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Extremist Chan Culture

International Centre for the Study of Radicalization

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CONTACT DETAILS

For questions, queries and additional copies of this report, please contact:

ICSR
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom

T. **+44 20 7848 2098**
E. **mail@gnet-research.org**

Twitter: **@GNET_research**

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User Journeys in Online Extremist Groups

*T*his project by the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) looks at the user journeys of individuals who enter and participate in the online spaces of extremist communities. A user journey here refers to the distinct path a user may follow to reach their goals when accessing and using an online space belonging to extremist communities.

User journeys are particularly important in offering insights into the rationale and motivations of users on the one hand, and to the inner workings of extremist online communities on the other. This is vital for understanding their goals and objectives.

In selecting the ideologies for this project, we drew upon extremist communities – rather than extremist and terrorist organisations or groups – including those actors that participate in the extremist milieu and share ideas but do not necessarily operate in concert. These ideologies include those of formal and well-defined extremist organisations of White supremacist and anti-government extremist groups in the United States, supporter networks of Islamic State (IS), and looser communities of extremist actors including accelerationists, incels and chan site members who operate on shared platforms, congregating around common beliefs but without the connection of formal membership.

This project is a response to the growing interest in understanding how individuals enter and participate in online spaces of extremist communities. A core goal of the project was to understand the role of algorithms in leading users to extremist communities, including the changes in algorithmic recommendations that lead users to more extreme content online. However, examining these changes proved impossible due to the precautions taken by the expert contributors to the project, such as the use of separate technology and VPNs throughout their research.

The project also highlights the distinct posting behaviour and operational security protocols of different groups, usually along ideological lines.

Executive Summary

This report is the sixth in a series of short reports that look at the user journeys of individuals in extremist communities. This report focuses on the extremist chan culture, which refers to a collection of online platforms. The existence of chans is in stark opposition to mainstream social media, where users are usually encouraged to share their personal content and use their real identities. Strong group identity within chans is mostly established by the use of in-jokes and subcultural slang, despite the anonymous online setting.

The decision to focus on extremist chan culture in this report is informed by the continued threat posed to broader society by chan sites, which foster a climate in which extremism is the norm and in which violence is often openly encouraged. These chan sites continue to represent a particular kind of extreme online hate which requires moderation in order to curtail the rise and spread of extreme far-right communities.

On the report's methodology, the study used focus groups, involving individuals who have accessed, observed and occasionally participated in the private communication channels of these extremist communities. The names of all communities mentioned during the focus groups, including those that participants accessed, have been removed.

Key findings on extremist chan culture are:

- While there are non-English language chan sites which attract large audiences in many countries, the most popular is 4chan, with more than 22,000,000 users. Since its inception, 4chan has been a haven for violence.

- Newcomers are generally only able to find new chan sites through word of mouth, with more informed users periodically posting lists of links to more obscure chans on popular forums like 4chan.

- The existence of smaller chan sites further implies their links to other such sites based on shared ideology and in some instances a sense of camaraderie.

- Misogyny and queerphobia remain rife on extremist chan sites, with different chan sites varying slightly in their attitudes towards women.

Contents

1 Overview

The collection of online forums known as chan sites, or "chans" are a longstanding alternative to mainstream social media platforms. Their roots lie in the intersection between Japanese *Otaku* (nerd) and Western internet subcultures. Whereas mainstream platforms often encourage audiences to share and effectively archive their lives online, chan users – known as "anons" – operate anonymously in an environment where content is often quickly deleted. While not all chans host extremist content, certain sites, particularly those with "/pol/" (politically incorrect) boards, have a longstanding reputation for attracting and housing a community of far-right extremists.[1]

The extensive collection of chan imageboards which now exists stems from the first chan site "2channel", which was created by Hiroyuki Nishimura in 1999 for a Japanese audience.[2] While 2channel was originally only a textboard, its sister site "Futaba" was launched in 2001 and was adapted to host images as well.[3] The Futaba software forms the basis of the majority of current chans. In the US in 2003, the then 15-year-old Christopher Poole roughly translated Futaba's software into English to create 4chan, the largest English-language chan site.[4] Since the creation of 4chan, an ecosystem of hundreds of "clone" chan sites has emerged, which uses similar software modelled on Futaba's original code. These software packages are open source, meaning that in theory, anybody with basic coding experience can create and launch their own chan site.

