

**From Empty to Angry:  
Extremism, Modernity, and the Search for Identity**

**by  
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## Abstract

An increase in the amount of high-profile incidents and attacks in the West perpetrated by individuals subscribing to a variety of extremist ideologies over the past decade has led to an influx of academic research concerned with uncovering how and why it is that individuals become radicalized toward ideologically-motivated extremist violence. While such research has examined a diverse range of social, demographic, and psychological variables and their potential link/correlation to the radicalization process, there has yet to emerge an accurate or reliable 'profile' with respect to who is more or less likely to become radicalized or join extremist/terrorist movements. The primary aim of this dissertation is to present a novel theoretical approach which centers the concept of individual identity as the fundamental factor which drives individuals in the West toward involvement with extremist movements. This theory of identity, which presupposes that macro-level structural factors fundamentally dictate how individuals experience and internalize identity on a micro-level, is outlined by tracing how the concept of 'identity' has historically evolved in 'Western' culture up to its current iteration in modern, hyper-connected, late-capitalist society. Once outlined, this theory of identity is empirically applied to the digital media content of two extremist movements via a mixed-method approach that utilizes topic modelling, sentiment analysis, and thematic/discourse analysis. More specifically, the content of the so-called Islamic State (including videos, magazines, and Twitter posts) and the user-generated comments of the notorious far-right online community *r/The\_Donald* are examined through this theoretical lens and analyzed with this mixed-method approach. Results indicate that, wittingly or not, modern extremist movements routinely incorporate questions of identity into both their propaganda and general discussions in a manner that provides simplistic solutions and answers to the complex problems of identity and self that are created and amplified within modern Western culture. As such, this dissertation argues that the attraction of extremist ideology and the potential for extremist violence is, at current, an inevitable byproduct of modern macro-level structural and economic conditions.

**Keywords:** extremism; identity theory; ideology; propaganda; social media

## **Dedication**

For ST

It is a bright, bright, bright world.

Erstwhile...

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

On the afternoon of March 15, 2019 mass shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand resulted in the deaths of 51 people and the injury of several dozen more. While the brutality and scope of these attacks, unprecedented and unparalleled as they were in the modern history of New Zealand, resulted in widespread international attention, further attention was given to the lone perpetrator of this massacre and to the ideological worldview to which he subscribed. The perpetrator of the attack, Brenton Tarrant, specifically chose two Christchurch mosques as the targets of his attack, with the intention of harming as many Muslims as possible. Within the manifesto that he posted online prior to the attacks, Tarrant routinely depicted and described Muslims living in Western countries ('Western' countries being used synonymous with 'White majority' countries in this instance) as 'invaders' or 'invading forces' that were seeking, actively and passively, and with the help of other clandestine organizations and interest groups, to supplant and ultimately replace the White majority populations of these countries (Önnerfors, 2019).

This example, heinous and globally recognized as it was, is only one of a consistently expanding list of attacks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that have been committed by individuals who subscribe to a variety of extremist ideologies. From the far-right/White nationalist ideology that inspired Tarrant (and the perpetrators of similar attacks such as Anders Breivik), the globally dispersed attacks committed by members and sympathizers of the so-called Islamic State, to the attacks perpetrated by individuals inspired by a variety of other ideological backgrounds, a rise in extremist violence and terrorism in the West has become an undeniable reality of the modern age (Freilich et al., 2018). Extremist movements and organizations in the West have had their influence and visibility bolstered through both the embracement of emergent and ubiquitous communicative technologies such as the Internet, and through increased representation within the legitimate sphere of electoral politics (Allen, 2014; Frojo, 2018).

This rising wave of violent extremism has not eluded Canada. The country has seen several recent attacks on its soil including the Ottawa shooting in 2014 (Islamist-inspired), the 2017 shooting at a mosque in Quebec City (anti-Muslim inspired), and the 2018 van attack in Toronto (believed to be inspired by gender-based extremism). In

addition, it has been estimated that more than 150 Canadians have left the nation to fight for the Islamic State (Ahmed, 2016). Meanwhile, far-right and White nationalist gangs and organizations continue to form, recruit, network, and operate across the country (Perry & Scrivens, 2016; Perry & Scrivens, 2018), presenting a threat clear enough that the Canadian government has, for the first time, added far-right extremist groups to their list of officially-designated terrorist organizations (Bell, 2019). While the levels of extremist violence seen within Canada have been relatively low when compared to other Western nations, the potential threat of violent extremism is nevertheless one that Canada should not ignore.

While terrorism and extremist violence is hardly a phenomenon that is unique to the modern age – such violence has, under various definitions and incarnations, largely remained a historical constant – what is potentially unique about the extremism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not only the ways in which extremist ideology is mediated, organized, inspired, networked, and transmitted through new communicative technologies, but also the ways in which the structural, cultural, and economic conditions of modern Western society, in its current hyper-connected, globalized, and late-capitalist form, may actually have a direct hand in shaping and inspiring the rise of extremist violence.

While each of these aspects will be examined within this dissertation, it is the latter that will act as the primary assumption which guides both the theoretical and empirical arguments of the following chapters. More specifically, the primary aim of this dissertation is to present a new theoretical approach for understanding contemporary extremism in the West – one that critically examines the role of macro-level structural factors on the radicalization process, and one that asserts that the allure of extremism may be largely attributable to the conditions such factors impose on individuals (younger individuals especially) living in modern Western societies. However, before this proposed theoretical approach can be explored further, it is important to provide definitional context for certain terms that will be frequently used throughout this dissertation.

## **1.1. Radicalization and Extremism – Defining Terms**

Like terrorism itself, the phenomenon of radicalization is one that is often nebulously defined (Hoskins & O’Laughlin, 2009; Neumann, 2013; Saleem & Tahir,

2014; Sedgwick, 2010). Similarly, there is no uniform consensus on what exactly constitutes extremist thought or extremist behavior (Borum, 2011). No matter how they are specifically worded, most definitions of radicalization and extremism seem to share the idea that the processes involve the gradual adoption of beliefs and attitudes that are in opposition to the mainstream status quo and dominant sociopolitical discourses (Goerzig & Al-Hashimi, 2015; Arshad-Ayaz & Naseem, 2017). For example, Maskaliūnaitė (2015) has defined radicalization as a, “process by which a person adopts belief systems which justify the use of violence to effect social change” (p. 14), however this definition seems to assume the use of violence as a predetermined end of the radicalization process, which is not always (or even most commonly) the case. For the sake of this dissertation, a more fitting definition of radicalization comes from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), who define radicalization as the process by which individuals, “are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views” (RCMP, 2009, p. 1).

However, in the same document the RCMP reminds us that radical beliefs and extremist attitudes are not necessarily illegal, nor are they inherently negative, citing historical figures such as Martin Luther King and Gandhi as figures who, while considered radical during their times, are now viewed favorably by history. It is not altogether uncommon for several individuals to, at some point in their life, hold views or opinions that may be considered extreme. In a majority of these cases, violence or any other problematic manifestations of these beliefs will not occur (Lindekilde, 2012; Bakker, 2015). Taken by itself then, adherence to radical ideas is not necessarily something that is innately worthy of condemnation (van San et al., 2013). Opposition to dominant sociopolitical ideology is generally not a problem – indeed it is the right of citizens in a democratic society to hold these beliefs – it is when these beliefs take on more nefarious forms that it becomes a serious problem in need of solving. Social and legal efforts to counter violent extremism must then strike a balance between deterring and preventing radicalized activity, while at the same time taking care not to infringe on individual rights or to discourage the free flow of ideas by imposing undue censorship.

Within this dissertation, the word ‘extremism’ will typically be used in favor of the word ‘terrorism’, which is a conscious decision given the different nature of these two terms. Whereas these terms might appear interchangeable, there are in fact significant

differences between them that are worth briefly acknowledging. In his 2018 book *Extremism* J. M. Berger clarifies that although the two concepts are often linked, “terrorism is a tactic, whereas extremism is a belief system” (p. 30). Therefore, one can be an extremist, and *not* a terrorist (and although less common, the inverse may also be true). Because this dissertation is primarily focused on the structural, macro-level conditions that inspire individuals to embrace extremist ideologies, ‘extremism’ (and not necessarily terrorist action) will be the favored of the two terms. Similarly, groups, organizations, and movements that are guided by extremist ideologies will typically be referred to as ‘extremist’ rather than ‘terrorist’ as it represents a more accurate and encompassing portrayal of the various groups that will be discussed. For example, while few would refute the claim that the so-called Islamic State is a terrorist organization, this label becomes more problematic when referring to certain groups/movements that, while extreme in their beliefs and attitudes, would not necessarily fit the definition of a ‘terrorist’ organization (the Alt-Right, for example). To summarize, this dissertation is written under the assumption that the adoption of extremism is a prerequisite for both terrorism and ideologically inspired violence, and as such, extremism will be the phenomenon that will be more closely examined.

It is also worth addressing that, particularly in a post 9/11 environment, the word ‘extremism’ has, for many, an immediate connotation with Islamist-inspired violence, which has led to a stigmatization of Muslim populations (Monaghan, 2014) and the erroneous notion that extremist violence is something that is exclusively perpetuated by radical Islamists. However, recent examples of extremist violence in the West highlight the multifaceted nature of extremism in addition to the diversity of the extremist ideologies that have influenced perpetrators of extremist violence. While Islamist-inspired acts of violence have and continue to occur in the West (the 2016 nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida and the 2016 truck attack in Nice, France to name just two recent examples), the information regarding the ideological motivations of various recent attackers reveals that there are a number of ideologies, oftentimes intersecting, that can inspire violence. For example, within the last several years alone North America has seen violent attacks perpetrated by individuals inspired by a diversity of ideologies including; anti-abortion (the 2015 shooting of an abortion clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado), anti-Islam (the 2017 mosque shooting in Quebec City, Canada), gender-based/anti-female (the 2014 Isla Vista, California killings, and possibly the 2018 van

attack in Toronto, Canada), white supremacy (the 2015 Charleston, South Carolina church shooting, and the 2017 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia which caused the death of one woman), and anti-immigration (the 2019 El Paso, Texas shooting). With this in mind, when the word 'extremism' is used in this dissertation, it does not refer to one specific ideology, but rather, to any ideology that potentially supports or inspires extremist ideals or behaviors.

## **1.2. CVE and Who Becomes Radicalized**

In the aftermath of several high-profile terrorist attacks of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century such as the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the 7/7 bombings in the United Kingdom, the field of study and policy known as 'countering violent extremism' (CVE) underwent a period of rapid and substantial growth as academics, governments, counter-terrorism personnel, journalists, and the general public expressed a strong desire to 'make sense' of these attacks and implement methods for preventing them from happening in the future (Monaghan, 2014). While many national governments began steadily allocating more resources and personnel to CVE efforts (in addition to a general and occasionally drastic increase in national security policies, airport security, and civilian surveillance), the rapid rise of the so-called Islamic State in the early 2010s, along with their displays of brutality and effectiveness in recruiting foreign fighters from around the globe, brought with it another surge of interest in CVE policy and practice within both academia and government. This interest in CVE has extended to the present day, and has, for the most part, begun to shift away from the initial focus on Islamist-inspired extremism to adopt a more diverse view of extremism which, following several significant events, now tends to incorporate far-right extremism and gender-based extremism.

Whether it is approached from an academic, law-enforcement, governmental, or public safety perspective, the underlying questions driving CVE study and policy are essentially the same – who is at risk of becoming radicalized, how are they radicalized, and what can be done to prevent this? To this end, a panoply of studies and research have been conducted in an attempt to address these questions. Such research has incorporated case studies, theoretical arguments, and a large selection of quantitative and qualitative methods in order to address the fundamental question of who becomes radicalized and why (Githens-Mazer, 2012).

To determine if any demographic commonalities exist between those who may be prone to radicalization, or if there is a certain demographic 'profile' that radicalized individuals may share, several demographic variables have had their potential predictive power empirically tested. For instance, level of income has been tested, generally under the assumption that those who are prone to radicalization will likely come from a position of relative impoverishment, and will thus have, in an economic sense, 'less to lose' (and potentially more to gain) by becoming involved with an extremist organization. However, income level has not been shown to be an effective predictor of extremist involvement, as radicalized individuals have been known to come from a diverse range of economic backgrounds that range from poverty to significant levels of wealth and privilege and everywhere between (RCMP, 2009; Venhaus, 2010).

Age is another such variable that has been tested, and the correlation between age and radicalization tends to be slightly stronger than that of other variables, and arguably one of the best 'predictors' of radicalization (to the extent that such a thing exists). That is, those more susceptible to radicalization tend to be younger in age, and as a result, extremist propaganda and outreach tends to be tailored more directly to teenagers and young adults, although it is worth mentioning that there are certainly exceptions to this rule, and by no means is radicalization and/or the committing of extremist violence something that is exclusive to young people (Davies, et al., 2015; Guadagno et al., 2010; Huey, 2015; Silke, 2008).

Gender is another demographic variable that has been shown to be at least somewhat correlated with radicalization. Specifically, most recruits to extremist organizations have been male (Christmann, 2012; Silke, 2008) and it has been suggested that young men, for a variety of reasons, are more prone to radicalization than females. For instance, Fiske (2013) suggests that extremist movements offer a source and outlet for power, agency, aggression, and control, all of which, whether due to factors of biology or socialization, are assumed to be particularly attractive to males. However, while apparently a rarer occurrence, this does not mean that females do not become radicalized or do not join extremist groups. Generally speaking, while men are (by a substantial margin) statistically more likely to engage in direct acts of extremist violence, women are by no means immune to becoming radicalized, and those who are will often still join extremist movements to fulfill a variety of, typically less violent, roles

for these movements (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2018; Huey & Witmer, 2016; Musial, 2017).

Attempts have also been made to link psychological factors to the radicalization process, often under the assumption that those who would be willing or excited to engage with extremist movements or to commit extremist violence are likely to have mental or psychological 'abnormalities' that predispose them toward such behavior. However, empirical research and evidence generally refutes this assumption, and there is a large collection of studies that have reached the same general conclusion – that terrorists and/or radicalized individuals are typically *not* psychologically troubled or mentally unwell, and are in fact rational actors who understand their decisions and their potential consequences (Cottee & Hayward, 2011; Goerzig & Al-Hashimi, 2015; Maskaliūnaitė, 2015; Schuurman & Horgan, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2009; Silke, 2008; Spaaij, 2012; Venhaus, 2010).

Several other potential factors have also been suggested as key radicalizing agents ranging from demographic imbalances (Bakker & Kessels, 2012), social and political stigmatization (Bakker, 2015; Postel, 2013) and disenfranchisement (Brown & Saeed, 2015), religious and racial discrimination and persecution (Goerzig & Al-Hashimi, 2015; Greenberg, 2016; McCoy & Knight, 2015; Shirazi, 2017), social alienation (Bowman-Grieve, 2013; Spaaij, 2012; van San et al., 2013), shame (Kriner, 2018), a desire for social connection (Borum, 2011; Guadagno et al., 2010), spiritual and existential unfulfillment (Cottee & Hayward, 2011; Gates & Podder, 2015; Neumann, 2008), the lure of excitement (Baines et al., 2010; Huey, 2015; Silke, 2008) and various other sociological, demographic, and economic factors at both the micro and macro levels. These factors, many of which may indeed play a strong role in the radicalization process, are nevertheless too individual and context specific to provide any sort of generalizable radicalization profile.

The results of these efforts to empirically test the predictive power of various demographic, social, and psychological variables on the radicalization process have, in short, failed to provide a valid or consistently reliable 'profile' of who is most likely to become radicalized. Aside from the variables of age and gender (those who are radicalized tend to be younger and tend to be male, though not exclusively), there is simply too much variation in the backgrounds of radicalized individuals to draw any

accurate conclusions or predictions about who is most prone to radicalization, a realization that has lately been accepted by many within the field of CVE studies (see Bakker, 2015; Cohen, 2016; Horgan, 2014; Selim, 2016). What this dissertation will argue, however, is that while all of these aforementioned variables may, depending on the individual, have some role to play in the radicalization process, there may in fact be a variable that is universally shared by both the radicalized and non-radicalized alike, and one that is integral to the 'success' and rise of modern extremism in the West – individual identity.

### **1.3. Research Aim – Identity and Extremism**

In a 2007 article professor Bill Durodié wrote:

Hence, a lazy empirical approach has been employed to identify the so-called 'risk factors' that may lead individuals to becoming 'radicalized'. This approach assumes a conclusion and then goes in search of the evidence to corroborate it; it is profoundly unscientific. Above all, it ignores the dominant social context within which most such individuals find themselves - that is, advanced Western societies. (p. 432)

While his assessment of the various empirical approaches used for understanding the risk factors of radicalization as 'lazy' may be somewhat harsh, the essence of this statement is worthy of further consideration, particularly his conclusion that most attempts at empirically understanding the radicalization process have been largely negligent of the structural and cultural conditions in which they are conducted. The central thesis of this dissertation expands on this idea, and argues that when addressing the questions of how and why radicalization occurs in the West, in addition to recognizing the litmus of measurable variables that have been previously tested, the structural, cultural, and economic conditions of modern Western society, and more specifically how such conditions have led to a breakdown and subsequent rebuilding of the concept of individual identity, must also be acknowledged.

The concept of identity and its potential link to the radicalization process has not been entirely ignored – there are several scholars within the field who argue that questions of identity may in fact be a central component of the radicalization puzzle (Berger, 2017; Dawson & Amarasingam, 2017; Sajoo, 2016) – but it nevertheless

remains an underexamined, and often misunderstood component of the radicalization process. Such examinations tend to conclude with relatively simplistic or reductive links to identity (Andre, 2015), often suggesting that those who become radicalized are simply 'searching for an identity', and while this claim may have some merit, it fails to acknowledge the conditional reasons as to *why* 'identity' is something that needs to be 'searched for' or 'reclaimed' or 'asserted' in the first place. The primary aim of this dissertation, then, is to present a theoretical approach (and empirical evidence) for understanding the lure of radicalization and extremist ideology in contemporary Western society which emphasizes and foregrounds questions of identity as the singularly most important piece of the radicalization puzzle.

By extension, this dissertation will also argue that because the processes of radicalization in the West are inspired by structural and conditional factors that are universally shared between the radicalized, this is a theoretical approach that may be applied to all radicalized individuals, regardless of the specific ideology that they subscribe to. That is, individuals who become radicalized are more similar than they are different, even if they believe in ideologies that may appear entirely opposite or incongruous. This is not to say that there is not a large degree of demographic and social variation between the radicalized – certainly there is – only that the structural conditions that inspire radicalization are equally shared between them.

Put succinctly, the thesis of this dissertation may be understood as thus – the contemporary rise of extremist ideology and extremist-inspired violence in Western society may be primarily attributable to the questions of, changing nature of, and confusion/anxiety about individual identity that have been created under the structural, economic, and cultural circumstances of late-capitalist modernity. In other words, the decision to engage with or adopt extremist ideology is not necessarily one that is dependent on individual agency, but rather it may be understood as the *inevitable* result of the macro-level conditions of modern society. This thesis, the theoretical approach that guides it, and a detailed definition of what 'identity' refers to will be elaborated upon in later chapters.

## 1.4. Potential Contributions and Significance

Despite the surge in academic focus since 9/11, the ‘question’ of radicalization is still one that remains essentially unanswered, and this dissertation does not erroneously or naively assume that it can ‘solve’ the problem of radicalization outright. What will be offered, however, is a new theoretical lens for understanding modern extremism which incorporates the relatively understudied component of identity, in addition to providing an approach that examines contemporary radicalization as something specific to and dependent on the conditions of Western modernity – a critical approach that has rarely been examined in detail. This critical theoretical approach, which builds upon existing radicalization and social theory literature (and for which the results of the two empirical analyses will provide additional support), argues that the primary cause of radicalization in the West is not any single social or psychological factor (or combination thereof) as has often been assumed, rather, the primary factor encouraging radicalization is the deeply ingrained ideology of modern society itself, one that has been magnified to troubling degrees via the recent increase in the ubiquity and importance of new communicative technologies such as the Internet and social media. This theoretical hypothesis, perhaps controversially, will assert that radicalization toward extremism in the West is, therefore, something that is an inevitable result of modern Western society’s longstanding philosophical emphasis on individuality and individual liberty. This theoretical paradigm will, therefore, refute a majority of existing radicalization theory and literature – a large portion of which assumes that radicalization is an individual choice influenced by individual variables – in order to present a model which presupposes that such variables have less explanatory power than the latent ideology of modern Western culture itself.

Ultimately, the primary aim of this dissertation is to provide a new theoretical framework – supported by empirical evidence – which emphasizes and explores the typically under-incorporated notion of ‘Western’ values, the way such values have been historically and structurally dictated, the ways in which modern technological conditions amplify and alter these values, and most importantly, the potential role such things may play within the larger radicalization process. It will not be erroneously assumed that this new model of understanding radicalization will be able to ‘fix’ the problem, though it may

provide new insights moving forward on how to more effectively address and understand it moving forward.

In addition, the two chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) dedicated to in-depth empirical analysis of extremist and extremist-adjacent content may provide further insights into the communications, propaganda, media, and ideology of the so-called Islamic State and the modern far-right respectively. Such examinations, conducted here with a mixed-message approach, serve the important function of revealing the nature of extremist content, the stated and latent messages found within, and how these messages serve to create, perpetuate, and justify extremist, and potentially violent, ideology. The data, methods, and findings of these studies are based primarily on the results of the author's doctoral research, amended here to incorporate more directly the proposed identity-based theoretical approach (Macnair, 2018; Macnair & Frank 2017; Macnair & Frank, 2018a; Macnair & Frank, 2018b; Macnair & Frank, 2020).

## **1.5. Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation is divided into six chapters, including the present introductory chapter. In the following chapter (Chapter 2) a review of the relevant literature related to the connections between extremism, radicalization, and the Internet will be presented, in addition to a more thorough overview of the various theories of radicalization that have been presented within the field of CVE/radicalization studies. This chapter also compiles and summarizes literature relevant to understanding how group dynamics and group identity are central to extremist ideology, which will act as the foundation for the theory of identity that will be explored in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive definition and overview of how 'identity' as a sociological and philosophical concept has evolved and changed over time within Western society, and how the current globalized, hyper-connected, late-capitalist structural conditions of the modern world have created historically unique challenges related to identity – challenges which in turn push individuals toward extremist ideology as a means of reconciliation. This chapter also outlines the theory of identity that will subsequently guide the rest of the dissertation. Specifically, this chapter will argue that modern advancements in technology and communications, when combined with Western culture's emphasis on individuality and the structural and economic conditions

of late capitalism, have created large amounts of doubt, fear, anxiety, and confusion related to self-identity, which in turn has led to an increase in the appealability of extremist ideology as a means of reconciling these feelings.

Chapter 4 presents an empirical, mixed-method examination of the Western-focused media and propaganda campaigns of the so-called Islamic State. The English-language videos, magazines, and Twitter content of the Islamic State are examined via the methods of sentiment analysis and thematic analysis in order to uncover the topical, linguistic, thematic, and narrative trends present within Islamic State media, and how these trends, when distilled to their essence, are all dependent on exposing, exacerbating, and taking advantage of the questions and concerns related to identity outlined in Chapter 3. The results of this empirical examination reveal that the narratives of Western-focused Islamic State media, whether intentional or not, are based primarily on providing relatively simplistic solutions to the complex problems of identity that the target audiences are expected to be experiencing.

Within Chapter 5 a similar empirical, mixed-method examination is conducted, this time on the user-generated comments of the popular and controversial subreddit *r/The\_Donald*<sup>1</sup> – an online forum which, prior to its banning in June of 2020, was dedicated to expressing support for American President Donald Trump. While such a space may not, based on this description, seem to have any connection to ‘extremism’ or extremist content, since its creation *r/The\_Donald* has gained a notorious reputation for being a hub for far-right, Alt-Right, White nationalist, and White supremacist ideology, where inclusion and tolerance of discriminatory and hateful content, and occasionally calls for violence abound.<sup>2</sup> This convergence of various far-right ideologies, combined with its scope and large volume of user-generated content, make *r/The\_Donald* an ideal space to empirically examine the dominant themes, narratives, and topical focus of the modern far-right in the West. While such spaces may, for some, act as potential gateways to more hardline extremist ideology, they also reveal how extremist ideology (far-right ideology in this case) comes to be introduced, developed, and reinforced, paving the way for potential radicalization in the process, and as such, this is a space that may reveal much about how extremist ideology is embraced. Similar to Chapter 4,

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<sup>1</sup> Originally located at [https://www.reddit.com/r/The\\_Donald/](https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/), the community has moved off Reddit and can now be found at <https://thedonald.win/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/r/RightAgainstTrump/wiki/violence>

the results of this empirical examination will reveal that the dominant topical and narrative focuses of r/The\_Donald may be best understood through the lens of modern identity.

Finally, Chapter 6 presents a summarized overview of the relationship between extremism, identity, and modernity, while also providing some predictions of things to come. In addition, the potential limitations of the dissertations are described, while some potential areas/topics for future research and exploration are also recognized.

## Chapter 2. Review of Relevant Literature

On the evening of January 29th, 2017, a young man named Alexandre Bissonnette opened fire inside a Quebec City mosque, killing six worshipping Muslims and injuring many others. When questioned by the authorities Bissonnette revealed that his primary motivation for targeting the mosque was to pre-emptively protect his family from a Muslim-perpetrated terrorist attack that he believed would soon occur. As with all recent mass-shootings and extremist attacks in North America, the life and background of the perpetrator were closely scrutinized, analyzed, and examined in order to determine what factors may have contributed to his actions. An investigation into Bissonnette's background and activities prior to this incident revealed that he was active in a number of far-right online communities and had routinely expressed anti-immigration and anti-Islamic beliefs within these communities and on publicly visible online spaces such as Facebook. While a myriad of psychosocial factors undoubtedly played a role in his eventual decision to attack a mosque, much attention was paid to Bissonnette's troubling online habits and on the possibility that his radicalization toward violence occurred primarily through his online activities and through constant exposure to online influences.

Bissonnette's online activity does not make him unique among those who have become radicalized toward extremist and occasionally violent ideologies. Virtually all recent cases of radicalization in the West, regardless of the guiding ideology, have involved individuals with some degree of online activity/exposure. Of course, use of the Internet is not something that is specific to extremists – it is something that is becoming increasingly ubiquitous for the general population – the issue for those concerned with understanding the radicalization process is determining what role the Internet and other online forms of communication actually have in shaping or inspiring an individual's trajectory toward extremism. Unlike other sociodemographic variables (education, age, gender, etc.), it is difficult to empirically measure the effect of the Internet and its potential correlation with radicalization. Because of this, while most would agree that it plays some role, there is not yet a consensus in the academic community with regard to how important the Internet actually is in the radicalization process. Is the Internet just one smaller piece of the larger radicalization puzzle, or is it perhaps the most important factor, capable of facilitating and encouraging radicalization in unprecedented ways?

In this chapter, previous academic literature concerned with the role of the Internet in the radicalization process will be compiled and briefly summarized. In addition, the results of literature concerned with the radicalization process more generally, and the various theoretical approaches that have been employed to understand it, will also be presented.

## 2.1. Extremism and the Internet

In 2002 journalist John Stanton wrote:

I believe that the continued deconstruction of 20th-century modes of thought and institutions, the evisceration of government's scope of power and legitimacy, the redefining of citizenship, and the empowerment relationship of the Internet make fertile ground for the terrorist opportunity. (p. 1018)

In their 2018 book *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*, Singer and Brooking present a more contemporary version of this argument that has existed since (at least) the early 2000s – that the Internet, social media, and emergent communicative technologies collectively represent a new digital 'battlefield' that is of equal, or perhaps greater, importance to conventional offline battlefields (Conway, 2006). This is an argument that presupposes, correctly, that any movement, group, nation, or organization that is involved in, or anticipating to be involved in, any degree of violent or ideological conflict will invariably end up relying quite heavily on these emergent communicative mediums in order to gain any advantages possible on both the 'digital' battlefield and the 'real' one. As a result, virtually all contemporary terrorist and extremist organizations of note have found the Internet to be a powerful and game-changing tool, and have utilized online spaces and new mediums of connectivity and communication in a way that has allowed them to amplify their scope, reach, and influence to a degree that is historically unique (Caldwell, 2008; Singh & Krupaker, 2014).

The specific ways in which terrorist and extremist movements use and benefit from the Internet have been deeply explored from a variety of academic, legal, social, and political perspectives. Though a thoroughly detailed account of the relationship between extremist movements and the Internet is beyond the scope of this dissertation, such movements have been known to use the Internet as a means of communication (Heickerö, 2014), networking (Neumann, 2013a), recruitment (Davies et al., 2015; Richards, 2014), planning/coordination (Cassim, 2012), administering propaganda

(Brandon, 2008), file sharing (Stenersen, 2008), indoctrination (Klausen, 2015), psychological warfare (Erez et al., 2011), publicity (Lachow & Richardson, 2007), soliciting sympathizers (Derrick et al., 2016), data mining/gathering (Weimann, 2004), news sharing (Crilley, 2001), and fundraising (Weimann, 2010). For terrorist organizations, the appeal of the Internet and new communicative technologies is partially in the affordability (Argomaniz, 2015), potential scope (Lieber & Reiley, 2016), anonymity (Awan, 2007), and social reach (Conway & McInerney, 2008) that such mediums offer, but also, and perhaps most importantly, in the levels of independence that these technologies create for extremist groups.

Historically, extremist organizations were forced to maintain a certain degree of reliance on 'traditional' forms of media to bring attention to their cause and to provide them with the publicity, exposure, and levels of public awareness/fear that their movements required to be successful, but with the advent and rapid spread of the Internet, social media, and other communicative platforms, modern extremist movements have largely freed themselves from this reliance on conventional media, and may now directly engage with large audiences, sympathizers, and potential recruits from around the globe (Bowman-Grieve, 2013; Qin et al., 2007). Adding to this is the fact that, while perhaps starting to change in some respects, the Internet has generally existed as a frontier that is largely unmoderated and uncensored, with minimal corporate/government intervention when it comes to approving, penalizing, or removing certain content (Ben-David, 2016; Jakubowicz, 2017). Because of these lax conditions, and an overall lack of any sort of universal content standards, digital spaces wherein like-minded extremists can openly congregate and share their beliefs have been allowed to flourish often with little or no restrictions (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017).

Terrorist and extremist organizations have taken advantage of these conditions and the general 'lawless' nature of the online world, often in combination with their own technical prowess, in order to anchor and spread their influence and reach across the digital landscape. Extremist movements from a variety of ideological backgrounds have been quick to take advantage of the visibility and reach that emergent social media platforms and online spaces offered. While many of their illicit activities (such as illegal fundraising) occurred in the comparatively hidden side of the online world, often referred to as the 'Deep' or 'Dark' Web (Qin et al., 2007), modern extremist movements have also relied on more mainstream online spaces to expand their reach. Twitter, for

example, has been widely used by groups such as the so-called Islamic State (Berger, 2016a) and far-right movements such as the Alt-Right (Crosset & Tanner, 2019). Similarly, Reddit was a main hub of activity and organization for the far-right, the Alt-Right, and gender-based extremist movements (Ging, 2017; Mittos et al., 2019). Extremist content and users have been found on virtually all other mainstream social media platforms as well including both Facebook (Neumann, 2013a) and YouTube (Conway & McInerney, 2008).

On these highly public and visible spaces, users affiliated with extremist movements would often attempt to introduce their talking points and ideology in a more subdued or cloaked manner, with the intention of bringing awareness to their cause to a larger and potentially susceptible audience (Perry & Scrivens, 2018). For instance, on Reddit the 'GamerGate' movement, on the surface, presented itself as a collection of concerned consumers dedicated to upholding ethics in videogame journalism, but in actuality served as a means of presenting far-right conspiracies and talking points about the supposed influence of Jewish elites under the more inconspicuous guise of videogame discussion (Mortensen, 2016). This proved to be an effective strategy for exposing young, generally apolitical men (convinced now that one of their preferred pastimes was under attack) to various far-right talking points and ideologies (Braithwaite, 2016).

More recently, as the dominant social media platforms have begun to impose stricter guidelines, more clearly defined content policies, and begun to crack down on extremist content, extremist movements (particularly those of the far-right) have found homes in niche, though openly accessible, online spaces such as 4chan's Politically Incorrect board (/pol/), and the clones of popular social media websites such as Gab (a Twitter clone) and Voat (a Reddit clone), where there are little-to-no restrictions or regulations in place with regard to content censorship (Finkelstein et al., 2018).

One of the most distinctively human traits is the persistent attempt to use language to influence the course of events and the behavior of others. Propaganda may be understood as media or discursive materials that systematically attempt at shaping and manipulating perceptions and directing behavior to achieve a desired response. More succinctly, it is simply discourse in the service of ideology (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1986). Though propaganda and other techniques of psychological manipulation have

been central to warfare for a long time, in the multimedia-driven landscape of the 21st century it has been suggested that 'the message' is now more important than ever (Richards, 2014). Particularly when their physical numbers or influence is small, the capability for extremist movements to manipulate social media algorithms has become a key tactic, and it is now possible for a small amount of very active and incessant users to bolster the visibility and accessibility of their movement well beyond their immediate reach (Artrip & Debrix, 2018).

