Echoes of Extremism: The Impact of Social Media on Group Identity, Moral Disengagement, and Dehumanization

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Abstract— **The digital revolution and the resulting social media platforms have brought about a transformation in human communications and intergroup relations. This paper examines the role of social media in shaping the dynamics of extremist group memberships. It explores how social media facilitates the spread of extremist ideologies and the recruitment and radicalization processes, leveraging theories such as Social Identity Theory and concepts like moral disengagement. The paper also discusses how the anonymity and global reach of social media enable these groups to not only strengthen their identities and cohesion but also engage in moral disengagement mechanisms, such as dehumanization, which rationalize extremist behaviours. Finally, it discusses the dual potential of social media to both propagate extremist views and serve as a tool for counter-radicalization efforts. Through a critical analysis of how digital environments influence group dynamics and individual behaviours, this essay contributes to the understanding of digital intergroup relations and underscores the need for strategic interventions to mitigate the adverse effects of social media on societal cohesion.**

Keywords— *Social Media, Intergroup Relations, Extremist Groups, Moral Disengagement, Radicalization*

I. Echoes of Extremism: The Impact of Social Media on Group Identity, Moral Disengagement, and Dehumanization

The emergence of digital landscapes has revolutionized the way individuals interact, raising pivotal questions about the impact of these changes on human psychology and the dynamics between different groups. As society navigates the complexities of online communication, the psychological underpinnings of how individuals and groups relate to one another in these digital spaces have become a focal point of interest. This sea change in human communications prompts a re-evaluation of traditional concepts within the field of psychology, particularly in the study of intergroup relations.

Intergroup relations explores how groups perceive, influence, and relate to one another. This field examines the formation of group identities, the roots of group conflict, and the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion (Hogg, 2013). The rise of social media platforms has introduced a transformative arena for these intergroup interactions, marked by its capability to transcend geographical boundaries and facilitate instantaneous communication. These capabilities, as well as its vast reach and often anonymous nature, has made social media a potent tool for shaping the perceptions and relationships between diverse groups.

Among the groups most significantly impacted by this shift are extremist organizations, which have adapted to these platforms to build identity, recruit members, and disseminate their messages to a global audience. The increasing popularity of the Proud Boys, for example, illustrates how social media has amplified the reach and intensity of extremist ideologies. The Proud Boys, a right-wing extremist hate group, leverage online spaces to attract followers and reinforce their identity through shared symbols, slogans, and targeted messaging that positions them as defenders of traditional values against perceived societal threats (DeCook, 2018; Nguyen & Gokhale, 2022). This online presence facilitates an echo chamber that reinforces radical beliefs and legitimizes aggressive or exclusionary behaviours.

Extremist groups and the process of radicalization represent a significant aspect of the changing landscape of intergroup relations in the age of digital communication. Extremist groups are characterized by their adherence to radical ideologies and beliefs that often oppose mainstream societal values, sometimes advocating for dramatic changes or the use of violence to achieve their goals (Stern, 2016). The process of radicalization involves individuals progressively adopting these extremist beliefs. Social media can potentially play a notable role in this context, offering extremist groups unprecedented platforms for dissemination of their ideologies, recruitment of members, and coordination of activities. The anonymity and global reach of social media allow these groups to connect with a wider audience, while also facilitating echo chambers that reinforce radical views and accelerate the radicalization process (Klein, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this paper argues that social media has significantly altered intergroup relations, especially among extremist groups. It has supercharged moral disengagement, specifically dehumanization processes, thereby influencing these groups in previously unimaginable ways. With social media, extremist groups have found a powerful medium for organization, radicalization, and recruitment, leveraging the platform's inherent characteristics to further their ideologies.

II. Theoretical Framework

A. Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, provides a psychological framework for understanding how individuals' self-concepts are shaped by their affiliations with various social groups, such as ethnic groups, clubs, and national identities (Al Raffie, 2013; Huddy, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Tajfel and Turner's (2004) theory offers insights into how and why individuals identify with certain groups and the effects of

these identifications on their behaviour and perceptions of others.

