

Kekistanis and the meme war on social media

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Abstract

This study examines public discourse, on Instagram and Twitter, related to the alt-right group which call themselves: Kekistanis. It offers an empirical understanding of this community, which uses highly-divisive language in promoting white supremacy through targeted memes. After tracing the origins and nature of the Kekistanis' coded language, I present a mixed method analysis of tweets and Instagram posts that reference Kekistan and Kek, in order to understand their main themes, messages, and communication strategies.

Keywords: Memes war; alt-right; social media; Instagram; Twitter

Introduction

In this study, we examine the Kekistani community on social media, that use memes as a form of cultural conflict against many people, groups, and institutions, including: mainstream media, liberals, LGBTQ, proponents of political correctness, globalists, feminists, immigrants, and religious and/or ethnic minorities. The word "Kek" refers to the name of an ancient Egyptian god (either male or female) who sowed chaos. It is Kek's propensity for chaos that is the focus of the online Kekistani community, which first emerged in online video gaming communities, such as Discord (for example, see Pepe emojis here: <https://discordemoji.com/category/13/pepe>). This community often consumes and propagates conspiracy theories like QAnon: a theory centered around the belief that there is a deep state in the United States working covertly to depose Donald Trump. Equipped with their own "national" flag, closely resembling the Nazi Swastika, the new religion attacks "normies," or ordinary people, in order to assert their superiority (Neiwert, 2017). The additional "istan" in the name is meant to resemble the names of many Muslim majority countries, as a way to mock them. There is a lack of empirical research on this online community, and so this paper attempts to fill a major gap in the literature.

A study of 4chan's "Politically Incorrect" board made a couple of passing references to Kek (Hine et al., 2017), but Kekistan remains under-researched. To help us understand the phenomenon, it is helpful to put it into a broader context of "alt-right" online networks and sensibilities. James Main (2018) considers the alt-right as a political group that went largely unnoticed prior to the 2016 presidential election when Steve Bannon was named as Donald Trump's aid. The main philosophy of the alt-right relies on the premise that humans are not equal, and they mostly believe in the supremacy of the White race. The community is currently functioning like a social movement on social media and elsewhere, often using coded language dressed up as Internet-savvy satire (Nagle, 2017). Many alt-right groups double their members by using anonymous armies of trolls in the strategic pro-Trump movement; this was especially true prior to and during the 2016 US election campaign. Despite the irony in their use of symbols and the anonymity of their followers on social media, Andrew Anglin, founder and editor of neo-Nazi website *Daily Stormer* (2016), describes the alt-right as a unique type of mass-movement that is simultaneously serious and idealistic. A significant number of alt-right members view themselves as loyal foot soldiers or cultural warriors of the world's first meme president, Donald Trump, whom they believe they have helped elect through their skillful deployment of meme power (Tuters, 2018).

The alt-right coalesced out of loose amalgamations of groups of men including "teenage gamers, pseudonymous swastika-posting anime lovers, ironic South Park conservatives, anti-feminist pranksters, nerdish harassers and meme-making trolls" (Nagle, 2017, p. 2). The alt-right successfully demystifies these and other online subcultures, many of which may appear bizarre and incomprehensible to outsiders. Before it was described as "alt-right", Berlet and Lyons (2000) analyzed the various forms of right-wing violence targeting abortion providers, racialized people, and the LGTBQ community aided by a wide range of alliances ranging from hard-core neo-Nazis to overall right-wing anti-

government activists. In “Don’t Feed the Trolls,” Malmgren (2017) discusses the alternative names of and movements that overlap with the alt-right, including neo-Nazis and white nationalists; moreover, Malmgren does this while emphasizing both the Christian nationalist and more secular bases of the movement that have emerged as forces in political activism. Some of the powerful and effective ways this community functions are through the use of memes, coded jokes, and recurring phrases like “shitlord” through which alt-right members satirize liberals, conservatives, and even themselves (Malmgren, 2017, p. 11). For example, Figure 1 shows two memes with coded messages, utilizing the QAnon language with its symbols and codes. The use of the triple brackets, or echoes, in the first meme is, for instance, intended to be a reference to Jews (Williams, 2016).