Modern extremist movements have a long history of exploiting loopholes, implementing clever workarounds, and expressing a generally heightened awareness as to how to take advantage and 'game' social media and online spaces to serve their interests. The undeniable importance of the 'digital battlefield' (and finding new and creative ways in which to exploit it) is likely one of the primary reasons why many extremist groups such as the Islamic State have attempted to specifically recruit and/or train members who have technical expertise or backgrounds in computer science/programming (Heickerö, 2014; Singh & Krupaker, 2014). The technical sophistication of many in the modern far-right, for instance, allowed them to create a number of websites/forums in the earlier days of the Internet, some of which are still online and active to this day, including the White nationalist forum Stormfront, which launched in 1996 (Conway et al., 2019). Their early adoption of the Internet and other communicative technologies gave far-right movements a significant 'head-start' in forming their online base and methods of communication and connection, including some of the earliest examples of MP3 file-sharing, where White power music was shared among the movement (Back, 2002; Holt & Bolden, 2014). More recently, Islamic State members have proven to be adept at 'gaming' the Twitter algorithm, engaging in practices such as 'hashtag hijacking' in order to infiltrate conversations and spread their propaganda (Veilleux-Lepage, 2016). Similarly, the Alt-Right has discovered effective ways of taking advantage of social media algorithms in order to increase the visibility of their content and reach online users who would not likely have had any direct exposure to the movement or its ideology (Daniels, 2018).

There is no question that the Internet, social media, and recent advancements in communicative technologies have been beneficial, in a variety of ways, for modern terrorist and extremist organizations. The scope, reach, and visibility of these movements have been greatly amplified by the platforms and possibilities that the online

world provides. But does this increase in visibility translate to more 'success' for these organizations, and how effective have their online propaganda and communication campaigns truly been in terms of inspiring or radicalizing those who have been exposed to them?

## **2.2. Radicalization and the Internet**

During the peak of the Islamic State's foreign fighter influx (2013-2016), there was something of a minor moral panic in the West expressed by those who feared that the IS was using the Internet to groom, radicalize, and eventually recruit young and impressionable Westerners to their cause. This sparked a mainstream discussion about what role the Internet had in the radicalization process, and whether it was indeed possible for individuals to 'self-radicalize' through online exposure to extremist content. Despite the fears of self-radicalization (sensationalized as they often were by the mainstream media), there is a consensus among most scholars and counter-extremist personnel that such self-radicalization through strictly online means is an extremely rare, if not an entirely unheard of, phenomenon. The simplistic depiction of self-radicalization that was often expressed during the Islamic State's rise to power is largely an ahistorical one that is negligent of the myriad of complicated and interconnected factors that make up an individual's radicalization trajectory (Archetti, 2015). Radicalization is a complex puzzle with many pieces, and although many may engage with and may be influenced by the media campaigns of extremists, without the other pieces in place (such as the influence or tutorship of other individuals in the offline world), that is likely as far as many of them will ever go (Ducol, 2015; Spaaij, 2012). Many radicalization scholars are in agreement that, taken by itself, exposure to online extremist content or ideology, no matter how effectively it is produced or delivered, will not be enough to steer an individual towards full-on radicalization (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010; Erez et al., 2011; Gates & Podder, 2015; Githens-Mazer & Lambert, 2010; Johnson, 2018; Nash & Bouchard, 2015; Neumann, 2008; Neumann, 2013a; Neumann, 2013b; Stevens & Neumann, 2009).

Simply put, while the Internet no doubt played a strong role in the radicalization process of many, it is by no means the only factor in the equation. Still, the specific roles that the Internet, exposure to extremist content, and engagement with online extremist communities play in the radicalization process are largely undefined. This is largely due

to the fact that radicalization is a highly individualized phenomenon that can vary quite substantially from one person to the next, but also because the ways in which extremist content is delivered, internalized, experienced, and influential to those who are exposed to it has been difficult to observe and empirically measure (Edwards & Gribbon, 2013; Huey, 2015). For instance, do people exposed to extremist content online move from a neutral position to a more radical one based on this exposure, or do people only tend to seek out said content after already establishing certain radical thoughts or attitudes in an attempt to reinforce and solidify these beliefs (Bowman-Grieve, 2013; Conway & McInerney, 2008)?

However, despite the consensus among academics and law-enforcement personnel that purely online self-radicalization is an extremely rare, if not an impossible phenomenon, there is perhaps more contemporary evidence to suggest that this may have begun to change. For younger demographics in particular, online interactivity has become a deeply ingrained and inseparable aspect of their daily existence, and the most recent wave of extremist violence in the West is perhaps indicative that the power of online social networks may indeed be potent enough to inspire real-world violence, without any of the offline social connections that have long thought to be a necessary requirement. For example, Patrick Crusius, who was 21 years old when he shot and killed 22 people in El Paso in 2019, was not known to have any direct, offline connections with far-right individuals or movements, but was known to be a frequent user of notorious online communities such as 8chan, where extremist rhetoric abounds. While all the details of his case and background are not yet known publicly, it is possible that Crusius did indeed undergo a process of online 'self-radicalization,' which may be a hint of things to come in the future, particularly for a new and perpetually online generation of potential violent extremists that do not require the same conventional offline radicalization prerequisites of the generation before them.

Ultimately, while the specific role that the Internet plays in the radicalization process is not clearly defined and open to some interpretation, it cannot be denied that, for modern extremist movements and the individuals who are attracted to them, the Internet is a crucial (and arguably the most important) tool in the radicalization process, especially with the future in mind.

## 2.3. Theories of Radicalization – A Brief Overview

In an effort to understand how and why certain individuals become radicalized (particularly given the absence of consistent or reliable predictor variables), various theoretical approaches have been applied to, or in some cases, specifically designed for the radicalization process. Several well-established social and criminological theories have been applied to the concept of radicalization and extremism, typically under the assumption that extremist violence is an act that is comparable to other crimes with respect to the psychosocial conditions and motivations of its perpetrators. For instance, Wilner and Dubouloz (2011) applied learning theory to the radicalization process, arguing that the ideological indoctrination and internalization of rationales that legitimize violent behavior, which are primarily taught by and learned from peers, can be understood through a learning-based model. The argument here being that, despite the wide range of sociodemographic backgrounds of those who have become radicalized, the one thing they all have in common is a certain personal, cognitive, and emotional transformation that is predicated upon a personal change, which itself relies on following the cues and practices of an extremist movement and its most influential figures. In their overview of various radicalization theories, Maskaliūnaitė (2015) concluded, “the most promising theory of radicalization so far links the process to a series of rational choice decisions,” (p. 21). Engagement in terrorism, for Maskaliūnaitė, may be best understood as part of a larger cost-benefit analysis as outlined by a rational choice theoretical approach.

Other theoretical approaches have been tweaked or designed to specifically address the phenomenon of radicalization, and these approaches, as one might expect, typically contain a more thorough examination of perceived radicalization factors and motivators. For instance, a ‘foot in the door’ theoretical approach has been outlined, which assumes that radicalization is a step-by-step process of incrementally extreme acts/behavior which begins with an initial act, exposure, or filtration with extremist ideology – the foot in the door (Guadagno et al., 2010). This theoretical approach which assumes that radicalization is an incremental process, one that is inspired not by a singular event or moment, but rather by a mounting collection of experiences, conditions, grievances, and life events which gradual propel an individual toward increasingly severe acts of extremist involvement has been largely explored and applied within the

radicalization literature (see Berger, 2016b; Bowman-Grieve, 2013; Costanza, 2015; Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Jensen et al., 2018; Silke, 2008; Spaaij, 2012). Such approaches typically assume that individuals who are radicalized, while similar in their gradually escalating shift toward extremism, nevertheless experience this escalation in a highly individualized way that is dependent on the specific social, cultural, psychological, and personal experiences of the individual, and the radicalization process is, therefore, not something that can or should be generalized to all (Windsor, 2018).

Still, many of these radicalization-specific theoretical approaches, while detailed and thorough, have also been criticized as being too 'surgical' or clinical, and flawed in their reduction of the radicalization process as something that be reduced to a series of incremental steps or stages that can be universally applied, or in their assumption that 'radicalization' is something that can ever be fully understood at all (Dawson, 2017). Some, believing radicalization to be such a highly specific, individualistic, and phenomenological experience, take the stance that no one theoretical perspective will ever be able to successfully 'explain' the process to the extent that is desired (Schwartz et al., 2009). Either way, there has yet to be an established consensus regarding which radicalization theory, if any, is the 'best' or most well-suited to explaining this highly complex process.

## **2.4. In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics**

Their specific differences aside, what most theories of radicalization typically have in common is their shared belief in the importance of clearly established in-groups and out-groups in the radicalization process. This is, of course, not something that is unique to radicalization – the social and psychological need for individuals to associate, connect, and belong with groups has been well-established (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). This sense of group belonging and the personal satisfaction and excitement that results is what Durkheim (1912/2001) referred to as 'collective effervescence,' that is, the experience that an individual member of a cohesive group gets when they feel that they are connected to 'something bigger' than an external part of their self now belongs to. Durkheim did not see this as an inherently negative phenomena, on the contrary, he believed it could serve as means of further unifying a group while simultaneously providing a sense of belonging and existential fulfillment for the group's individual members. However, the 'groups' Durkheim was primarily referring to were religious

groups, or various community-based groups within a society, and not necessarily extremist movements, who are typically unified on the basis of some shared hatred or fear of an opposing out-group.

It has been claimed that one of the first prerequisites for extremism or terrorism is a sense of collectivism and a prioritization of the group's general needs over the needs of any specific member (Schwartz et al., 2009), and this assumption can be readily understood through the in/out-group dynamic. The group in which an individual identifies with and belongs to is referred to as the 'in-group,' while the various collections of individuals who fall outside this are referred to as the 'out-group.' Such in/out-group dynamics are not inherently problematic, and conflict between the two is not always assumed or inevitable. For instance, a university's local chess club may meet across the hall from the astronomy club, and while these two groups technically act as out-groups to each other (assuming that one can only be a member of one group and not the other), there is unlikely to be any severe conflict or animosity between the two. However, in the context of terrorism and extremism, the identification of and dynamics between in and out-groups are a fundamental component of the group's ideology, identity, and justification for extremist action (Berger, 2018a).

The further ingrained and indoctrinated into extremist ideology that one finds themselves, the more rigid and stark the dichotomy between the in-group and the out-group appears. This is typically a gradual process that happens over time as the perceived threat of the out-group becomes more clearly defined and established (Berger, 2017). Members of the out-group are generally thought to represent the exact opposite of any morals, values, customs, beliefs, or ideologies that the in-group holds. If in-groups perceive themselves as morally just, virtuous, or strong, out-groups will generally be characterized as immoral, sinful, or weak (Schwartz et al., 2009). This is a phenomenon that tends to appear in nearly all extremist movements regardless of their ideology or beliefs. For example, jihadi propaganda has been shown to routinely depict the in-group as righteous, exalted, and dignified, while depicting the out-group as 'evil,' grotesque, and unjust (Bérubé, 2018; Chouliaraki & Kissas, 2018). Similarly, within the rhetoric of modern far-right movements, the in-group is often depicted as the stalwart last line of defense against the invading forces who seek to supplant, erode, and destroy the morals and culture of the West with their alien ways of life (Polletta & Callahan, 2017; Windisch et al., 2018). This gradually building negative depiction of the out-group

may eventually lead to a more severe dehumanization of the 'Other,' where they may be seen as dangerous, dirty, parasitical, sick, or in the most extreme cases, as something less than human or less deserved of life or freedom (LaChine, 2017).

Once defined, extremist organizations tend to portray out-groups as being more powerful, dangerous, and existentially threatening to the in-group than perhaps they really are. This is often done by exaggerating, and in some cases fabricating, the levels of social, political, and cultural influence and power that the out-group wields (Falcous et al., 2019). Extremist movements often perceive the influence of out-groups as totalistic and all-encompassing, seeping into every facet of society and culture (Gray, 2018). This portrayal of the out-group as the ones who, through their own manipulation, greed, and corruption, have been able to seize and control power in society may act as a strong motivator for members of the in-group to radicalize and potentially take action in order to reclaim some of the power that is believed to have been lost or stolen from them (Robin, 2018).

While these group dynamics serve the important function of allowing extremist organizations to project their problems, fears, and anxieties onto readily identifiable and overtly villainous out-groups, they also play a powerful role in establishing one's identity and sense of self through their involvement with their in-group. Political scientist Liliana Mason explored this dynamic through the context of the American political parties in her 2018 book *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, wherein she argues that one's political party affiliation in America (Democrat or Republican) often has less to do with political ideology, and more to do with the level of personal investment and sense of self that is extracted through one's identification with either party. When one invests a part of their personal identity through their affiliation with a particular group, any perceived attack on this group may be perceived as an existential attack on their very sense of self, and can inspire drastic action in an attempt to defend the group, and by extension, one's own sense of self (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011; Mason, 2018a; Mason, 2018b).

In extremist communities, particularly in online spaces, in/out-group dynamics are constantly reinforced and, for the individuals who invest more time and sense of self in these communities, identification with the larger group and its motives and ideology is emboldened and solidified. Empirical research conducted on examining the content and

posting behavior of online users of extremist spaces have found that, over time, individuals show increased connection to and identification with the in-group through both the content of their posts, and the language used to express themselves (Bäck et al., 2018). More specifically, the longer and more frequent that users engaged with extremist spaces, the more their language shifted from individualistic to collectivistic expressions, as references to the self decreased over time while references to the larger group increased (Windsor, 2018).

Forums, message boards, social media websites, or any other online spaces where extremists are able to congregate, network, and communicate, aside from introducing new members to extremist ideology (Durkin et al., 2006), providing a source of validation and support for extremist views (Bowman-Grieve, 2013), reinforcing prejudices/stereotypes about opposing out-groups (Crilley, 2001), and normalizing radical beliefs (Stevens & Neumann, 2009), play the important function of fostering a sense of shared identity with and commitment to the in-group and the ideology it represents (Ducol, 2015). This notion of identity (which will be the primary focus of the following chapter) is one that is often overlooked in the radicalization process in lieu of other more 'conventional' (and empirically testable) demographic and psychological variables. Still, group cohesion, the ways in which it builds self-identity, and how it may all be linked to the process of radicalization toward extremism has been explored to some extent. Ludemann (2018), for example, explored the various ways in which users of 4chan's 'Politically Incorrect' board (a hub of far-right activity) engaged in a constant 'performance' and exploration of identity based primarily on social signifiers such as race, that is, members belonging to a particular race were expected to act and present themselves in a specific way based on the agreed upon expectations put in place by users of this space. Similar explorations of group and identity formation have been conducted on specific spaces such as Reddit (Eschler & Menking, 2018), and on specific extremist movements such as White supremacists (Simi et al., 2017) and jihadist extremists (Huey, 2015; Silke, 2008).

While the link between identity formation and radicalization/extremism has not been as deeply explored or established as other potential radicalizing factors, few are likely to deny that 'identity' is a component in the radicalization process that can or should be ignored. Identity-based approaches to understanding radicalization have been explored or incorporated to some extent (Dawson, 2017; J. Richards, 2017), often with

an emphasis on the perceived loss or crisis of identity that the radicalized individual experiences (Monaghan & Molnar, 2016), but even radicalization theories that emphasize the importance of identity have typically done so in a way that neglects the larger social, cultural, and economic conditions in which 'identity' is formulated and understood (Durodié, 2007). While several of the various theories of radicalization briefly outlined in this chapter incorporate the concept of identity to varying degrees, the rest of this dissertation, and the following chapter particularly, will attempt to foreground questions of identity in a way that places them not just as an unignorable component of the radicalization puzzle, but as the central and most foundational component through which all modern extremism may be understood.

## Chapter 3. Identity and Extremism

This chapter outlines and argues for a theory of radicalization toward the adoption of extremist ideology that centers personal identity as the primary and most influential variable in the radicalization process. This identity-based theory will subsequently guide the more empirical, data-driven chapters that follow.

While the concept of ‘identity’ has not been entirely ignored as a factor in the radicalization process – there is a portion of literature that emphasizes the importance of identity to various degrees (see section 1.3) – there are several understandable reasons why an identity-based approach has largely failed to be adopted as the basis for either academic inquiry or the implementation of CVE policy in lieu of other theoretical approaches that emphasize more standard demographic or psychosocial variables. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that ‘identity’ as a concept is one that is difficult to define or measure, and therefore, difficult to operationalize, quantify, and empirically test (Dawson & Amarasingam, 2017). It is easy to make the claim (as this chapter nevertheless will) that the embracing of extremist ideology serves as a means of reconciling feelings of lost or fragmented identity, but it much more difficult to measure or otherwise ‘prove’ this relationship in a conventional or positivistic manner, particularly when there is confusion about what ‘identity’ means in the first place.

In the interest of clarity, ‘identity’ is being used and defined here in primarily sociological terms. That is, one’s identity and understanding of self is something that is determined by both factors attributable to macro-level structure (nationality, race, class, etc.) and micro-level agency (sexuality, personal interests, clothing/appearance, etc.). Identity, then, is fundamentally related to the question of ‘who we are’ and how we distinguish and define ourselves against the backdrop of our larger society, and is a question that is primarily answered through a combination of our lived experiences, our social and demographic conditions, and the pervasive influence of the dominant culture (James, 2015). The theory of identity presented in this chapter assumes that one’s identity is, therefore, partly formed through an individual’s own agency and choices, but also through the pervasive influence of social, cultural, and economic factors that are beyond individual control.

The second reason why identity-based approaches to understanding radicalization and extremism have not typically been favored is due to the concept of identity itself having not been sufficiently explored or defined. The ways in which notions of identity have previously been discussed or linked to the radicalization process have often been simplistic, reductive, essentialist, and have largely failed to consider not only the cultural and structural conditions that shape identity from the top-down, but also historical conditions, that is, the ways in which our understanding and approaches to identity have drastically changed over time, and are continuing to change in the wake of an increasingly hyper-connected and globalized world.

To effectively argue for a theory of identity or for the direct relationship between identity and extremist ideology, 'identity', and the structural, cultural, and historical factors that have and continue to shape this concept must be sufficiently defined and examined. This requires an acknowledgement of both the transitional and the cultural nature of identity. 'Transitional' in the sense that the concept of individual identity is not something that is essential or fixed throughout time, but rather one that is undergoing constant gradual change, and 'cultural' in the sense that it is not something that is universally experienced in the same manner by everyone on the planet, but rather something that can vary quite substantially depending on the cultural conditions that one finds themselves within.

With this in mind, it is worth restating that the theory of identity central to this dissertation is one that attempts to explain radicalization and the adoption of extremist ideology *in the context of modern, Western culture*. While it will be argued that this theory can be utilized to understand virtually any recent examples of extremist violence (or the radicalized individuals that have perpetrated them) through the lens of identity, it is *not* a theoretical approach that can or should be applied to understand extremist/terrorist incidents of the past (when identity did not mean what it does today), or to those that take place outside of the West<sup>3</sup> (where identity is not necessarily formed or approached in the same manner or conditions).

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that issues or complications relating to identity are inherently or essentially a 'Western' phenomenon – surely they are not – and through the widespread globalization and proliferation of certain cultural and technological products and neoliberal economic models, it may be argued that these are indeed conclusions that may be applied globally. However, in the interest of avoiding potential misrepresentations or erroneously applying a Western lens to the situational conditions of other global cultures, this dissertation is focused specifically on the social, technological, and cultural conditions of 'Western' locations.

However, in order to understand a theory of how the modern conception of identity relates to the radicalization process, or indeed how such a conception is being defined, it is important to first provide a brief historical overview of 'identity' in the West, including a discussion of its philosophical origins, the ways in which identity has changed through the influences of individualism, nationalism, technological progress, and globalization, and how we are currently living in a historically unique age where individual identity is, due to its ongoing commodification and increased malleability, undergoing a state of rapid change. After tracing the ways in which identity has changed and been commodified, the subsequent loss of, and confusion around, personal identity that many now experience, and the ways in which this may potentially act as a necessary prerequisites for extremist ideology to flourish under the modern conditions of late capitalism in the West, will be discussed.

### **3.1. Identity and Individualism – Enlightenment and Early Modernity**

It is generally believed that in the earliest agrarian and hunter/gatherer societies, the concept of 'identity' was a comparatively straightforward and uncomplicated one. Unlike the fragmented and fluid nature of identity in the modern age, identity in these early societies was largely something that was fixed, stable, and for the most part, predetermined by factors such as age and gender (Kellner, 1992). Because rigid hierarchies and strictly defined roles based on these factors were in place, there was little room for individuals to explore or pursue alternate sources of identity (Fukuyama, 2018). In such early societies there existed what Durkheim referred to as a state of 'mechanical solidarity' – a state wherein all members of a community were bound by a shared collective consciousness that was maintained through each member's participation in the same rituals and religious practices and through the typical isolation of villages and communities, which made direct comparison to other cultures or ways of life a rarity (Durkheim, 1893/1997). In such a state, there was no concept of individual identity as we perceive of it today, and certainly no reason for individuals to question their place in society or to succumb to any confusion or crises of identity. One was born into a tight-knit community with shared values and beliefs, ascribed a role based on predetermined factors, and expected to serve the function of said role until they could no longer, while those who deviated from this were swiftly punished or ostracized.

The roots of the modern conceptualization of Western identity, along with its emphasis and reliance on individual agency, liberty, and choice (in contrast to the rigid determinism and lack of choice found in many early agrarian societies), can be traced back several hundred years at least to the thought and ideals expressed in the European Age of Enlightenment and the social and political change that they inspired throughout the subsequent period of modernity. The precise timeframe marking the beginning of this period is somewhat contested, and not entirely important for the sake of this argument, though many would agree that the period of Enlightenment commenced roughly during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the following years would directly influence a number of highly significant events in the Western world including the American and French Revolutions which lead to the independence of the United States from the British Empire and the abolition of the French monarchy respectively.

The Enlightenment ideals that inspired such events, many of which can be found in the writings of (among many others) Rousseau, John Locke, and Adam Smith, were those which envisioned a new and emancipatory version of personal identity based on the concepts of individual liberty, universal equality, freedom from religious/governmental/political oppression, and the belief that within each individual person rested a unique 'inner self' that distinguished them from everyone else. In this view, governments and political institutions were believed to have one role that was paramount above all others – to protect and preserve as many of these individual rights and freedoms as possible (Fukuyama, 2018). This perspective is readily seen within the language and statutes of the both the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, both drafted following the Revolutionary War in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the later famously asserting that 'all men are created equal' and as such, are all granted the unalienable rights of 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness', which the government would ideally exist to maintain and defend. Post-Revolutionary America, then, was a society that not only enshrined the importance and protection of individual liberty into its most important national documents, but one that continued to interpret, revise, and apply the emancipatory individualism of Enlightenment philosophy in a number of important ways – the pulse of which can still be felt today.

While many Enlightenment-era philosophers displayed skepticism about religion, or at least of the structural and political power and influence that religious institutions held at the time, many communities in post-Revolutionary America maintained devout

religious adherence, and would, whether they were aware of it at the time or not, combine this religious practice and belief with the emergent culture of individualism and the structural and economic conditions brought about by early Industrial Revolution-era capitalism. This phenomenon is detailed in Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/2002) wherein he outlined the union between American individualism, the so-called 'Protestant work ethic', and the rise of early capitalism in the country. The (very) simplified version of Weber's thesis was essentially that the early American emphasis on individual freedom and liberty, when combined with the Puritan religious ideology that many of its early citizen subscribed to, instilled in many the belief of a personal obligation to work, to the accumulation of wealth, and to the rejection of idleness or time that was 'wasted' by not living a fruitful, devout, and productive life. Such a worldview, argued Weber, planted the ideological roots that would allow the capitalist mode of production to flourish in early American society.

As the line between faith and economic productivity blurred, it was individualism itself that for many Americans eventually emerged as a kind of new secular religion, one that was more influential in determining daily practices than the religious traditions themselves, resulting in 'individualism' as a belief structure becoming "America's ideology" (Mount, 1981, p. 363). This was a unique individualism, undoubtedly inspired by the religious ideologies of Reformation, Calvin, and the Protestant work ethic, but perhaps even more so by the (mostly) secular emphasis on individual rights, liberty, property, and economics espoused by the classical liberal philosophers of the Enlightenment and the American founding fathers themselves. And while these ideals became less overtly religious and more secularized over time, the importance of work, individual usefulness, and a person's ability to achieve or accumulate wealth on their own merits and commitment nevertheless became instilled as American values soon woven into the cultural fabric of the nation itself – values that many still hold and espouse in the version of modern meritocracy where one's personal and financial success or failure is primarily based on how hard they are willing to work (Spence, 1989).

In much of Europe, meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution was also in full swing, bringing about largescale social, economic, and structural change that would (and to a large extent still does) serve to both directly and indirectly shape the ways that many people approached personal individualism and identity. During this time much of the

Western world began to shift from a traditionally religious to a more modern and scientific frame of reference as old notions of self and society were questioned and new ones were being asked and explored. Simultaneously, increased industrialization and urbanization forced many to resettle from rural areas into burgeoning urban centers for work, leaving their small, tight-knit communities behind and replacing them with a new exposure to a more diverse set of cultures, beliefs, and conditions that forced them to question, or at the very least, become more aware of their own background, their current role in society, and indeed their very identity (Fukuyama, 2018).

Consider a young man from a small German village in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with no prior experience or exposure to the larger world now being forced to relocate to an urban center for factory employment. As this young worker meets his new co-workers, many of whom similarly came from small and relatively isolated communities, and as he explores the city, he, through comparison, becomes more aware of his own accent, his dialect, his religious beliefs, his spiritual practices, his nationality, and his personal identity in a way that he might not have been aware of previously. This question of identity becomes even more complex when taking into account Marx's critique of the working conditions of factories at the time – conditions that he believed, due to the prolonged repetition of mindless, assembly-line tasks, and a complete disconnect from the worker to the products of their labor, reduced the factory worker to little more than a cog in machine, which in turn, resulted in feelings of existential disconnect and alienation – a loss of self (Marx, 1867/2004).

In essence we see in this time the gradual shift from a communal to a more individualistic subject, with questions of self and the structural forces that shape identity gradually coming into the foreground (Cushman, 1990). Still, despite the legal and cultural emphasis on the protection of the 'American' values of individualism and personal liberty, it is worth noting that many of those living in post-Revolutionary American society were not entirely driven by such extreme self-interest, but still by more group-oriented social responsibilities that served the larger community – indicating that while personal liberty was highly encouraged and protected, it was also curbed somewhat by one's perceived civic and community duties (Grabb et al., 1999). Simply put, community (and the role one played within it) was still an important factor shaping American/Western life and personal identity, and ties to communities, whether tangible or abstract, family-sized or nation-sized, would, through their combination with the

ideology of individualism, continue to act as influential agents of identity into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **3.2. Identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – Nationalism, Patriotism, and a New Individualism**

The concept of identity in the West,<sup>4</sup> in addition to the various cultural and structural factors that influence how the ‘self’ was defined and determined, underwent significant changes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the aftermath of the two World Wars. In his 2018 book *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity*, cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that prior to the end of World War II, those in the West did not typically think about their identity or define themselves or ‘who they were’ in terms of race, sex, class, nationality, or religion. Appiah posits that the ‘modern’ notion of identity, in America especially but also elsewhere in the West, began to take shape in the economically prosperous, culturally creative, and socially critical decades immediately following WWII as ideas of patriotism and national identity became more rigid, as the Cold War forced Americans to relate more directly to their status as ‘Westerners’ or as ‘Americans’, and as the social and politically progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s began to challenge the ways in which the traditional status quo benefitted or disadvantaged individuals based on identifying aspects such as class, race, gender, and sexuality.

On a structural level, the American economy had quickly transitioned from its wartime variant, one marked by incessant production, planning, and rationing of certain goods/materials, to its postwar variant, marked now by a need for a drastic increase in the public consumption of goods in order to match the levels of production that had previously been devoted almost entirely to the war effort (Langman & Ryan, 2009). This proved to be a prosperous time for American business and for the American economy writ large. Writing back in 1952, American political scientist Alpheus Mason’s observations of these economic trends (and their impact on personal identity) proved to be both an accurate reflection of the time, and a prescient prediction of things to come:

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<sup>4</sup> While this section primarily focuses on the events and conditions of American society specifically, it is worth noting that many of the values, trends, and most importantly, the ways in which the notion of identity was undergoing significant change, are equally applicable, if perhaps to a slightly lesser extent, to the societies and populations of other Western nations such as Canada (Grabb et al., 1999).

For two generations American political and economic life has been moving swiftly toward "bigness," toward monolithic organization. We live by, in, and among bigger and bigger corporations, bigger and bigger unions, bigger and bigger governments. On all sides individual freedom and responsibility have shrunk... Man's own handiwork has become a Frankenstein monster, destroying his initiative and individuality. In the grip of forces he has created, helpless single-handed to control, he suffers from loneliness, from not belonging, from impersonality. Millions who live in great cities, hundreds of thousands employed in assembly-line factories and organized in industrial unions, thousands of stockholders who can only endorse management's policies governing "their" billion dollar corporation -all these experience frustration, helplessness. (p. 1)

With regard to identity, Mason's quote reveals some of the personal anxiety, alienation, and disconnection that many were beginning to feel during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 'destruction' of individuality suggested here, while perhaps hyperbolic in its language, nevertheless suggests that 'identity' was indeed a concept undergoing a significant evolution in the wake of American economic growth and the transition to modern consumerism.

In addition to the role that the postwar economy played in shaping American identity, as Cold War tensions continued to escalate, the American public, through the constant discussion, coverage, and rhetoric of politicians and the media, was made increasingly aware of their status and their identity through direct comparison to their perceived enemy and rival – the Soviet Union (officially known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR). The Soviet Union (and the ideology of communism more generally) was routinely depicted in American media and by American politicians as evil, oppressive, undemocratic, and intolerant of the religious, intellectual, and political freedoms that Americans were thought to enjoy (I. Richards, 2017). Essentially the USSR was thought to represent everything that was *un-American*, and such representations (regardless of how exaggerated or accurate they may have been), combined with the looming existential threat of nuclear destruction, caused much of the American public to begin identifying more strongly with their status as Westerners, as freedom-loving Americans, as nationalists and patriots, and as apologists and/or champions of a free-market economy and the capitalist mode of production (Zelizer, 2018).

While the Soviet Union was depicted as restrictive of individual rights and individuality in general by not allowing true artistic, academic, or personal expression,

Americans began to further embrace the 'culture of individualism' and the rights of personal liberty that the nation was initially founded on (Motak, 2009). While such a culture had previously been in place to some extent, the emphasis on individuality and personal freedom was drastically amplified in the context of the Cold War, as were the social and political ideologies of conservative and anti-communist writers and 'philosophers' such as Ayn Rand (and others) who doubled down on the assertion that American society was unique in the level playing ground that it offered its citizens, where there were no barriers to achieving personal and financial success beyond one's own work ethic and dedication – an ideology of hyper-emphasized individualism that would personify American culture and mainstream political rhetoric for the rest of the century (Robin, 2018).

With respect to postwar identity on a more micro, personalized level, in a seminal 1990 essay psychologist Philip Cushman categorized the post-WWII American individual as the 'empty self', one that must subsequently be 'refilled' by the purchase and consumption of consumer products, media, and unique experiences. Cushman contends that while America had slowly been transitioning from the socially, sexually, and financially prudent and restrictive society that it initially was during its founding to a more indulgent and hedonistic one, it was the economic conditions brought about by the end of WWII that drastically expedited this transition. The global political and economic hegemony of postwar America was reliant on the mass production and consumption of goods and commodities that were, in many respects, becoming increasingly nonessential (though the birth of modern advertising and marketing would effectively create increased demand for such goods). The result was, according to Cushman, a self that, "seeks the experience of being continually filled up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era" (1990, p. 600).

This sense of post-war alienation is effectively captured in the 2012 Paul Thomas Anderson film *The Master*. In it, World War II veteran Freddie Quell struggles to adjust to post-war life, and finds himself bouncing between jobs, but never remaining at one for very long as he is prone to outbursts of rage, confusion, and destructive behavior. After drifting for some time, Quell eventually meets the charismatic Lancaster Dodd and is subsequently recruited into Dodd's burgeoning pseudo-spiritual movement 'The Cause.' Dodd and the other members of The Cause provide a sense of security, community, and

identity for Quell, helping him to make sense of and channel his frustrations and energy in a way that benefits the movement. While not directly stated, it is heavily implied (and confirmed by Anderson) that the character of Lancaster Dodd was inspired and partially based on L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology which itself was similarly formed shortly after the war in the early 1950s(Brooks, 2012).

The founding of Scientology, in addition to several other spiritual and religious movements (in various stages of official organization) are emblematic of the changing role of religion during this time, and more specifically, a shift toward what Motak (2009) refers to as 'religious individualism.' As the economically prosperous post-war years provided many Americans with certain freedoms, comforts, and opportunities to reinterpret or reaffirm their role and place in society, many began to question the role of religion in a similarly individualistic way. In this sense, religious affiliation became more malleable as Americans became more inclined to individually decide not only the role that religion would play in their lives (if any), but also how they would form their own individual relationships with God, places of worship, and religious communities, whether it was through the traditional manner of regular church attendance, prayer, and ritual, or through involvement in any of the less formalized spiritual movements that were emerging and developing at the time. In other words, the extent to which one identified with religious structure, whether traditional or alternative, was becoming an increasingly personalized decision, and not one that was simply prescribed or predetermined as it largely had been.