The heart of Social Identity Theory is understanding how individuals perceive themselves and others through a process that begins with social categorization, which is the classification of people into various groups (Huddy, 2001). Tajfel and Turner (2004) propose that this categorization is not just a means of organizing social information but also leads to a homogenization of perceptions within these groups, often exaggerating the similarity of those within the same group and the differences between groups. Following categorization, individuals then engage in social identification by adopting their group's identity as a core part of their self-concept. This adoption significantly influences their behaviour and attitudes as the group's characteristics, values, and norms become integrated into their personal identity. The final step—social comparison—sees individuals comparing their group favourably against others, enhancing their self-esteem based on their group membership. This comparison leads to in-group bias, where there is a preference for one's own group, and out-group discrimination, where members of other groups are viewed less favourably, ranging from subtle biases to overt hostility (Huddy, 2001).

In the realm of extremist groups, Social Identity Theory can offer insights into how strong in-group identities are formed and how out-groups are demonized. Al Raffie (2013) explains that such groups leverage the processes of social categorization and identification to foster a deep sense of belonging among their members, often centering around well-defined characteristics such as ideology, ethnicity, or religion. This strong identity is further reinforced by narratives of threat or competition from out-groups, justifying in-group bias and out-group discrimination. These dynamics not only solidify group cohesion but also rationalize a range of actions against perceived out-groups, including violence, under the guise of defending or advancing the group's interests or survival. Understanding these psychological processes provides a foundation for interventions aimed at reducing intergroup conflict and promoting inclusivity.

The Proud Boys' group dynamics on social media illustrate core principles of Social Identity Theory, as defined by Tajfel and Turner (2004). Through digital platforms, members create a strong sense of in-group identity by adopting symbols, language, and shared beliefs that distinguish them from mainstream society (Nguyen & Gokhale, 2022). This process begins with social categorization, where members and recruits are defined by common values, such as nationalism and traditional masculinity (Nguyen & Gokhale, 2022). This identity is then solidified through social identification: members adopt group symbols, slogans, and participate in exclusive online forums, which reinforce their alignment with the Proud Boys' ideology (DeCook, 2018; Rothbart & Bere, 2024).

As the group identity strengthens, social comparison amplifies in-group loyalty and out-group hostility (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Members view themselves as protectors of traditional values, contrasting their identity against those they label as liberal or anti-nationalist threats (Nguyen & Gokhale, 2022). This distinction enhances members' self-esteem by positioning them on the morally correct side, which simultaneously justifies their hostility toward out-groups.

Social media intensifies these processes by facilitating group interactions and providing a platform for echo chambers (Klein, 2019). In this digital environment, Proud Boys members actively seek content that confirms their beliefs and discredits outsiders, strengthening the boundaries of their group identity and reducing empathy toward those outside of it (DeCook, 2018).

B. Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement, a concept introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura, refers to the process by which individuals rationalize or justify harmful actions towards others by disengaging from the moral standards to which they typically adhere (Bandura, 2016). Bandura (2016) proposes that this process allows individuals to engage in actions that contravene their ethical standards without experiencing the cognitive dissonance that would normally ensue. Bandura identified several mechanisms—including moral justification, euphemistic labelling, and displacement of responsibility— through which moral disengagement operates, each facilitating the distancing of one's actions from one's personal moral compass.

Bandura (2016) proposes that moral justification involves reinterpreting otherwise reprehensible actions as serving a noble cause. By framing harmful behaviours as in service of a greater good, individuals can view their actions as not only acceptable but commendable. This redefinition allows individuals to align harmful actions with positive self-concepts, thus avoiding the tension between their behaviour and their moral standards. Euphemistic labelling is the employment of sanitized or neutral terms to describe harmful actions. Language plays a critical role in moral disengagement and through the use of euphemistic labelling, individuals can mask the severity or immorality of their actions. This linguistic distancing reduces the strong emotional impact usually associated with harmful behaviours, making them feel less egregious and easier to commit without moral conflict. Displacement of responsibility involves attributing one's actions to an external authority, such as a superior or societal norms, thereby diluting personal accountability. When individuals perceive their actions as dictated by others, they can dissociate themselves from the moral implications of these actions. This displacement allows individuals to view themselves as mere agents, executing orders or conforming to group norms rather than as autonomous moral agents.