The origin of extremist content on chan sites is complex and somewhat unusual. Unlike some other forums such as Iron March and Stormfront, English-language chan sites were not created as extremist spaces. 4chan's original userbase had significant overlap with that of the notorious online comedy forum Something Awful, which was known for its particularly hostile brand of troll culture. Thus "trolling" – "the practice of writing deliberately inflammatory comments designed to elicit outrage from one's targets" – was a central part of chan culture from its inception.[5] In the early years of 4chan, however, this trolling tended to be largely ideologically ambivalent, with a range of targets being considered fair game. Hate speech also was present on 4chan, yet it was veiled by many dense layers of irony. Self-professed Nazis – such as White supremacists from Stormfront who attempted to recruit /pol/ users – were largely not welcome on the site.[6]

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1   Stephane Bael et al., "Variations on a Theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun, and Other chans' Far-Right '/pol' Boards," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2021): 65.
2   Naohiro Matsumara et al., "The Dynamism of 2channel," *AI & Society* 19, no. 1 (2005): 84.
3   Fernando Alfonso, "Now 10 Years Old, 4chan Is the Most Important Site You Never Visit," *Daily Dot*, October 1, 2013, https://www.dailydot.com/debug/4chan-10-years-christopher-moot-poole/. Accessed August 3, 2020.
4   Alfonso, "Now 10 Years Old."
5   Edwin Hodge and Helga Hallgrimsdottir, "Networks of Hate: The Alt-Right, 'Troll Culture', and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35, no. 4, 576.
6   Janet Reitman, "All-American Nazis," *Rolling Stone*, May 2, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/all-american-nazis-628023/. Accessed March 19, 2023.

The ideological landscape of chan culture was permanently altered, however, by the events of Gamergate in 2014. Gamergate refers to the years-long misogynistic harassment campaign led by members of the online gaming community against (mainly) female game developers, journalists and their supporters, with particular emphasis on the indie developer Zoe Quinn following the launch of her controversial game *Depression Quest*. This harassment, which included doxxing and copious death and rape threats, became so virulent and ubiquitous on certain 4chan boards that all talk of Gamergate was eventually banned on the site. This prompted die-hard Gamergate enthusiasts – and thus hard-line misogynists – to move the less stringently moderated sibling chan site, 8chan.[7]

In the wake of the move to 8chan, the ironic embrace of hate speech on 4chan became more earnest on 8chan's /pol/ board, a largely unmoderated online space populated by highly active misogynists. As journalist Tom McKay observed in 2016, "while 4chan's /pol/ is more an agglomeration of casual racists, 8chan's /pol/ seems to be dominated by genuine white supremacists".[8] Thus, chan culture became a harbinger of overt extremism and neo-Nazism, largely through community fracturing and self-selecting users spending time in environments which were increasingly permissive of extremism. Since 8chan's rise to prominence, extremism is now a familiar feature across a large number of chan sites, and chan culture has become linked to a number of transnational terrorist arracks.

7   Sal Hagen et al., "Infinity's Abyss: An Overview of 8chan," *Oilab*, August 9, 2019, https://oilab.eu/infinitys-abyss-an-overview-of-8chan/. Accessed June 6, 2021.
8   Tom McKay, "Inside 8chan's /pol/, the Far-Right Forum Where Trump's Star of David Meme First Spread," *Mic*, June 13, 2016, https://www.mic.com/articles/147969/what-is-8chans-pol-forum-where-trump-star-of-david-meme-first-spread. Accessed August 22, 2019.

2 Methodology

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On the report's methodology, the study used focus groups with individuals who have accessed, observed and occasionally participated in the private communication channels of these extremist communities. The names of all communities mentioned during the focus groups, including those that participants accessed, have been removed.

This project received ethics clearance from King's College London.

3 Public Activities of Extremist Chan Culture

Platform Use

While a number of non-English-language chan sites attract large audiences in many countries – including Japan, Brazil and Germany – by far the most popular English-language chan site is 4chan, which in 2022 reportedly attracted more than 22,000,000 unique users.[9] 4chan's sibling site, 8kun (formerly known as 8chan), is the second most frequented English-language chan site, yet it attracts significantly less traffic, with just over 530,000 users visiting the site in January 2023.[10] However, the way in which the extreme right uses chan sites has shifted drastically since August 2019, when the site closed temporarily after being linked to a number of mass shootings.