While religion remained, as it had for a long time prior, an important source of identity and community for many, it was becoming clear that the extent to which religion was allowed to shape and influence a person's life and identity was increasingly becoming a personal decision – and very much one that was open to negotiation, individual interpretation, and the influence of a variety of new, updated, and reinterpreted spiritual practices. And while people were becoming more aware of their personalized connection to religion, so too were they (often whether they actively wanted to or not) becoming more aware of other social identities that shaped their lived experiences. The civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, the growing second-wave feminist movement, Marxist and capitalist-critical academics, and various other social movements forced many to contend with and/or acknowledge issues of race, gender, and class in ways that they may not have previously.

In this sense, some were able to find and assert part of their identity based on their status as a woman, as poor, as Black, and so forth, in addition to the more traditional sources of social identity found in work, church, and family (Davis, 2003). The result is what Cushman (1990) referred to as a self that was increasingly ‘fragmented’, that is, their identity was not dependent or dictated solely by their connection to one traditional social structure or role, but now by a growing number of identity roles that one was expected to play based on a gradually expanding list of factors – which, while potentially a source of alienation and identity confusion for some, alternatively proved to be for many others a helpful way to ‘make sense’ of social life and their individual place within it (Wee & Brooks, 2010).

Ultimately, the changing nature of identity in postwar America was emblematic of the fact that ‘identity’ and ‘individualism’ were concepts that were not rigid, unchangeable, or otherwise transhistorical, rather the ways in which such things were approached, understood, and applied proved to be highly dependent on the macro-level, structural, economic, and political factors of a society (Cushman, 1990; Mason, 1952). And while the approach to identity in postwar Western society did indeed undergo significant changes that can still be felt today, by the time that the first email was sent, the first digital avatar was constructed, the first personally-curated Spotify playlist was uploaded, and the first targeted Amazon advertisement was delivered, our understanding of individual identity would be drastically transformed once again.

### **3.3. Post-Modernity, the Digital Age, and the Fragmented Self**

The period that has (somewhat arbitrarily) been marked here as beginning around the year 1990, and which has continued to the present day, has been referred to by many different names, some of which may not necessarily mean the same thing, but nevertheless have a common strand between them. Postmodernity, the Information Age, late modernity, the Digital Age – regardless of any individual nuances and differences between these concepts, all share an emphasis on new communicative technologies, media saturation, and the role of the individual in society, and it is these common traits that will be focused on here. The characteristics of this new age, and in particular the role that the individual plays within it, have been theorized and written about extensively (using slightly different terms), perhaps most prominently by social theorists such as

Ulrich Beck (second modernity), Anthony Giddens (reflexive modernity), and Zygmunt Bauman (liquid modernity). While there are many subtle and occasionally substantial differences between these theorists (the specifics of which are not terribly important here), they are largely united by their shared reevaluation of identity and individualism in the context of a changing modern world (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991).

The simplified idea is, for these theorists, that in the modern world we see a transition from the industrial society of the previous centuries to an information-driven society where there is a breakdown in the traditional sources of identity that shaped the lives of the previous generations. Put another way, identity is no longer something that is fixed or dependent on the more stable factors of the past. For instance, in post-WWII society, it was relatively commonplace for an individual, once finishing high school or college, to begin employment with a company or in an occupation that they would then remain with for most if not all of their working life (Gennaro, 2005). For such people, there was undoubtedly a large degree of personal identity invested in their work, in their occupation, and in the company that employed them, which is understandable given the sheer length of time that they devoted to such things. Today this is a rarer occurrence as young workers routinely bounce between jobs, companies, occupations, and employers, sometimes undergoing drastic career changes when they feel unsatisfied or unable to find gainful employment (Wee & Brooks, 2010). For people in such a position, 'work', given its more fluid nature, likely no longer provides the stable sense of meaning and identity that it had previously (Langman & Ryan, 2009).

And not only are younger people less likely to find meaning and identity through work and occupation, but this also extends to other primary sources of identity that were dependent on the structural conditions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rates of religiosity among younger people in the West have been on a gradual decline (Pew Research Center, 2018) as the individualistic approach to religion and spirituality – away from involvement in organized religion and toward a more personalized spirituality – gaining popularity over the past century has continued to grow (Motak, 2009). So too have the patriotic and nationalistic commitments of Cold War society began to diminish, particularly amongst younger generations. In the wake of globalization, and in the absence of a unifying 'enemy' on the apocalyptic scale of the USSR, the impetus for young people to find personal identity through a sense of nationalistic duty or patriotic loyalty, while not

entirely absent (and certainly reignited to some extent following 9/11), has arguably begun to fade.

The result is, according to Giddens, a world that has been 'stripped' of individual meaning in the once conventional sense (Adams, 2003). That is to say that the modern individual is no longer able to be so neatly categorized on the basis of structurally identifiable factors as they once were. Instead, the onus now falls upon individuals themselves to reflexively assert, acknowledge, and make sense of their identity in a world where traditional meaning, labels, categorization, and identifiable groupings are undergoing constant dissection, erosion, and reevaluation (Warde, 1994). Identity in this modern age is something that must then, through individual agency, awareness, and curiosity, be personally explored, rather than ascribed on the basis on largely predetermined structural factors or social ties (Hassan, 1999). Under such conditions, individuals are encouraged to explore and combine their various internal criteria, lived experiences, self-conceptions, and reflexive awareness in order to build and maintain their own unique 'personal brand' – one that expresses their true internal nature, and one that is highly malleable, adaptable, and capable of continuous reexamination and transformation (Davis, 2003; Wee & Brooks, 2010).

Identity, in this respect, is not defined primarily by one singular factor (one's occupation, for instance), but rather it has become something that is fragmented, particularly as younger people are increasingly encouraged to become multi-skilled and to engage in as many extracurricular and unique experiences as they can in the interest of self-growth (Gennaro, 2005). A young person today is not simply a daughter, a Canadian, or a university student, but is, in addition to these roles, also a hockey player, a second-generation immigrant, president of the chess club, a gamer, a bartender, a yoga enthusiast, and so on – and they are expected to shift seamlessly between these roles, some of which may occasionally contradict or oppose each other, but all of which provide a fragmentary source of identity that are to be collected and organized as a meaningful whole (Langman & Ryan, 2009). Ultimately, the question of 'who am I?' had become an increasingly complex one, more difficult to navigate and answer amid a torrent of technological change and increased opportunity (Fukuyama, 2018).

This new level of agency, opportunity, and personal responsibility to seek and establish one's identity can act as a potent source of anxiety, alienation, and identity

confusion, that has, for many, lead to what Cushman (1990) referred to as an 'inner emptiness' that many try to subsequently counter or reconcile through a variety of occasionally self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, drug abuse, and general crime. Further complicating this process is the parallel rise and subsequent ubiquity of mass media and new communicative technologies such as the Internet, smartphones, and social media, all of which offer new mediums and opportunities for exploring identity. The social, psychological, political, economic, and cultural impacts and effects of the Internet, hyper-connectivity, and social media at both the micro and macro level have been thoroughly and extensively documented and analyzed and do not need to be covered here, apart from a brief overview of their connection to individual identity. Such technologies, central and undetachable as they are in the lives of many young people, provide seemingly unlimited possibilities for users to establish and explore concepts of the self and identity (Sihvonen, 2015). This phenomenon of digital personalization and individualization was succinctly captured when in 2006 *Time* magazine awarded its annual 'Person of the Year' distinction not to any specific individual but to 'You.' Here 'You' was used to refer to the legions of social media users and online content creators, the implication being that within each individual person (aka 'You') the possibility existed to create and share content and to explore identity in an unrestricted, readily accessible way that is undeniably historically unique.

The increased reliance on the Internet as a potential source of identity has led to outcomes both positive and negative. For instance, Internet addiction and overuse has been correlated with an increase in reported levels of identity confusion, depression, compulsive buying, and a general reduction of quality of life (Hinsch & Sheldon, 2013; Hsieh et al., 2019; Sharif & Khanekharab, 2017). All this, of course, in addition to issues of body image, loneliness, disconnection, sexual confusion, communicative skills, and social withdrawal that have been linked to constant exposure to new forms of media over the years. However, while it may be easy or intellectually exciting to focus on the negative or potentially dehumanizing aspects of technology (take the popularity of the television series *Black Mirror* for instance, which routinely depicts dystopic near-futures that have been adversely impacted by society's cultural obsession with social technology), it should be acknowledged that the Internet and online communities can also act as positive spaces for people struggling with issues of personal identity. For example, it has been noted that online communities created for LGBT individuals can act

as spaces that provide support, reassurance, answers, and confidence for LGBT youth who may be struggling with their social and sexual identities (Craig & McInroy, 2014). For individuals who struggle with, or are confused or possibly ashamed by questions of identity, and feel as though they do not have anyone in their offline world to talk to or confide in about these struggles, the Internet can provide a much needed source of community. For others, the Internet may simply provide a space for creating and sharing jokes and memes, anonymously or not, that poke fun at bosses, bureaucracy, politicians, and other forces of power/authority. Such acts serve as a small, but nonetheless important, means of countering feelings of alienation, meaninglessness, and powerlessness by building bonds and solidarity through identification with the oppressed, downtrodden, or otherwise overlooked (Mauldin, 2008). While this chapter is largely a critical examination of the negative impact that technology and new media can have on personal identity, it is also worth remembering that such advancements and developments have, for many, undoubtedly made the world a better place (Banda, 2019).

So, while emergent technologies and a reduction of the influence of traditional power structures have led to younger people of the modern age approaching identity in a fragmentary and occasionally anxious way, it is the act of consumption that has, for many, come to serve as the dominant practice that dictates and establishes identity in these confusing times, a phenomenon that has been thoroughly documented and established. Where the conditions of late modernity have caused many to feel confused and powerless regarding their identity, it is through the domain of consumption that they are able to reclaim some power over their identity and sense of self (Miller, 1997; Strelitz, 2002). By maintaining and communicating identity through the use and consumption of certain brands, lifestyles, music, and media content, individuals are thought to be able to avoid potential existential anxieties and insecurities about their identities (Shankar et al., 2009). It is this relationship between identity formation and consumption, escalated and amplified as it is in the current climate of late capitalism, personalized marketing, and infinite content, that has direct implications for understanding modern extremism, as this union has led to a commodification of identity itself, a reduction of personal purpose and meaning to something that can be bought, sold, advertised, and manipulated – and in so doing, has inadvertently created the

conditions for violent extremists to begin answering the questions of identity that have subsequently arisen.

### **3.4. On the Commodification and Loss of Identity**

How is it that a concept as nebulous and complex as personal identity has, in the context of late capitalist modernity, come to be something that is commodifiable and especially prone to the influence of consumerism, and why does such a development matter with regard to the increase of violent and political extremism in the West since the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As will soon be argued, it is this modern union of fragmentary identity, globalization, breakthroughs in communicative technologies, and the unrestrained aggressiveness of late capitalism that has created a significant shift in the way that personal identity is approached – a shift that has foregrounded and highlighted the fears, anxieties, and insecurities inherent in the process of modern identity formation. It is these fears and questions of identity that become central to the ideology of modern extremist organizations in the West, as they attempt to provide answers that explain, justify, or otherwise reconcile such questions. But from where do these fears stem? The previous sections provided a very brief historical account of how the concept of identity has evolved up to the present day, but now the focus will be more specifically on how identity has increasingly come to be dependent on external, often unstable market and media factors, and reduced in many respects to a malleable and shallow commodity – one that is more prone to being ‘lost’ than perhaps ever before, and how such a loss has left many feeling unsure of their purpose in an increasingly alienating modern world.

As far back as the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the impacts of mass media/culture and their interplay with consumerism, capitalist commodification, and identity were already beginning to be critically examined. Around this time, philosopher Theodor Adorno remarked that the border between culture, media, and empirical reality were becoming increasingly blurred and indistinct, concluding that mass culture “is an organized mania for connecting everything with everything else” (Adorno, 2011, p. 83). For Adorno, consumer capitalism invariably leads to the ‘standardization’ and commodification of all art, which in turn would hamper both an individual’s connection to art as well as their ability to critically assess it. Were Adorno still alive today, he might look at the lists of the top-grossing films from recent years, populated as they are almost entirely by sequels, spinoffs, remakes, and retreads, as evidence that he was correct in

his assertion of the standardizing role of capitalist consumerism on art and media. Writing more recently, Tanner (2016) channels Adorno's argument for the modern times in no less critical terms:

As Hollywood doles out one superhero movie after another and the teen romantic-fantasy book genre delivers endless dreck, our culture becomes total fantasy, one without acknowledgement of our current place in history – which is categorized by rampant unemployment and underemployment, staggering debt, a diminishing middle class, racial injustice, transphobia, environmental disaster, and emotionally and intellectually stunted political groups paid by massive corporations to perpetuate fantasies in order to dilute the collective consciousness of the West. (p. 57)

The suggestion here is that, rather than acknowledging any of the problems listed, people in the West opt instead to be distracted and fascinated with an ever monolithic and all-encompassing media output, and while this is certainly not a new or novel suggestion – the notion of the 'masses' being too distracted with trivial or profane pursuits and leisure to effectively organize for meaningful social change has been well-explored and can be traced back to the 'bread and circuses' of ancient Rome – it nevertheless is in need of renewed examination under the light of 21<sup>st</sup> century digital and mass media.

The links between the formation of identity and the consumption of commodities and media is well-established in the fields of psychology and marketing (Thompson & Loveland, 2015). In short, the media and products that one consumes can play a significant role in shaping their preferences, everyday concerns, lifestyles, and values – all of which contribute to the process of identity formation (Sihvonen, 2015). While this may have been the case in the early days of marketing and the early post-WWII consumer society, the importance of consumption on personal identity has been drastically increased in the context of the current globalized, hyper-connected Western society where marketing, brands, and media have permeated nearly every aspect of daily life (Heller, 2003). Consider how media consumption has changed since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time when household television sets were just starting to become commonplace in the West. During this time, households typically had one television set shared by the entire family, and as such, watching TV was, by necessity, often something that was done communally as a family. The selection of channels and available programs at this time were limited, and if one was not interested in the content being shown, there were no alternative sources to turn to. Today, this is obviously not

the case. It is not uncommon today for households to have either multiple televisions, or at least, multiple sources where TV shows and media can be viewed (computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.). So too has the sheer amount of available content been exponentially increased, not just with regard to the number of available channels and programs, but with the essentially endless amount of content being generated daily on platforms such as YouTube. Streaming services such as Netflix offer a large and continually expanding selection of content on demand, available to be watched at any time. The result of such advancements is typically not a family sitting in front of one television set, forced to sit through programs they may not have any interest in (or scheduling their plans around programs they are interested in, which aired at specific times), rather media consumption in a modern household is a largely individualized phenomenon where agency and responsibility is granted almost entirely to the consumer to independently seek out and find content that they are interested in and to watch it on their own time and terms. So too has this individual responsibility contributed to the process of identity formation and potential confusion by providing yet another question for individuals to contend with – of the infinite possibilities available, what media/content will you choose to consume, and to what extent will you personally identify with it?

Questions of identification with commodities and media are particularly pressing for the current younger generation, unique in that they have grown up and lived the entirety of their lives under the panoptic and totalizing embrace of modern social technology and increasingly personalized and clandestine marketing tactics that are meant to blur the line between commodification and reality even further. For example, an Instagram model casually posing with or incorporating a branded product into one of her pictures, while not a formal ‘advertisement’ in the traditional or conventional sense nevertheless serves the same function while contributing at the same time to the blending of ‘reality’ and marketed consumerism. This is not to suggest that identification with media or commodities is always or inherently a negative relationship that will lead to anxiety of confusion. Music, for instance, has been cited as one potential sphere where identity can partially be formed in a positive manner. That is, the styles of music and types of artist that one listens to can, for those invested, embody dynamics of personal narratives and identity claims (Shankar et al., 2009). Similarly, children or young adults, when watching certain fictional characters or media personalities, can express ‘wishful identification’ (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005) with these characters, meaning that they may

express a desire to be defined as or to act like the characters they enjoy, particularly when characters are already similar to them in some respects (similar age, race, gender, etc.) – such a process can be valuable in forming positive values or notions of identity (provided, of course, that the characters themselves represent such virtues or positive affirmations).

Still, young people must wrestle and contend with a shockingly well-funded and well-researched marketing machine designed to capture their attention, loyalty, and eventually, their disposable income – one that attempts to bury its roots deeply and early. Gennaro (2005) argued that within Western society there has, due in no small part to the influence of mass media and consumerism, recently emerged a state of ‘perpetual adolescence’, wherein children, teenagers, and young adults are encouraged to extend the interests, hobbies, and pastimes of their youth ‘forever’ (or at least well into adulthood) in order to keep them marketable for as long as possible. The massive and relatively recent popularity (and profitability) of certain products and past-times, once generally thought to be comparatively niche, or limited in appeal to children or teenagers – video games, comic books, super hero movies, action figures, toys, collectables, and so on – may be evidence of this trend. More cynically, Langman and Ryan (2009) assert that such consumer-based lifestyles and the marketers who promote them have effectively ‘colonized’ childhood, instilling in impressionable children a desire for consumption, for identity formation *through* consumption, and for an internalized hedonism that they are expected to carry and engage with into adulthood, just as their levels of disposable income are expected to rise.

Other commodities and products outside of mass media, some of which entire ‘cultures’ have been built around, can also act as a source of identity. For instance, in a recent study Rössel and Pape (2016) found that wine consumption, for those heavily involved in it, can act as something relevant for their personal identity, that is, they come to define who they are based partially on their consumption of wine, and in their involvement in ‘wine culture.’ What’s to recognize here is the fact that for such individuals, ‘identity’ is being partially formed based on a commodity that is external to them, the conditions, accessibility, and availability of which are subject to external structural forces in a way that other sources of identity (race or age, for example) are typically not. This matters, for when such commodities and external sources of identity, which are not beholden to the individuals who associate with them, disappear, or come

to be perceived (accurately or not) as threatened or under attack, it can be interpreted and internalized as a blow to one's own sense of identity or self. In the words of sociologist Joseph Davis, "we know who we are and we judge the quality of our inner experience through identification with the things we buy" (2003, p. 41).

Just as *The Master* was a film that successfully captured the confusion and spiritual alienation of post-WWII American society that many experienced, it could be argued that David Fincher's 1999 film *Fight Club* similarly presents an accurate snapshot of the anxieties that many felt, consciously or otherwise, regarding the interconnected relationship between identity and consumption that had been increasingly building toward the end of the millennium. In *Fight Club* the unnamed protagonist works a monotonous office job that, while financially rewarding, is ultimately unfulfilling. To compensate for this lack of excitement, the protagonist spends his free time browsing and shopping for the newest and trendiest clothes, furniture, and home accessories, only to find that his relentless devotion to consumption has not satiated him, but rather left him feeling weakened, emasculated, and with debilitating insomnia. The protagonist is attempting to find and purchase *meaning* through consumption, he is attempting to address both his perceived powerlessness and lack of direct purpose in society by filling himself and his living space with commodities and brands that are meant to represent financial success, yet his grasp on his sense of self is never improved via this manner. In terms of nonfictional evidence, a study conducted more recently on those with compulsive buying habits found empirical support for this phenomenon, concluding that compulsive consumerism was significantly correlated with both identity confusion and general depression (Claes et al., 2016).

This modern world, paradoxically, offers individuals inundated to its conditions more freedom than ever before to explore who they are through their connection with an endlessly expanding ocean of content, media, and connections, while at the same time stifling one's sense of self and the unique individualism that Western society has emphasized for hundreds of years. Deeply embedded in both the latent and manifest ideology of Western liberal society is the idea (detailed in the previous sections) of a unique 'inner self', who is encouraged to explore and pursue the avenues of identity that bring them happiness, fulfillment, and existential awareness of their place in society, but modern conditions complicate this process. How is one expected to feel as if they are personally unique, when at any moment they can log-on to the Internet and find legions

of people who, for all intents and purposes, share their same interests, hobbies, outlooks, opinions, demographic characteristics, sense of style, and lexicon? Identity is not dictated entirely by consumption or connection to mass media, it is a process of formation also dependent on personal, lived experiences, and cultural position (Strelitz, 2008), but these too are factors that may be made universal in the context of hyper-connectivity – are there any personal stories, anecdotes, or feelings one may have that haven't also been experienced, shared, and discussed by someone else on the Internet? When there is a meme, gif, emoji, or pop cultural reference that is the most 'appropriate' expected reaction for any online interaction or conversational prompt, what does this reveal about an individual's own agency in such situations? When one accepts, consciously or otherwise, that the concepts of a 'unique' experience or a personal identity become near impossibilities in a world where the majority of the human experience has been collectively shared and uploaded, some potential existential insecurity is an understandable result.

Recent developments in consumerist marketing strategies and the meteoric rise and spread of new communicative technologies have left in their wake a cultural landscape where human identity is tenably entwined with media and commodity consumption, and in many respects reduced to something that is itself subject to the same nature of commodification. The result is a modern conceptualization of identity that is based largely on external factors and extrinsic qualities, and one that, through its disconnected and fragmentary nature, undermines traditional notions of community, connection, and human solidarity (Banda, 2019). And when identity, diminished, unstable, commodifiable, and fleeting as it becomes under such conditions, feels as if it has become lost or ungraspable – when young people feel alienated, confused, disconnected, isolated, or powerless when faced with questions of identity, self, and where they fit in, terrorist and extremist organizations have repeatedly proved that they are willing to provide concrete, tangible, and dangerous answers to these very relevant questions.

### **3.5. Identity and Extremism**

Having established the evolution of personal identity in the West, and the commodified and fragmentary nature in which it is currently formed under the conditions of technologically mediated consumer capitalism, the pieces are now in place to explore

more directly an approach that positions questions of identity as fundamental and central to the processes of radicalization and to the development and justification of extremist ideology. We have seen how the union of technology, consumerism, and globalization have led many to experience uncertainties and insecurities regarding their identity and their place in the world, fears that are represented in rising rates of depression, anxiety, mental illness, nihilism, and alienation, particularly among the younger generation. As summarized by philosopher and social theorist Slavoj Žižek (2018):

We live in an extraordinary era in which there is no tradition on which we can base our identity, no frame of meaningful universe which might enable us to lead a life beyond hedonist reproduction. Today's nihilism – the reign of cynical opportunism accompanied by permanent anxiety – legitimizes itself as the liberation from the old constraints... The only radical alternative to this madness appears to be the even worse madness of religious fundamentalism, a violent retreat into some artificially resuscitated tradition. (p. 4-5)

It is the idea expressed in the last sentence of this quote that is of particular interest. Here, Žižek is suggesting that in response to the modern manifestations of anxiety and identity confusion that many young people experience, some are looking to traditional structures of power and social organization to provide both personal meaning and tangible, clear answers to questions of identity. Religious fundamentalism is the example of a traditional power structure he provides, and this certainly holds (and will be covered in detail in the following chapter), but such sources of authority, and the social hierarchies of power they assume or promote, have taken on many shapes in the context of modern extremist movements. And, when people are willing to express an unflinching commitment to the hierarchies and social orders of traditional authority and power structures, they are given a new opportunity to reaffirm their identity through their radicalization and through their commitment to such ideals (Atran, 2015).

In the modern social world, confusing and alienating as it has proven to be for many, the desire to subscribe to a deterministic social order that is natural and relatively uncomplicated, erroneous as it may be, becomes more appealing for many than trying to make sense of an increasingly complex social world – one where notions of personal identity are becoming increasingly central to social and political life. Modern discussions and representations, in addition to their more complex and sophisticated categorizations, of personal identity signifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, body type, and mental health, while seen as important breakthroughs of recognition and acceptance for many

individuals who have historically (and accurately) felt marginalized based on certain aspects of their identity (transgender people, asexual people, those with chronic depression, etc.), have for others provided another source of identity confusion in an already complicated modern world. For some (and in particular for those who are more likely to embrace an extremist ideology), it is easier or more comforting not to try and understand or empathize with such people, but rather to turn toward ideologies, traditions, of belief structures that emphasize rigid social hierarchies in which all people can be 'accurately' placed.

Such an outlook is, of course, not a new phenomenon. The acceptance of naturalistic social hierarchies based on all manners of empirical and scientific 'proofs' have been utilized throughout history in order to justify a wide range of discriminatory, segregationist, and occasionally genocidal actions and policies. In the wake of the Enlightenment, which is typically and for the most part, accurately, viewed as a humanistic movement which emphasized individual freedom, equality, and the adoption of the scientific method of inquiry (as opposed to a strictly religious one) for understanding the social and natural world, there arose a new fixation to label and categorize, positivistically, all aspects of society. The dark side of this fixation came when such tendencies were applied and used to justify natural social hierarchies based on aspects such as race. Slavery in America, for example, was largely justified on the basis that White people were 'naturally' superior to Black people, and thus the subordination of the former was grounded in scientific 'fact.' The biological science of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inspired as it was by new developments such as phrenology, was used to determine essential and natural 'differences' between races (and other social groups such as criminals/non-criminals), and was used to justify the culturally enforced policies in place at the time (Appiah, 2018). Such a worldview was adopted and applied to its most extreme during the regime of Nazi Germany, where it was assumed that the targeting and subsequent genocide of various social groups was based on a rigid and inarguable hierarchy which placed the Aryan people on the top and tended to see all others as lesser peoples, and in some instances, not as people at all.

While such perspectives and outlooks tended to quickly fall out of favor as the crimes of Nazi Germany were made public, as constructionist epistemologies (which assumed that differences between racial groups were grounded not in nature, but were, for them most part, socially constructed) began to dominate the social sciences, and as

developments in the natural sciences came to show that humans, regardless of race or nationality, tended to be more biologically similar than different, there has recently been a resurgence in the proliferation and popularity of scientific racism, and in the belief of natural hierarchies of social order. Several extremist movements of various ideologies have subscribed to the idea of natural social hierarchies and have used this idea to once again justify their position (or where their position *should* be) at the top of them. A quick visit to 4chan's 'politically incorrect' board, considered to be one of the home-bases of the White supremacist 'Alt-Right' movement (Ludemann, 2018), reveals an apparent obsession with racial classification and hierarchization, where users routinely argue about who should and shouldn't be considered White, how certain ethnic or national groups should be categorized, the intelligence levels of racial groups, and the many cultural, social, and behavioral differences between racial/ethnic groups, all of which are assumed to be innate and naturally occurring. Similarly, various gender-based reactionary movements such as the 'Incel' community and male supremacist groups typically ground their gender-focused ideology in the belief of a natural, hierarchized relationship between men and women based on their fundamental differences. While obvious differences between biological males and females do indeed exist, these groups perceive these differences as entirely biological, and all interactions between men and women as inherently predetermined by these differences, that is, men are 'programmed' to act a certain way, and women equally bound in their range of reactions (Baele et al., 2019).

To summarize, the reliance on assumed hierarchies, on a biological deterministic approach to understanding the differences between social groups, and on an outlook of social categorization that helps frame and justify the ideology of many extremist movements, while not historically unique, have seen a modern resurgence due in part to the ability of such approaches to address the confusion and questions of identity that many are struggling with. For those who are wrestling with who they are, where their place in society is, or with whom they identify, such perspectives provide tangible and concrete answers that are grounded (or believed to be, anyway) in nature, logic, and a scientific and 'correct' understanding of the natural and social world. And, when there are those willing to accept such a hierarchized understanding of the world, there are undoubtedly those also willing to take measures to justify or defend their assumed natural position on the top, particularly when it is perceived to be actively threatened.

Such hierarchical models are based, of course, on notions of identity, structured as they are on identifying factors such as race, gender, religion, or nationality, which may serve an important dual existential function. On the one hand, they offer those who subscribe to them a renewed sense of identity and self, allowing one to relate more directly or actively to their status as a White man, as an American, and so on, while on the other hand they simultaneously offer a sense of purpose, meaning, and power in a world where people, often justifiably, feel as if such things have been lost. Questions of identity and self, exacerbated further by social and economic anxieties (particularly following the 2008 Great Recession), tend to demand answers – answers that can be found within the assumptions of hierarchical organization, where the problems of one group can easily be thought to be caused, directly or indirectly, by the actions of another group. While the distinction and conflicts between in-groups and out-groups, and the roles such things play in the radicalization process have been discussed in the previous chapter, it is worth addressing the extent to which personal identity is entwined in the dynamics of group competition and conflict and how this relates to the adoption of extremist beliefs.

Take the White nationalist, for instance. Having bought in to the concept of race not only as a factor of their personal identity (which, taken by itself is not inherently or necessarily problematic), but as the *most* important aspect of their personal identity, their ‘Whiteness’ becomes a self-ascribed master status from which all other experiences are formulated and filtered through. The White nationalist’s identity, therefore, is deeply invested in their race, for it provides a fundamental sense of who they are, of their values, cultural history, and, for those who subscribe to the more supremacist interpretations of the ideology, it provides justification for their position of superiority above other racial groups. The White nationalist, like anyone else living in the modern age, grapples with existential, financial, social, and personal fears and anxieties, but unlike most, they can address these fears (though not necessarily reconciling them in the process) by identifying a specific source and cause for them. The complex structural and economic factors of late capitalism become exempt as blame is instead ascribed to various scapegoats and out-groups that are thought to be the genuine source of these anxieties. This belief, exaggerated, fabricated, or conspiratorial as it may be, that not only are one’s immediate material problems being caused by some collection of nefarious outgroups, but that one’s status, position, way of life, and indeed their very

existence, are also under attack is commonly expressed by many far-right extremist groups in the West (Holt et al., 2020).

Indeed, all reactionary ideology, regardless of its extremity, can be, according to Corey Robin, distilled to the “meditation on – and theoretical rendition of – the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back” (2018, p. 4). This is why the lure of ideologies that promote authoritarianism or the rigid classification and subjugation of certain social groups (fascism, White supremacy, etc.) can be so potent – they can act as an immediate response to anxiety and powerlessness through the creation of a symbolic community, one that elevates the status, dignity, and power of a perceived ‘chosen’ people or race, while simultaneously dehumanizing and punishing the ‘enemy’ groups that are thought to be the source of all societal ills (Langman & Ryan, 2009). Power is reclaimed through domination, identity is reaffirmed through conflict, and anxiety is cathartically released through directed hatred.

Modern extremist movements in the West are ‘correct’ in their recognition of the problems, fears, and anxieties that are an inescapable byproduct of daily life under late capitalism. While the commodification of identity and the incessant promotion of consumption and consumerism we find in the modern world has nurtured feelings of identity confusion and alienation in many, creating questions of purpose and self that extremist movements have been quick to answer, there is also an ironic and cyclical relationship at play here when considering who these movements believe to be responsible for these conditions.

Consider the topic of same-sex marriage, legalized nationwide in Canada in 2005, and by most Western nations since – including the United States in 2015. For many, the legalization of same-sex marriage was viewed as a positive decision, one that directly benefitted a previously marginalized population, and one that, in the context of a progressive, liberal Western culture, was either overdue or inevitable. And while public support for same-sex marriage in both Canada and the United States remains generally high,<sup>5</sup> there is still defiant opposition from several groups that vary in the extremism of their rhetoric and in the actions that they are willing to take to counter what many of them

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<sup>5</sup> In Canada public support for same-sex marriage is at 76% ([https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/dr/AB2016-17\\_Dominican\\_Republic\\_Country\\_Report\\_W\\_12.11.17.pdf](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/dr/AB2016-17_Dominican_Republic_Country_Report_W_12.11.17.pdf)), in the USA public support for same-sex marriage is at roughly 73% (<https://gssdataexplorer.norc.umd.edu/trends/Gender%20&%20Marriage?measure=marhomo>).

see as evidence of the apparent ‘gay’ or ‘pink’ political agenda that seeks to undermine or destroy traditional family values and/or gender roles in society (Ammaturo, 2015; Buss, 2004). Some of this opposition comes from individuals and groups who oppose same-sex marriage on the grounds of traditional religious beliefs (Godfrey, 2003) and who vary in the actions they are willing to take – from the ‘proper’ legislative approach undertaken by socially conservative politicians such as American Vice President Mike Pence, to the more severe tactics of fringe religious groups like the notorious Westboro Baptist Church who have routinely engaged in behaviors such as the picketing of military funerals in order to protest what they see as America’s inexcusable toleration and embracement of homosexuality (Barrett-Fox, 2016).

Other movements oppose same-sex marriage, and homosexuality in general, less on religious grounds and more on cultural grounds (assuming for a moment that we can neatly separate the two). For example, many members of the Alt-Right see the legalization of same-sex marriage as evidence that society is becoming increasingly ‘degenerate’ – a term whose specific use they borrow from Hitler’s regime where ‘degenerate’ was a label applied to art and thought believed to have originated from ‘un-German’ (ie. Communist, Jewish, homosexual, etc.) sources (Moeller, 2018). For some of the more conspiratorial minded, society’s perceived acceptance of homosexuality is part of a larger ongoing plot to destroy Western culture, including *The Daily Stormer* founder Andrew Anglin, who suggested in his 2016 *Guide to the Alt-Right* that it was in fact the Jews who were behind, in addition to many other social movements, “the homosexual political agenda” (Anglin, 2016, p.13).