Within the context of extremist groups, moral disengagement plays a central role in facilitating participation in violence and aggression (Bandura, 2016). Aly et al. (2014) explain that these groups often employ narratives and rhetoric that invoke the mechanisms of moral disengagement to justify their actions. By portraying violence as a necessary means to achieve a higher moral purpose, employing euphemistic language to describe violent acts, and emphasizing obedience to the group's ideology or to its leaders, extremist groups can significantly lower the moral barriers that would normally prevent individuals from engaging in harmful behaviours.

Aly et al. (2014) describe that the process of moral disengagement in these groups not only allows members to participate in actions that align with the group's goals but also to maintain a positive self-image. It minimizes the moral dissonance that arises from the gap between their actions and their personal ethical standards. As a result, members can support or directly engage in acts of violence and aggression without the full psychological burden of their moral implications. This disengagement is not only instrumental in sustaining participation in the group's activities but also in recruiting new members who can adopt the group's cause without facing immediate moral conflict.

The Proud Boys' rhetoric and actions online often exemplify moral disengagement, a process where individuals rationalize harmful behaviour by disconnecting from usual moral standards. DeCook (2018) explains that one way this occurs is through moral justification: members frame aggressive actions as defense of traditional values or patriotism, portraying their hostility as a noble fight to preserve their ideals. This reframing allows members to see confrontations or inflammatory behaviour as morally acceptable, even commendable.

Another mechanism they use is euphemistic labeling. Online, Proud Boys may use softened or coded language to describe violence or aggression, referring to confrontations as rallies or peaceful resistance (DeCook, 2018). This can sanitize their actions, making them appear less harmful and masking the underlying aggression.

Displacement of responsibility also plays a role; members might attribute their actions to following group leaders or responding to perceived threats by outsiders. By placing accountability on leadership or external enemies, individuals within the Proud Boys can distance themselves from the ethical consequences of their actions, viewing themselves as part of a larger cause rather than as morally responsible individuals (DeCook, 2018).

Social media amplifies these mechanisms by creating a supportive environment where members receive positive feedback for behaviour they might otherwise question (Klein, 2019). This digital validation allows for increasingly aggressive actions to be rationalized without confronting the usual moral discomfort.

C. Dehumanization

Dehumanization, another mechanism of moral disengagement, is the process by which individuals or groups are perceived as less than fully human (Bandura, 2016). According to Bandura (2016) this perception paves the way for increased aggression and reduced empathy towards those identified as outside one's own group, essentially by stripping away their human qualities. Within the dynamics of extremist groups, dehumanization serves as a powerful tool for overcoming the moral and psychological barriers that would normally prevent acts of aggression. Viewing those deemed as others as lacking in human qualities simplifies the justification needed to commit violence against them (Aly et al., 2014).

According to Bandura (2016) the process of dehumanization goes beyond simply enabling acts of violence; it actively diminishes the capacity for empathy and compassion towards the targets. Since these individuals or groups are not seen as fellow human beings with thoughts, feelings, and rights, but as mere objects to be ignored or symbols worthy of disdain, the natural human inclination towards empathy is significantly weakened. This lack of empathy is necessary for extremist groups, as it helps to maintain a clear division between the in-group and out-group, reinforcing group identity and cohesion by uniting members against a common enemy (Stern, 2016).

The impact of dehumanization can extend beyond the immediate context of violence and lead to long-term entrenchment of divisions between groups (Stern, 2016). Reducing people to less than human status can reinforce and perpetuate the cycle of violence and aggression, and make reconciliation and understanding between divided groups more challenging (Stern, 2016). The reduced capacity for empathy also hampers efforts to address the underlying issues fueling conflict, as it obstructs the ability to see the situation from the perspective of the dehumanized group (Stern, 2016).

The Proud Boys provide a real-world example of how dehumanization operates within extremist groups, especially in online spaces where anonymity and group support reduce accountability. Through social media, the Proud Boys often label out-groups—such as political opponents or marginalized communities—as threats to national identity, framing them as morally inferior or unworthy of empathy (DeCook, 2018). This portrayal not only rallies members around a common enemy but also strips the out-groups of their individuality and humanity, making hostility towards them feel justified (DeCook, 2018). The repetitive exposure to dehumanizing rhetoric within these digital echo chambers intensifies in-group cohesion and reduces empathy for those outside the group (DeCook, 2018). Consequently, this dehumanization process hinders the potential for dialogue and conflict resolution, as members become entrenched in a polarized worldview where others are seen as obstacles rather than fellow human beings (Klein, 2019).