Chan Fragmentation and Platform Migration

Prior to 8chan's closure, the site's /pol/ board attracted the largest base of loyal and overt extreme-right users. However, many White supremacists who were users of 8chan have shunned the site's rebrand to 8kun, taking issue with changes to the site's format, and distrusting the site's owner, Jim Watkins, due to his espousal of the QAnon conspiracy theory.[11] Many of these former 8chan users have flocked to smaller, less well-known, and more openly extreme chans.[12] While some extremists have also continued to use 4chan, which has arguably become less ironic in its embrace of White supremacy in recent years, 4chan still continues to act as something of a "feeder" into more extreme, smaller chans.

These shifts in the userbase since 2019 make the community of extremist chan users more dispersed and harder to track than before. The ideology of chan users is also somewhat fractured, with many sites hosting explicitly accelerationist spaces and others favouring different forms of national socialism and White supremacy. Stephane Baele et al. theorise that this collection of different sites forms a "series of distinct yet overlapping 'sub-subcultures'". They add that 4chan's /pol/ board is both the most active and comparatively the least extreme chan site, with increasingly extreme content being found on 8kun, and the most extreme on smaller, less active chans.[13] Indeed, many of the smaller chan sites that host extremist boards receive fewer than ten posts per hour.

9   4chan Press, https://www.4chan.org/press. Accessed March 10, 2023.
10   "8kun.top," similarweb, accessed March 10, 2023, https://www.similarweb.com/website/8kun.top/#overview.
11   Rachel Greenspan, "Who is Q? Why QAnon's Ringleader May Have Been Hiding in Plain Sight All Along,"
     Insider, April 8, 2021, https://www.insider.com/who-is-q-why-people-think-jim-watkins-qanon-8chan-2020-10.
     Accessed March 16, 2023.
12   Florence Keen, "After 8chan," Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, December 4, 2020,
     accessed March 10, 2023, https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/after-8chan/.
13   Stephane Bael et al, "Variations on a Theme?," 66.

Chan Resilience

Part of the reason why these smaller sites remain less active is their lack of online visibility. Whereas 4chan, and to some extent 8kun, have reputations which precede them and are part of the collective zeitgeist of internet culture, many smaller chan sites have considerably less public visibility and cannot be easily searched for online unless their name is known. Many chan sites therefore struggle to attract a sizeable userbase. Furthermore, many smaller chans which are only hosted on the dark web can only be searched for online using their exact URL, which restricts access considerably. Most newcomers can therefore only find new chan sites through word of mouth, with more informed users periodically posting lists of links to more obscure chans on popular forums like 4chan. Occasionally, small chan sites will also run promotional campaigns on 4chan, spamming 4chan boards with links to a new site. By comparison, some other chans may discourage this kind of posting, wishing to keep their membership small and "high quality".

Though their membership is comparatively small, the network of smaller extreme chan boards is resilient to takedown attempts. Many smaller chan sites are linked either by a shared ideology or simply by a sense of camaraderie, and therefore host "bunkers" of boards on other chan sites. These bunkers store content from other sites and act as a place of online refuge where a community can go in the event that their preferred chan site is subject to deplatforming. This dynamic makes it particularly difficult for a chan community to be entirely deplatformed, as a large part of the community can generally migrate successfully to another site should one board ever be taken down. However, chan sites do often shut down or become inactive if they fail to attract a significant number of users, the site's owner decides it is no longer financially viable to continue to host the site, or community infighting discourages users from frequenting the board.[14]

Imagined Community

Although infighting is common both internally within chan sites and between the userbases of different chans, Dale Beran has highlighted that part of what unites most chan users as a kind of imagined community is their allegiance to counterculture. Chans exist in stark opposition to mainstream social media where users are encouraged to share personal content and use their real identities. Instead, Michael Bernstein et al. highlight that chan sites are characterised by a culture of "anonymity and ephemerality", in which users operate without usernames and content is rapidly deleted rather than archived.[15] They add that the feature of anonymity and resultant online disinhibition enables "de-individuation and mob behaviour". Yet they also observe that this anonymity leads to the creation of an online in-group, where users prove their worth as a member of the collective by posting increasingly obscure in-jokes which function as a form of online social capital.[16]