The irony here is that many of these groups or movements who oppose same-sex marriage see its new legal status as the result of a lapse of morals in society, or for others as the result of a nefarious ‘gay agenda’ that seeks to undermine and destroy the traditional values of Western culture, and not as a result of the consumeristic conditions of late capitalism – conditions that they are typically willing to justify and defend. The wedding industry in the West is an enormously profitable industry, estimated to have brought in \$72 billion in revenue in the United States alone in 2018 (Sergan, 2018). It is an industry that provides jobs and revenue for wedding planners, bakers, photographers, DJs, servers, makeup artists, hairstylists, dressmakers, tailors, and cooks, to name just a few of the professions who benefit from this industry. From the perspective of a consumer capitalist system, where markets, growth, and potential audience must

continually increase, what reason would those who benefit from the wedding industry, either directly or indirectly, have to oppose the legalization of same-sex marriage and the large increase of potential customers that come as a result? This is, of course, not to suggest that the decision made by many Western nations to legalize same-sex marriage was purely an economic one, but only that there is certainly more direct evidence to suggest that the wedding-industrial complex and the market demands of capitalism were perhaps a more influential force in this decision than any 'pink agenda' conspiracy dreamed up by reactionary movements.

The conditions of late capitalist, globalized, hyper-connected modernity have led to an undeniable crisis of identity in the West as human agency is increasingly inundated and stifled by an abundance of choice and the personal responsibility it presents, as personality is increasingly standardized and commodified, as the alienation and material anxieties of the working and middle classes are steadily amplified, and as the younger generation wrestles with the emotional and psychological side effects of rapid technological shifts that permeate every aspect of their social existence. Modern extremist movements, unwittingly, perhaps, magnify these crises of identity by calling attention to these very real problems, but by shifting their origin and placing their blame not on the structural, cultural, and economic conditions of late capitalist hyper-consumerism, but on the perceived influence of other identity groups. The result is an artificially constructed battleground wherein opposing identity groups (men/women, immigrants/natural citizens, believers/non-believers, Whites/non-Whites, etc.) are locked into what is believed to be necessary conflict, with the only way to establish any meaning, personal purpose, existential fulfillment, or unique sense of self is through the embracement of a warped depiction of identity that, by necessity, obscures the true origin of modern alienation and suffering. The specific ways in which two extremist organizations/movements (the so-called Islamic State and the populist far-right) exploit these conditions will, through an empirical analysis of their media and narrative outputs, be further explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **3.6. Toward a New Theoretical Understanding of Radicalization and Extremism**

The theoretical approach to understanding both the radicalization process and the ideologies linked to modern extremist movements in the West outlined in this chapter

and applied throughout this dissertation is one that centers questions of identity – whether they be related to identity confusion, a perceived loss of identity, commodified identity, or the need to assert a unique sense of identity – as the most important and influential variable for understanding how and why individuals turn to extremism. Extremist movements in the West, whether their ideologies are influenced primarily by issues of politics, race, gender, religion, culture, or some combination thereof, may seem at a glance drastically different (and certainly they are in many ways), but fundamentally they all offer the same thing for those who are attracted to them – simplistic solutions to complex questions of identity and self. Through involvement with extremist movements and/or ideology, whether actively or passively, individuals are granted the relatively rare opportunity to find, discover, define, assert, protect, and/or express identity in a pronounced, empowering, and meaningful way that has become increasingly difficult to do under the noisy conditions of modern late capitalism (Durodié, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2009).

Though, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, while the importance of identity has not been entirely ignored, the concept has largely remained underdeveloped in the field of radicalization and extremism studies. Arguably, the most thorough work detailing a theory of identity has been the 2017 book *Extremism, Radicalization and Security: An Identity Theory Approach* by Julian Richards. In it, Richards presents a theory that centers and emphasizes the role of identity in a comprehensive way and with detail that few scholars in the field have attempted. The main thesis of Richard's approach might best be summarized by the following passage from the preface:

The argument presented in this book, however, is that an identity based approach that begins with a bottom-up analysis of why individuals may be motivated to turn to violence is not only of critical utility for observers and policy-makers alike, but seems to be becoming ever more prescient in an environment of heightened identity politics in contemporary society. Within such a thesis, this book takes the view that identities are social and political constructions based as much on myth as on any reality. (viii)

A few pages later Richards adds:

However, while it is accepted that no individual can operate completely in a vacuum and is the product of his or her environment and history, it is also postulated here that every individual's journey into violent extremism is specific and context-bound. This inevitably reduces the significance, while

not ignoring the effect completely, of top-down actors in the process. (2017, p. 4)

While Richards is correct in his assertion that, “questions of identity are the most central and significant frame for considering the contemporary security picture” (2017, p. 21), the theoretical approach presented here differs in one substantial way – the assumption that the factors contributing to identity are in fact dictated structurally, from the top-down, and not from the bottom-up as Richards suggests. Richards’s theory of identity operates under the premise that individuals, due to their specific standpoints and lived experiences, develop questions of identity and undergo a process of radicalization that is uniquely modeled upon these individualized experiences, channeling the well-established argument in the field of radicalization studies that no two individuals undergo the exact same process of radicalization (see section 1.2). This is likely to be true, but the approach argued in this chapter amends this, arguing that, almost without exception, the specific doubts, fears, and anxieties which complicate notions of identity and potentially lay the groundwork for radicalization are *not* the direct result of individualized experiences, but are instead predicated upon the structural conditions of late-stage capitalist modernity, which themselves shape the individualized experiences that follow.

This perspective, which amends and combines the identity-based approaches of Richards and other scholars with a Marxist interpretation and critique of the capitalist mode of production, presupposes that one’s personal identity, and all struggles relating to it, are less a matter of individual choice and agency, and more a matter of coping with the macro-level structural conditions that are beyond one’s immediate control. The central assumption of this theory of identity, then, is that modern extremism in the West, regardless of its ideological variant, is an *inevitable* byproduct of the macro level, structural conditions of late modernity, and *not* something that chaotically or arbitrarily arises through individual action. In other words, modern structural conditions and macro-level factors have led to a culture in the West where one’s identity and sense of self are exposed to a myriad of historically unique challenges which, if not ‘properly’ addressed, can be ‘answered’ and reconciled through involvement with extremist movements/ideologies, the modern variants of which are primarily tailored toward addressing these challenges. Once again – the modern world creates complex problems of identity, extremist ideology provides easily understandable answers.

This chapter has traced how the concept of identity has historically and culturally been developed in the West over the years in order to argue the case that macro-level structural factors have, to a large extent, *always* dictated how individuals approach and make sense of identity at the micro level. This situation is no different today, and if anything, has only been amplified in the wake of rapid structural changes brought about by globalization, technological and communicative advancements, increased commodification of the self, and the economic fallout of decades of globalized neoliberalism. In the interest of exploring this identity-based theoretical approach further through more direct evidence, the next two chapters will be dedicated to the empirical analysis of the specific ideological, propaganda, and communicative campaigns and presence of two modern extremist groups/movements with a significant presence in the West – the so-called Islamic State (and in particular, their Western-focused media campaigns) and the modern far-right (and their online presence specifically). Specifically, the ways in which the dominant messages, themes, and narratives of these media campaigns have been, consciously or otherwise, tailored toward addressing the various issues of identity outlined in this chapter will be highlighted in order to demonstrate the inseparable relationship between identity and modern extremism.

## Chapter 4. Identity and the Media of the Islamic State

About halfway through the six-minute video, a Caucasian man addresses the camera directly and says in English:

I was one of you. I was a typical Canadian, I grew up on the hockey rink and spent my teenage years on stage playing guitar. I had no criminal record, I was a bright student, and maintained a strong GPA in university. So how could one of your people end up in my place, and why is it that your own people are the ones turning against you at home?

The man featured in this 2014 video was John Maguire, one of the earliest and most publicized cases of a Canadian citizen leaving their nation behind to travel to Syria to fight for the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). Maguire, a young man who, aside from the combat vest he is wearing in the video, looks like the type of person you might find walking the streets of any Canadian city. His appearance in this Islamic State video, wherein he renounces, accuses, and threatens the citizens and government of his former country, caused many to ask the same question that Maguire himself posed – how could someone who once led a comfortable and safe life, with a loving family and strong social network, end up leaving it all behind to fight in a foreign land for an extremist organization?

Since 2013 the Islamic State has emerged as the world's preeminent Islamist extremist organization. And while much of their early notoriety may be attributable to the well-documented ruthlessness and brutality that they were willing to enact on their enemies, the IS also gained infamy for their demonstrated ability to recruit new members from around the globe to fight for their cause of establishing a global caliphate. During the height of the foreign fighter influx, roughly between 2013 and 2015, it was estimated that over 20,000 foreign fighters had left their home countries to fight for the Islamic State, with roughly 20% of them coming from Western nations such as France, Germany, and Canada (Neumann, 2015) – a number that has only increased since. Much of the Islamic State's initial success in foreign recruitment was attributed to the organization's robust propaganda, media, and communications campaign, which incorporated videos of undeniably high production quality and the consistent release of online magazines (Christien, 2016), both of which appeared in a variety of languages

and were often specifically tailored toward Western sensibilities and audiences (Gates & Podder, 2015). In addition, incessant and savvy use of social media platforms like Twitter and social messaging services like WhatsApp allowed the IS to connect directly with potential recruits and sympathizers with unrestricted ease (Davies et al., 2015; Farwell, 2014).

The Internet, in general, has proven to be a valuable tool for the IS – a tool that has largely freed them from their traditional dependence on mainstream media for attention (Klausen, 2015), while simultaneously providing them a powerful and largely unrestrictive communicative platform with which to organize and update their ranks and spread their messages and ideology (Argomaniz, 2015). And while use of the Internet, taken by itself, does not make the IS unique from comparable jihadist and Islamist extremist groups (Richards, 2014), the IS distinguished itself from organizations such as Al Qaeda by marketing and promoting itself, particularly in the online world, to an extent that similar and competing organizations have yet been able to match (Huey, 2015; Mahood & Rane, 2017; Stern & Berger, 2015). This tendency is exemplified by the al-Hayat Media Center, a media arm of the IS that produces propaganda content aimed more directly at Western audiences. Since its inception in 2014 the al-Hayat Media Center has released dozens of professional-quality videos as well as the equally high-quality periodical magazines, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, which have been translated into several languages including English, French, and German (Ingram, 2016). But what exactly are the messages that are being delivered by the IS through the al-Hayat Media Center, who are they being specifically directed toward, and how do they incorporate and provide answers to the questions of identity and self outlined in the previous chapter?

Addressing these questions by analyzing, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the Western-focused media and propaganda output of the IS (and the narratives, themes, and messages contained within) will be the focus of this chapter. The data used for this study consists of various IS-produced videos, the text from IS-produced online periodical magazines, and catalogued social media posts from IS-affiliated Twitter accounts, all produced during the ‘height’ of the organization’s global influence and scope (2014-2018). Sentiment analysis was applied to this data in order to identify commonly occurring words and phrases, to examine how these words and phrases are being used, to highlight any potential differences in the content or severity of messages

between mediums, and to provide potential evidence for the existence of any inherent themes or narratives. Additionally, thematic analysis was applied to this content in order to reach some conclusions regarding the specificities of the narratives, who the target audience is, the methods in which this target audience is being addressed, and how the Islamic State, purposely or otherwise, has effectively channeled (and provided attractive solutions for) modern anxieties surrounding questions of identity into their Western-focused media campaign.

In the wake of recent territory losses brought about by the overwhelming military advantages of its many enemies, the IS of today has had its scope, influence, and power significantly reduced (Azman, 2016). As those loyal to the cause scatter into smaller insurgent cells, as many of the foreign fighters attempt to escape or return to their home countries (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2018), and as their propaganda and social media output continues to dwindle, the threat posed by the IS, while not entirely negated, is undoubtedly less severe than it was during the groups most notorious period of the mid-2010s. As such, the results of this study do little in the way of providing urgent insights as to how to counter, subvert, or combat the IS or its propaganda. However, an in-depth examination of the Western-focused IS media campaign may act as a valuable case study that can provide insights into the themes, narratives, and communicative tactics of effective extremist propaganda, and most importantly, the ways in which the IS successfully acknowledged, channeled, and addressed the questions of identity that were (and are) causing so much confusion and alienation for people in the West – people like John Maguire who convinced themselves that these questions could be answered through fighting (and ultimately dying) for the Islamic State and what it offered its members. However, before outlining the dominant narratives, themes, and topical focuses found in IS's Western-aimed propaganda, it is important to first provide a brief overview of the Islamic State's extensive and notorious media campaign.

#### **4.1. The Islamic State Media Campaign**

In addition to its rapid rise and well-documented ruthlessness, the Islamic State has also proven to be an organization that is adept at using the Internet and new communicative technologies to its advantage, establishing a notable and far-reaching online presence in a relatively short period of time. During the height of this online communicative campaign, it was often noted that there were no other contemporary

Islamist extremist organizations that had succeeded in globally marketing themselves via the Internet and social media to the degree that the IS had (Stern & Berger, 2015). The IS media campaign includes and incorporates a multitude of outputs and platforms ranging from propaganda videos, social media activity, online magazines, forums, blogs, and chatrooms. At the time of its release, this audiovisual media was noted for its technical sophistication, high production value, consistency, and multilingual nature – all of which aided in the construction of a consistent and legitimate brand image (Melki & Jabado, 2016). A stable and high-quality media output in conjunction with constant social media activity allowed the IS to gain global visibility and reach well beyond its relatively limited physical territory. This provided the IS with an opportunity to assert their presence on an international scale, despite the fact that most of the organization’s physical combat activities were limited to their immediate territories in Iraq and Syria (Zelin, 2015). The IS media machine may also partially account for their success in enticing and recruiting individuals and sympathizers from a diverse collection of nations around the world including the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, and many others (Carter et al., 2014; Farwell, 2014).

Much of this media output has been produced by the al-Hayat Media Center, a branch of the IS’s larger media campaign that targets international audiences more directly through ‘Westernized’ production techniques and the use of multiple languages (Christien, 2016; Richards, 2016). al-Hayat has released several propaganda videos featuring English speaking IS soldiers, in addition to periodical online magazines, both of which feature undeniable production talent and proficiency (Gates & Podder, 2015; Mahood & Rane, 2017). The specific components of the IS media campaign analyzed in this study – magazines, videos, and Twitter posts – will now be briefly outlined.

#### **4.1.1. Magazines**

The first English-language IS magazine, *Islamic State News*, was initially released by the al-Hayat Media Center in May of 2014.<sup>6</sup> A total of three issues of *Islamic*

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<sup>6</sup> The clearest precursor to the online magazines released by the Islamic State is most likely Al Qaeda’s *Inspire* magazine, which was initially released online sometime in 2010 (Soriano, 2012). *Inspire*, which was written in English and made readily available to all online, lacked some of the quality and ‘shine’ that would be seen in the IS magazines that followed a few years after, but did share some similarities with the IS variants (Ingram, 2017). Articles contained within *Inspire* urged Al-Qaeda sympathizers around the world to carry out lone wolf attacks on their home soil, often providing details and instructions on how to create homemade weapons and explosives (Colas, 2017).

*State News* were released during the summer of 2014. At approximately the same time (June 2014), four issues of another al-Hayat produced magazine, the *Islamic State Report* were released. When compared to the IS magazines that would come shortly after, *Islamic State News* and *Islamic State Report* were significantly shorter (averaging approximately 5-7 pages in length per issue), and heavily pictorial, containing far less text than their successors (Azman, 2016). The content of these magazines (which were written in English) consisted almost entirely of photo-reporting of IS military campaigns and battle updates (Ingram, 2016; Ingram, 2017).

In July of 2014 the IS (via the al-Hayat Media Center) released the first issue of *Dabiq*, the magazine that would come to serve as one of their media flagships. Far more detailed and expansive (an average issue consists of roughly 60 pages) than its predecessors, *Dabiq*, while still containing many high-quality images and graphics, was more text-based and was composed of several different sections that went beyond standard battlefield updates. Each issue of *Dabiq* (which was released in a variety of languages including English, French, and German) typically contained sections devoted to religious doctrine/ideology, news/battlefield updates, interviews with IS leaders, testimonials from recent IS recruits, women's issues, and calls for international recruitment (Christien, 2016; Colas, 2017; Kibble, 2016).

Initially the al-Hayat Media Center maintained a regular monthly release schedule for *Dabiq*, though production slowed down in 2015 when it became bimonthly and became slower still in 2016 when it was released only quarterly. This decrease in production was possibly the result of an increase in military pressure and attacks against the IS (Azman, 2016). In total, 15 issues of *Dabiq* were released in the two years between July of 2014 and July of 2016, and while it is difficult to pinpoint the direct impact that *Dabiq* may have had on its international audience, it has been suggested that the magazine, to some degree or another, was a contributing factor to the success of the IS global recruitment campaign (Celso, 2014; Ingram, 2016).

As of 2020, there have been no new issues of *Dabiq* since Issue 15 was released in July of 2016, however, in September of 2016, the al-Hayat Media Centre released the inaugural issue of a new magazine, *Rumiyah*. Structurally similar to *Dabiq* in terms of length and production value, *Rumiyah* also shared much of the language and thematic content of its predecessor. Issues of *Rumiyah* were released on a regular

monthly schedule for a full year, though there have been no new issues of the magazine since Issue 13 was released in September of 2017. The IS's recent losses of territory and other various setbacks may be the cause for this sudden cessation of production, and it remains to be seen whether any new issues of *Rumiyah* (or perhaps a new magazine entirely) will be released in the future or if it has run its course after one year of publication.

Though it is difficult to pinpoint the exact role that *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* may have in the larger IS media strategy and the impact that these magazines may have on those who are exposed to them, it has been suggested that the content of these magazines is not necessarily intended to inspire attacks or even to radicalize its readers as initially assumed (Colas, 2017). Rather, the primary intention of IS magazines may be less grandiose and more pragmatic, that is, the purpose of the magazines may simply be to reinforce the ideology and mission of the organization for both current and potential future members alike. Still, the specific impact that IS magazines may have in the larger radicalization process, if any, has yet to be clearly defined.

#### **4.1.2. Videos**

The IS was also known for creating and releasing videos with an undeniable degree of technical proficiency. Many of these videos, specifically those created by the al-Hayat Media Center, target Western and international audiences more directly through their incorporation of multiple languages and through calculated attempts to produce the videos in ways that align with what Western youths are culturally familiar with stylistically (Gates & Podder, 2015). This includes the use of sophisticated production techniques such as superimposed graphics, transitions, rapid cuts, voiceover narration, audio engineering, and background music, indicating that the al-Hayat team has access to both the technology and the expertise required to make videos of a high standard (Macnair & Frank, 2017). While the IS has released a number of videos depicting gruesome acts such as beheadings (Friis, 2015), the videos produced officially by al-Hayat are often more subdued, and focus less on violence and more on portraying the ethnically and nationally diverse soldiers of the IS (including Canadian, French, Australian, and British recruits) as well as the idyllic scenery and sense of community found in the territories the IS controlled at the time (Bourrie, 2016). Videos produced by the IS have been shown to rely more heavily on narration and on the testimonials of

speakers than videos by other jihadist organizations, often selecting speakers (young males primarily) who are capable of communicating with and relating directly to the individuals in Western nations that they are trying to entice (Bérubé, 2018).

While jihadist videos are not exclusive to the IS and have been filmed, produced, and released by various other extremist organizations<sup>7</sup>, the early days and rapid growth of the IS coincided with the increased accessibility and affordability of the technology required to create and share high-quality videos with relative ease. Since the 21<sup>st</sup> century, videos have become an attractive method of propaganda dissemination for terrorist organizations, partially due to the increased access and affordability of video-creating and editing technologies (a standard smartphone is generally all that is required to shoot a relatively high quality video), as well as the ease in which videos may be spread, shared, and catalogued on video-sharing and social media sites such as YouTube (Conway & McInerney, 2008).

### **4.1.3. Twitter**

Twitter acted as a cornerstone of IS media-communication operations during the organization's years of peak activity and quickly became their preferred social media platform (Berger, 2016a). Like video production, the sheer fact that the IS uses Twitter is not particularly noteworthy – potential terrorist use has been a concern since the earliest days of the platform (Weimann, 2010) – what is more striking, however, is the proficiency with which the IS has used Twitter to their advantage. The IS effectively used Twitter as a means of providing both their local soldiers and their global sympathizers with real-time updates, while simultaneously soliciting recruitment, spreading propaganda, and building their international brand (Klausen, 2015). During the initial period of IS use, Twitter made numerous attempts at blocking and deleting the thousands of accounts linked to official IS members and other non-affiliated sympathizers, though a complete removal of terrorist activity on the platform was often

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<sup>7</sup> Jihadist videos have been a relatively common occurrence since the start of the War on Terror. Weisburd (2009) examined a sample of 100 of these videos, identifying several recurrent themes such as leadership, rewards of membership, and the denouncement of enemies. More graphic videos that show uncensored footage of jihadist suicide attacks have also made headlines around the world and have served to highlight the commitment and danger of these organizations to international audiences (Guadagno et al., 2010; Qin et al., 2007).

perceived as a futile endeavor (Neumann, 2013a). However, more recently it would seem as if repeated attempts and more efficient takedown methods have been largely successful as IS activity on Twitter has dropped substantially, if not entirely, since its peak around 2015 (Conway et al., 2019).

## **4.2. Themes and Narratives of Islamic State Propaganda**

Aside from the practicality of fostering communication, the magazines, videos, and social media activity of the IS serve the important function of establishing and spreading cohesive thematic narratives by use of specific language and discourses. These narratives contain the ideologies, interpretations, and explanations that guide the organization and are generally presented in a straightforward way that may be readily understood and digestible by those outside the group – an important factor for soliciting sympathizers and recruitment (Mahood & Rane, 2017). Regardless of how it is delivered, the thematic elements of IS media are generally very consistent, suggesting that the organization is committed to maintaining cohesive narratives and a certain 'brand image' (Macnair & Frank, 2018; Melki & Jabado, 2016). Previous studies focusing on IS media have noted that in the roughly four years since the IS began their international media campaign, the content and message of IS propaganda has undergone little change and has remained largely in line with the original goals and vision of the organization (Kuznar, 2017; Wignell et al., 2017). A selected example of some of the most prevalent narratives found in IS media, all of which may be understood through the lens of identity, will be briefly described for the sake of reference.

### **4.2.1. Spiritual and Existential Fulfillment**

The propaganda material developed by Islamist extremist groups often attempt to portray the jihadi lifestyle as one that is exciting, dangerous, and above all, meaningful (Silke, 2008). Consequently, part of the allure of joining an extremist organization may be attributed to the promises of adventure, action, and glorification that come with such a lifestyle (Baines et al., 2010). These organizations, and the content of their media, offer the possibility of an existentially and spiritually fulfilling life to those who may feel lost, bored, or otherwise unsatisfied with their current position (Cottee & Hayward, 2011). In addition, any affinities, sympathies, or involvement with organizations that one's society

or government has deemed an enemy carry with them certain countercultural and subversive elements, which may be attractive to those who wish to distance themselves from mainstream values and carve out a more distinct existential identity for themselves – an attraction that terrorist media producers are seemingly aware of (Berger, 2016b). The propaganda of the IS is no different in this regard, and the promise of a life where spiritual, existential, and personal fulfilment can be reached through jihad and through a commitment to the organization's cause is a common refrain of their media message (Artrip & Debriz, 2018; Winter, 2018).

#### **4.2.2. Strength, Pride, and Victory**

A common narrative found in Islamist extremist media is one of the continuous victory and forward momentum of the organization. In videos, shots and images that depict victory, successful skirmishes, the aftermath of won battles, the raising of flags, and the bombing of enemy targets are also routine (Neumann, 2008). In contrast, enemies are presented as unjust, weak, and cowardly (Weisburd, 2009). Such belittling of enemies has been a common and long-running tactic of extremist media more generally (Bowman-Grieve, 2013). IS media in particular often portrays the organization and its mission from a perspective of eschatological determinism, this is, they depict themselves as on an unwavering path toward an inevitable and ultimate victory over their enemies. This narrative of victory applies to both short-term victories, such as successful battles and skirmishes, but also to a long-term vision that ends with a total IS victory and the eventual and unchallenged establishment of their caliphate (Farwell, 2014). IS media depicts its soldiers as perpetual winners in both life and death, focusing on notions of progress, growth, and forward momentum despite their 'underdog' status (Zelin, 2015). The ability for one to align and identify with 'winners', as these organizations typically depict themselves to be, is likely to be alluring to those in the West who may feel downtrodden, powerless, or otherwise emasculated within their society.

#### **4.2.3. Friendship and Comradery**

People have an inherent social and psychological need to belong to groups, and extremist organizations have been shown to prey on these base needs with their media outputs (Borum, 2011; Guadagno et al., 2010; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2011).

Promoting a sense of social belonging is a key element in the process of persuading and potentially recruiting new individuals into a movement, and much of the media content produced by terrorist organizations is pitched in a way that is tailored to this (Davies et al., 2015). In his analysis of jihadi videos, Weisburd (2009) noted that shots of mujahedeen brothers traveling together through the landscape, smiling, and enjoying one another's company were common. Though generally portrayed as stalwartly determined and pious, soldiers depicted in IS videos and photos are also shown to be friendly with one another, often engaging in acts of comradeship such as 'hanging out' and eating pizza (Klausen, 2015). Similarly, Huey (2015) found that IS soldiers in videos were frequently presented in a way that emphasized notions of belonging, brotherhood, and comradeship. While the sense of community and comradeship in videos was often expressed by and for male combatants, in IS magazines certain sections were devoted exclusively to the discussion of women's issues, with the theme of sisterhood and friendship between the women of the IS being commonly reinforced (Musial, 2017).

#### **4.2.4. The Narrative of Good and Evil**

IS media typically depicts a very rigid dichotomy between what they believe to be the forces of good, truth, and justice (themselves), and the forces that they believe to be heretical, infidel, or otherwise 'evil' (everyone that is not them, but primarily the nations of the West). This narrative draws heavily from the dualistic interpretation of 'good and evil' found in the texts of Abrahamic religions and allows the organization to clearly establish who their allies and enemies are (I. Richards, 2017). This technique of portraying enemies as a force of evil that is ultimately incompatible with the lifestyles of the 'just' is hardly unique to the IS, and has, for example, been compared to the ways in which the United States and the Soviet Union depicted one another during the Cold War (Zelizer, 2018), though nevertheless it serves as an effective way of implementing a stark 'us vs them' dichotomy that adds a compelling and dramatic element to their media (Ingram, 2016). Aligning oneself with the forces of 'good', may provide a renewed sense of purpose and self-worth for those who may otherwise feel aimless.

## 4.3. Data and Methods

This study applied sentiment analysis to the textual content found in videos, magazines, and Twitter posts made by or affiliated with the Islamic State, in addition to a more detailed thematic analysis of this content, with the intention of revealing the dominant ideological narratives and topical focuses inherent within. The results of this mixed-method approach, which assesses the primary outputs of the Islamic State's Western-focused media campaign during the height of its activity (2014-2018), will then be discussed through the lens of the theory of identity outlined in the previous chapter in order to see how the Islamic State, consciously or otherwise, proved to be well-skilled in capitalizing on the many questions, fears, and anxieties of identity that have become emblematic of the modern Western zeitgeist.

### 4.3.1. Data Collection and Preparation

#### ***Magazines***

Each issue of every officially produced English-language Islamic State magazine (as of 2020) was collected for this study. In total this included 32 individual issues (15 issues of *Dabiq*, 10 issues of *Rumiyah*, 4 issues of *Islamic State Report*, and 3 issues of *Islamic State News*). PDFs of the IS-produced magazines were downloaded from various websites that are devoted to cataloguing extremist media (specifically [clarionproject.org](http://clarionproject.org) and [jihadology.net](http://jihadology.net)). Once compiled, the text of each magazine was extracted and placed in a separate textual document that could then be used for sentiment analysis. In total, the 32 individual issues yielded just over 560,000 words for analysis. While it may be correctly argued that a purely textual analysis of magazines will fail to incorporate the visual information they contain, the language of IS magazines have been shown to effectively portray the organization's ideology, goals, religious interpretations, and renditions of current events (Ingram, 2017; Musial, 2017), and as such, may still potentially reveal much about the IS narratives contained within.

#### ***Videos***

English-language (whether spoken or subtitled) videos produced by the IS were located first by generalized Google searches ("Islamic State propaganda video"), followed by more specific searches through video-sharing sites such as LiveLeak,

various news sites, and other special interest websites devoted to cataloguing Islamic extremist content.<sup>8</sup> In total 30 IS videos produced between 2014 and 2018 were included in this study, and while the IS does produce significantly more video content than this, this study was concerned only with videos that appear in English, and by extension, those that are aimed at Western audiences. Once located, each video was downloaded and manually transcribed into a textual document that could be used for sentiment analysis.<sup>9</sup>

While it may not seem intuitive to apply a method that is so reliant on text to a medium that is so reliant on visuals, the decision to apply sentiment analysis to videos content can be justified, and has been done in the past (see Wöllmer et al., 2013 for an example). While it is true that a certain amount of context and information is lost without the imagery of the videos, the textual transcriptions themselves still provide a rich set of data. This is especially true of the several videos that consist of little more than IS soldiers speaking to the camera. With videos of this type, very little is lost with a purely text-based analysis. Several other videos feature a narrator who espouses IS ideology, which is convenient for the sake of sentiment analysis. Ultimately, while videos may not initially seem like a good fit with sentiment analysis, transcriptions of videos can still provide data that is worth exploring, albeit in lesser volumes, particularly when supplemented with the thematic analysis approach, which takes the visual components of videos into account.

### ***Twitter***

Sentiment analysis has been shown to be well-suited to examining the textual data of Twitter and has been applied to this medium with much more frequency when compared to magazines and videos. The user-generated data of Twitter is vast, primarily textual, topical, and often automatically categorized via hashtags, making it an excellent source for sentiment analysis (Ficamos & Liu, 2016; Wills, 2016; Zhu, 2016). To this end, we made use of a pre-collected dataset of tweets from Islamic State members and global sympathizers. This dataset, which consists of tens of thousands individual, English-language tweets from between 2014 and 2016, has previously been used to test whether machine learning techniques could successfully identify extremist Twitter

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<sup>8</sup> <http://jihadology.net/>

<sup>9</sup> Table A.1 in the Appendix contains a list of all 30 videos included in this study.

accounts based on the language of individual tweets (Ashcroft et al., 2015). The textual content of each individual tweet was extracted and converted into a document that could then be used for sentiment analysis.

Though not expected to make a substantial difference, it is worth acknowledging that while platforms such as Twitter provide a vast amount of potentially valuable extremist content, it can sometimes be difficult to account for the context with which these messages were written. Expressions of humor and sarcasm and other linguistic nuances are generally lost when a strictly sentiment-based approach is applied. The limited length of tweets also presents challenges, as previous sentiment-based approaches have generally focused on examining larger bodies of text. Since an average tweet contains less than 30 words, the amount of potential sentiment expression contained within is understandably limited. Also worth mentioning is the fact that while all of the video and magazine data used for this study comes directly from official Islamic State media outlets (the al-Hayat Media Centre most commonly), much of the data collected from Twitter has been independently created by IS sympathizers and soldiers and is therefore not necessarily representative of the overall IS media campaign 'brand.' These shortcomings aside, Twitter data nevertheless provides a wealth of potential data for linguistic analysis.

#### **4.3.2. Data Preparation, Cleaning, and Processing**

A complete sentiment analysis of the entirety of each of the three textual datasets would yield a vast amount of redundant information about many irrelevant words and terms. To alleviate this, sentiment analysis was applied only to the specific topics and words that were of the most interest. While similar studies suggest manually selecting certain keywords (Ghajar-Khosravi et al., 2016), the decision was made instead to focus simply on the nouns that were the most reoccurring, a decision that was informed by the methodology utilized in a similar study by Scrivens and colleagues (2017). For each text document, the top 200 nouns based on frequency were identified for sentiment analysis under the assumption that the words that the IS uses the most in their media are generally words that serve an important narrative function.

Once the data from the magazines, videos, and Twitter was compiled and converted in textual format, it required a certain level of cleaning and preprocessing

before it could be subjected to the sentiment analysis. This was particularly true of the Twitter data, which has been known to be exceptionally 'noisy', often containing a large amount of grammatical variance and mundane chatter (Burnap & Williams, 2015). In line with the recommendations put forth by previous Twitter-based studies (see Agarwal, 2011; Ghajar-Khosravi et al., 2016; Ficamos & Liu, 2016; Pandarachalil et al., 2015; Martínez-Cámara et al., 2012), the following preprocessing steps were taken in order to make the textual data as 'clean' and straightforward as possible for the sentiment analysis.

### ***Removal of Redundant Information***

Oftentimes tweets are cluttered with information that is not directly relevant or applicable for sentiment analysis. This information includes hyperlinks/URLs, the hashtag symbol (#), digits, references to other users, retweets (denoted by the letters 'RT'), and emoticons. This information, while not necessarily lacking in inherent value, is not properly recognized by sentiment analysis algorithms, and must therefore be removed beforehand. This process was done semi automatically by searching the Twitter text document for certain key characters and symbols and deleting them.

### ***Removal of Repeated Letters***

Because the writing on Twitter can oftentimes be quite informal, words are often spelled in elongated or exaggerated ways. For example, someone expressing affirmation might simply write the word 'yes', while another might write the word as 'yeesssssssss!!'. To account for this, all elongated versions of any particular word were replaced with the properly spelled version.