III. EVOLUTION OF EXTREMIST GROUPS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The historical evolution of extremist groups reveals notable shifts in the methods of communication and identity formation, largely influenced by technological advancements. Prior to the advent of social media, these groups relied heavily on traditional forms of communication such as printed materials, face-to-face meetings, and, later, websites and internet forums (Frazer, 2023; Prezelj & Zalokar, 2024). These methods, while effective in their time, had limitations in terms of reach and speed of information dissemination. Because of these limitations, the formation of group identity and the dynamics of intergroup hostility were constrained, with the result that this period was characterized by a localized approach to recruitment and radicalization, with a heavy reliance on physical community and direct interaction (Prezelj & Zalokar, 2024).

The migration of extremist group dynamics to the digital realm marked a significant transformation in their operation and impact. The introduction of digital platforms facilitated a broader engagement with potential recruits and sympathizers,

transcending geographical limitations and enabling a global reach (Prezelj & Zalokar, 2024). This shift not only expanded the audience for extremist ideologies but also streamlined the process of identity formation and group cohesion through more efficient and widespread communication channels (Prezelj & Zalokar, 2024).

With the proliferation of social media, the modern digital age ushered in new possibilities for extremist groups to engage in psychological warfare and propaganda dissemination at an unprecedented scale. It broadened the scope of intergroup interactions and potentially amplified psychological processes such as moral disengagement and dehumanization (Klein, 2019). Social media platforms, with their vast networks and algorithms, facilitate an environment where individuals can easily encounter and interact with extremist content (Prezelj & Zalokar, 2024). These platforms may allow individuals to disconnect from the ethical implications of their actions and views, thereby making it easier to justify and engage in harmful behaviours towards others (DeCook, 2018; Klein, 2019). Additionally, the rapid spread of dehumanizing rhetoric through social media can desensitize individuals to violence and aggression against perceived out-groups, further entrenching extremist ideologies and facilitating the recruitment and radicalization process (DeCook, 2018; Klein, 2019).

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON EXTREMIST GROUPS

A. Identity, Belonging, and Extremism

Social media facilitates anonymity while offering visibility, allowing users to explore and express aspects of their identity that resonate with extremist ideologies (Frissen, 2021). This dual capability of social media simplifies the creation of social networks that endorse extremist viewpoints, thereby potentially reinforcing the users' sense of belonging and validating their ideological alignment with the group. Thus, social media serves to consolidate extremist identities by providing a space where individuals can connect, share extremist content, and reinforce their group identity. This digital environment might also enhance the ideological cohesion of the group, because extremist messages can be rapidly tailored and focused on the issues and identities of the particular group. This renders social media an effective tool for sustaining and growing extremist movements, distinguishing it from traditional forms of social interaction that do not offer the same level of immediacy, control, specificity, and widespread reach.

The concept of echo chambers on social media further exacerbates the psychological effects of radicalization and the reinforcement of extremist views. Echo chambers occur when individuals are exposed primarily to information and opinions that reinforce their existing beliefs, effectively isolating them from opposing or dissenting viewpoints (Cinelli et al., 2021). This isolation is facilitated on social media platforms, where algorithms can curate content that aligns with the user's preferences, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of exposure and engagement with extremist ideologies (Cinelli et al., 2021). The psychological impact of this phenomenon is profound, as it not only validates the individual's beliefs but also intensifies them, pushing some

towards more extreme positions (Cinelli et al., 2021). The echo chamber effect seems likely to contribute to the radicalization process by creating an environment where extremist views are normalized, and opposition and counter-narratives are rarely encountered, thereby reducing the opportunities for critical reflection.

B. Impact of Social Media on Dehumanization

Social media may not only disseminate extremist narratives, but it also might critically undermine the ethical barriers that would typically prevent individuals from engaging in violence and discrimination. This undermining is achieved through the strategic manipulation of information, where extremist groups craft and propagate content that frames their cause as morally superior or as a moral imperative (Frissen, 2021; Stern, 2016). The selective exposure offered by social media platforms isolates individuals from a balanced discourse, omits conflicting ethical considerations, creating an environment where the ethical implications of actions are not just overlooked, but systematically obscured.