14   Blyth Crawford, "Tracing Extremist Platform Migration on the Darkweb: Lessons for Deplatforming,"
      Global Network on Extremism & Technology, January 18, 2022, accessed March 16, 2023,
      https://gnet-research.org/2022/01/18/tracing-extremist-platform-migration-on-the-darkweb-lessons-for-
      deplatforming/.
15   Michael Bernstein, Andrés Monroy-Hernández, Drew Harry, and Paul André, "4chan and /b/: An Analysis of
      Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community." Paper presented as part of the *Proceedings of the
      Fifth International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, Barcelona*, (2011): 1–8.
16   Bernstein et al., "4chan and /b/," 1–8.

Indeed, the use of in-jokes and subcultural slang on chans serves to establish a strong sense of in-group identity despite the anonymous online setting. Community is created through specific cultural practices such as formatting posts in a particular way and relentlessly mocking those who violate these unspoken rules. Other cultural practices include referencing hateful in-jokes such as using the "echo symbol" – writing multiple parentheses around someone's name – to imply that a particular popular figure is Jewish, and therefore part of an undesirable out-group.[17]

Vyshali Manivannan has observed that users often accrue cultural capital on chan sites by posting deliberately shocking or offensive content, such as gore, racial slurs or violent threats. Manivannan writes that this hostile culture of offensive content was "designed as a… barrier to entry".[18] Users who express offence or shock at the content mark themselves as newcomers to the space, as they are unable to detect the "irony inherent in the use of slurs" which is likely to have been chosen only "due to the extreme sensitivity surrounding the epithets". She argues that the core value on 4chan – and other sites like it – is subversion and the refusal to "accept anything at face-value". Thus, by taking slurs and offensive content seriously, newcomers mark themselves as outsiders of the in-group of chan users.[19]

Visual culture is also highly important for community formation on chan sites. In their study of meme culture, Savvas Zannettou et al. found that 4chan's /pol/ board was one of the most influential online spreaders of racist and political memes into other online communities.[20] Similarly, Gabriel Hine et al. studied more than 1,000,000 images shared on 4chan, and concluded that "/pol/'s ability to find or produce original content is likely to be one of the reasons it is thought to be at the centre of hate on the web".[21]

Blyth Crawford, Florence Keen and Guillermo Suarez de-Tangil provide further context for the kind of memes shared on extremist chan boards, collecting images shared across 17 extremist chan boards. They report that a large percentage of the memes shared in these communities was not inherently extremist, rather it took on more sinister or violent meanings when shared in context alongside other extremist posts. However, they also highlight that many other memes shared on chans explicitly depicted violent acts perpetrated against minorities, contained visual references to antisemitic conspiracy theories, or were used to encourage violence.[22]

Beyond fostering a climate where extremism is the norm and where violence is often openly encouraged, chan sites are also useful archives for sharing and storing extremist documents and instructional material. Various chans host regularly updated "reading lists" containing hundreds of PDFs of extremist literature. These threads

17 "Echo," Anti-Defamation League, accessed March 12, 2023, https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/echo.
18 Vyshali Manivannan, "Attaining the Ninth Square: Cybertextuality, Gamification, and Institutional Memory on 4chan," *Enculturation*, October 10, 2012, accessed March 13, 2023, http://enculturation.net/attaining-the-ninth-square.
19 Manivannan, "Attaining the Ninth Square."
20 Savvas Zannettou et al., "On the Origins of Memes by Fringe Web Communities," 2018 Internet Measurement Conference, 14.
21 Gabriel Hine et al., "Kek, Cucks, and God Emperor Trump: A Measurement Study of 4chan's Politically Incorrect Forum and Its Effects on the Web," 11th International Conference on Web and Social Media (2017), 11.
22 Blyth Crawford, Florence Keen, and Guillermo Suarez de-Tangil, "Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures," Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2020, 1–50.

often contain manuals with instructions for carrying out violent attacks, obtaining or constructing a weapon, or making 3D-printed firearms. These instructional materials are generally consistent between platforms, with many chans storing similar content to other sites.