### ***Combining Alternate Spellings of Words***

Because certain words have different spellings depending on location (for example, the American 'color' vs. the British 'colour'), it is important to combine these alternate spellings prior to sentiment analysis so that they are not analyzed separately. This is particularly true when dealing with foreign words and terms, as this particular dataset does. While the dataset is comprised of English-language tweets, the IS in all of their English-language media, including magazines and videos, often incorporates a large amount of Arabic words and phrases – many of which have a number of alternate

spellings. To account for this, all alternative spellings of words were combined into one specified variation in order to be analyzed collectively.

Additionally, all possible variations of a particular noun, rather than being assessed individually, were combined and analyzed as a singular block. For example, the word 'crusader' accounts for all possible variations of this word, including the plural 'crusaders' and the possessive 'crusader's.' Similarly, some Arabic words may have slight variations in their English spellings. For example, the word 'kufaar' (a word that roughly translates as 'disbeliever' or 'infidel') may also be spelled as 'kuffar' or 'kafir', and as such, all alternate spellings were combined and analyzed together, a decision borrowed from the methodology utilized in a similar study (Ghajar-Khosravi et al., 2016).

### **4.3.3. Methods of Analysis**

#### ***Sentiment Analysis***

Sentiment analysis has been defined as, "a process that automates mining of attitudes, opinions, views and emotions from text, speech, tweets, and database sources through Natural Language Processing" (Kharde & Sonawane, 2016, p. 5). More simply, sentiment analysis programs allow the language of textual data from a wide range of sources to be automatically labelled and categorized as positive, neutral, or negative based on the types of words used and the context in which they appear. Take for instance the sentence, 'I hate cockroaches, they are disgusting.' Sentiment analysis can look at the nouns/subjects of a sentence, in the case 'cockroaches', and apply a positive, negative, or neutral (zero) sentiment score to them based on the surrounding words and the context with which they are used. In this example, the word 'cockroaches' will be assigned a negative sentiment score since it is preceded by the word 'hate', and followed by the adjective 'disgusting', both of which are labeled negatively by sentiment analysis software. Based on the sentiment results of this one sentence you could then conclude that cockroaches are viewed and depicted negatively by the author of the sentence. Obviously with larger samples and collections of text, more precise and accurate sentiment results can be uncovered.

Using words and phrases as the basic units of analysis, sentiment analysis aims to find the hidden-yet-significant meanings within large bodies of text and is thus a well-suited method for uncovering linguistic trends present within textual media (Cho & Shin,

2014). Sentiment analysis has been demonstrated as a time-efficient, inexpensive, and relatively unlaborious means of automatically sorting through and categorizing large amounts of text through the use of automatic algorithms (Philander & Zhong, 2016).

Once the keyword lists for each document were cleaned and processed, they were subjected to sentiment analysis via the use of SentiStrength, an open software designed for this purpose.<sup>10</sup> Following the analysis via SentiStrength, sentiment values for each individual noun were provided. However, due to the large discrepancy in word counts between the three datasets the sentiment values needed to be standardized in order for these values to be directly comparable across mediums. This was done by taking the raw sentiment score of any given noun and determining the average expected sentiment expression of that noun across 1000 words. Expressed as an equation:

$$\textit{standardized sentiment score} = \textit{raw sentiment score} / (\textit{total word count} / 1000)$$

The resulting values indicate the expected sentiment score of a particular word per every 1000 words of text – values that can then be directly compared regardless of how many words exist within the original text document. All values presented are based on this equation and should be interpreted thusly.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

Similar in nature to content or discourse analysis (Brown & Yule, 1983), thematic analysis acknowledges the importance that language, and the presentation of language, has on the construction and exhibition of ideas, narratives, and social reality, and has been used to varying degrees in previous studies of extremist media (Goerzig & Al-Hashimi, 2015; Ghajar-Khosravi et al., 2016). Simply, thematic analysis is a method for identifying patterns and trends in qualitative data, making it a suitable fit for the analysis of the more visual components of IS media (videos, especially), where the blending of images, sounds, and language create a well of potentially rich thematic data to draw from. The optimal thematic analysis approach, outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and adhered to in this study, involves following the process of data familiarization, coding, and theme identification. To this end, each video was watched several times, with careful attention paid to both the presentation of the content and the content itself. Notes

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<sup>10</sup> <http://sentistrength.wlv.ac.uk/>

on the videos were then examined while recurrent themes were extracted, categorized, labelled, and defined.

In addition, once the specific words in the textual data with the highest and lowest sentiment values were distinguished (as outlined in the previous section), they were used as a starting point for the identification of potential narrative themes through thematic analysis. For example, the results of the sentiment analysis indicated that the word 'praise' was a highly positive word across all three datasets. With this in mind, instances of the word 'praise' were manually located throughout the datasets in order to see how this word was being applied and to discern the ways in which the comparatively high sentiment value of this word potentially supported the existence of particular themes or narratives. Specific examples that are particularly representative of these themes or narratives have been pulled as examples for the following discussion.

#### **4.4. Results and Analysis**

Table 4.1 presents the average sentiment values across each form of media (magazines, videos, Twitter). These results indicate that, on average, the sentiments surrounding the words and language used by the IS in their videos (-5.47) tend to be more negative than those seen in their magazines (-0.87) or on Twitter (-0.94), which have comparably similar values. When all words from all media types are taken into account, there is an average sentiment value of -1.36, indicating that the majority of the language used by the IS is negative in nature.

These results indicate that the chronologically earliest magazine, *IS News*, has an average sentiment score (-13.11) that is noticeably more negative than any of the magazines that succeeded it. *Dabiq*, which was the most prolific IS magazine in terms of the number of issues released, has the lowest average sentiment value (-0.70) of the four, and is the closest to the neutral value of zero, although the average sentiment of *Rumiyah* (-0.77) is closely comparable. While the average sentiment score of all magazines is a negative value (-0.87), this value is close to the neutral value of zero, indicating that while IS magazines tend to consist of language that is negative, this language is not particularly egregious. With regard to videos, the difference in average sentiment indicates that although the language of all videos tends to be quite negative, those produced by the al-Hayat Media Center are closer to neutral than those that are

not. The overall average sentiment of IS tweets was -0.94, a value that while representing negative sentiment, is close to the neutral value of zero, and is thus not particularly overt.

**Table 4.1 Average Sentiment Value of Islamic State Media Formats**

Magazines	Average Sentiment
IS News	-13.11
IS Report	-1.40
Dabiq	-0.70
Rumiyah	-0.77
All Magazines	-0.87
Videos	
al-Hayat	-4.47
Non al-Hayat	-7.57
All Videos	-5.47
Twitter	-0.94
All Media	-1.36

It is worth noting that the average word sentiment value expressed by the Islamic State across all forms of media was negative (-1.36), indicating the organization’s predilection towards the use of language that is intrinsically negative. Even words that one might logically predict the IS would use favorably, such as ‘Islamic’, ‘Allah’, or ‘Muslim’, tended to be some of the most negatively-valued words of all. Ultimately, the overall negative use of language serves to highlight the feelings of dread, violence, and antagonism that is inherently present in online IS media narratives – even when describing themselves and their beliefs (Winter, 2018).

This negative sentiment was shared across the various media platforms and although the average sentiment values of Twitter and magazines are quite similar, the language expressed in videos tended to be much more negative on average. There are several potential reasons as to why the language used in videos is more consistently negative than the language used on Twitter or in magazines. For example, the way in

which language is delivered via videos is noticeably different than the way it is delivered via Twitter and magazines. IS videos have been previously noted as being more 'commercialized' and exuberant than their text-based counterparts, taking many stylistic cues from Westernized media (Richards, 2016). To serve as effective and enticing propaganda, the language utilized by videos is therefore more extreme in both its content and delivery. Videos express language audibly and in combination with dynamic visual imagery, while Twitter and magazines express language purely through text, which is only occasionally accompanied with visual pictures or graphics. Those delivering the messages in IS videos, often IS recruits and soldiers, tend to speak in a very fervent and impassioned way, relying heavily on personal experience, whereas the text of magazines and Twitter tend to be more information-based and aimed at providing 'factual' accounts of recent events and religious interpretation. For example, compare the information portrayed in the following tweets:

IS managed killing 4 soldiers of the Syrian regime forces they were ambushed on the road (Twitter).

More than 30 syrian regime forces have been killed in addition to 40 injured & 15 missing in the past 3days battles with the IS (Twitter).

With the following excerpt from the al-Hayat video *Honor is in Jihad*:

They are preparing you to be like sheep, getting you ready for the next genocide, the next slaughter. Remember the last war in Bosnia and how the same government, together with those around them prepared the genocide in Srebrenica and many other genocides and many other killings of Muslims and the raping of our Muslim sisters.

Though this is a handpicked example, it represents the general tendency for the language expressed in the videos to be noticeably more extreme, containing highly negative words such as 'genocide', 'slaughter', and 'raping', when compared to the more nuanced and fact-driven language of the tweets and magazines.

Table 4.2 presents the specific five words that were found to be the most negative and the most positive across the various media sources.<sup>11</sup> These results indicate a degree of consistency with regard to how certain words are used across different media sources. For instance, the words 'islamic' and 'attack', were identified as

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<sup>11</sup> Table A.2 in the Appendix contains a more exhaustive list of various extremely valued words in the dataset.

words with the most negative use across all three media types, while the word 'praise' was identified as one of the most positively-valued words across all media.

**Table 4.2 Most Negatively and Positively Valued Words of Islamic State Media**

Most Negatively Valued Words	Average Sentiment	Most Positively Valued Words	Average Sentiment
<b>Magazines</b>			
islamic	-7.58	security	1.71
state	-6.87	praise	1.03
war	-6.73	blessing	0.96
attack	-5.46	truth	0.84
army	-4.43	support	0.82
<b>Videos</b>			
battle	-26.14	god	14.55
media	-23.79	praise	8.01
war	-22.17	lord	5.91
islamic	-19.06	victory	5.48
attack	-18.96	blessing	5.45
<b>Twitter</b>			
attack	-16.31	side	0.72
syria	-8.95	support	0.58
islamic	-8.90	worship	0.18
state	-8.53	praise	0.11
iraq	-7.93	reward	0.10
<b>All Media</b>			
war	-10.71	god	2.90
islamic	-9.62	praise	2.13
attack	-9.40	blessing	1.27
state	-8.76	lord	1.14
death	-5.12	victory	1.14

By looking closer at the specific words with the highest and lowest sentiment values, we can see the importance that the IS places upon certain concepts. The corresponding sentiment values of several of the most and least positive words make intuitive sense. For example, words such as 'blessing', 'praise', and 'worship' are used and depicted positively across all media, a fact which may have been safely assumed

beforehand. The following examples illustrate how IS magazines use these particular words in a positive way:

All **praise** is due to Allah. May **blessings** and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah, and upon his family, companions, and followers (*Dabiq* 11, p. 4).

As there is nothing worthy of **worship** other than Allah, the True King, there is nothing more deserving of our praise, love, and obedience than Him, the Mighty, the Wise (*Dabiq* 15, p. 26).

All **praise** belongs to Allah, Lord of the creation, and may peace and **blessings** be upon the one who was sent with a sword as a mercy to mankind (*Rumiyah* 7, p. 18).

However, there are other words which contain sentiment values that would seem to contradict expectations. For instance, the word 'Allah', which was used positively in the previous examples, had one of the most negative average sentiment values across all media (-3.33). This negative value may be explained by the way in which the word 'Allah' is used by the IS, more specifically, as a means of justifying negatively described behavior as expressed in the following examples:

The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its hear will continue to intensify – by **Allah's** permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq (Foreword of every *Dabiq*).

May **Allah** continue to humiliate the secularist murtaddīn in all their colors and stripes (*Dabiq* 2, p. 13).

Thus, do not let the enemy of **Allah** catch his breath or fortify his defenses. Set up ambushes. Be relentless in the fight and be severe in combat (*Rumiyah* 4, p. 5).

And what is waiting for them is even more disastrous and bitter, by the help of **Allah** (*Rumiyah* 10, p. 7).

These examples show that even though Allah is often spoken of with reverence and praise in IS media, His name is also used to defend and support severely negative responses to and recommendations for enemies. This trend supports the idea of religious righteousness and retribution which has been previously established in similar studies (Ingram, 2017; Kibble, 2016), that is, the IS finds justification in their extreme actions and ideology through the belief that what they do is supported by and based upon the true interpretation of Allah's will.

The results of the sentiment analysis of IS media, particularly the identification of the most positive and negative words, can act as a starting point for the identification of specific ideological narratives. Using the recurring words with the highest and lowest sentiment values as potential thematic indicators, it becomes possible to identify and further decipher the specificities of the dominant narratives present within Islamic State media. This, in conjunction with the detailed thematic analysis of videos resulted in the identification of the following four thematic/narrative categories, all of which speak to a particular aspect of modern, Western identity.

#### **4.4.1. The Narrative of Strength, Victory, and Power**

In the final minutes of the *Flames of War* video, the English-speaking narrator appears on screen for the first time, though behind a mask, as soldiers, recently captured by the IS, dig their own graves just behind him. The captured soldiers laud the strength and piety of the IS soldiers, one of them claiming that, “it’s as if Allah has blessed the Islamic State. They captured [our base] in a matter of seconds even though there were 800 of us and they only numbered in the dozens” (whether this statement is factually true, or whether the prisoner was forced to exaggerate his claims is open to interpretation). In the next sequence, the narrator and a few other IS soldiers stand before the prisoners, now kneeling before the graves dug by their own hand. Speaking to the camera, the narrator promises that, “the flames of war are only beginning to intensify, the fighting has only just begun.” The prisoners are then executed by a shot to the head before they tumble into the graves. The film ends with a warning to America and to the West about proxy wars or further engagements in the area: “As for the near future, you will be forced into a direct confrontation... and the sons of Islam have prepared for this day.” This evocative scene, itself an unabashed display of power, is a potent example of the messages of strength and victory commonly presented within al-Hayat videos and IS media more generally.

Though it may seem unusual that the words ‘Islamic’ and ‘state’ are two of the most negatively valued words across all IS media, this can possibly be explained by the ways in which the IS represents themselves through the language of their media. More specifically, when referring to themselves, their soldiers, or their actions, the Islamic State tends to use intense and often cruel language that depicts the fury and strength of the organization. This narrative of strength serves to depict the IS as a powerful

organization capable of inflicting great harm to its enemies. The following excerpts highlight the ways in which the words ‘Islamic’ and ‘state’ are used to portray a narrative of strength and fury within their media:

With every kāfir that is enlisted to fight the Islamic State, every bomb that is dropped onto the homes of its people, every lie that is circulated against it by the international media, and every coin that is spent to try to halt its advance, the Khilāfah and its mujāhidīn only grow stronger, more determined and more defiant (*Dabiq* 5, p. 13).

By Allah, black days are coming to you. By Allah, you will fear to walk in the streets. You will fear working in your offices. You will fear. You will be terrorized and feel depressed even in your homes. We will put fear in you and terrorize you even in your dreams when you are asleep (*Honor is in Jihad* video).

Islamic state slaughter 4 of peshmerga fighters in #Hawija #Iraq (Twitter).

When using words such as ‘slaughter’ and ‘terrorized’ to describe the actions that they themselves take, it becomes clear as to why the IS is depicted ‘negatively’ within their own media. However, though the sentiment value of these words are inherently negative, the IS are using them in a way that projects strength and commitment, and are thus not likely to consider these representations as negative.

Another way in which al-Hayat portrayed the strength of IS soldiers was through the use of threats against their enemies. By commonly threatening and belittling their many (and often militarily superior) enemies, IS soldiers are depicted as perpetually brave and unafraid. Threats were made in many of the videos and ranged in both their specificity and target. In some instances, they were direct – in *My Revenge*, a French-speaking man directs his threat at the then French president, exclaiming, “this is a gift for François Hollande”, before firing his weapon into a target painted onto a nearby wall. Generally, threats were made in a vaguer manner, as is the case in *Honor is in Jihad* wherein an IS soldier speaking to and pointing directly at the camera promises that:

By Allah, black days are coming to you. You will fear to walk in the streets. You will fear working in your offices...We will put fear in you and terrorize you even in your dreams when you are asleep.

Similarly, in *Blood for Blood*, the lyrics of the song that plays throughout hint at the violent acts that IS are ready to engage in:

Well-armed soldiers are ready to kill you...our swords are sharpened to slice necks, men are ready to blow themselves up...your roads will soon be rigged with mines by well-trained and determined brothers, our warriors are everywhere.

Aside from issuing threats, IS media also routinely attempts at belittling and undermining the resolve and ability of its enemies. In the *Flames of War* video, as footage is shown of IS soldiers storming an enemy building, the narrator states that, “the secularists tasted the wrath of Allah, the flames scorching them, forcing them to run like cowards,” while later in the video, the narrator describes the defeated soldiers of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) as fighting “with a secularist ideology for the sake of land for a secularist state,” adding that, “strong fighters they were not, their very foundation was weak, they only stood to fall.” The lyrics of the song featured in *Hijrah* claim that, “our enemies are in severe terror”, while the narrator in the *No Respite* video directly questions the determination of American soldiers, arguing that America:

May have the numbers and weapons, but your soldiers lack the will and resolve. Still scarred from their defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq they return dead or suicidal with over 6500 hundred of them killing themselves each year...we continue to haunt the minds of your soldiers and sow fear into their hearts, with 18 of your soldiers committing suicide each day.

As these words are delivered, images of coffins draped in American flags, distraught American soldiers, and pharmaceutical pills (to treat psychological distress) are shown on the screen, implying that American soldiers, lacking the faith and piety of IS soldiers and fighting for secularism, are destined to either die, or to return from combat as emotionally scarred and haunted.

Many of the negatively valued words found in IS media were used in a way that belittled, insulted, or taunted their many enemies. The preferred term for IS enemies, *kuffar* (which roughly translates as ‘disbelievers’), was often used in conjunction with words that described the cowardice, ineffectiveness, and hypocrisy of IS opponents. Even attempts at providing ‘factual’ news updates were often tinged with negative depictions of IS enemies. This all serves to establish the narrative of the humiliated enemy, exemplified by the following excerpts:

Allah continued to humiliate the enemies of the Islamic State, especially in Iraq, where deviant forces and their high-tech US weaponry were up against the mujahedeen (*Flames of War* video).

You kafir your burning aren't you the Islamic project is winning in syria you kafir (Twitter).

IS were able 2 kill about 35 soldiers of d SAA & destruction of 2 tanks & armored & seize munitions after d ambush in east alsafirah War against #IS a proven failure (Twitter).

The final way in which the narrative of strength and power was displayed was through an emphasis on past, present, and future IS victories. The most reoccurring, positively-valued, and non-religious word within the IS media was the word 'victory.' The frequency of this word and the way in which it is used by the IS constructs the final media narrative – that of constant and continual victory. The narrative of victory can be seen in the following excerpts:

Life goes on with or without us! The caravan goes on with or without us! Victory is a guarantee just as much as Death is! (Twitter).

So do not fear the enemies of Allah on account of your small numbers and their large numbers as long as you are upon His order and are upright in obedience to Him and to His Messenger, for indeed triumph and victory will be yours and not theirs (*Dabiq* 6, p. 12).

Indeed, your brothers the mujahedeen were blessed with victory by Allah and were blessed with consolidation after long years of jihad and patience and fighting the enemies of Allah (*Flames of War* video).

And indeed the victory is forthcoming for the Muslims because it's the Promise of Allah that certainly breaks not His promise (*Orlando Attack* video).

The victory of the IS in all of their endeavors is presented as something that is a guarantee, something that is promised by religious authority. The Islamic State portrays themselves in their media as an organization that is continually growing, while at the same time being consistently victorious in their military efforts. The growth of the IS is repeatedly stressed by the use of rhetoric and language relating to the expansion of both territory and personnel. In *No Respite*, the narrator, accompanied by visual infographics, asserts that IS territory is, "remaining and expanding", and is now, "already greater than Britain and eight times the size of Belgium", while in *My Revenge* the lyrics of the song playing throughout the video make the claim that "after all these years of fierce battles, the Khilafah thrives once again and the time has come for revenge."

Past victories of the IS are glorified and are used as a means of painting a picture of constant military success. The video *My Revenge* makes specific reference to

the recent attacks at the Bataclan theatre in Paris and the Brussels Airport, showing CCTV and emergency footage of the aftermath of these attacks, the implication being that the destruction caused by these attacks unfolded exactly as according to plan. *Flames of War*, which is shot and edited in a documentary-style format, tells the story of IS military success, complete with intimate footage of skirmishes and battles, shots of IS soldiers raising their flag over captured buildings, all while the familiar narrator describes the importance and impact of each victory.

Despite emphasizing their perceived and expected successes and victories, the narrative constructed by IS media still tends to portray the IS as the hero in a traditional 'underdog' story, wherein the small but dedicated IS must endure and thrive against the enemy forces of the West and their overwhelming advantages of land, numbers, and weaponry. Unfazed by their admitted underdog status, soldiers in the videos remain confident that their faith and piety will see them through to victory. In *No Respite* the narrator claims that despite the "countless deviant factions raising their false banners" against them, the IS remains unwavering in their commitment. As an image appears on screen showing the flags of all the nations that have officially opposed the IS, the narrator confidently offers a challenge – "bring it on, all of you, your numbers only increase us in faith...gather your allies, plot against us, and show us no respite, our ally is the greatest, He is Allah." This narrative establishes a depiction of the IS as righteous, strong, and stalwart, while simultaneously decrying its enemies as cowardly and ineffective soldiers, who despite having the advantage in terms of numbers and weaponry, are still unable to defeat the superior forces of the IS. This narrative allows the IS to use their underdog status as an advantage, showcasing the dedication and purity of its soldiers when compared to the those of the enemies, who are negatively depicted as pawns of corrupt and hypocritical regimes.

#### **4.4.2. The Narrative of Spiritual and Existential Fulfillment**

The results of the sentiment analysis show that while a majority of the words used by the IS were used in a negative context, a large portion of words that were positively-valued were those of a religious nature ('god', 'praise', 'blessing', 'lord', 'worship'). This highlights the narrative of religious righteousness, piety, and fulfillment present in much of the IS media. When describing both themselves and their enemies, the IS tends to rely heavily on destructive and apocalyptic language, yet when describing

their religious conviction, the tone of the language shifts from one of hostility to one of reverence. From this it may be inferred that while the majority of IS media uses language that is hostile or otherwise negative, this language softens and become more positive when discussing matters of religion. The pious narrative is depicted in the following examples:

All praise is due to Allah who prohibited oppression for himself and made it illegal between His slaves. May blessings and peace be upon Allah's Messenger...and may blessings and peace also be upon his companions and those who follow him (*Dabiq* 10, p. 12)

Praise be to Allah for all the blessings He has given us. We thank Allah for joining us all together here in Sham. We are honored and proud to present ourselves as the slaves of Allah coming from the land of the Balkans (*Honor is in Jihad* video).

May Allah blessing the Khilafah for organizing this good events (Twitter)

Praise be to Allah who, by His mercy and support, all good comes to completion (*Join the Ranks* video).

These examples serve to reinforce the notion that the IS is operating under the will of God, and is thus justified in all of their worldly actions. It also serves to establish the idea that IS soldiers are fighting for a cause that is beyond this physical realm, a cause that they describe using language that is positive, which is a stark contrast to the negative language that they favor nearly everywhere else.

Particularly common amongst the videos aimed at recruitment were the appeals made to those in the West who may feel spiritually or existentially unsatisfied or unfulfilled with their current lifestyle. The IS soldiers featured in the videos cleverly tap into this dissatisfaction and promise that the life of an IS recruit is one that is joyous, full of honor, and meaningful, ensuring that both worldly and spiritual fulfillment will be delivered to those who pledge themselves to the cause. Soldiers of the IS are depicted as pious, strong, well-trained, and determined, but also as very happy and joyful. To those in Western nations who may feel depressed or unhappy, the IS offers a remedy. In *No Life Without Jihad* a British IS recruit empathizes:

To all my brothers living in the West, I know how you feel. In the heart you feel depressed. The cure for the depression is jihad. You feel like you have no honor... my brothers, come to jihad and feel the honor we are feeling, feel the happiness that we are feeling.

Similarly, in *The Chosen Few*, a Canadian IS recruit notes that before he came to Syria he “had money, I had family, I had good friends... even though I wasn’t rich, I was making it, it was good,” yet despite these worldly comforts, he still felt unhappy, something that changed when he devoted his life to the IS. The happiness of IS soldiers is further evidenced by the many shots of them laughing together, painting a picture of friendship and belonging that may be missing in the lives of many potential recruits.

Aside from happiness on this Earth, the recruits featured in al-Hayat videos also guarantee spiritual fulfillment and reward in the afterlife. In the *Hijrah* video, we see footage of an IS leader addressing the crowd, “if you knew what was in jihad, of reward, honor, loftiness, and might, in this world and the hereafter, none of you would sit back or remain behind,” his words indicating that anyone who accepts the promise of jihad would be inclined to make the decision to commit themselves. In some instances, potential recruits were reminded that their worldly status or possessions would not follow them into the afterlife. In *No Life Without Jihad* an IS recruit asks:

Are you willing to sacrifice the fat job you’ve got, the big car you’ve got, the family you have, are you willing to sacrifice this for the sake of Allah? If you sacrifice something for Allah, Allah will give you 700 times more than this.

While in *The Chosen Few* video a similar message is delivered:

You can easily earn yourself a high station in the next life by sacrificing just a small bit of this worldly life, the trade is a very good trade, it’s like trading something worthless for the most precious diamond in the world.

The allure of the afterlife is also represented by the ways in which dead IS soldiers are depicted. Several of the videos devote time to glorifying the martyrs who have fallen in battle, often accompanied by the soldier’s name and a message (“may Allah accept him”). Furthermore, dead IS soldiers are not necessarily portrayed in a tragic or unfortunate light, but rather through a lens of pride, reverence, and enlightenment, with many of the corpses shown with half-smiles on their faces. Whether or not these facial expressions were manipulated postmortem could be argued, but regardless, the image that is depicted of the dead is one of contentedness, implying that they have fulfilled their earthly duty and found everlasting peace and reward in the afterlife.

### 4.4.3. The Narrative of Grievance, Victimization, and Islamophobia

Interestingly, while words dealing with religion tended to have some of the highest average sentiment values, the word for someone who practices the religion of Islam, 'Muslim', had a negative sentiment value, particularly within IS magazines (-4.57). Initially this would seem to go against the previously mentioned trend of religious positivity, however, a closer examination of how the word 'Muslim' is used in IS media shows that it is not Muslims themselves that are depicted negatively, rather, it is the actions and attitudes of others toward Muslims that contribute to the negative score. The global Muslim population are often depicted in IS media as the victims of rampant Islamophobia spearheaded by the West. The following examples use the 'negative' language of violence to highlight the narrative of the victimized Muslim and may partially explain the word's negative average sentiment value:

America, the evil, crusade, infidel among the worst of the unbelievers and harshest in the war against Islam and its people. It has killed millions of **Muslims** in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. In fact, it's the spearhead of the war on Islam. (*Orlando Attack* video).

Know that Allah resurrects you naked and you'll have your sins on your neck, Allah is gonna show you the sister that got violated, the child that got beheaded for being a **Muslim**, it will be brought in front of you, the brothers that gave their lives their bodies will be shown in front of you and Allah will ask you, 'where were you?' (*No Life Without Jihad* video).

They carried on with their pacifist and even pro-democracy da'wah while **Muslim** women around the world were being abused, vilified, imprisoned, and violated at the hands of the kuffar and their puppets (*Rumiyah* 1, p. 15).

In Turkey, the communists began rioting, and even attacking and killing **Muslims** in anger over the course of events on the battlefield (*Dabiq* 5, p. 15).

When commonly surrounded and described by words such as 'killing', 'beheaded', 'violated', and 'abused', it becomes clear as to why the word 'Muslim' retains the negative sentiment value that it does, though it must be acknowledged that this negative score is not the result of hostile depictions of Muslims, but rather the result of hostile actions described *toward* Muslims.

No faction in any conflict is likely to accept the label of villain or to see themselves as the 'bad guys', on the contrary, a common goal of propaganda is to

outline the villainous tendencies and actions of the enemy while maintaining their own image of integrity and righteousness. The videos produced by al-Hayat were no exception to this, and in many instances, the enemies of the Islamic State, most often the West, were portrayed as immoral, bloodthirsty, and generally out to rid the world of Islam. This message of grievance and victimization was typically delivered by focusing on the past crimes committed by the West against Muslims, and on the perceived anti-Islamic coalition led by nations such as America and Russia. For example, the entirety of the *Blood for Blood* video is essentially devoted to highlighting the crimes that the West has committed against the IS. Throughout the video, a young boy pensively wanders through the rubble of destroyed buildings, the implication being that this young boy's neighborhood has been completely destroyed by the forces of the West. As the boy sorrowfully looks into the blown-out buildings, finding no one else, flashes of 'enemy' leaders such as Barrack Obama, Vladimir Putin, and Manuel Valls are seen, accompanied by the lyrics of the song heard in the video:

Your soldiers kill our children and you call them heroes, you show no remorse for the thousands you killed... You grant yourself the right to massacre us in the name of your so-called precious freedoms... Your fighter jets bomb and destroy, your intellectuals look on without shame, your media conceals all the atrocities, our dead are not being mentioned by your media. You are liars and manipulators.

The *My Revenge* video hits many of the same thematic notes, featuring another song with lyrics aimed at exposing Western atrocities such as, "Valls wants to threaten us and see our corpses amassed. When their planes take off and bomb our schools and when they take control of our lands and plunder our oil."

Another means by which al-Hayat attempts to arouse support is by portraying the conflict not necessarily as 'the world versus the Islamic State', but rather, many of the videos point to history and the current geopolitical climate to paint a picture of 'the world versus Islam.' Audio and video of speeches made by Western leaders were often used to highlight the perceived war against Islam, including a clip of George W. Bush's infamous "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" ultimatum (seen in *Flames of War*) and another of then French Prime Minister Manuel Valls affirming that, "we are at war... We will execute and strike, destroying this enemy. We will respond to this aggression justly, with high resolve and will" (seen in *My Revenge*). In *The Religion of Unbelief*, the narrator, in the style of a documentary, explains how America and

Russia, once enemies during the Cold War, have now become allies against the Islamic State, describing this as hypocrisy. He goes on to suggest that the geopolitical situations of nations such as Turkey and Pakistan, as well as their conflict with the IS, are nothing more than the machinations of the Americans and Russians and their desire to unite the world against a new common enemy.

The 'world versus Islam' mentality touched upon in many of the videos may also be understood as a conflict between the secularism of the West and the piety of the Islamic State. For example, in *Honor is in Jihad*, the United Nations is referred to as "the church of secularism", while in *No Respite* the narrator asserts that while the Islamic State is built on a "prophetic methodology" inspired by the Quran, the West is a secular state built on man-made laws that support the interests of "legislators, liars, fornicators, corporations, and the freedoms of sodomites", accompanied by images of Barack Obama, Joe Biden, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and corporate logos (including those of Shell and the Federal Reserve). The message here being that while the West is based on greed, corruption, and the erroneous rule of man, the Islamic State is based only on the infallible word of Allah, and is thus superior.

Although graphic videos of terrorist organizations engaging in brutal acts of violence such as executions and beheadings have recently made news headlines and found popularity on various shock and gore websites, it is worth noting that the videos produced by al-Hayat are comparatively tame in this regard. While there are indeed moments of violence to be found in al-Hayat's videos, these depictions were typically quite sparse, and were generally included to support the narrative of Muslim victimization by highlighting the apparent atrocities of enemy forces. In the video *Blood for Blood*, shots and images of bloodied, injured, and deceased children are shown, interspersed with shots of 'enemy' leaders such as Barrack Obama and Vladimir Putin, the implication being that the actions of these leaders are responsible for the violence that has occurred. Similarly, in *Honor is in Jihad*, images of slain Muslim youth and emaciated concentration camp prisoners are shown as the narrator describes the persecution of Bosnian Muslims during the 1990s. The narrator states, "our children were killed and our sisters were systematically raped and slaughtered," as graphic images of child corpses flash across the screen. Given that a primary aim of al-Hayat is to entice Western audiences towards recruitment, the decision not to linger on violent acts committed by IS soldiers was likely one that was thoughtfully made. As Foucault

(1977) reminds us, when violence is both overtly visible and severe, even when it is perpetrated against enemies, it may arouse unintended sympathy for the victims. In this vein, al-Hayat does an effective job of both hinting at the violence that the IS is capable of without too closely emphasizing or dwelling on it and perhaps dissuading any potential recruits or sympathizers that may be squeamish or otherwise put off by such images, and consistently depicted themselves in a state of victimization.

#### **4.4.4. The Narrative of Comradery, Brotherhood, and Inclusivity**

Displays of friendship, comradery, brotherhood, and inclusivity, though less distinguishable in the textual data, were common amongst many of the IS videos. This was exemplified by the many shots of IS soldiers smiling, laughing, eating, and praying together. The video *Honor is in Jihad* portrays the IS territories as clean, well-maintained, family-friendly locations where recruits can enjoy a socially connected and caring environment. It is of note that the message of brotherhood promoted by al-Hayat is seemingly also one of inclusivity. That is, through al-Hayat's videos, the Islamic State presents itself as an organization that is open to individuals of all ages, nationalities, races, and abilities – so long as they are dedicated to the cause.