What can appear as an absence of logical reasoning is, in fact, often coded terminology and co-opted symbols conveying very deliberate forms of messages; the codes and symbols may be deployed either to avoid detection or to enhance the mystery, and mystique, around the nature of the alt-right (Miller-Idriss, 2018, p. 123-127). In the three memes seen above, the redpill hashtag is used; this is a term borrowed from the science fiction movie *The Matrix*, which in alt-right parlance refers to knowing the harsh reality as opposed to the blue pill that indicates an effeminate, blissful ignorance. The red color is also a reference to the Republican Party, which is referenced in different formats in the above hashtags (e.g. #RedWave or #Conservatives).

To better understand the implications of the proliferation of popular memes as a new common cultural shorthand, it is important to borrow from Hannah Giorgis’ articulation of “21st-century meta-language” (2015, para. 6). Perhaps unsurprisingly, popular memes on the Internet have become the meta-language of our time. This is especially true among young people, who, as it happens, played an important role in the 2016 US presidential election. To make matters more complicated, the alt-right’s anonymous production of memes inserts itself into the

collective identity of the new generation of young users by blurring the line between what is a user-generated meme and what serves the ideologies of the alt-right. One of the important features of memes that scholars have identified is their effectiveness in building online communities (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 485). In this regard, Limor Shifman (2012) emphasizes that memes function on a microlevel in terms of their association with smaller communities and on a macrolevel due to their influence on the formation of broader public opinion and collective identities. Many online communities, having recognized the importance and influence of memes, create and distribute memes that reflect their political backgrounds (Burgess, 2008; Miltner, 2014). In this sense, memes can be seen as cultural items shared by activists, many of whom call themselves “warriors” who oppose the status quo (Lasn, 2012, p. 147). Memes transmit cultural power, and this is why some users speak in terms of, “fighting for the hegemony of memes,” in what is known as “memes warfare” (Häkkinen & Leppänen, 2014, p. 7 & 19).

In this meme warfare, Pepe the Frog became a potent weapon for Kekistanis. The image of Pepe was originally created by cartoonist Matt Furie with a message of love in the 2016 US presidential election, but this peaceful content was transformed by the alt-right platforms and users into a vile symbol of white nationalism (Van Dijck, 2013). Kien (2019), in his book *Communicating with Memes*, explains the process of modification of Pepe the Frog by revisiting Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, which examines the relationships between the symbolism of culture and its perceived reality. Kein (2019) points out how, especially on the Internet, the world often regards the appearance of things as reality. Harris and Taylor (2005) argue that Nazi content has successfully been introduced into social media terrains, becoming part of the mainstream by hiding behind the irony, dark humor, and sarcasm of white supremacists. In this case, via what began as an inside joke, Pepe the Frog went from innocent online humor to a pervasive symbol

of the alt-right online. The use of the flag of Kekistan is another example of adopting a sign and turning it into a totally different signifier. In this case, the Kekistani flag helped the group develop the mythology of an imaginary country that was, or would be, a kind of “ethnstate,” in the language of the new European far-right. Even though believers claimed to be engaged in a clash of civilizations against the forces of “political correctness,” the ironic use of Nazi iconography appears as “floating signifiers,” for those who understand it, while providing a veneer of ideological innocence (Fielitz & Thurston, 2018). Ironically, not only were popular memes altered for the delivery of alt-right content, but also the Internet meme culture – which is grounded with roots in the Indymedia of the late 20th century as an effort to democratize and challenge the dominance of official sources or meta-narratives – was itself repurposed (Anderson & Revers, 2018, p. 25).

In terms of what accounts for the resonance between online subcultures and the global insurgency of alt-right populism, Tuters (2018) points to the demographic make-up of the culture of 4chan and of “hard core” computer gamers who claim they are “trolling,” “live action role playing” or “LARPing” (p. 38). This group adopted the ironic slogan “teh [sic] Internet is serious business” to imply there is nothing serious taking place on the Internet (Tuters, 2018, p. 38). Thus, all memes or shorthands can be explained away as social media satire with no deliberate intention (see for instance the most retweeted post below). This all becomes more problematic when ironic slogans and shorthands become popularized in the realm of social media platforms. One popular ironic slogan, for example, is “I want to kill you in front of your children.” To those in the know this is not considered as a threat or a statement of actual intent, but rather as an expression of exasperation or frustration (Lumsden, 2019).