Violence and Attacks

Since its inception, 4chan has been a haven for violent rhetoric. The site has also been linked to the announcement of a murder in 2014, and of a school shooting in Oregon in 2015 on the "/b/" (random) board.[23],[24] However, in 2019, chan sites became the epicentre of a string of White supremacist accelerationist attacks.

On 15 March 2019, a lone attacker carried out a firearms attack targeting Muslim worshippers across two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 and injuring 40.[25] The shooter referenced the so-called "Great Replacement" theory – which supposes the White race is at risk of being ethnically and culturally "replaced" by non-White immigration and birth rates – as a major inspiration for his attack. Prior to initiating his assault, the shooter – Brenton Tarrant – announced his attack by posting to 8chan's /pol/ board. He praised the users there as "the best bunch of cobbers a man could ask for" and linked to a 72-page manifesto and a livestream of the attack. Both the manifesto and livestream were littered with memetic references. During his attack, Tarrant gave a "shout out" to YouTuber Pewdiepie, who in the mid-2010s became something of an ironic idol of the alt-right against his will.[26] Tarrant's manifesto also contained references to copypastas[27] which is popular within chan culture, as part of attempts to misdirect readers who existed outside his online extremist in-group.[28]

Tarrant's attack would serve as the blueprint for a wave of extreme-right terrorism with ties to chan culture. Tarrant was quickly embraced as a "saint" in extremist chan boards, with the sharing of memes that depicted him as a religious figure clutching a copy of his manifesto as if it were a holy text. This semi-ironic idol worship of Tarrant was partly connected to the large number of people murdered in his attack. Online users quickly praised Tarrant for killing so many people and challenged each other to beat his "high score" by carrying out similar attacks where even more people would be murdered.

A second factor which is likely to have contributed to Tarrant's status as an icon within chan culture, was that he specifically praised chan users in the announcement of his attack, and the aesthetics of his attack and manifesto deliberately appealed to an extremely online audience. By including memes and specific references to niche aspects of internet culture, Tarrant solidified himself as

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23   "4chan Murder Pictures: David Kalac Arrested in Oregon," *BBC News*, November 6, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-29932087. Accessed March 19, 2023.
24   Hannah Rose Ewens, "4chan Users Encouraged the Oregon School Shooter to Kill," *Dazed*, October 2, 2015, https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/26808/1/4chan-users-encouraged-the-oregon-school-shooter-to-kill. Accessed March 19, 2023.
25   "Christchurch Mosque Attack: Brenton Tarrant Sentenced to Life without Parole," *BBC News*, August 27, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53919624. Accessed March 18, 2023.
26   Emma Grey Ellis, "PewDiePie's Fall Shows the Limits of 'LOL JK'," *Wired*, February 16, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2017/02/pewdiepie-racism-alt-right/. Accessed March 18, 2023.
27   A copypasta is a block of text that has been repeatedly copied and pasted in internet forums. It is generally used as an inside joke to troll new users.
28   Robert Evans, "Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre," *Bellingcat*, March 15, 2019, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/. Accessed March 18, 2023.

belonging to a particular brand of online extremism, and essentially honoured this movement with his attack, thus cementing himself as a representative of the online far right.

Just one week after the Christchurch shooting, an extremist actor in Poway, California attempted an arson attack at a nearby mosque, for which he was never apprehended. One month later, on 27 April 2019, he carried out a firearms attack at a local synagogue, killing one person and injuring three others.[29] Prior to his attack, the attacker also posted to 8chan's /pol/ board, linking to a livestream – which ultimately failed – and to a manifesto in which he cited similar ideological influences to the Christchurch shooter, writing "Brenton Tarrant inspired me. I hope to inspire many more". Just four months later, on 3 August 2019, an attacker in El Paso, Texas uploaded a similar manifesto to 8chan's /pol/ board, again crediting Brenton Tarrant as an inspiration, before initiating a firearms attack targeting Hispanic people at a supermarket, killing 23 and injuring a further 23.[30] Similar to both Tarrant and the Poway attacker, the El Paso shooter also cited the "Great Replacement" theory as a key motivating force behind his attack.