Though young adult men comprised the majority, the ages of the IS members featured in the videos ranged from the toddlers seen smiling and playing with their caretakers in *Honor is in Jihad*, to the child soldiers seen training and standing in formation in *Blood for Blood*, right up to the grey-haired French recruit seen raising his rifle towards the sky at the end of the *Hijrah* video. While it may be assumed that young, able-bodied men may be the most valuable recruits in terms of combat operations, the images and messages included in al-Hayat's videos suggest that the Islamic State is willing to accept both young and old and everything in-between.

An individual's nationality is another factor that does not seem to matter to the IS, and in fact, many of the videos express pride in being able to recruit from all corners of the globe. In *No Life without Jihad*, a man with a British accent sits with his comrades and professes, "we have brothers from Bangladesh, Iraq, Cambodia, Australia, U.K., nothing has guided us except to make Allah's word the highest", later claiming that the Islamic State, "understands no borders." The message of multinationalism is also suggested in al-Hayat's decision to focus on recruits from a range of national

backgrounds including Canadian (*The Chosen Few*), Indonesian (*Join the Ranks*), French (*Hijrah*), Balkan (*Honor is in Jihad*), and Australian (*No Life Without Jihad*).

In *No Respite*, the narrator claims that to the Islamic State, “there is no difference between an Arab and a non-Arab, or a black man and a white man except through piety.” As this line is delivered, an image is shown of four men with noticeably different racial backgrounds. The men face the camera with their arms around each other’s shoulders and with ear-to-ear smiles on their faces. The implication of this video, which goes on to criticize America on a number of different fronts, is quite clear – while the Western world is plagued with problems of racism and tense race relations, these are problems that do not exist within the IS.

In *The Chosen Few*, the Canadian IS recruit featured in the video makes it clear that the IS is looking for more than just foot-soldiers. He stresses that even if one is unable to physically fight, they may contribute in other ways:

We need the engineers, the doctors, the professionals, we need volunteers and fundraising, we need everything and there is a role for everybody. Every person can contribute something to the Islamic State. If you cannot fight, you can give money, and if you cannot give money, you can assist in technology, if you cannot assist in technology, you can use some other skills, you can even come here and help rebuild... There is a role for everyone here in Syria.

Gender is seemingly the one exception to the general message of inclusivity presented through al-Hayat’s videos. Though the calls for recruitment seen in *The Chosen Few* and *Honor is in Jihad* stress that entire families are welcome, the bulk of al-Hayat’s message seems to be aimed exclusively at men. The soldiers and recruits featured in the videos are all male with only a few females occasionally shown in the various ‘community’ shots. Videos aimed at recruitment call specifically to the brothers of foreign lands, and narrations refer to IS soldiers strictly in masculine terms (*No Respite*).

Perhaps the most prominent message of al-Hayat’s videos, and certainly one of the most reoccurring, is the repeated call for global recruitment, with many of the videos specifically aimed at this purpose. These calls for recruitment are often targeted towards audiences of specific nationalities and locations including Canada, France, the Balkans, the U.K., and Indonesia, and many of these videos feature emigrants from the aforementioned nations who urge others to follow their path. It is unsurprising that

nations such as France and Indonesia are specifically addressed given their large Muslim populations. It is also worth noting that all videos may be understood in English. When English is not the primary spoken language, English subtitles are present, indicating al-Hayat's desire to connect with the English-speaking world.

In *The Chosen Few*, a Caucasian man calling himself Abu Muslim speaks to the camera and says, "I am your brother in Islam here in Syria. I originally come from Canada", and while shots of the snow-covered Canadian landscape and children playing pond hockey appear on screen he continues (using words similar to those used by John Maguire in his video), "before Islam I was like any other regular Canadian, I watched hockey, I went to the cottage in the summertime, I loved to fish... I liked outdoors, I liked sports." He goes on to urge other Canadians Muslims not to continue living in a land where they are oppressed, implying that even 'normal' people like him are capable of making the trip to Syria and are accepted once they arrive. He assures that the life of an IS soldier is not always difficult, claiming that, "Mujahedeen are regular people too, we get married, we have families, we have lives just like any other soldier in any other army."

In *No Life Without Jihad* several British and Australian men sit together, rifles in hand, and take turns addressing the camera. The men preach, they quote Mohammad and the Quran, but above all, they call on their brothers in Western countries for participation. Towards the end of the video, footage of men is seen laughing and smiling together, indicating once again that the life of an IS soldier, while serious, is not without friendship and joy. *Join the Ranks* features an Indonesian man sitting with his brothers and addressing the Muslim population of his birthplace. Speaking fervently, at times shouting, the man professes, "we are your brothers from Indonesia who have come to the Islamic State...we emigrated for the sake of hijrah and jihad in the path of Allah", asking the Muslims of Indonesia if their homes, businesses, and wealth were, "more beloved to you than Allah?"

*Brothers in France*, though very much a video aimed at recruitment, takes a slightly different approach. Rather than have IS soldiers address the camera, the video tells a story through music and imagery. It begins with shots of men packing their bags, followed by the same men walking out their front doors, arriving at an airport, flying in a plane (with a visible Air France logo on its side), and arriving in IS territory (portrayed as

a beautiful and sunlit location). The implication obviously that these men have left their homes to fight for the IS. Next, a Caucasian man, speaking French, addresses the camera, “this is a message...from your French brothers who have made hijrah – what are you waiting for?” We then see shots of men engaging in training drills and exercises, running obstacle courses, and shooting weapons – a collection of shots resembling the type of recruitment videos produced by the American or Canadian armies.

## **4.5. The Question of Identity in Islamic State Media**

In their own specific ways, each of the four dominant thematic narratives identified in the Islamic State’s Western-focused propaganda address (among other factors) questions of identity, and as such, may all be approached and understood using the identity-theory approach outlined in the previous chapter. The narrative of strength, victory, and power, to start with, may be interpreted as a direct response to the powerlessness and emasculation that many young people (primarily young men, in this instance) in the West are experiencing. In the wake of financial crises, the rising costs of housing and postsecondary education (itself become an increasingly important necessity for many), a stagnation in minimum wages, and the increased concentration/unequal distribution of wealth, it has been suggested that many of today’s young adults are, for seemingly the first time in modern history, personally and financially in worse-off position than their parents (Luhby, 2020). When a young person does everything that they are ‘supposed’ to do in order to be ‘successful’ (graduating high school, getting a postsecondary education, etc.) but is left with little options (and often with crippling financial debt), feelings of doubt, financial anxiety, and powerlessness are an understandable result. What the IS offers in their Western-focused media, consciously or otherwise, is a way to remedy these feelings by providing a source of power, pride, and strength. Soldiers in IS media are consistently seen as resolute, prepared, strong, and in control of their lives and agency, in addition to being depicted as victorious, and on the path toward constant victories in the future. When attempting to attract new members or sympathizers, this narrative may be useful in that it potentially speaks to the innate predilection of many towards winning, and the desire to identify and brand oneself with other winners, particularly when one feels as if they have been ‘losing’ for much of their life. Affiliation with the IS offers a way for individuals in the West to potentially reclaim

some of the lost status and power which has been eroded by the social and economic conditions of late modernity.

The narrative of spiritual, religious, and existential fulfillment speaks, quite blatantly, to the feelings of nihilism, cynicism, and hopelessness that have become the unintended byproducts of late modernity. In a time where religious involvement and the perceived importance of religion among the younger generations is in slow but steady decline, the fundamental and universal life truths that religion was once thought to provide do not carry the same value and meaning for many, often leaving them with feelings of confusion, or a burden of individual agency when it comes to 'making sense' of this life and one's place within it. When the British-born IS soldier in one of the propaganda videos looks directly to the camera and says, "I know how you feel. In the heart you feel depressed," he is directly acknowledging and addressing feelings of aimlessness and hopelessness and is providing a graspable solution through jihad and through committing one's life to the ultimate purpose. The life promised by IS is one of struggle, yes, but it is a struggle that provides a sense of meaning, identity, and direction that 'normal' and unfulfilling life under the relentless, secular, detached, and cynical conditions of Western modernity does not always readily provide. The attraction of the worldview presented by the IS, then, is not simply one that can be provided through a return to a Western religious institution – such structures having diminished cultural influence in the modern West, largely replaced as they are by individualistic relationships to religion and faith – rather, the attraction is likely due to the extremist interpretation of the faith which very neatly and unambiguously distinguishes correct from incorrect, good from bad, and the righteous from the wicked. Such binary categorization, if accepted and internalized, may free individuals from the burden of choice, and may help them to 'make sense' of the morally grey and liquid conditions of late modernity, potentially alleviating existential and identity-based fears in the process.

The narrative of grievance, victimization, and Islamophobia is one that speaks more directly to an individual's identity, status, affiliation, or identification with Islam or with their own status as a Muslim. As previously established, harm, threats, or discrimination against a group with which one belongs or identifies with can act as a catalyst that may reinforce one's commitment and identification with the group. IS media routinely depicts the Muslim population of the world as in a state of constant threat, harassment, and discrimination by the Islamophobic forces of the West (and elsewhere),

and while this depiction is undoubtedly exaggerated, it does have a firm basis in reality. Islamophobic sentiment is not uncommon in Western nations, espoused even by their politicians and national leaders (as we will see in the following chapter), and the foreign interventionist military policy of the West, spearheaded by the US, has led to disastrous conditions for many Muslim civilians in the Middle East, the fallout of which will be likely be felt for a long time. The media of the IS capitalizes on these sentiments and uses them as justification for Muslims in the West to embrace their identity and 'fight back' against the forces that would do them harm. The solution presented by the IS is, like many of their outlooks, a starkly dichotomous one. To be a 'good' Muslim is to acknowledge that the West is harmful to the global Muslim population and to take up action to do something about it, while to be a 'bad' Muslim is to continue living in the West, ignoring the fact that your tax dollars are partially contributing to Islamophobic foreign and domestic policies. This narrative, then, is directly reliant on notions of Muslim identity in order to influence and radicalize Muslims in the West toward taking actions based on protecting or avenging this particular identity group.

Finally, the narrative of comradery, brotherhood, and inclusivity is, quite directly, one that speaks to feelings of loneliness and alienation that are emblematic of digitally-driven, largely urbanized modern society, where social interactions have become increasingly transparent and fleeting, where being constantly online has paradoxically led to greater feelings of disconnection, and where one is less likely to form lasting friendships or meaningful social relationships after a certain point. *Forbes* magazine recently labeled the chronic levels of loneliness among millennials in the West as an 'epidemic' responsible for causing feelings of rampant isolation and the conditions of depression and physical/mental unwellness that may follow (Howe, 2019). IS media, once again, offers a solution to this very real and undeniable problem of modern life. Aside from offering young people a source of purpose, pride, meaning, and power, the IS is also offering something that may be equally or even more valuable – a community of tight-knit comrades who will act as your friends, brothers, and social support network, all of which, while tremendously important, have not been easy for many to find in their 'normal' lives.

The Western-focused media and propaganda of the Islamic State is the dark, but inevitable, response to the conditions of late modernity and the identity confusion that such conditions create. With this in mind, the question posed by John Maguire at the

beginning of this chapter becomes easier to answer. When examined at face value, the decision for many Westerners like Maguire, and the thousands of others who lived largely 'normal' and comfortable lives to leave everything behind to fight (and likely die) for the Islamic State may seem an irrational or 'crazy' one, but when these decisions are examined through the lens of modern identity, and more importantly, through what the IS offers to those who are struggling with questions of identity, the rationality in these decisions, while still brash and misguided, becomes much more apparent. The Islamic State, like all modern extremist movements, offers straightforward and tangible solutions to complex problems. They are solutions that are largely incorrect, negligent of the true source of the problems, dangerous, and deadly, but they are solutions nonetheless, and for some, that might be just enough.

## Chapter 5. Identity and the Far-Right Ideology of r/The\_Donald

Regardless of whether such trends will hold in the future, the global political landscape of the past decade (2010-2019) may now be safely and accurately described as one of a rising right-wing populism and nationalism (Bäck et al., 2018). The rise and subsequent election of a number of right-wing populist leaders around the world, from Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, to Viktor Orbán in Hungary (to name but a few notable examples), is evidence of the apparent attractiveness of this ideology in many parts of the world. This “surge of right-wing populism across the globe” (Govil & Baishya, 2018, p.67) has been attributed and perceived as a response to a number of different factors including economic recessions, the ongoing migrant ‘crises’ in Europe and elsewhere, the results of the Brexit referendum, general Islamophobic/anti-immigrant sentiment, and a perceived loss of national/cultural identity (Andre, 2015; Conway et al., 2019; Pohjonen, 2018).

However, despite the general success of right-wing populist ideology, discourse, and leaders in the legitimate realm of national politics, the 2010s were simultaneously plagued by several brutal acts of extremist violence perpetrated by individuals who often felt as if their nations or governments were moving too slowly or not doing enough to address these perceived problems. Between the 2011 attack by Anders Breivick in Norway, the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand, and the 2019 El Paso mass shooting in the United States (in addition to several others), extremist attacks perpetrated by individuals who subscribe to or have been influenced by far-right ideologies have been revealed as a grotesque byproduct of these global political trends and the potential for similar attacks in the future still remains a significant threat to public safety (Freilich et al., 2018). Put another way, the rise of right-wing extremist (RWE) inspired violence in the past decade did not emerge randomly or in a vacuum, but rather, as a partial result of changing sociopolitical conditions worldwide and the far-right/nationalist ideologies that have found success through their attempts to reconcile and address these conditions.

What the modern far-right has done, regardless of its specific ideological iteration (the populist right, the Alt-right, White nationalists, etc.), and done quite successfully, is

foreground notions and depictions of identity as central to understanding both the cause and the solution to the worsening socioeconomic conditions and perceived cultural decay of many Western nations. The allure of populist leaders, then, lies partially in their ability to channel the complex problems, scarcities, crises, and market crashes that are both inherent to and result from the globalization of neoliberal economics and ongoing Western military/economic intervention through the comparatively simplistic lens of identity. In the words of political scientist Francis Fukuyama (2018):

Confusion over identity arises as a condition of living in the modern world...the freedom and degree of choice that exists in a modern liberal society can also leave people unhappy and disconnected from their fellow human beings... They find themselves nostalgic for the community and structured life they think they have lost, or that their ancestors supposedly once possessed... They can be seduced by leaders who tell them that they have been betrayed and disrespected by the existing power structures, and that they are members of important communities whose greatness will again be recognized. (p. 164-165)

In the West, the decade's quintessential example of these populist trends and this nostalgic desire to return to a 'simpler' time where questions of identity were less complex has arguably been the presidential campaign and subsequent election of Donald Trump in the United States. Trump, who ran a campaign peppered with both direct and implied nationalist, anti-globalist, isolationist, populist, and occasionally xenophobic language and sentiment, came to embody and personify many of the traits and values that have become emblematic of the modern far-right (Freilich et al., 2009). This is not to say that Trump himself is or should be considered a political 'extremist' (and in fact, several of the perpetrators of recent far-right inspired attacks have criticized Trump for being too 'moderate', for not going far enough with his nationalist/xenophobic policy, and for being a perceived pawn of Israel and Israeli interests<sup>12</sup>), only that he accurately represents a rising trend of identity-inspired populism/nationalism that itself is one of the ideological anchors of modern far-right extremist movements.

In the lead up to and during the 2016 American presidential election (and in the subsequent years that have followed), one of the largest and most vocal, cohesive, and controversial bases of support for Trump was found on the content

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the perpetrator of the Christchurch mosque shooting said of Trump (in his manifesto) that while he was an effective 'symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose,' he did not consider him to be an effective or inspiring leader of the movement and doubted his ability to create and implement meaningful policy that would benefit the movement.

aggregator/discussion website Reddit (Heikkilä, 2017), and more specifically, on the subreddit r/The\_Donald. Despite (or perhaps because of) being mired in a number of controversies, including the subreddit's promotion of the 2017 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, which resulted in the death of counter-protestor Heather Heyer (Feinberg, 2017), r/The\_Donald quickly rose to become one of Reddit's fastest growing and most active subreddits, and largely remained so until June of 2020 when it was finally banned by Reddit after accumulating nearly 800,000 members (Tiffany, 2020). However, despite its impressive size, constant amount of activity, and self-proclaimed role as 'the forum of choice for The President of The United States'<sup>13</sup>, and despite receiving a fair amount of notable media coverage, very little scholarly or empirical work has been done to analyze the content of r/The\_Donald, the Internet's role in facilitating the rise of right-wing populism more generally (Krämer, 2017), or the ways in which Trump's popularity (and the recent popularity of far-right populism more broadly) is largely attributable to the questions of identity previously established in Chapter 3.

This study aims to begin filling this gap by presenting a more thorough and rigorous analysis of the textual content found on r/The\_Donald during its most active period (2016-2019). More specifically, this study applied several methods of textual analysis (including topic modelling and sentiment analysis) beginning with over 850 million words collected from r/The\_Donald during this period in order to determine not only what the most frequently discussed topics were, but also to explore *how* these topics were being discussed (positively, negatively, etc.), and what larger themes or ideological narratives were created and perpetuated through such discussion. Put more simply, what is the story that r/The\_Donald is attempting to tell, how does this story reflect, challenge, or influence the larger right-wing populist ideologies and narratives that have risen to prominence in many parts of the world over the past decade, and how can it all fundamentally be understood through the application of an identity-based theoretical approach?

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<sup>13</sup> Official subreddit description found on [https://www.reddit.com/r/The\\_Donald/](https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/)

## 5.1. The Narratives and Ideologies of Right-Wing Extremism and Far-Right Populism

Before examining the links between communicative technologies such as the Internet and RWE/right-wing populism more generally, and the role of the r/The\_Donald subreddit more specifically, it is worth clarifying and defining the ideology, beliefs, and narratives of the modern far-right in more detail. Though there are occasionally important ideological schisms and differences between the various movements that comprise the modern far-right, such as the Alt-right, White nationalists, and White supremacists (all of which could be found, to varying degrees, on r/The\_Donald), these differences are not especially important here, rather the beliefs and outlooks that the various far-right movements typically have in common are what will be considered.

Previous examinations of the modern far-right in the West reveal that the movement is typically fierce in their nationalism, anti-globalist, suspicious of centralized federal authority, reverent of individual liberties (particularly in America where the rights to own firearms and freedom of speech are perceived to be under attack), xenophobic/generally opposed to immigration, anti-establishment, and populist in outlook (Carter, 2018; Kerodal et al., 2016). Also central to the ideology of the modern far-right is the narrative of a perceived ongoing (and worsening) inter-group conflict between an apparent in-group and an apparent out-group which seeks to undermine, supplant, or eliminate the members, values, or culture of the in-group (Berger, 2018). This assumption is based largely in social identity theory, which argues that not only do humans have an inherent desire and need to belong to and identify with groups, but when the status or security of such a group is perceived as being threatened or undermined, committed members will experience the urge to defend the status of the group when possible (Hogg & Adelman, 2013; Mason, 2018).

When applied to the context of modern far-right populism in the West, the in-group is typically comprised of individuals who identify as, and/or are committed to, the 'traditional' notions, depictions, and demographics of White, European, Western identity. More specifically, the in-groups of the far right are generally thought to represent and consist of (in most, though certainly not all cases) those who are White, Christian, heterosexual, masculine (or females who value traditional notions of masculinity/gender), nationalistic, and 'natural' born citizens (non-immigrants) of

Western nations (Kelly, 2017; Perry & Scrivens, 2018). By extension, the out-groups – the nefarious forces that the far-right is reacting against – are comprised primarily of the perceived ‘Others’ such as non-Whites, Muslims, Jews, and immigrants, but also by White and/or ‘natural’ citizens who have adopted contrary or ‘incorrect’ political/social beliefs, practices, or lifestyles, including homosexuals, transgender people, liberals, leftists, and feminists (Anglin, 2016; Charnley, 2017).

Prior research examining the discourse and narratives of the far-right have found that members of the out-group are typically discussed, described, and depicted in ways that present them as dangerous, dirty, sick, parasitical, and threatening to the social, moral, and cultural order – often to a degree that is exaggerated and/or conspiratorial, and in many cases, based on evidence or proofs that are entirely fabricated (Andre, 2015; Bäck et al., 2018; Burch, 2018; LaChine, 2017; Sajoo, 2016; Zizek, 2018). These depictions serve a dual function of delegitimizing the out-group, while allowing members of the in-group to reaffirm their identity and values through this opposition (Archetti, 2015; Berger, 2017). Several members and movements in the far-right use these interpretations of the out-groups as hostile and threatening forces as justification for a call to direct social and political action, and in some cases, for the use of violence as a means of defending the interest and wellbeing of the in-group (Windisch et al., 2018). To summarize, it is an ideology of xenophobia (which itself is rooted in certain depictions, expectations, and conflicts of identity and identity groups) that may be argued as the predominant factor driving the modern far-right and populist movements that have gained prominence in many parts of the world (Edelstein, 2003; Falcous et al., 2019). But how has this ideology been formed, expressed, and spread via emerging communicative technologies such as the Internet over the years and into the present day?

## **5.2. Right-Wing Extremism and the Internet – A Brief History and Some Modern Trends**

While the shift toward right-wing populist ideological trends in the 2010s (in addition to the more ideologically extreme figures and movements that have emerged from these trends) is not historically unique – such trends have found largescale popularity at various points throughout modern history – it is also worth acknowledging that, despite what some might consider a new or emerging trend, the far-right has a long

and rich history with new and developing communicative technologies such as the Internet and the various forums and social media platforms (including Reddit) contained within (Holt & Bolden, 2014). For example, Daniels (2018) argues that the tendency for reactionary/hate-based movements to become early and successful adopters of new communicative technologies may be traced back at least one hundred years, citing the scope and innovation of the influential pro-Ku Klux Klan 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* as a prominent example.

Regarding the Internet specifically, as far back as the 1980s, when the early Internet was still a largely inaccessible and unknown niche, RWEs were some of the earliest adopters of this technology, establishing and maintaining a variety of online bulletin board systems designed to spread far-right propaganda and information (Conway et al., 2019). Throughout the 1990s, as the Internet became more available and prominent, various RWE movements continued to develop spaces (including the White nationalist forum Stormfront which launched in 1996 and remains active today) and methods to take advantage of the relative anonymity and potential reach offered by these new technologies (Back, 2002). Through the 2000s and into the present day, RWE and RWE-adjacent movements and individuals have maintained a notable online presence, both on 'legitimate' and widely popular platforms such as YouTube, Reddit, and Twitter, but also in more specialized communities and spaces such as 4chan and Gab, which, typically far more lax in their approaches to censorship and content moderation, allow such individuals to speak openly and bluntly about their numerous grievances, conspiracies, and discriminatory/hateful ideas and rhetoric (Finkelstein et al., 2018).

Regardless of how far back these trends may definitively reach, the link between RWE movements and their early adoption of new communicative technologies is not a new phenomenon (Perry & Scrivens, 2018). Still, in the modern context it has been suggested that, as the Internet has become a largely ubiquitous, integral, and inescapable part of life for many in the West, that RWE and far-right populist movements have, through their online presence, had a more direct hand in shaping, normalizing, and reframing radical or extreme ideas into more digestible, subtle, and populist formats that are more suitable for, and attractive to, the general public – one of several potential reasons for the rising success of right-wing populist politicians such as Donald Trump (Govil & Baishya, 2018).

The ‘best’ example of the modern convergence of online technology and far-right/reactionary ideology masquerading as a more palatable populism in the West has arguably been the somewhat nebulously defined movement known as the Alt-right, which gained widespread publicity and prominence in the lead-up to the 2016 American presidential election (Bezio, 2018). Through a variety of primarily online spaces and campaigns, the Alt-right sought to ‘rebrand’ their far-right and White supremacist ideology in a way that was more humorous, accessible, and appealing to the broader public, and particularly to younger and more tech-savvy demographics, often cloaking conventional RWE beliefs and talking points in the more nuanced language of nationalism and populism (Futrell & Simi, 2017). And while the Alt-right was far from the only, or even the most significant, base of support for Trump and his presidential campaign, they proved to be a vocal and prominent force during the election, particularly online, where they often congregated and communicated on spaces such as Twitter or 4chan’s ‘politically incorrect’ board, and – most importantly to the current study – on Reddit, and in particular, on the r/The\_Donald subreddit (Heikkilä, 2017).

### **5.2.1. Reddit and the RWE Presence**

One of the most popular and frequently visited platforms of the Internet, Reddit is a social media content aggregation and discussion website comprised of various communities called ‘subreddits’ (Saleem & Ruths, 2018). Reddit allows anyone to create and moderate their own subreddits based around specific interests, topics, and hobbies, which other users may then subscribe to and begin contributing their own content and discussions. Demographically, average users of Reddit tend to be male, relatively young, and likely to receive the majority of their news about political and world events via online and digital media sources (Barthel et al., 2016).

Discriminatory language and attitudes have been found on various ‘apolitical’ subreddits, where sexist, racist, Islamophobic, and nationalist discourse is often cloaked inside jokes, humor, and irony (Topinka, 2018). On more overtly reactionary/far-right political subreddits, Reddit’s generally lax approach to censorship and content moderation (in addition to the relative anonymity of its users) have created conditions where hateful language, beliefs, and ideologies are expressed more blatantly and unapologetically (Nakayama, 2017; Salter, 2018). Such conditions have, according to Daniels (2018), allowed Reddit (and similar platforms) to act as spaces where far-right

extremists may freely congregate in larger numbers and in a way that is much more visible and accessible than what was previously available on niche extremist spaces such as Stormfront.

It is difficult to definitively pinpoint the specific influence that these spaces may have on the real-world political, social, and ideological outlooks and activities of their regular users, or the roles they may play in the process of extremist radicalization (and these are things that are likely to vary quite substantially from one individual to another). However, it has been suggested that, once introduced and acclimated to the lingo and lexicon of the various subreddits, forums, and online spaces of the far-right, frequent users tend to engage in certain acts, conversations, and rituals that may serve to shape or reinforce their political outlooks, identities, and the ways in which they understand, interpret, and discuss perceived enemies and out-groups (Krämer, 2017; Rafail & Freitas, 2019; Windsor, 2018). In some instances, frequent and prolonged use of these spaces has been shown to empirically alter the linguistic patterns and cadence of users as they begin to adopt and mirror the language habits of other users (Bäck et al., 2018). Of course, no discussion of the far-right populist presence on Reddit would be complete without specific mention of the subreddit *r/The\_Donald*, the emblematic combination of the aforementioned trends and the focus of the present study.

### **5.2.2. The Case of *r/The\_Donald***

The *r/The\_Donald* subreddit was created in June of 2015 immediately following Donald Trump's official presidential campaign announcement. In the following months, *r/The\_Donald* quickly became one of the fastest growing and most active subreddits on the platform and was by far (prior to its 2020 banning) the most popular subreddit dedicated to any of the American presidential candidates, past or present. For comparison, prior to being banned, *r/The\_Donald* had just under 800,000 subscribers, while at the same time the subreddit for Bernie Sanders, *r/SandersForPresident*, (the second largest subreddit for an American presidential candidate), had only 500,000 subscribers.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See [https://subredditstats.com/r/The\\_Donald](https://subredditstats.com/r/The_Donald) for more detailed statistical information regarding the growth, metrics, and user activity of *r/The\_Donald*.

As it rose in popularity, r/The\_Donald gained a notorious reputation as a proudly 'non-politically correct' space, complete with its own specialized jargon and terms (which may appear as completely nonsensical or impregnable to outsiders not familiar), where the perceived enemies of Trump (political opponents, socialists, liberal elites, globalists, mainstream media, progressives, etc.) were brazenly ridiculed and where nationalist and far-right sentiment were discussed both openly and via the use of coded language and political dog-whistles (Falcous et al., 2019; Greene, 2019; Hale & Grabe, 2018). Many users took advantage of the often murky hate-speech policies of social media platforms, where there is an unclear distinction between what is and isn't 'acceptable' or otherwise in violation of sitewide rules/policy (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017), in order to discuss out-groups (in this case, anyone who may be interpreted as an enemy or foil to Trump) in irreverent, offensive, and in many instances, hateful terms (Mills, 2018). For example, in the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch attacks, many users expressed the belief that this targeted attack on Muslims was justified in the name of cultural defense/preservation of the West (Conway et al., 2019).

The dominant narrative found on r/The\_Donald, much like the one expressed by global far-right populist movements more generally (and also seen to be expressed by the so-called Islamic State in the previous chapter), is arguably one of grievance. Users routinely express the idea that 'normal' Americans of today (in this case, 'normal' primarily refers to White, working/middle-class, socially conservative men), are constantly undermined, ridiculed, sidelined, and ignored by the perceived malevolent forces consisting of liberals/democrats, the mainstream media, globalist elites, intellectuals, environmentalists, feminists, immigrants, and Muslims (Greene, 2019; Mills, 2018). For these individuals, Trump provided not only a dominant voice capable of articulating their grievances, but also tangible and material solutions (regardless of their practicality) for the social, cultural, and economic problems these out-groups were thought to be creating or perpetuating (Polletta & Callahan 2017). These are, of course, narratives built and sustained upon notions and understandings (flawed as they may be) of identity and identity groups, and the presupposed conflict between them.

In June of 2019, after a number of sitewide rule violations (and possibly as a response to increased public pressure for social media companies to 'crack down' on hateful content in the wake of various far-right extremist attacks) the administration of Reddit placed r/The\_Donald under 'quarantine' status. When quarantined, a subreddit is

still allowed to exist and function as ‘normal’ (users can still post and respond to posts regularly), though certain restrictions are put in place in order to limit the visibility and accessibility of the subreddit (for example, content from quarantined subreddits will not appear in Reddit search results, nor will it appear on Reddit’s aggregated frontpage). Finally, in June of 2020 the subreddit was banned outright by the administration of Reddit, though shortly prior to this a new web forum was created outside of Reddit with the intention of maintaining the community and userbase of the r/The\_Donald while freeing users from any of the content restrictions imposed by Reddit.<sup>15</sup> And while the subreddit no longer exists in its original form, there is still much that the content of this particular space may reveal about the ideology of several of its users and of the modern far right more generally.

### 5.3. Data and Methods

This study seeks to explore the language, sentiment, and dominant topics/ideological narratives of r/The\_Donald, and the ways in which these narratives are influenced and formed by questions of identity, by directly analyzing the textual content provided by its hundreds of thousands of users. To this end, all textual content posted by users of the subreddit from the period of January 2016 to April 2019 was collected for use in this study. Data was downloaded from the Reddit archive PushShift.io, which publishes incremental archives containing all Reddit posts on a monthly basis. Table 5.1 displays the total amount of words posted to r/The\_Donald during select months. The total amount of words posted each month has remained relatively consistent since 2016, with the notable exception being the month of November 2016, which sees a large spike in activity, likely due to this being the month of the American presidential election. In total, roughly 850 million words from this period of three years and four months were included in the analysis.

Once the content of r/The\_Donald was collected in textual format, the words (nouns, specifically) were sorted by order of frequency to determine the topics that were the most recurrently discussed on the subreddit. Three separate lists were created, each containing the twenty most commonly occurring words – one list for specific individuals

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<sup>15</sup> This new forum is located at <https://thedonald.win/> and is meant to resemble and function similarly to the original r/The\_Donald subreddit.

(Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, etc.), one list for specific locations (California, Israel, etc.), and one list for more general groups/concepts (Liberals, Muslims, etc.). These lists included all variations of the specific words that comprise them – for example, the total amount of mentions of the word ‘Liberal’ was calculated by combining the various grammatical variations of the word (liberalism, liberals, etc.) in addition to the specific variations that are used on r/The\_Donald subreddit (libtard, libcuck, libshits, etc.). The decision to focus on these three specific types of words (individuals, locations, and groups/concepts) was made with the assumption that such topics have the most potential to reveal the dominant narratives or ‘story’ that exists within the content of r/The\_Donald (a justification borrowed from a similar Reddit-based study by Klein et al., 2018), that is, who are the key figures/characters in this story, where does the story take place, and what special interest groups/movements are impacting/effected by the events?

After creating the three lists of most occurrent words, these sixty words were subjected to the process of sentiment analysis. Using words as the basic units of analysis, sentiment analysis is a semi-automated process which allows the attitudes and opinions inherently contained within large amounts of textual data to be swiftly mined and organized based on positive, neutral, and negative sentiment (Cho & Shin, 2014; Kharde & Sonawane, 2016). For example, consider the following sentence taken from a post on r/The\_Donald, ‘I feel blessed to have Trump as my president, the best one I’ve seen in my lifetime.’ Sentiment analysis allows for the subject of a sentence (in this example ‘Trump’) to be assessed a quantifiable sentiment score based on the surrounding words being used to describe it. In this example, since ‘Trump’ is described by positive words such as ‘blessed’ and ‘best’, the sentiment score provided for the word ‘Trump’ is likely to be a positive one. Based on this result you might conclude that this user views Trump in a favorable, positive manner.

In order to directly compare the sentiment scores of each word in a meaningful way, it was necessary to standardize their raw sentiment values. This was done by taking the total sentiment score of each given word and dividing it by the total number of times that word appeared in the dataset. For the sake of easier readability, these standardized values were then multiplied by 100 to produce ‘cleaner’ numbers that may be understood and compared more intuitively.