The group’s public pedagogy operates by the logic that “absolute idealism must be couched in irony,” often targeting ordinary people, referred to as “normies,” who are not aligned with the alt-right (Cole,

2019, p. 55). Who is qualified as a normie? Anglin defines a normie as someone who is not a member of a given subculture but who might perpetuate the alt-right ideology by use of popular social media. In other words, normies are considered "sheeple" (docile, sheep-like people) who are easy to lure in (Cole, 2019, p. 35). In this way, the ideological movement shields itself in a shell of irony and vulgarity while its message settles in the minds of unsuspecting normies. For example, Sarah Jeong from *The New York Times* often ignites (or offers the redpill to) the mind of "normies" with her progressive views on feminism and race (Greene, 2019, p. 66). James Caron (2016) delineates two levels of satire, or a "satire two-step": (1) an obvious façade, which is non-serious and comic, and (2) hidden content with a serious tone which is more likely a political message (p. 175). If the alt-right has accomplished anything besides normalizing "ironic" expressions of intolerance and hate, it would be in their innovative infusion and deployment of political memes to various fan cultures. It is simplistic, however, to consider the alt-right movement as the pioneer of political fan culture. Building on the emergence of the agency of active users in 1990s-era cultural studies, user-generated content that can function as a form of collective identity constructs a fandom, or collective of fans, that then contributes to another subject or political project. Tuters (2018), referring to the case of Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, calls it "dark fandom" or "toxic fandom," with a doctrine implicitly mobilizing fans based on alt-right ideas not only in North America but also throughout the world (p. 44-45).

Kekistanis on Social Media

In this study, we used the search terms "Kekistan" and "Kek" in different formats to retrieve social media data from Twitter and Instagram. First, a Netlytic Academic subscription was used to download 36,778 tweets posted between March 31st and October 26th, 2019. Then, we used a customized Python script to retrieve 33,695 Instagram messages posted between March 15th, 2015 and April 9th, 2019. Data was analyzed using

a computer program called *QDA Miner 5 – Word Stat 8* which allowed the researcher to identify the most frequent hashtags used in the two datasets and identify the most frequently recurring themes in the posts. This program was used due to the high number of posts, which were in excess of 70,000 messages. Regarding the tweets' distribution, Figure 2 provides a visualization of these posts. We can see that September 20th, 2019, has the highest number of tweets (n=1203). It coincides with a popular post that, on the surface, does not make any sense at all: “when big chungus harambe dat boi storms area 51 to find real pepe kekistan my name jeff what are those 4chan keemstar me gusta and we meme run out with sans naruto dab hoshido csgo enemy spotted overwatch to wakanda fate grand order roblox winston and fortnite house harlem shake” (Flsre, 2019). The use of this kind of ambiguous and confusing language is purposeful to spread the message further, because it keeps people wondering about the intended message.

As for Instagram posts, Figure 3 provides a visualization of their distribution. We can see that July 9th, 2017 has the highest number of Instagram posts (n=231). Unlike Twitter, the majority of posts on Instagram are accompanied by images and mere hashtags, such as the following one, which was reposted 70 times on July 9th: “#CNNblackmail #Pepe #Memewarfare #Memewar #Kekistan #Forkekistan #Memewar2017 #Snowflakefreezone #Maga #Praisekek #DonaldTrump2020 #Donald2k16 #Kek #Freespeech #Profreespeech #Secondamendment #2a #Peacethroughstrength #Buildthatwall #Trumpwall #DonaldTrump #CNNisISIS #Wethepeople #Threepercent #1776 #Alexjones #Savage #Based.” It's not hard to decipher a clear attack here against mainstream media, especially CNN, which is associated with terrorism and blackmail mostly due to its continuously critical coverage of Donald Trump.