In the wake of these mass-casualty attacks, 8chan was forced to shut down temporarily, after its network provider Cloudflare removed hosting services in the face of significant public pressure to stop platforming the site.[31] However, the removal of 8chan did not extinguish the wave of violence ignited by the Christchurch attack. Just five days after the El Paso shooting, on 8 August 2019, a lone actor in Bærum, Norway murdered his stepsister of Chinese descent, before attempting a mass-casualty firearms attack at a local mosque, injuring one person.[32] Prior to conducting his attack, he posted to the /pol/ board of 8chan's sibling site Endchan, announcing his attack and linking to a large collection of pictures of himself. Alongside his announcement, he uploaded a meme depicting Brenton Tarrant as a "saint", and the Poway and El Paso shooters as his "disciples".

A further attack emanating from chan culture occurred on 9 October 2019 in Halle, Germany when a lone attacker attempted to conduct a mass-casualty firearms attack inside a synagogue, before targeting nearby civilians after failing to gain entry to the building, killing two.[33] Before beginning his assault, the attacker posted to the /meadhall/ page of the niche chan site Meguca. In his post, he linked to a livestream on the Twitch streaming site, a short manifesto-style document, blueprints for creating improvised weapons, and two shorter texts containing memes and deep-seated references to niche aspects of chan culture. Unlike those attackers before him, he did not directly reference Brenton Tarrant's attack as inspiration. However, in his livestream, he referenced the "Great Replacement" theory, citing feminism as a concept spread by an imagined Jewish elite in order to encourage non-White immigration into European countries.

29   Greg Moran, "Poway Synagogue Shooter Gets Federal Life Sentence," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 28, 2021, https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/courts/story/2021-12-28/poway-synagogue-shooter-federal-life-sentence. Accessed March 17, 2023.
30   Robert Moore, "Man Who Killed 23 at El Paso Walmart Pleads Guilty to Hate Crimes," *Texas Tribune*, February 8, 2023, https://www.texastribune.org/2023/02/08/el-paso-walmart-shooting-pleads-guilty/. Accessed March 17, 2023.
31   Matthew Prince, "Terminating Service for 8chan," *Cloudflare*, August 5, 2019, https://blog.cloudflare.com/terminating-service-for-8chan/. Accessed March 17, 2023.
32   "Norway Mosque Attack and Murder Trial Begins in Oslo," *BBC News*, May 7, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52572542. Accessed March 17, 2023.
33   "Halle Synagogue Attack: Germany Far-Right Gunman Jailed for Life," *BBC News*, December 21, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55395682. Accessed March 17, 2023.

This string of violence with direct connections to chan sites continued on 14 May 2022, when an 18-year-old attacker in Buffalo, New York targeted African-Americans in a firearms attack at a supermarket, killing ten and injuring three.[34] Similarly to Tarrant, the attacker uploaded a 180-page manifesto and livestream prior to his assault. In his manifesto, the attacker referenced the "replacement" of the White race through mass immigration and declining White fertility rates, issues he attributed to the imagined influence of Jewish people. Again, the shooter highlighted Tarrant as a major inspiration behind his attack, also mentioning the Poway, Bærum and El Paso attackers in his manifesto.

In a departure from previous shooters, the Buffalo attacker uploaded these materials to Discord rather than a chan site. However, it is highly likely that the shooter was also deeply embedded in chan culture. The shooter's manifesto contained several passages copied from popular 4chan copypastas, and a log of his past activity on Discord contained links to and screenshots of smaller chan sites. The shooter also cited posts he made to 4chan's /pol/ board 9 November 2021, warning that a "Brenton Tarrant event will happen soon", thereby foreshadowing his intention to commit an act of mass-casualty violence.

4chan was also linked to a firearms attack on 17 July 2022 in Greenwood, Indiana, where a lone actor initiated a shooting, killing three and injuring a further two inside a shopping centre. It later emerged that the shooter appeared to have posted to 4chan's '/bant/' (international/random) board prior to initiating his attack, uploading several images of himself alongside a colourised image of a wedding in Nazi Germany.[35] Unlike the other attacks mentioned here, the ideological influences behind this attack are not as clearly linked to the "Great Replacement" theory, and it is not clear that the attack was directly influenced by the Christchurch shooting. However, the incident indicates that 4chan attracts users from various points across the extreme far-right ideological spectrum, and also demonstrates the site's practical attractiveness as way to publicise a mass shooting.