This process of moral disengagement facilitated by social media also involves more than passive consumption of biased narratives; it requires active engagement with content. As users interact with this content—liking, sharing, and commenting—they become participants in a feedback loop that reinforces the narrative's legitimacy and their disconnection from societal moral standards (DeCook, 2018; Frissen, 2021; Klein, 2019). This cycle of validation and engagement is critical for the perpetuation of extremist ideologies, as it allows individuals to rationalize participating in, or supporting, actions that they would otherwise recognize as harmful or unethical.

Furthermore, the process of dehumanization can potentially be amplified on social media, where the portrayal of out-group members as less than human can spread rapidly and widely. The amplification of dehumanization might lie in its normalization. Injunctive societal norms refer to the shared expectations within a society regarding behaviours that are approved or disapproved of (Goldstein et al., 2008, Nolan, 2021). The constant exposure to dehumanizing rhetoric subtly modifies how users perceive these norms, making extreme viewpoints appear more acceptable and less contentious within online platforms (DeCook, 2018). Again, social media's extensive reach and the algorithms that prioritize content engagement, speed the process of normalization embedding harmful ideologies more firmly through digital interactions (DeCook, 2018; Klein, 2019). By continually circulating content that negatively portrays out-groups, social media may contribute to a gradual shift in the baseline of what is deemed acceptable to discuss or express. This shift, influenced by the digital reinforcement of injunctive norms, might lead to a broader acceptance of dehumanizing language and concepts, integrating them into the core of digital communications.

V. THE DUALISTIC NATURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The dual role of social media in the context of extremism embodies a complex interplay between facilitating moral disengagement and fostering moral engagement. While these platforms can amplify extremist ideologies, transforming

them into potent vehicles for the spread of divisive narratives and moral disengagement, they also could possess the inherent capability to act as powerful tools for promoting moral re-engagement and thus to counteract extremist influences. This potential for positive impact is derived from the same mechanisms that allow for the dissemination of harmful content: the vast reach, immediacy, and interactive nature of digital platforms (Frissen, 2021).

Social media's capacity to erode moral barriers, enabling individuals to rationalize and engage in extremism, conversely suggests that these platforms might also be harnessed to rebuild these moral barriers and promote ethical reflection and dialogue. Initiatives aimed at countering extremism through social media leverage the platform's extensive network to introduce narratives that emphasize peace, dialogue, and mutual understanding. These efforts are not merely attempts to counterbalance extremist content but are strategic endeavors to penetrate the echo chambers that perpetuate hate, offering alternative perspectives that promote empathy and humanization of the 'other.'

Moreover, by highlighting the stories of individuals who have disengaged from extremist ideologies and showcasing the tangible consequences of violence, social media campaigns can foster a process of moral re-engagement. This process involves reorienting users' perspectives towards recognizing the humanity in others, thereby dismantling the psychological groundwork of dehumanization. In doing so, social media can transform from a platform for moral disengagement to one that actively encourages moral reflection and engagement.

This nuanced understanding of social media's dualistic nature is important. It underlines the importance of strategic and thoughtful engagement with digital platforms, recognizing their potential to both spread extremism but also as a vital resource in the global fight against it.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The intersection of social media and modern extremist groups presents an important area of study, particularly when examined through a psychological framework. These digital platforms transcend their role as mere communication tools, potentially intensifying dangerous cognitive processes like moral disengagement and dehumanization, which are fundamental to the operation and dissemination of extremist ideologies. Inquiring into the psychological dynamics of intergroup relations reveals social media's potential impact on the construction of group identity, cohesion, and the radicalization pathway. The Proud Boys provide a clear example of how extremist groups exploit social media to foster a strong in-group identity and amplify hostility toward out-groups through dehumanizing rhetoric, reinforcing the psychological distance between members and those they oppose. Moreover, social media's capacity to amplify mechanisms that allow for the rationalization of, and engagement in, extremist actions make these platforms significant catalysts in the spread of these ideologies. The nuanced relationship between social media and the psychological processes of moral disengagement and dehumanization underscores how platform-specific designs and user interactions can contribute to the escalation of intergroup hostility and aggression and underscores the challenges posed by social media to societal cohesion and the critical need for future research to effectively confront extremism.

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