Table 1 provides the results on the top 30 most recurrent hashtags on both Twitter and Instagram. The hashtag #meme and derivations like #Dankmemes, which refer to superficial and low-resolution images, are

extremely frequent, indicating the use of this media to communicate political messages. Based on our qualitative assessment of these Kekistani memes, we find some themes, illustrated in Figure 4, that carry anti-LGBTQ messages, including the use of the conspiracy term “gay chemicals” and references to right-wing media host Alex Jones, who once claimed that chemicals in the water are making frogs gay (Higgins, 2018, para. 12).

The other main feature of the top hashtags is the political support the Kekistani community shows towards US President Trump, and terms and themes associated with his presidency, including: #MAGA (Make America Great Again); #QAnon, #WWG, and #Qarmy, which refer to alt-right conspiracy movements and their symbols; #KAG (Keep America Great); #Lockherup, in reference to Hillary Clinton; #GOP, #Stablegenius, and so forth. The animosity towards and attacks against liberals both in the US and Canada comes across very clearly. The memes illustrated below in Figure 5 show the kind of political memes that the Kekistani community most often circulates. Another key feature of these memes is the kind of anti-Islamic or anti-Muslim sentiments associated with the far-right, often depicting Muslims as a threat to Western civilization, and as rapists or outcasts (See Figure 6).

Finally, many memes and their accompanying captions or texts encourage Kekistani users to support each other in their online cultural war by following active users, reposting their messages and memes, and by otherwise engaging with Kekistan’s literature and viral posts. Figure 7, for instance, shows two memes whose purpose is to show solidarity and support for the community, a virtual call to arms in support of President Trump for his upcoming 2020 presidential re-election bid.

In order to better understand the messages of Kekistanis, we identified the ten most recurrent retweets and their frequencies. Unlike Instagram, where the recurrent posts are mostly a combination of hashtags since the emphasis is on the images, Twitter contains more meaningful and

substantial messages, with the exception of the top post which is referenced above. The second most frequent retweet, for example, refers to supporting straight men and implies rejection of gay rights, stating: “As a straight guy I’m really glad this guy is out there fighting for my rights.” Three other retweets refer to the QAnon conspiracy theory, and its relevant hashtags (No. 3, 4, 10), urging Kekistanis to be digital warriors in this period of great new awakenings. As with Instagram, there is a visible effort to consolidate and strengthen the online community, which often can be seen by the references to other Kekistani usernames on the platform and the requests for their support by reposting memes and commenting on them (See No. 4 & 5). As mentioned, there is an emphasis on using coded language, sarcasm, and irony, as illustrated by retweet #9 which is responding to a Twitter user who expressed his surprise that a man was carrying a revolver at a public gathering. The Kekistani user responds in a seemingly disparaging and sarcastic manner, using pejorative terms like Trumpsters and the ironic hashtag #OrangeManBad, while describing the gun as a “fully semi automatic assault” weapon; beneath the surface, the real intention of this tweet is to promote gun ownership and the values of Kekistan. Finally, retweet #8, which appears to refer to a perceived war waged against Kek, has been deleted from the platform.

In conclusion, the Kekistani community relies on the affordances of social media like Instagram and Twitter to spread their sarcastic and heavily-coded memes. In order to ensure these posts reach their community members, they often use targeted hashtags and usernames that suggest alliances with Donald Trump and the alt-right movement. Irony is frequently deployed to mask the real meaning of the messages; posts often superficially look critical of conservative views, but carry completely opposite meanings. For the Kekistanis, these activities are all part of a war of memes that started before the 2016 US election as a sort of fun game to elect Donald Trump. These users often call themselves “virtual soldiers” or “cultural warriors” who see it as their duty to spread

supportive and funny memes to influence the minds of other users, or normies, especially young and impressionable ones. The major themes the Kekistanis discuss and the tropes they deploy include political correctness, anti-LGBTQ, anti-feminism, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, anti-liberal, and anti-immigration. Several authors, including George Hawley (2017) and Mike Cole (2019), argue that social media outlets, such as Reddit and Twitter, have played a role in facilitating fascist or proto-fascist ideologies like the alt-right movement. These platforms, motivated by a desire not to lose valuable advertising revenues from alt-right users, often point to freedom of expression as a pretext to continue offering such users free access to transmit their coded hate messages.

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