Most recently, on 12 October 2022, a lone actor initiated a firearms attack outside an LGBTQI+ night club in Bratislava, Slovakia, killing two people and injuring one.[36] Like the Buffalo shooter, the attacker did not announce his assault on a chan site. Rather he uploaded a manifesto to Twitter prior to his attack. However, before being caught by police, the attacker posted to 4chan and interacted with users there while on the run.[37] The shooter's manifesto cited Brenton Tarrant and the El Paso and Poway shooters as inspirations for the attack. The manifesto also highlighted 8chan as a site which had particularly influenced his world view, stating: "8chan may be gone, but its influence continues to propagate forward. And they will continue to propagate for a long time".

34   "Buffalo Shooting: Suspect Charged with Domestic Terrorism," *BBC News*, June 2, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61669403. Accessed March 17, 2023.
35   Tess Owen and Mack Lamoureux, "Indiana Mall Gunman Appears to Have Posted Plans on 4chan," *Vice*, July 20, 2022, https://www.vice.com/en/article/epzxba/indiana-mall-gunman-4chan. Accessed March 17, 2023.
36   "Slovakia: Two Dead after Shooting Outside LGBT Bar," *BBC News*, October, 13, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63239523. Accessed March 17, 2023.
37   Chapman, "In Slovakia, a Young Neo-Fascist Killed Two People in front of a Gay Club," *Italy 24*, October 13, 2022, https://news.italy24.press/trends/109025.html. Accessed March 17, 2023.

This spree of violence demonstrates that extremism on chan culture is transnational. Attackers around the world have used chan sites as a platform through which to announce their attacks and effectively gain publicity for mass shootings. These users have some degree of ideological consistency in their far-right beliefs, and for the most part are ideologically motivated by the "Great Replacement" theory. These shootings have also cultivated a particular aesthetic of violence – mass-casualty attacks are accompanied by manifestos filled with memes and misdirects, and attack announcements contain almost loving tributes to communities of chan users. The persistence of these attacks, despite the closure of 8chan, also demonstrates the pervasive nature of chan culture, illustrating how difficult it is to dampen extremist communities on chan sites.

Gender Dynamics

The userbase of chan sites is – for the most part – anonymous, although 4chan's user statistics suggest that approximately 70% of users across the site as a whole are male.[38] However, given that much of extremist chan culture has ties to the Gamergate controversy – an inherently misogynistic movement in which women were consistently at the receiving end of violent threats – it is likely that the number using extremist chan boards is higher than the site average. Arguably, these origins have contributed to the kind of "geek masculinity" present in many chan communities where "technological mastery formed the basis of masculine esteem and status".[39]

Misogyny

Misogyny is present on extremist chan boards both as an underlying constant and as the subject of various trolling campaigns or targeted, violent rhetoric. Different chan sites vary slightly in their regard for women. Many extremist boards frame women as less mentally capable than men, and thus possessing less autonomy or ability to understand the perceived "threats" facing the White race. In these communities, women are positioned as somewhat helpless (potential) wives and mothers, in need of physically strong and mentally robust men to protect them. By contrast, a number of other extremist chans adopt a kind of resentful beta masculinity, blaming women for their perceived lack of status within society, and at times advocating rape as a means of controlling them.

This somewhat superficial divide is illustrated by the various framings of women by attackers linked to chan sites. In his manifesto, Brenton Tarrant depicts White women as the targets of sexual assault by non-White "invaders", thus framing them as victims in need of male protection. The final page of his manifesto also contains images of White men decked out in military gear or hiking in nature, and White women tending to a farm and nurturing young children. The gender dynamics evidenced by these images reinforce the framing of men as protectors of their wives and families who are more suited to the domestic realm. By contrast, the Halle shooter references

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38   "Advertise," 4chan, accessed March 17, 2023, https://www.4channel.org/advertise.
39   Michael Salter, "From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological rationality of Online Abuse,"
      Crime Media Culture 14 no. 3 (February 2017): 2.

feminism as a dangerous ideology in his livestream, and in one of his manifesto-style documents he includes a hyper-sexualised cartoon-style image of a "cat girl", stating that anyone who carried out a mass-casualty attack would receive one as a reward.[40] Although the inclusion of the cat girl in his manifesto is an obvious attempt at humour, the graphic sexualisation and objectification of women is a clear departure from the idealised conception of women as domestic caregivers. Crucially, however, both gendered attitudes inherently frame men as superior to women.

