains very negative language, it may be given a higher SIRA score even if the user’s actual words in their response to the quote were not negative. Future studies of Reddit communities using sentiment analysis, SIRA, or other algorithm-based tools should be aware of this.

This study offers many avenues for future directions. The SIRA algorithm offers a novel way of examining Reddit, giving researchers the ability to comb through massive amounts of data in searching for radical users and in order to highlight prolific users. In addition, the date-centric approach offers an alternative method of utilizing the SIRA algorithm. Further exploration into the presence of RWE in r/Canada should look at whether there has been an increase of extremist sentiment over time, and if so, whether that increase is tied to notable “hot button” issues as well. This study looked at r/Canada posts between 2014 and 2019, meaning it did not look at the evolution of the subreddit during the Covid-19 pandemic; therefore, future studies should either include this time period, or compare the subreddit pre- and post-pandemic.

Finally, it is important to address the need for researchers to take care of their mental health when conducting research on this topic. Qualitative analysis of right-wing

extremism involves countless hours of reading comments that are often upsetting, threatening, and bigoted. Taking breaks from this type of work is necessary, and it is important both within and outside academic to talk about the impact on mental health this type of research has. The well-being of researchers in this area, particularly those that are members of groups targeted by far-right harassment, should not be forgotten.

## **5.4. Conclusion**

We have seen how RWE can move the needle in Canadian politics, from the creation of the PPC to the growing acceptance of extremist sentiment in mainstream online spaces. This study combined Sentiment-Based Identification of Radical Authors with qualitative thematic analysis to explore the presence of right-wing extremism in one particular mainstream subreddit, r/Canada, as well as the manner in which these beliefs are spread. This study found three overarching themes: distrust of the government and “the left,” the existence of the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory in r/Canada, and the presence of overt and covert bigotry in the subreddit. These themes have implications for understanding the tactics that right-wing extremists use in order to spread far-right rhetoric in mainstream spaces. Overall, these tactics involve redefining “us” and “them” in a manner that encourage a collective identity within the subreddit and relying on “hot button issues” to present opinions as facts. Finally, it is important to be aware of the web that right-wing extremists weave their rhetoric in; to ignore the way these hostile sentiments overlap would minimize their reach and their impact.

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# Appendix

## SIRA Keywords

tax, taxes, taxation	vote, votes, voter, voters	populist, populism
politics, political	debate, debates	Nazi, Nazism
politician, politicians	candidate, candidates	swastika
party, parties	idology, ideologies	dictator, dictatorship
elect, election	agenda, agendas	misinformation
Trudeau	conspiracy, conspiracies	disinformation
Scheer	liberal, liberals, liberalism, lib	troll, trolling
Trump	conservative, conservatives, conservatism	journalist, journalism
right, right-wing	socialism, socialist	patriot, patriotism
left, left-wing	communism, communist	globalist, globalism
alt-right	fascism, fascist	antifa
alt-left	libertarian, libertarianism	anarchy, anarchist, anarchism
leftist	nationalist, nationalism	terror, terrorist, terrorism

extremist, extremism	China, Chinese	slave, slaves, slavery
pizzagate	India, Indian	north, northern
person, people, peoples	bigot, bigotry	east, eastern
race, racism, racist	religion, religious	south, southern
minority, minorities	Christ, Christian, Christianity	west, western
segregation	Jesus	diverse, diversity
ethnic, ethnicity	church, churches	passport, passports
black, blacks	Islam	genocide, genocides, genocidal
blackface	Muslim, Muslims	ICE
white, whites	burqa, burka, burqas, burkas	Visa, Visas
BLM	niqab, niqabs	human, humanity
supremacist, supremacism	hijab, hijabs, hijabi, hijabis	heritage
ghetto, ghettos	skin	tolerance
native, natives	asylum	diverse, diversity
Indigenous	colour, color, colours, colors	tradition, traditional, trad

civil, civilized, civilization	Jew, Jewish, Judaism	border, borders
neighbor, neighborhood	antisemitism, anti-Semitism, anti-Semite, antisemite	nation, nations, nationality
multicultural, multiculturalism	Holocaust	citizen, citizens, citizenship
invasion	synagogue	refugee, refugees
tourist, tourism	Sikh, Sikhism	LGBT, LGBTQ
house, housing	Turban	lesbian, lesbians, lesbianism
xenophobia, xenophobe	Atheist, Atheism	lesbophobe, lesbophobes, lesbophobia
foreign, foreigner	God, gods	gay, gays
deportation	pray, prayer	bisexual, bisexuals, bisexuality
headscarf, headscarves	cult, cults	biphobe, biphobes, biphobia
mosque, mosques	world	transgender, transgenderism, trans, transition
jihad, jihadi	culture, cultures	transphobe, transphobes, transphobia
Islamophobia	immigrant, immigrants, immigration	homo, homos, homosexual, homosexuals, homosexuality
Sharia	language, languages	homophobe, homophobes, homophobia

gender, genders	sexuality, sexualities	man, men
identity, identities	dysphoria	male
intersex	hormone, hormones	female
pride	slur, slurs	wife, wives
AIDS	masculine, masculinity	husband
HIV	feminine, femininity	mother, mothers
pronoun, pronouns	feminism, feminist, femininists	father, fathers
orientation, orientations	snowflake, snowflakes	maternity
stereotype, stereotypes, stereotypical	trigger, triggered	paternity
biology, biological	sexist, sexism	parent, parents
ally, allies	misogynist, misogyny	boyfriend, boyfriends
bathroom, bathrooms	pregnant, pregnancy	girlfriend, girlfriends
straight, straights	abort, abortion, abortions	boy, boys
hetero, heteros, heterosexual, heterosexuals, heterosexuality	woman, women	girl, girls

child, children	environment, environmental, environmentalism	teacher, teachers
baby, babies	climate, climates	professor, professors
fetus, fetuses	science, scientists	money
miscarriage, miscarriages	nature, natural	job, jobs
rape, rapes, rapist	vegan, vegans, veganism	work, worker
genital, genitals	vegetarian, vegetarians, vegetarianism	workplace
marriage, marriages	planet	workforce
wedding, weddings	earth	business, businesses
divorce, divorces	pollution, pollutant, pollutants	income, incomes
relationship, relationships	vaccine, vaccines	economy
pro-life	ocean, oceans	price, prices
pro-choice	carbon	industry, industries
anti-choice	school, schools	cost, costs
pro-abortion	university, universities	wage, wages
anti-abortion	college, colleges	debt, debts

property, properties	inflation	Internet
infrastructure, infrastructures	salary, salaries	technology
dollar, dollars	mortgage, mortgages	privilege
labour, labor, labourer, laborer	unemployment	Canada, Canadian
wealth	recession, recessions	America, American
profit, profits	capitalism	spectrum
bank, banks	corporation, corporations	autism, autistic
employer, employers	strike, strikes	retard, retarded
employee, employees	homeless, homelessness	incel, incels
manager, managers	problem, problems	
management	fact, facts	
employment	argument, arguments	
poverty	opinion, opinions	
career, careers	history, histories	