**Table 5.1 Total Monthly Word Count of the r/The\_Donald Subreddit (January 2016 to April 2019)**

Month	Total Word Count
January 2016	1,118,254
March 2016	20,749,176
May 2016	16,801,005
July 2016	18,829,029
September 2016	20,971,578
November 2016*	48,969,407
January 2017	34,525,737
March 2017	28,210,176
May 2017	24,143,776
July 2017	22,289,255
September 2017	20,152,038
November 2017	21,669,790
January 2018	20,857,131
March 2018	18,665,556
May 2018	17,826,976
July 2018	18,857,863
September 2018	19,416,055
November 2018	19,945,759
January 2019	20,365,457
March 2019	19,029,004
April 2019	16,715,798
Monthly Average	21,282,685
Total Word Count (January 2016 to April 2019)	851,307,414

\*US 2016 Presidential Election

All discussions of sentiment hereafter will be based on these standardized calculations. Additionally, in the interest of comparison and to see whether or not the ways in which these words were used/discussed on r/The\_Donald were unique or otherwise consistent with their use on other spaces on Reddit, the above process was applied to the content of three other subreddits (r/CasualConversation, r/AskReddit, r/CanadaPolitics). These subreddits were chosen on the loose criteria of popularity (r/AskReddit is the second most popular subreddit on the entire website with over 25 million subscribers), 'friendliness' (r/CasualConversation is designed as a space for 'friendly' and non-hostile conversation), and politics (r/CanadaPolitics being one of the most popular subreddits

for discussing Canadian and world politics through a Canadian perspective). These comparison subreddits, while somewhat arbitrary and largely interchangeable, are expected to give a general sense of how the ‘rest’ of Reddit discussed the commonly mentioned topics found on r/TheDonald.

Finally, once the standardized sentiment values of the most common words/topics of r/The\_Donald were calculated, these words were manually searched in the dataset in order to find representative examples of how the words were being used (and how to justify/explain their occasionally unexpected sentiment values to some extent). The individual words of the three keyword lists (individuals, locations, groups/concepts) were then organized into loose thematic categories based on their sentiment values and the ways in which they were used within the dataset (highlighted by selected examples). These loose thematic categories are then used in the more detailed discussion regarding the narratives and ‘story’ of r/The\_Donald that follows. All usernames have been omitted and all individual comments have been slightly altered to protect the identities of the users while maintaining the essence and purpose of their statements (borrowed from Sowles et al., 2018).

## **5.4. Results and Analysis**

Table 5.2 displays the twenty most frequently occurring topics across the three categories (individuals, locations, groups/concepts) along with their total amount of mentions in the dataset. These results give some indication as to what the most popular and commonly discussed topics are on r/The\_Donald. Regarding specific individuals, Donald Trump himself – as one might expect – was by far the most frequently mentioned person by a large margin (the second most frequently mentioned individual, Hillary Clinton, was mentioned less than half as often). The bulk of the list of most frequently mentioned individuals is comprised of notable American politicians (Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, etc.) and government officials (James Comey, Robert Mueller), but also includes two non-American political figures (Justin Trudeau and Vladimir Putin), as well as one historical figure (Adolph Hitler), two media/news pundits (Tucker Carlson and Milo Yiannopolous), billionaire businessman George Soros, and Reddit CEO Steve Huffman (more commonly referred to by his Reddit user name ‘spez’).

Regarding the most frequently mentioned locations, America (as a whole) was by far the most common. The rest of this list is comprised of specific locations within America (states such as California and Florida, and specific cities such as Chicago and Hollywood) and foreign countries (Russia, Germany, etc.), in addition to one collective continent (Europe). Finally, the list of most frequently mentioned groups/concepts was comprised of political groups (Democrats, Liberals, Leftists, etc.), media sources (CNN, FOX, Reddit), identity groups (Muslims, Blacks, Immigrants, etc.) and two specific organizations (the FBI, and the so-called Islamic State, or ISIS). Based on these frequencies alone, it becomes clear that the ‘story’ of r/The\_Donald is, unsurprisingly, one that is predominantly about Donald Trump (and the various groups/individuals that act as enemies and allies to him) and one that takes place mostly in America. However, when the average sentiment values of these words are taken into account, that is, the ways in which these topics are discussed (in positive or negative terms), it becomes possible to clarify the heroes, villains, and narratives of this story in more specific detail.

**Table 5.2 Most Frequently Mentioned Individuals, Locations, and Groups from r/The\_Donald**

Individual	Mentions	Location	Mentions	Group/Concept	Mentions
Donald Trump	4,014,482	America	975,430	CNN	890,253
Hillary Clinton	1,782,225	Russia	381,764	MSM	721,397
Barrack Obama	730,721	Sweden	186,652	Democrats	583,359
Bill Clinton	548,063	Europe	180,965	Liberals	550,500
Bernie Sanders	400,142	Mexico	157,801	Reddit	537,930
Ted Cruz	185,744	California	156,706	Cuck	467,735
George Soros	178,196	Iraq	150,114	ISIS	410,453
Steve Huffman	144,782	China	149,969	Republicans	405,053
James Comey	115,245	Texas	149,333	Muslims	402,862
Robert Mueller	101,661	Germany	119,907	Islam	326,950
George Bush	97,409	UK	112,734	Terrorists	244,945
John McCain	81,559	Canada	96,186	Whites	242,935
Adolph Hitler	80,786	Israel	93,666	FBI	215,253
Vladimir Putin	71,714	France	84,416	Leftists	201,433
Milo Yiannopolous	59,189	Hollywood	76,178	Blacks	148,574
Tucker Carlson	54,679	Washington	73,356	Immigrants	138,955
Ronald Reagan	42,477	Florida	65,625	FOX	126,772
Mitt Romney	42,029	Iran	65,377	SJWs	116,770
Joe Biden	32,567	Syria	61,396	Conservatives	115,285
Justin Trudeau	29,429	Chicago	55,704	Criminals	113,976

Table 5.3 arranges the most occurring words of the three groups in order of their average sentiment value (highest to lowest). Interestingly, only one of the 59 words (Texas) has an average sentiment value that is not negative. However, even though every other word has a negative sentiment value, this should not be interpreted to mean that users of r/The\_Donald necessarily feel 'negatively' about each of these topics. For instance, given that the subreddit was designed to celebrate and venerate Donald Trump, his negative sentiment value of -0.835 may not make intuitive sense. However, the reason for this negative sentiment score becomes clearer when we look at examples of how 'negative' language is commonly used on the subreddit to describe the actions of (and reaction to) Donald Trump, particularly when concerning his many perceived enemies. Consider the following comments:

The left hates Trump more than anything, it's absurd.

Unlike Obama, Trump murders and kills ISIS effectively.

In this context, it becomes apparent how Trump received a negative sentiment value (being discussed in conjunction with negatively valued words such as 'hates', 'murders', and 'kills') despite that fact that these comments actually express support for Trump. The overall negative average sentiment found on r/The\_Donald is indicative of the tendency for harsh, violent, angry, hateful, or otherwise negative words to be used on this space, even when discussing topics that they may feel favorable toward. If these results are compared to the average sentiment values of the comparison subreddits (see Table A.3 in the appendix), we can see that the typical language of r/The\_Donald is indeed more negative on average than the language of other spaces on Reddit when the same topics are discussed.

That the language of r/The\_Donald has a tendency to be overtly negative (and perhaps much more so than the average language on Reddit) is an interesting finding, though it should be cautioned against extrapolating too much from this without a more detailed analysis of Reddit as a whole. Still, when the sentiment values of these topics are combined with the contexts in which they are used/discussed, a clearer picture of the themes and narratives present on r/The\_Donald begins to emerge.

**Table 5.3 Average Standardized Sentiment of Frequently Occurring Topics from r/The\_Donald**

Individual	Average Sentiment	Location	Average Sentiment	Group/Concept	Average Sentiment
Tucker Carlson	-0.006	Texas	0.472	Reddit	-0.511
Ted Cruz	-0.546	Florida	-0.711	FOX	-0.901
Ronald Reagan	-0.565	California	-0.816	ISIS	-1.320
Bernie Sanders	-0.633	America	-1.364	Cuck	-1.417
Milo Yiannopolous	-0.687	Sweden	-1.377	Republican	-1.866
Donald Trump	-0.835	Washington	-1.535	FBI	-2.409
Hillary Clinton	-1.004	Iraq	-1.537	Democrat	-2.917
Joe Biden	-1.041	Canada	-1.632	Conservative	-3.095
Barrack Obama	-1.174	Mexico	-2.176	Media	-3.216
Vladimir Putin	-1.333	China	-2.280	CNN	-3.504
Mitt Romney	-1.472	Hollywood	-2.291	SJW	-3.678
Justin Trudeau	-1.483	Israel	-2.404	Liberal	-3.860
George Bush	-1.786	Chicago	-2.820	Immigrant	-4.110
James Comey	-1.887	France	-3.065	Muslim	-4.184
Robert Mueller	-1.889	Europe	-3.118	Islam	-4.755
John McCain	-2.272	Iran	-3.202	Leftist	-5.582
Bill Clinton	-2.739	Russia	-3.360	Black	-7.802
Adolph Hitler	-2.840	Britain	-4.257	White	-9.039
George Soros	-3.489	Syria	-6.126	Terrorist	-14.907
Steve Huffman	-3.682	Germany	-10.997	Criminal	-15.212
Total Average	-1.568		-2.730		-4.715

#### **5.4.1. The Cast of Characters – The Hero, Allies, Adversaries, and Villains**

The most frequently discussed individuals of r/The\_Donald can be separated into four distinct categories – the hero, allies, respected adversaries, and villains. The singular ‘hero’ of the story is, of course, Trump himself, and he is often described, depicted, and discussed in heroic and virtuous terms. Part of this is by design, as the subreddit has a policy against slandering or smearing Trump in any way (and such content is promptly removed by moderators). The veneration of Trump, while appearing sincere, is occasionally somewhat exaggerated, and he is often affectionally referred to by terms such as ‘God Emperor’ (a title borrowed from the lore of the popular tabletop

game *Warhammer 40,000*), while his perceived heroic qualities, perfect judgement, and penchant for making strategic decisions are routinely discussed:

I have pledged my allegiance to God Emperor Trump.

Donald Trump is the greatest human to have graced the Earth.

Happy resurrection day patriots. God save the King! Trump, the most Christian friendly and supportive President in my lifetime! Praise God for our marvelous president!

This personification of Trump as an infallible figure who is constantly outmaneuvering his political opponents serves an important identity function for the users of r/The\_Donald who sincerely (or even partially) accept this representation, that is, it allows them to associate themselves and their support with an undeniable winner, one who consistently defeats his many opponents and experiences constant victory, even when the entire media, cultural, and political establishments are thought to be out to get him. Much like the Islamic State's media in the previous chapter, the allure of constant victory and of aligning oneself with the 'winning team' can potentially serve as a source of pride, strength, and power for individuals who feel (often correctly) as if some of these aspects have been taken away.

The second category of individuals may be understood as allies to Trump and his cause. Individuals such as Tucker Carlson, Ted Cruz, Ronald Reagan, and Milo Yiannopolous not only have some of the highest average sentiment values (all appearing in the top five), but are typically discussed with regard to how they either actively support (or in the case of the deceased Reagan, used to represent) Trump's policies and ideology.

Happy birthday Reagan, the original MAGAMAN!

Tucker is a paladin, an underrated genius and a gem on the Right/Republican side of politics.

Ted Cruz has become loved. Texas loves Ted Cruz. Trump should nominate him for SCOTUS, if anyone is going to uphold the Constitution, it's him.

The third category of individuals have been labelled as 'respected adversaries', and while these individuals may be in opposition to Trump, they are typically discussed more positively and in a more respectful light than those labelled as villains. Individuals such as Bernie Sanders and Vladimir Putin have relatively high average sentiment values, and while they receive a fair amount of scorn and ridicule, they are also often

discussed and depicted in ways that highlight their perceived redeeming qualities and strength:

I'm not gonna lie, I like Bernie. He may be a degenerate socialist who wants horrible policies for America, but he seems like a genuinely nice and honest guy.

Putin will just eradicate Muslim terrorists - he doesn't care. He already outlawed public religious things to combat Muslim's spread. He won't stop there. No wonder US liberals and Europe hates him.

I'm not a Putin-hater, he is a strong leader. US and Russia can and should be friends.

The final and most populous category is comprised of those who are considered as villains or enemies to Trump. Any individual who has opposed Trump, either politically, legally, or socially, is often discussed in blatantly disrespectful, often hateful terms. Villains range from past and current political rivals from both the Democratic (Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton) and Republican parties (George Bush, John McCain), to those who have publicly spoken out or testified against Trump (James Comey, Robert Mueller), to those who have been accused of using their financial/media connections to slander or undermine Trump (George Soros, Steve Huffman). Villains are routinely smeared as cheaters, liars, traitors, sex offenders, perverts, criminals, and/or as 'secret Muslims/homosexuals:

Hillary is secretly a member of the Muslim brotherhood and Obama is a muzzle. What do you think was going on?

What we do know is that Obama has had male lovers that he may or may not have had killed before the election.

Didn't he take all those trips to under age sex slave island? Wait that was Bill Clinton.

Justin Trudeau would easily get beat up by a woman. He literally sweats soy. Trudeau and Macron are both fags.

McCain seriously fucked this country over because of a personal grudge...what a worthless piece of shit.

These negative depictions often rely on certain identity factors that many would not consider as 'negative' (homosexuality, femininity, Muslim faith), but are used here as impure, abnormal, or undesirable identity characteristics. Unsurprisingly, the enemies of r/The\_Donald are discussed in a way that highlights these unfavorable identities while reaffirming the valued identities of the userbase (straight, masculine, Christian/non-

Muslim) in a way that assumes an inherent conflict between them. Worth specifically singling out is the case of Hungarian-American multibillionaire George Soros, who users of r/The\_Donald seem to believe is secretly responsible and in control of all opposition to Trump, both domestically and internationally. This, combined with the fact that he has the second most negative average sentiment value, suggests that if Donald Trump is the undisputed hero of this story, George Soros arguably plays the role of the ultimate villain/antagonist, secretly pulling the strings behind many foreign governments and masterminding significant world events. Many comments discussing the perceived influence of Soros veer into the conspiratorial and/or hateful:

Honestly, I think the root is even more sinister. Everything always seems to eventually point back to Soros.

The German media companies are either in bed with, or controlled directly by, the German government; who are themselves Soros flunkies.

Soros should be hung by his eyeball sack by hooks. There is no other adequate method.

Soros is the one name that comes to mind. Through his spider web of NGOs, he is bringing thousands and thousands of Muslims into Europe. But why? To what end?

For users of r/The\_Donald, George Soros seems to fulfill the same role that Emmanuel Goldstein played for the villainous Ingsoc Party of George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that is, Soros acts as a beacon for which the anger, frustration, and general hatred of the population may be collectively directed toward. Soros, like Goldstein, is a wealthy and influential Jewish figure whom all the perceived problems of the world, from immigration to the state of mainstream media (and everything between) can be traced back to. By putting a name and face to all of their problems, users of the r/The\_Donald are able to redirect their ire and hatred toward a distinguishable figure, which may provide them with some sense of catharsis and release. When the 'enemy' of your movement is one who is as powerful and influential as Soros is thought to be, there is likely a renewed sense of urgency and importance in defeating them, which itself may offer an important sense of purpose and identity.

### 5.4.2. The Settings – America, Internal Corruptions, Lesser Nations, and Rival Nations

When examining the frequency and sentiment values of the most commonly discussed locations on r/The\_Donald, the settings that are most important to the story of the subreddit reveal themselves. Just as Trump acts as the central heroic figure of this story, America acts as the dominant setting where most of the story's events take place. A stark dichotomy presents itself when examining the ways in which America is discussed by users. Those who support Trump are those who love America, while those who oppose or hinder Trump do so out of a hatred of America. In this sense, America is depicted as something of a battleground, where the forces of 'good' (Trump and his allies and followers) seek to protect and preserve a conservative vision of what they believe America should represent, while the forces of 'evil' seek to corrupt, change, or in some cases, completely destroy America:

Happy New Year, Mr. President! May God bless you, your family, and the greatest nation on earth, America!

America first! We love our country, freedom, and justice!!!

Democrats hate America.

Everything from the left is projection. In fact, they despise America and want to see our country overthrown and socialism implemented.

In some instances, specific locations within America are discussed in more detail, often as internally corrupt locations that are hurting or holding America back from what it could or should be. With the exception of Texas (which has the highest average sentiment value and is generally discussed in positive terms), most American locations whether they be states (California) or cities (Chicago, Hollywood) are often discussed unfavorably as locations of internal corruption:

California was once the epitome of American potential. Nice house, great weather, opportunity everywhere. Now it's a sanctuary state for illegals and pedophiles.

The US takes in almost 2 million third world immigrants a year and the people never got a vote on it. Go to any big city in California and it doesn't look like America anymore. That's an invasion if you ask me.

Apparently it's not ok to be white in Chicago, but there isn't a jury in the city that would convict a black person of a hate crime. Most corrupt city in America.

Locations outside America are also discussed, most commonly as unfavorable comparisons to America. The continent of Europe (including individual nations within it such as France, Sweden, and Germany) and several foreign nations (Mexico, Canada) are frequently discussed in negative terms and typically used as cautionary warnings as to what America could become if the enemies of Trump were granted power. Such foreign locations are depicted as being lawless, politically impure (ie. 'too socialist'), or overrun with immigrants, Muslims, and/or other groups that are deemed unfavorable by users of r/The\_Donald:

You will get stabbed to death in Sweden by some ungrateful idiot who refuses to assimilate and only stabs you because you offend their backward culture.

Anyone who willingly visits a third-world shithole like Mexico gets no sympathy from me when they end up kidnapped or murdered.

Sad but true. Look at Europe and its feminized populations inviting in disastrously violent and subhuman Muslims.

The UK now has two choices. Burn down the mosques and deport all the refugees, or just continue to let Whites be bred out of existence.

The final category of locations is comprised of foreign nations that have been deemed as strong rivals/adversaries to America. Nations such as Iran, Russia, and China tend to have a lower average sentiment value, indicating that r/The\_Donald is discussing them in a negative or unfavorable way, which is typically true, however, unlike the foreign nations of the previous category, which are generally depicted as weak, crumbling, or culturally irredeemable, the nations labelled as rivals tend to be portrayed as strong, brutal, authoritarian, and discussed in terms of the potential threat they could pose to American hegemony:

China is undermining us with allies and other nations around the world. They are trying to topple the U.S. dollar as the global currency. God only knows what happens if they are successful.

The Russian system is way more hardcore. If Putin wants you convicted of something you will be convicted. He can call the shots however he wants which is part of the reason Russia has stayed mostly un-cucked.

### 5.4.3. Parties of Interest – Forces of Good, Crooked Media, Political Opposition, and Outsiders

Finally, the most frequently discussed groups/concepts can be arranged into four general categories – the forces of good, the crooked media, political opposition, and outsiders. The first category, forces of good, are distinguished through their support for Trump and the ideology he represents. Identity groups such as Conservatives, Republicans, and Whites, are routinely depicted as being vilified, under attack, downtrodden, and ignored by the media and general public. When looking at specific examples from r/The\_Donald, a narrative of the forces of good as oppressed underdogs who are potentially facing an existential threat fighting back against a corrupt system that hates them and wants to see them fail (or eliminated) becomes apparent:

The left openly hates Whites just look at what's happening in Eurasia every white country is being flooded by and destroyed by diversity and the 3rd world. Liberals want to turn all White countries into South Africa.

Conservatives kids are the only ones being raised right, but conservative families need to have more kids otherwise our country will become just like those in Europe. Nearly 25% of school aged kids are from immigrant households.

Luckily the Hispanic birthrate has dropped dramatically. Unluckily it's still much higher than white birthrates. Country is over if we never address this on a national scale with a serious conversation.

The second category, the crooked media, is comprised of the mainstream media as a collective whole (labeled here as 'media') in addition to specific media networks such as FOX and CNN. Such organizations are generally vilified due to their supposed unfair or harsh treatment of Trump and are often slandered as lying or dishonest organizations that are used as tools of propaganda by the powerful elite to fool and mislead the general public. Users of r/The\_Donald were fixated on pointing out the perceived hypocrisy of the mainstream media (CNN and 'media' are the first and second most frequently discussed organizations respectfully):

Other than Tucker, most of Fox is indeed Leftist Propaganda. It is more subtle than CNN or MSNBC, but that almost makes it more dangerous.

I have it on good authority that the people who run the big media companies are doing everything in their power to take down Trump, his supporters, conservative middle America. They have total disdain for anyone outside the liberal bubble.

CNN is evil, globalist propaganda. No one should appear on any of their programs.

The third category, political opposition, is comprised of the various political (Democrats, liberals, leftists) and social (SJWs, or 'social justice warriors') groups that are believed to act in opposition to Trump. Such groups are typically discussed via negative sentiment and, as has been the case with all of Trump's perceived enemies and opposition, depicted in ways that exaggerate and/or fixate on the perceived moral, ethical, and social shortcomings of these groups:

Traitor is just another word for democrat.

Let's see, Liberals want to take guns away, the Nazi's took guns away. Liberals love censoring people and love burning books they don't like, Hitler and the Nazi's did the same. Liberals love socialism, the Nazi's were socialists.

The SJW cult of PC libtardation has ruined Hollywood.

Finally, the last category is that of the outsiders. This category is made up of the various groups that r/The\_Donald generally views and perceives as 'outsiders' who threaten the conservative vision of America that they hold. Such groups include Muslims/Islam, Immigrants, Blacks, and Terrorists. These groups had some of the lowest average sentiment values, indicating the general dislike users of r/The\_Donald have for these groups, and evidenced further by the discriminatory and resentful way in which they are discussed:

You also can't deny that there are MILLIONS of Mexican illegals sneaking into this country and blending in with the rest of the Mexican population. Those are facts. Look at what happened to California, look at what's happening to Texas. Look at all drugs and crime they bring.

When the muzzies are in the minority they demand tolerance. When the muzzies are in power they demand obedience. France is at that tipping point with the muzzies right now.

Islam isn't just a religion, it is an ideology that is fundamentally incompatible with the American system. We have every right to deny immigration to Muslims.

The vilification, 'othering', and dehumanization of these enemy groups are not undertaken (for the most part, it would seem) through some random or unjustified malice, but rather due to the fact that, like the specific enemies identified in the prior sections, they are thought to be causing, perpetuating, and reveling in, either directly or

indirectly, the various cultural, social, and economic problems that have been identified. The shortsightedness of this reaction, which is largely negligent in recognizing the true source and scope of such problems, nevertheless provides a stable source and reaffirmation of identity through a stark 'us and them' dichotomy.

## **5.5. The Question of Identity on r/The\_Donald**

The story told on r/The\_Donald is a relatively simple one, and one that is very much in line with the majority of the prior literature on the narratives of extremist and fringe political organizations. The themes and narratives of the r/The\_Donald can be readily understood through Berger's (2018) concise breakdown of political extremism as the perpetual conflict between well-defined in-groups and out-groups. Put another way, the story of r/The\_Donald is told as a classic tale of 'us' versus 'them' and good versus evil, where the forces of good are deified, venerated, stripped of all potential flaws, and justified in every decision they make, while the forces of evil are belittled, dehumanized, mocked, and discussed with angry, vitriolic language. It is also very much an underdog story, where a great imbalance of power exists between the downtrodden, abandoned, and oppressed heroes and the malevolent forces who create and perpetuate these conditions. Again, this story largely echoes what has already been said about the narratives and ideologies of modern far-right populist movements (Polletta & Callahan, 2017) but also of the media of the Islamic State and other extremist movements of seemingly different and incompatible ideologies.

Analysis of the content of this space has revealed that users of r/The\_Donald tend to speak in predominantly negative terms, using negative language to both slander their enemies and to describe the hostile conditions in which they believe themselves and Donald Trump exist under. This overtly negative language, combined with their willingness to spread conspiracy theories, misinformation, and inaccurate/exaggerated depictions of their enemies in an insulated environment (where dissent is quickly dismissed or removed outright) has arguably created the conditions required for the adoption and justification of an extremist and potentially violent far-right populist ideology to emerge. If we accept Berger's (2018) premise that the adoption of extremist attitudes and the use of politically-motivated violence can be understood as members of an in-group doing whatever they deem necessary to protect their group against the perceived threat posed by various out-groups, then this analysis shows that the r/The\_Donald,

where only one specific story is allowed to be told, may indeed act as a space where such conditions and justifications may be encouraged. This, of course, is not to say that anyone who frequents this space will end up supporting violence or expressing extremist ideology/rhetoric, just that these are the conditions that are required to influence those who may be more prone to such radicalization.

The users of r/The\_Donald, like most people, have certain anxieties, fears, and doubts about the fast-changing nature of the modern world. An increasingly connected and globalized world – socially, culturally, and economically – means that significant actions in one corner of the world can end up having far-reaching and widespread implications which, depending how one interprets them, may not always be positive or beneficial. For users of r/The\_Donald, these changes are a source of anxiety that in turn has caused many of them to retreat into traditional notions of identity in order to find some solace, security, or understanding. The success of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, and especially his promise to 'make America great again', is a direct response to this anxiety. In the wake of globalization, the increased visibility and cultural acceptance of certain minority groups in the West, mass immigration brought about by war and regional instability, and a perceived vilification/erasure of 'normal' people by the mainstream media, Trump's campaign spoke to the desire of many people to return to a simpler time where notions of identity were less complicated. However, this promise is predicated on both the assumption that there is a traditional, pre-post-modern world that it is still possible to return to (there isn't), and the assumption that these complications of identity are caused not by the economic conditions of globalized neoliberalism, or American hegemony/foreign intervention, but rather by some identifiable malevolent force that is actively seeking to undermine and supplant 'traditional' Americans and what they believe in.

The users of r/The\_Donald, and the modern far-right more generally, operate under the assumption that questions of identity and the feelings of powerlessness, confusion, and anxiety that come with them may be 'solved' by either turning the clock backward and returning to a more 'traditional' place in time, and/or by separating and distancing themselves from (or in more extreme cases, getting rid of entirely) certain social groups who are thought to be the source of these negative feelings. One cannot fault these movements or the individuals who comprise them for attempting to find answers to or causes for the (mostly) real problems that they may be experiencing, but

much like the content of the Islamic State's media analyzed in the previous chapter, the far-right and other modern extremist movement have proven themselves to be adept at providing answers that are both easily understood, and those that are capable of orienting people toward their ideological cause.

The results of this analysis highlight the importance that personal identification with various groups may have in 'making sense' of the social world. By consistently reinforcing and solidifying one's relationship to race, nationality, politics, gender, and so on, and the sociocultural values, virtues, and morals such groups are thought to comprise and represent, individuals are granted the ability to categorize and parse out the conditions of a complicated world in a relatively simplistic manner. In essence, this may partially explain the modern lure and attraction of far-right populist ideologies and politicians within many Western nations – they promise simplistic, identity-based solutions for addressing the complex social and economic problems that have become increasingly difficult to ignore.

Still, there are at least two conceptual and methodological limitations of this study that are worth addressing, which may also potentially serve as starting points to inform further research on the topic of r/The\_Donald specifically, or on online extremist content (whether from the far-right or any other ideology) more generally. First, this study analyzed only the textual content of r/The\_Donald, and did not incorporate any of the many images, memes, screenshots, comics, and other visual components that make up a significant portion of the subreddit's content. Memes and other such visuals have been known to play a significant and effective function in spreading political/social ideology in an easily digestible and humorous way and should therefore be considered as an important potential area of study moving forward.

Second, while this study utilized the method of sentiment analysis to help 'make sense' of hundreds of millions of words worth of content, any results that come from the application of this method to the content of spaces such as r/The\_Donald, should be interpreted and used very cautiously. This is because users of many online forums and spaces (whether they may be considered extremist or not) such as Reddit, Twitter, or 4chan tend to include many displays of sarcasm, irony, exaggerated performance, humor, and inside jokes/meta-references in their content that, if examined as is, may obfuscate or conceal the true intent of their language. In this respect, it can be difficult to

decipher what is a legitimate or sincere expression of belief or ideology and what is simply meant to be humorous, self-aware, or purposely transgressive (Nagle, 2017; Phillips, 2015). Because of this, some level of manual oversight/interpretation is recommended when using semi-automated methods to analyze content of this nature. While such manual oversight was applied here to some extent, to have manually interpreted the millions of comments in this dataset would not have been realistic or practical, and as a result, it remains possible that the true nature of some of the content has remained concealed.

Ultimately, r/The\_Donald was a space of contradictions, false equivalencies, conspiratorial reasoning, and general distrust and hatred of the racial, religious, non-American, political, social, and cultural 'Other.' It was a space where the neoliberal politics of centrist Democrats like Barrack Obama and Hillary Clinton are thought to be indistinguishable from those of socialists and communists. It was a space where all members of certain identity groups are painted with the same exaggerated brush – where anyone who is politically left-of-center is cheering and actively engaging in America's destruction, where all Muslims are secretly jihadists-in-training, where all immigrants and refugees are engaged in criminal activities. It was a space convinced that the ideas of Trump and his supporters are under constant attack and censorship, but at the same time, moderators of this space were willing to readily remove any and all content that is even vaguely critical of Trump. It was a space where any words uttered against Trump, whether by the mainstream media or by foreign leaders, were thought to be orchestrated and amplified by invisible globalists who manipulate both American and international resistance against Trump from the shadows. It was a space where, like the Islamic State media analyzed in the previous chapter, simplistic solutions for the complex problems of identity are offered in straightforward terms. Were this a fringe space with low membership and visibility, the potential role it may have in fostering and spreading far-right populist ideology and extremist rhetoric/action may have been easy to dismiss. The fact that it was an active, easily accessible space comprised of nearly 800,000 users – and tied to the will of one of the most powerful and outspoken politicians in the world – is perhaps more cause for some degree of concern, particularly as it now exists uncensored and independent of whatever content restrictions were imposed on it by the Reddit administration.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

The results of the empirical analyses of the content found in Chapters 4 and 5 reveal how deeply questions of identity permeate the discussions, propaganda, and media of extremist organizations such as the Islamic State and extremist-adjacent spaces such as Reddit's r/The\_Donald community. When such content is examined through the lens of the identity-based approach outlined in Chapter 3, it becomes clear why modern versions of extremism may be seen as attractive to (primarily) young people in the West who, for a variety of cultural, structural, and economic reasons, feel as if their unique sense of identity (which is a historically fundamental component of the modern existence) has not been clearly defined or established, or has been misplaced, stolen, lost, or otherwise threatened by some perceived enemy force. These results (which, as the theory of identity outlined in Chapter 3 argues may also be applied to any modern Western extremist group, movement, or ideology not covered here) also indicate that not only is 'identity' a central component of their media and conversational narratives, but there is also a fundamental misrepresentation from these movements with respect to how questions of identity should be reconciled or otherwise solved – from which the potential threat of violent extremism arises.

The media analyzed in the previous chapters suggests that, while both the far-right and the Islamic State have recognized and outlined legitimate problems and grievances found in modern Western society (economic and occupational anxiety, general feelings of sadness/depression, Islamophobia, destabilizing Western foreign policy, etc.), the solutions that are offered are typically those that shift the blame from top-down structural factors (or at least, the ones that matter) toward specific groups and individuals, most of which have, at best, only a tenuous connection to the problems that have been identified. Discrimination, mistrust, and general hatred of these groups and individuals is a fundamental aspect of the ideology, and, when taken to its most extreme conclusion, can manifest as real-world action or targeted violence. Fundamentally, all stages of this conflict, as well as the processes of radicalization that are required to translate thought to real world action, may be understood, as this dissertation has argued, as the result of questions and complications relating to the concept of identity, and in particular, the rapid and ongoing changes that have altered how we understand this concept in the modern day.

When philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that ‘God is dead,’ he was, in essence, making a statement about how the ideals, scientific discoveries, and humanism inherent to the Age of Enlightenment ultimately lead to a new moral order in which ‘God’ (and religion as a whole) was no longer needed to serve the role and societal function that it had for so many years. However, this statement also acted as a prescient prediction – and possible warning – of how Western society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and onward would be forced to cope with a world in which the direction, sense of purpose, universal answers, and inarguable truths that religion had long since provided were, for many, no longer there. History has revealed how many from this post-WWII, ‘baby boomer’ generation chose to respond to these new conditions. The decrease in the membership and dominant cultural prevalence of mainstream religion and the increase in the amount and membership of a variety of cults and new spiritual movements in 20<sup>th</sup> century America are not unrelated phenomena, as many turned to these new movements to find the purpose and the answers to the questions that traditional religious structures historically offered. And while such movements still exist today with varying degrees of prevalence and membership, the argument could easily be made that modern extremist movements, from the Islamic State to any of the far-right fringe groups, fundamentally offer their members the same apparent benefits. Specifically (and as has been seen in the results of Chapters 4 and 5), they offer their members a sense of purpose – whether that be the defense of their people, the protection of their land or ways of life, or commitment to a higher power – while also providing universal, inarguable answers to the complex questions of modern life, all of which help provide a stable and clearly-defined sense of identity for members.