Queerphobia

Queerphobia is also rife within extremist chan communities. A baseline of homophobia is normalised within chans, with the suffix "fag" being applied to terms to indicate a derogatory insult. For example, users who unknowingly violate particular cultural practices common on chan sites may be accused of being a "newfag". This rhetoric becomes more pointed in trolling campaigns where queer people, particularly transgender people, are disproportionately targeted. Much of the White supremacist rhetoric on extremist chan sites frames queer people as antithetical to the mission of preserving the "racial purity" of the White race by having White children inside a traditional, heterosexual family unit. Queer people are framed as threatening the rigid gender dynamics which underpin traditional conceptions of the family, and are thus framed as a threat to the White race.[41] Transgender people are at the sharp end of this hateful rhetoric. While more mainstream chan sites like 4chan may ostensibly be accepting of homosexual people, transgender people are routinely the subject of abuse across all extremist chan boards.

This kind of queerphobia is also evidenced by attackers with ties to chan culture. Most notably, the Bratislava gunman targeted queer people in his attack, and in his manifesto he framed queerness as an affliction controlled and spread by Jewish people in order to target the White race. Ninian Frenguelli highlights that the Buffalo attacker also included a number of queerphobic and transphobic epithets throughout his manifesto. In particular, the Buffalo shooter included a number of memes in his manifesto which framed Jewish people as "turning" White children trans.[42] Both these attacks demonstrate the interconnection between queerphobia and antisemitism, and also demonstrate the pervasiveness of queerphobia within chan culture.

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40   A Catgirl is a fictional creature with both feminine and feline traits and anatomy. Depictions of this character are popular in anime and manga forums.
41   Patrik Hermansson, "Transphobia and the Far Right," Hope Not Hate, March 16, 2022, https://hopenothate.org.uk/2022/03/16/transphobia-and-the-far-right/.
42   Ninian Frenguelli, "Transphobia in the Buffalo Shooter's Manifesto," *Vox Pol*, June 15, 2022, https://www.voxpol.eu/transphobia-in-the-buffalo-shooters-manifesto/. Accessed March 18, 2023.

4 Private Activities of Extremist Chan Culture

Extremist chan cultures, like many other far-right extremist communities, use a number of methods for vetting new members, including invitations. Questionnaires and interviews are also used. These nvolve asking questions intended to establish identity and verify motivations. And to ensure that members are well vetted, in-person vetting is sometimes carried out at events. DNA tests are also conducted in some far-right extremist communities, with potential members being asked to provide the results of DNA tests to prove their heritage. It is significant that the use of DNA tests was reported by multiple participants across a range of far-right extremist communities. Out-linking also remains a common feature of online extremist communities. This is used to invite members to join other platforms and channels or to connect to material hosted on alternative platforms in order to avoid content moderation. Content moderation was noted as a concern for far-right communities, particularly on Telegram.

5 Conclusion

Chan sites represent a particular kind of extreme online hate. Although not inherently extremist spaces, the lack of moderation on chans has enabled the rise of a thriving extreme far-right community. Users of extremist chans embrace counter-culturalism and eschew mainstream social media norms in favour of an environment where shock and violent rhetoric are standard. Chan sites are a cultural touchstone for much of the far right and are likely to play a significant role in far-right radicalisation.

Extremist chan boards have been linked to several mass-casualty and far-right terrorist attacks around the world. Although geographically dispersed, attackers have fostered a sense of in-group belonging through their shared allegiance to both ideology and counter-cultural aesthetics. Although the online landscape of extremist chan culture has changed significantly since the collapse of 8chan, the continuation of violent attacks with links to other chans indicates that any perception that the far-right threat posed by these boards has been neutralised should be dispelled.

Global Network
on Extremism & Technology

CONTACT DETAILS

For questions, queries and additional copies of this report, please contact:

ICSR
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom

T. **+44 20 7848 2098**
E. **mail@gnet-research.org**

Twitter: **@GNET_research**

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