Of course, most members of the baby-boomer generation did *not* end up joining or finding meaning through cults or new religious/spiritual movements, so how did the majority of these individuals cope or acclimate to an increasingly secularized modern world wherein ‘God was dead’? For many, the answer was to eventually replace God with themselves, ushering in a new era of individualism that placed immediate emphasis on satisfaction and exploration of the self (Mount, 1981), and through the ‘filling’ of the self through consumerism, products, brands, and hedonistic experiences (Cushman, 1990). While this new era of modern consumerism, amplified as it was in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as increased access to the Internet opened the door for new and increased avenues of individualized consumption, does not, taken by itself, act as a direct catalyst for extremist

violence, the social and cultural impacts of such a system have led to a variety of identity-related complications through which extremism has been seen as a remedy. Coinciding with the beginning of the new post-modern, digital age was the end of the Cold War. Without the 'villainous' Soviet Union and the impending threat of nuclear war to unite America (and the West more generally) against a readily identifiable external threat, tensions and mistrusts were turned inward.

In his 2004 book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, psychologist Barry Schwarz argued that the drastically increased prevalence of consumer choice with respect to certain goods and services in modern Western society, which may seem like a positive thing at a first glance (more options being better than fewer options), actually serves to increase the anxiety and confusion of consumers. In the years since, the amount of available choices has only continued to grow, not just with respect to consumer goods, but also with the amount of potential media, content, sights, experiences, communications, and relationships that are available to people through the Internet and social media. In addition, individuals, particularly young people who have grown up entirely immersed within these conditions, are expected to carve out and claim their own unique identity amid this vastly expanding ocean of noise, where choices appear infinite, but ultimately less meaningful than ever before. The result is a younger generation who, on top of oppressive structural conditions, economic anxiety, and the feelings of alienation that Marx argued were a 'fundamental evil of capitalist society', must also wrestle with trying to etch out their own unique sense of self in a digital world which offers near limitless possibilities and avenues to do so. Where some have been able to cope, successfully navigate, and occasionally thrive under such conditions, others have become burdened with anxiety, fear, depression, and a lack of purpose or direction, and it is these individuals, confused and unsure of their identities and place in the world, who are at a heightened risk of succumbing to the allure processes of radicalization toward extremism.

The Islamic State media and propaganda analyzed in Chapter 4 were especially emblematic of this. As was shown, the messages of Western-focused IS media were frequently those which were likely to appeal to individuals who felt frustrated, confused, angry, depressed, and betrayed by their communities, societies, and governments. Attractive alternatives were offered to such individuals through involvement with the Islamic State. Purpose would be provided, as would a sense of comradeship and

community, a source of strength and pride, and the affirmation of fulfillment and victory in both this life and the next. In essence, those who have been trying to understand why an otherwise 'normal' person from a Western nation would be willing to sacrifice their life of relative stability and comfort to fight and likely die for the Islamic State have been asking the wrong questions. Previous research has shown that, for Westerners who have joined the Islamic State, their radicalization was not necessarily a question of income, education, geography, personality, psychology, or even religion/faith (many IS foreign fighters are late converts with a tenuous and slim grasp on the religious itself), so perhaps the question should not be one of what demographic characteristics radicalized individuals may share, but instead one that asks what it is about our modern society that would drive people toward such extremism in the first place.

Still, not all who become radicalized are necessarily experiencing a 'crisis' of identity or a need for spiritual/existential 'truth.' There are others who turn to extremist ideology not as a means of finding answers, but rather as a means of reaffirming the identities that they have already begun to establish, often fatalistically accepting the confusing conditions of modernity and turning to nihilism, absurdity, and occasionally chaos in order to find a sense of excitement that's worth living for. For young people who have grown up interacting within online environments and inundated to the endless barrage of content found through online spaces, one of the most effective ways of establishing a unique sense of identity is by embracing an identity that is inherently antagonistic and negative toward the identities of others. In practice, such an adoption can take the form of excessive vulgarity, transgression, obscenity, and various forms of discrimination (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) that range in their severity (Langman & Ryan, 2009), and often begin not with a sincere commitment to an ideology of prejudice, but rather through a detached, humorous, ironic, or purposely transgressive perspective that is meant to ridicule those who are perceived as being 'too invested' in their identities while simultaneously providing a unique 'negative identity' for those who adopt such methods (Hihara et al., 2018). Such a negative identity, which can be characterized by extreme or radical behaviours (prejudice, discrimination, rioting, self-harm, targeted harassment, etc.) serves as means of circumventing the conventional challenge of establishing a unique sense of self by providing a source of meaning and purpose through antisocial beliefs, radical action, and, somewhat ironically, through the subjugation of the identities of others.

This is likely one of the tendencies that is primarily driving many young people of today toward various far-right movements, particularly those (such as the Alt-right) which recruit, operate, and communicate primarily through online means. What may begin as a relatively harmless (perhaps even important) process of flirting with transgression or ridiculing sources of power/authority and their apparent methods of control (in the context of the far-right this generally means the perceived imposition of overt political correctness, diversity within media, affirmative action, etc.) may, over time, become internalized as sincere ideological belief. For children and teenagers, there is a certain subversive thrill to saying the ‘bad’ things that, according to societal standards, you are not supposed to say. It’s unlikely that a young teenager who incorporates racial slurs or prejudicial stereotypes into their patterns of speech (particularly in online environments) has fully internalized the ideology or assumptions behind such words – more likely they are using this language as a means of transgression or exploring the types of negative identity that allow them to feel unique. Simply put, saying the words, making the jokes, and posting the memes that you are not supposed to say, make, or post provides people with a sense of excitement and identity that may have been difficult to achieve under more conventional means.

However, constant exposure and inundation to such language, and to the spaces where such language abounds, over a certain period of time may lead to an internalization or further exploration of the discriminatory or extremist ideologies where such discourse is used in earnest. This may explain the attraction of a space like r/The\_Donald, which prides itself on its unwillingness to censor (except in the most severe cases) such content and language, thereby distinguishing itself from the rest of ‘mainstream’ Reddit, where there are typically much tighter restrictions in place with regard to hate speech and discriminatory language. Because of this (and the subreddit’s controversial and somewhat villainous reputation), the very act of posting to r/The\_Donald is itself a subversive and transgressive one that may, for young people especially, provide a sense of excitement, meaning, and identity (negative as it may be) in a modern world where such things can be difficult to achieve.

## **6.1. The Future of Extremism – Some Predictions**

The various high-profile and deadly attacks in the West committed by individuals inspired by a variety of extremist ideologies within the past ten years is emblematic of a

disturbing rise in extremist violence and the pervasiveness of extremist ideology more generally. Given that the structural, cultural, and economic conditions that have created the anxiety, confusion, alienation, and breakdown/loss of identity that, as this dissertation argued, inspire extremist violence have not fundamentally changed (and arguably may have become even more pronounced and apparent), it unfortunately seems likely that these trends are to continue into the future. This is particularly true in the context of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which is set to economically destabilize and/or lead to the unemployment of millions of individuals in the West, causing unprecedented levels of economic anxiety (in addition to general feelings of isolation, confusion, and fear). Opportunistic extremist movements have already begun to capitalize on the turmoil of this pandemic, seeing it as an opportunity to justify certain narratives, arouse racial/ethnic tensions, and politically/ideologically motivate frustrated individuals toward their causes (Mekhennet, 2020).

In addition to this, there is currently a new generation of individuals coming of age in the West, whose unique set of challenges, experiences, and cultural expectations make them particularly prone to the identity confusion and alienation that modern extremist movements prey upon. While the general consensus within the fields of radicalization and extremism studies has, up until now, been to deny that radicalization through purely online means is something that can or does happen (seeing online interaction with extremist content, spaces, and individuals as something that is largely supplemental to more important offline radicalizing influences) there is reason to believe that this may be beginning to change, particularly with respect to the youth and young adults of today. One of the key characteristics of this new generation – commonly described as Generation Z, and referring to those born in the mid to late 1990s – is their status as ‘digital natives’ who have spent the entirety of their lives surrounded by and immersed within new communicative technologies and online spaces (Turner, 2015). For many of this generation, online interactions, consistent connection, and one-way parasocial relationships with online figures have become central and inseparable components of their daily existence, providing a constant ‘background noise’ and sense of connection to a social world that may be entirely digital (Sihvonen, 2015; Wilsey, 2018).

While there is much that remains to be seen with respect to the short and long term social, psychological, and cultural impacts of these generational changes (whether

positive or negative), there is a case to be made that such conditions provide a framework for extremism to potentially flourish. Consider the popularity of platforms such as YouTube, particularly among those who are under the age of 25.<sup>16</sup> The fact that young people spend a lot of time watching videos on YouTube, taken by itself, is not inherently problematic or worthy of much concern, particularly if we assume that most of the content that is being watched is related to relatively 'harmless' hobbies and interests (video games, music, instructional videos, YouTube personalities, etc.). However, if young people are instead finding, consuming, and forming one-way parasocial relationships with content creators on YouTube who may have certain ideological goals and/or intentions of swaying viewers toward a certain ideological outlook, then the potential for such online platforms to act as radicalizing agents becomes more apparent.

This is something that extremist movements are keenly aware of, and YouTube has been singled out as a platform through which young people may be introduced to the ideology of movements such as the Alt-Right and White supremacy through charismatic personalities who are affiliated with these movements and who will speak, occasionally for hours at a time, to the fears and insecurities of their viewers while simultaneously introducing them to the primary talking points and beliefs of their ideology (Blodgett & Salter, 2018; Harwood, 2019; Nakamura, 2019; Ribeiro et al., 2020). The importance and potential influence of these parasocial relationships (and online interactions more generally), when combined with the capacity for consistent exposure to extremist ideology, spaces, and content via the Internet, may indeed mean that the violent extremists of tomorrow will be those whose radicalization occurred entirely from behind a computer screen.

## **6.2. Limitations and Ideas for Further Research**

Despite the large amount of content/data that was empirically examined within this dissertation, there are several methodological and theoretical limitations, restrictions, and concerns that are worth addressing here, several of which may potentially inform or direct future research in the field of extremism/radicalization studies. First, while the theoretical approach presented within this dissertation is argued to be applicable to all ideological variants of modern extremism in the West, only two such variants (Islamist

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/296227/us-youtube-reach-age-gender/>

extremism and the far-right) were specifically examined. While most metrics (amount of attacks committed, number of fatalities/injuries attributable to, etc.) would situate the modern impact and potential future threat of far-right and Islamist extremism as the clearest security threats to be aware of at the moment, these are hardly the only two 'versions' of extremism that exist in the West.

For instance, within the last few years especially, there has been a large increase in media and academic attention paid to various individuals and movements inspired by an apparent 'gender-based' ideology (Baele et al., 2019). Online movements such as the 'Incels' (involuntarily celibate) and the 'Red Pill,' while often overlapping with far-right movements and ideology, may constitute an emerging gender-based version of extremist ideology that centers gender and misogyny as the lens through which modern society is understood and through which gender-based violence is justified (Ging, 2017). The 2014 shooting in Isla Vista and the 2018 van attack in Toronto are two of the most notorious incidents that have recently been linked to this particular ideology. Similarly, left-wing extremism, while generally less violent in both its ideology and praxis, and certainly less of a threat with respect to the amount of violence/attacks that have been attributable to it, is nevertheless a form of modern radicalism that could also be examined and understood with an identity-based theoretical approach. Additionally, there are a variety of single-issue and special-interest causes that have inspired extremist violence and action in modern times (anti-abortion, animal rights, environmentalism, anti-taxation, anti-LGBT, etc.). While many of these issues may fall within a larger political/ideological framework on either the far-right or the far-left, the ways in which identity and modernity influence the outlooks of those radicalized toward these causes is worthy of closer and specific examination.

On a related note, it must be acknowledged that while this dissertation examined the thematic and topical content of two specific spaces/movements related to far-right and Islamist extremist ideologies, these are not unified pillars of ideology to begin with, and should not be interpreted as such. It should not be erroneously assumed that the r/The\_Donald subreddit is representative of or comprises all ideological thought related to the modern far-right, just as it should not be assumed that the so-called Islamic State is representative of all modern Islamist extremism. The modern far-right is ideologically diverse, and is comprised of numerous fractions, movements, and outlooks, some of which are in direct ideological competition with one another, and because of this, the

'far-right' should not be viewed as a monolithic group, and nor should it be assumed that the users of r/The\_Donald represent all the interests, perspectives, and outlooks of this large and diverse international movement. Similarly, the Islamic State represents a very specific version of Islamist extremism, and their media and communicative tactics/messages should not be considered representative of all Islamist extremism – some of the group's most bitter rivals are, after all, other Islamist extremist organizations.

Ultimately 'extremism' takes on many forms, exists in many spaces, and is presented in many ways, and more empirical work is required to examine the applicability of the identity-based, critical theoretical approach that has been utilized throughout this dissertation. While examining a larger selection of these variants within this dissertation would have been beneficial for providing more diverse empirical support for this theoretical approach, there was, because of restraints related to time and data collection/accessibility, simply a limit to the amount of content that could be examined and included. Hence, the decision to focus on these groups/movements specifically was made primarily because they are believed to be relatively accurate (though not entirely comprehensive) representation of two of the most prevalent versions of extremism (Islamist inspired and far-right inspired) seen in the West today.

Additionally, there are limitations with respect to the methods used to analyze the various extremist content and media. To efficiently 'sort' the large portions of textual data and to identify patterns and trends contained within, semi-automated linguistic techniques such as topic modelling and sentiment analysis were used. While such methods provide a relatively convenient means of analyzing large amounts of textual data, these are not particularly well-suited to assessing such content in a more qualitative or interpretive way that an identity-focused approach typically demands. To compensate for this, the results of the linguistic analyses were combined with the more manual and interpretive approach provided by thematic/discourse analysis. Still, such an approach is but one of the many ways in which extremist content could be analyzed and observed. Other methodological approaches from both quantitative and qualitative frameworks are encouraged to be applied to the question of identity within extremist media, content, and ideology.

Related to this is the type of content that has been examined here. With the exception of the videos that were analyzed in Chapter 4, all content examined in this

dissertation was of a textual nature (Reddit posts, Twitter posts, magazine text, etc.). While such textual content provides valuable insights into the ideology and communications of extremist movements, this is still only one form of content, and is thus not an all-encompassing view of extremist media. Modern extremist movements rely on a diverse array of media in order to communicate and spread ideology, which in addition to the textual content found on forums and social media, also includes videos, memes, podcasts, illustrations, and livestreams – all of which are in need of closer examination, particularly as they relate to the issues of identity and alienation presented within this dissertation.

Another related area of inquiry that is relatively understudied within the fields of radicalization and extremism is the impact that extremist media and content, whether it be the specific content analyzed within this dissertation or any of the many other variants, has on those who are exposed to it. For instance, what specific impacts do Islamic State propaganda videos have on those who watch them? Are they influential and potent sources of radicalization, or are they a smaller, perhaps even inconsequential, piece of the larger radicalization puzzle? Does regular exposure and engagement with the content of r/The\_Donald and similar spaces influence one's social, political, and ideological outlooks and perspectives, and to what extent? While studies that examine the audience reaction to extremist content have been attempted (see Cottee & Cunliffe, 2018), such approaches are rare, and while this is understandable given the methodological complications of 'measuring' or testing audience reaction to extremist content, the question of what specific role such content has in the larger radicalization process, large or small, nevertheless remains an important one to consider in the future.

Another limitation (and valid criticism) of the identity-based theoretical approach argued for within this dissertation is the difficulty with which 'identity' as a concept is defined, operationalized, and empirically measured. Within Chapters 4 and 5, the extremist content has been analyzed and interpreted primarily through the lens of identity (though supported by empirical linguistic trends), and while an effort has been made to remain consistent with such interpretations, they are nevertheless still interpretations, and are therefore still reliant on a certain degree of subjectivity, potential bias, and personal error in a way that more 'conventional' or quantifiable variables typically are not. Unfortunately, there is not a readily available solution for this, and it is

unlikely that a concept as fluid, individualistic, and inherently phenomenological as 'identity' will ever be able to be 'measured' with the same validity as concepts such as age or economic income. While this does not negate the potential importance and insights offered by identity-based approaches, it does possibly limit their attractiveness and potential use within the field. This is particularly true with respect to CVE initiatives or academic research that is funded or otherwise supported by the government or other institutional agencies, where more direct and 'measurable' results are often preferred over theoretical abstractions. Still, despite the abstract nature of identity, and the inherent difficulty of measuring and testing such a concept, what the results of this dissertation hopefully reveal is that there are merit to such approaches, and they are worthy of further inquiry, incorporation, and attention within the field of CVE and radicalization/extremism studies more broadly.

There are valid criticisms related to the identity-based theoretical approach itself that are worth acknowledging. In particular, one of the primary arguments presented in this dissertation – that extremism is an inevitable and unavoidable result of modern social and structural conditions – is likely to be seen as somewhat problematic, overtly cynical, and/or overly deterministic. After all, if we accept the fatalistic assumption that extremism is the inevitable byproduct of late modernity, then what purpose does CVE research and policy serve, and why bother looking for potential causes and 'solutions' for violent extremism in the first place? To clarify, what the thesis of this dissertation suggests is that extremism is inevitable, yes, but this inevitability is predicated upon the modern structural conditions of late-capitalist modernity. What this means is that the 'solution' to extremism will not be found or implemented from within these conditions, as any such policies, actions, or endeavors to reduce the allure of extremism from within these conditions will be, at best, temporary and not cognizant of the deeply embedded sources of the problem itself.

Finally, one area worthy of further inquiry is the intersectional and complex nature of identity itself. The central thesis of this dissertation asserts that it is questions of identity, above all else, that are the most powerful factors driving people toward extremism in the West. However, if this is indeed the case, why is it that those who are radicalized (and especially those who engage in acts of extremist violence) tend to share certain demographic traits (age and gender most noticeably)? While this question could have been answered via an identity-based perspective, it was not thoroughly addressed

here, as it falls somewhat outside the scope of this dissertation. However, further research which examines the specific relationships between identity and factors such as race, class, gender, and age more closely is recommend. For example, what might social and cultural expectations/constructions relating to men and masculinities reveal about modern 'male' identity in the West (and the unique identity challenges it potentially poses), and how can this be used to explain exactly why it is that men seem to be more prone to radicalization and/or extremist violence than women?

Ultimately the identity-based theoretical approach toward understanding modern radicalization and extremism in the West, while supported by the empirical analyses conducted within this dissertation, requires further examination and analysis of a more diverse collection of data and a more diverse selection of methodological approaches in order to have its validity more rigorously tested and its potential applicability more elucidated.

### **6.3. A Final Word**

A rise in not just the amount of violent extremist incidents, but also in the general visibility, influence, and legitimacy of extremist and extremist-adjacent ideology has become an undeniable reality of modern Western society over the past decade. What this dissertation has attempted to argue is that this rise in extremism (in addition to other factors, or course) is fundamentally tied to questions and crises of identity, which themselves are caused by the historically and technologically unique macro level structural and economic conditions of late capitalist Western society. Because of this, there are no easy solutions or quick fixes to be suggested here with respect to how we might 'solve' radicalization or reduce the attractiveness of extremist ideologies. The search for such a remedy has been one of the primary flaws of many post-9/11 CVE approaches and policies. By extension, any methods aimed at removing, limiting, censoring, prosecuting, or predicting extremist behavior or content, are, even at their most effective, only temporary solutions. And while such approaches may indeed provide effective short-term solutions that are potentially worth pursuing in some instances (the removal and restriction of extremist content on various social media spaces, for example, has largely been shown to be an effective means of limiting the reach and communicative capabilities of these groups), none of them address the root cause of the problem. Imagine a pot filled to the brim with water and placed on a hot

stove. Given enough time, the water will eventually start to boil and spill over the sides. We can clean the boiled-over water when this happens, but so long as the pot remains on the stove, the water will continue to boil and eventually spill over. We can add ice cubes to the water to temporarily slow the boiling, but of course, the only way to ensure that the boiling won't occur is to remove the pot from the source of heat entirely.

This is why it is worth taking a legitimate and detailed look at the conditions of modern society that inspire or push individuals toward extremism. A common refrain throughout this dissertation has been the effectiveness with which extremist movements provide simplistic and easily understandable answers to the complex challenges and anxieties posed by the modern world. Such answers are no doubt attractive to young people who are wrestling with not only their material and economic conditions and opportunities, but also with a plethora of social and psychological ills that have arisen in the wake of a culture which may have simply changed too drastically and too rapidly from one generation to the next. While these answers may be flawed, reductive, or flat-out wrong, what solutions have been provided as an alternative? Individualistic Western culture has, over several generations, conditioned its members to internalize blame, and to measure their successes or failures against their own agency and independent choices, so when people do fail, when they are unable to escape their restrictive economic conditions, when they are unable to find 'success' in life, whatever that may mean to them, they are typically given the choice to either blame themselves, or to transpose that blame onto some perceived out-group as a means of coping and reconciling with failures or problems in life. But what if both reactions are missing the mark?

Extremist ideology and the justification for extremist violence is predicated fundamentally on the assumption that there is a nefarious out-group that must be quelled before they are able to do grave existential harm to the perceived in-group. This is a conflict that is, therefore, based on the assumption of scarcity, of limited resources, and of the unequal distribution of economic and cultural power. But are such scarcities, distributions, and anxieties truly the result of conflict between various identity groups, or are they more dependent on the structural conditions in which they exist – namely a late-capitalist society which has created a distribution of wealth so brazen as to appear inconceivable and nearly invisible to the average individual? If we are indeed committed to the cause of curtailing the modern rise of violent extremism in the West, then we owe

it to ourselves, and to the legions of struggling, dispossessed, depressed, and lost individuals of this generation and the next, to take an honest and possibly uncomfortable look at the scarcity, economic distribution, consumerism, and imperialism that are fundamentally inherent to and dictated by our late-capitalist mode of production and question whether alternatives are possible.

In short, while extremist movements have been providing their own answers, the onus is on us to start providing *better* ones.

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## Appendix A. Supplemental Tables

Table A.1 List of Islamic State Produced Videos Included in the Analysis

Video Title	Length (mm:ss)	Release Date (mm/dd/year)	Current Link (as of 01/10/2020)
Abu Muslim from Canada	11:07	07/12/2014	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2014/07/12/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-al-ghuraba-the-chosen-few-of-different-lands-abu-muslim-from-canada/">http://jihadology.net/2014/07/12/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-al-ghuraba-the-chosen-few-of-different-lands-abu-muslim-from-canada/</a>
Aftermath of US Airstrikes	2:55	10/03/2014	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=852_1412377257">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=852_1412377257</a>
American Boy	5:42	08/24/2017	<a href="http://right-mind.us/american-isis-boy-10-threatens-trump/">http://right-mind.us/american-isis-boy-10-threatens-trump/</a>
Answer the Call	2:31	01/26/2018	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2018/01/26/new-video-nashid-from-the-islamic-state-answer-the-call/">http://jihadology.net/2018/01/26/new-video-nashid-from-the-islamic-state-answer-the-call/</a>
Arsenal	0:24	07/05/2014	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=f3f_1467749425">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=f3f_1467749425</a>
Balkan Muslim Recruitment	1:28	06/25/2015	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=55a_1435260371">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=55a_1435260371</a>
Black Tawhid	13:00	11/15/2013	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=a06_1384565862">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=a06_1384565862</a>
Blood for Blood	3:40	04/29/2016	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2016/04/29/new-video-nashid-from-the-islamic-state-blood-for-blood/">http://jihadology.net/2016/04/29/new-video-nashid-from-the-islamic-state-blood-for-blood/</a>
Children Training	6:54	06/10/2015	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=f4a_1433948553">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=f4a_1433948553</a>
Cubs of the Khalifa	14:11	06/15/2015	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=e81_1434383901">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=e81_1434383901</a>
Donald Trump	1:21	01/02/2016	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=d93_1451751148">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=d93_1451751148</a>
Flames of War	55:13	09/19/2014	<a href="https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2014/09/28/the-flames-of-war-the-fighting-has-just-begun/">https://pietervanostaeyen.com/2014/09/28/the-flames-of-war-the-fighting-has-just-begun/</a>
Flames of War II	58:08	11/29/2017	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2017/11/29/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-flames-of-war-ii/">http://jihadology.net/2017/11/29/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-flames-of-war-ii/</a>
French Recruitment	4:05	05/19/2015	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=22a_1432048012">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=22a_1432048012</a>
Honor is in Jihad	20:44	06/04/2015	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2015/06/04/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-honor-is-in-jihad-a-message-to-the-people-of-the-balkans/">http://jihadology.net/2015/06/04/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-honor-is-in-jihad-a-message-to-the-people-of-the-balkans/</a>
Inside the Khilafah	14:58	07/06/2016	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2016/07/06/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-structure-of-the-caliphate/">http://jihadology.net/2016/07/06/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-structure-of-the-caliphate/</a>
Jihadi Junior	1:52	02/11/2016	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=046_1455223770">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=046_1455223770</a>
John Maguire – Canadian	6:13	12/07/2014	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=20d_1417975041">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=20d_1417975041</a>
Join the Ranks	8:27	07/22/2014	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxsPR-fYnk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxsPR-fYnk</a>

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Michele Bachmann	8:32	10/04/2014	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=798_1412463689">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=798_1412463689</a>
My Revenge	4:31	07/05/2016	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2016/07/05/new-video-nashid-from-the-islamic-state-my-revenge/">http://jihadology.net/2016/07/05/new-video-nashid-from-the-islamic-state-my-revenge/</a>
No Life Without Jihad	13:26	06/19/2014	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2014/06/19/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-there-is-no-life-without-jihad/">http://jihadology.net/2014/06/19/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham-there-is-no-life-without-jihad/</a>
No Respite	4:13	11/24/2015	<a href="http://heavy.com/news/2015/11/new-isis-islamic-state-news-pictures-videos-no-respite-english-language-propaganda-full-uncensored-youtube-daesh/">http://heavy.com/news/2015/11/new-isis-islamic-state-news-pictures-videos-no-respite-english-language-propaganda-full-uncensored-youtube-daesh/</a>
O Disbelievers of the World	4:02	12/31/2018	<a href="https://baytalmasadir.com/2017/12/31/nashid-islamic-state-al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-mecreants-de-lhumanite-o-disbelievers-of-the-world/">https://baytalmasadir.com/2017/12/31/nashid-islamic-state-al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-mecreants-de-lhumanite-o-disbelievers-of-the-world/</a>
Omar Hussain Brittani	0:43	2014	<a href="http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1333238/ISIS-militant-Omar-Hussain-2014-message-David-Cameron.html">http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1333238/ISIS-militant-Omar-Hussain-2014-message-David-Cameron.html</a>
Orlando Attacks	5:41	06/17/2016	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=9d7_1466179069">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=9d7_1466179069</a>
The End of Sykes Picot	15:03	06/30/2014	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=787_1404129649">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=787_1404129649</a>
The Religion of Unbelief	3:15	05/30/2016	<a href="http://jihadology.net/2016/05/30/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-religion-of-unbelief-is-one/">http://jihadology.net/2016/05/30/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-the-religion-of-unbelief-is-one/</a>
Warriors of Allah	4:24	09/06/2015	<a href="http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=610_1441578595">http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=610_1441578595</a>
You Must Fight Them Muwahhid	7:06	11/28/2016	<a href="http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/video-you-must-fight-them-o-muwahhid-isis-tutorial-on-killing-disbelievers/">http://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/video-you-must-fight-them-o-muwahhid-isis-tutorial-on-killing-disbelievers/</a>

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**Table A.2 Sentiment Values of Commonly Occurring Words in Islamic State Media**

Word	Sentiment	Word	Sentiment	Word	Sentiment
abdullah	-0.166	dabiq	-2.395	jew	-0.142
addition	-0.432	day	-1.344	jihad	-2.333
ahmad	-0.237	death	-5.115	khilafah	-1.219
alayhi	-0.474	deeds	-0.121	king	0.007
ali	-0.217	disbelievers	-1.300	knowledge	-0.291
allah	-3.325	dunya	-0.198	kufr	-4.007
allies	-0.865	earth	-0.121	land	-2.042
america	-3.041	end	-1.997	law	-0.354
american	-1.296	enemy	-4.844	leader	-0.277
anyone	-1.351	example	-1.852	life	-0.415
apostasy	-0.484	face	-0.562	lord	1.143
apostate	-0.635	factions	-0.895	man	-1.939
apostates	-1.693	family	0.3642	matter	-0.735
area	-0.686	father	-0.117	meaning	-0.465
army	-3.652	fear	-4.481	media	-2.389
article	-0.512	fighters	-2.694	member	-0.413
attack	-9.399	forces	-1.802	men	-2.198
authority	-0.817	front	-0.639	mercy	0.673
bakr	0.190	god	2.9005	message	-0.035
battle	-5.076	government	-1.693	messenger	-0.613
believers	-0.342	group	-1.033	month	-0.707
blessing	1.270	hadith	-0.261	muhammad	0.019
blood	-3.056	hand	-0.232	mujahidin	-2.157
book	-0.224	head	-0.812	murtadd	-1.024
brother	-0.577	heart	-2.059	murtaddin	-1.969
camp	-1.155	hijrah	-0.598	mushrik	-0.193
campaign	-0.560	him	-1.327	muslim	-4.554
case	-0.378	history	-0.271	nation	-0.317
cause	-1.741	husband	-0.323	nationalism	-1.459
children	-0.960	hypocrites	-0.576	news	-1.470
christians	-0.337	ikhwan	-0.186	night	-0.110
city	-0.862	imam	-0.336	nothing	-0.881
claimants	-0.475	individual	-0.453	number	-1.310
coalition	-1.282	interests	-0.170	nusayri	-1.685
companions	-0.058	iraq	-3.304	obligation	-0.626
condition	-0.482	islam	-4.168	one	-3.445
control	-0.175	islamic	-9.615	operations	-0.815
course	-0.536	issue	-0.753	order	-1.171
crusaders	-1.764	istishhadi	-0.666	others	-2.825

**Table A.2 Sentiment Values of Commonly Occurring Words in Islamic State Media (continued)**

Word	Sentiment	Word	Sentiment
part	-0.758	sin	-0.942
parties	-0.927	sister	-0.558
party	-0.272	slave	-0.198
path	-0.440	slaves	-0.144
peace	0.072	soldiers	-4.832
people	-3.638	something	-0.134
permission	-0.290	son	-0.092
person	-0.441	state	-8.762
pkk	-1.498	statement	-0.641
place	-0.968	sunnah	-0.696
point	-0.322	support	0.957
position	-0.311	sword	-0.303
power	-0.487	syria	-2.362
praise	2.127	taghut	-1.931
prayer	-0.203	takfir	-0.552
prophet	-0.524	tawhid	-0.435
quran	-0.094	time	-1.235
radiyallahu	-0.496	today	-2.074
rafidah	-1.470	truth	0.714
rahimahullah	-0.634	umar	-0.336
ranks	-1.138	ummah	-0.205
reality	-0.306	vehicle	-0.692
reason	-0.772	verse	-0.183
regime	-1.729	victory	1.139
region	-0.439	village	-1.808
religion	-1.645	war	-10.705
report	-0.740	way	-1.816
reward	0.838	wealth	-0.538
rule	-0.662	weapon	-3.985
ruling	-0.274	west	-2.488
sahwah	-0.896	wife	-0.130
sahwat	-1.498	wilayah	-0.249
sake	-0.763	wilayat	-0.420
sallallahu	-0.568	woman	-0.813
sallam	-0.804	words	-0.739
scholars	-0.414	world	-2.483
security	0.801	worship	1.0264
sham	-1.890	year	-0.372
shaykh	0.258	years	-1.644
shirk	-1.508		

**Table A.3 Average Sentiment Values from Comparison Subreddits**

Individual	Average Sentiment	Location	Average Sentiment	Group/Concept	Average Sentiment
Bernie Sanders	1.828	California	-0.109	FOX	1.390
Donald Trump	0.699	Chicago	-0.126	Reddit	0.0033
Milo Yiannopolous	0.094	Washington	-0.160	Democrat	-0.627
Steve Huffman	0.065	Florida	-0.174	FBI	-0.726
Ted Cruz	-0.044	Texas	-0.205	CNN	-0.799
Vladimir Putin	-0.088	Canada	-0.208	Republican	-0.944
Joe Biden	-0.151	Sweden	-0.218	Immigrant	-0.998
Barrack Obama	-0.409	Hollywood	-0.284	Liberal	-1.092
Bill Clinton	-0.414	Mexico	-0.321	Conservative	-1.298
Tucker Carlson	-0.455	China	-0.348	Leftist	-1.404
James Comey	-0.474	Europe	-0.374	Muslim	-1.439
Justin Trudeau	-0.580	France	-0.606	Islam	-1.931
Hillary Clinton	-0.650	America	-0.607	SJW	-1.986
Robert Mueller	-0.672	Israel	-0.663	Black	-2.139
Adolph Hitler	-0.719	Russia	-0.854	ISIS	-2.556
Ronald Reagan	-0.796	Iran	-1.029	Cuck	-2.998
John McCain	-0.813	Britain	-1.610	White	-3.212
George Bush	-0.838	Iraq	-1.738	Media	-5.031
George Soros	-0.859	Syria	-2.222	Terrorist	-7.513
Mitt Romney	-0.963	Germany	-3.896	Criminal	-9.085
Total Average	-0.312		-0.788		-2.220