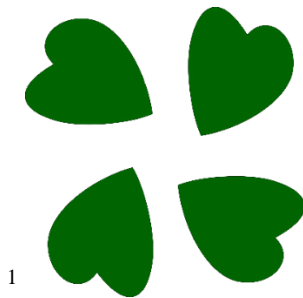# *The reasoning of the /pol/itically incorrect*

Negative attitudes towards immigrants expressed on the online platform of 4chan

Master project Social Policy and Public Health 2019-2020

Thesis on existing data (201800155)

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Abstract

The influential online discussion board 4chan is known for its production of memes and obscene content. Specifically the politically incorrect board (/pol/) is perceived as the online base of the alt-right. Although 4chan is a highly relevant medium to assess prejudice and online expression, the platform is highly understudied. From previous research we know that prejudice towards immigrants is expressed on /pol/, but we know little about how these attitudes are voiced. Therefore, this study aims to examine the way /pol/-users express negative attitudes towards immigrants. 22 relevant threads were collected and analysed using a qualitative content analysis. Insights from social identity theory and integrated threat theory were used as main explanations of negative attitudes towards immigrants in the analysis of the threads. The results show that users express anti-immigrant sentiment by creating social categories on the basis of national identity. In this way, a country's natives are categorized as the in-group and immigrants as the out-group. Threats and negative stereotypes were used to justify prejudice and protect users' dominant position in the social hierarchy. These findings demonstrate how negative attitudes towards immigrants are voiced and justified in everyday interaction on an online platform characterized by a high level of anonymity and ephemerality.

Keywords: 4chan, /pol/, negative attitudes, social categorization, threats, negative stereotypes, immigrants, content analysis

Introduction

'Eerst onze mensen' (Own people first – Vlaams Belang, Belgium), 'Nederland weer van ons' (The Netherlands, ours once again – PVV, the Netherlands), and 'Wir sind das volk' (We are the people – AfD, Germany) are the slogans of various European far-right and populist political parties. Politicians advocate anti-immigrant sentiment, claim that immigrants pose a threat to the national cultural heritage, and aim to close the borders (Mols & Jetten, 2017). This kind of reasoning proved to be successful as Vlaams Belang, PVV, and AfD achieved a place in the top

three political parties last elections. Anti-immigrant discourse is gaining ground in not only the political, but also the public debate of Western countries. In all immigration host countries, opposition to immigrants is present (Esses et al., 2001). Immigration fuels strong sentiments and a heated societal debate. Immigrants are blamed for causing national economic problems, terrorism, violence, and the weakening of cultural values, and thereby become the scapegoats of society (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Verkuyten, 1997).

At the same time, online platforms are increasingly important for people to express and share their opinions. People are no longer restricted by their local communities but can talk to like-minded people from all over the world in ways that deviate from the social norm. On the internet, far from the public eye, a subculture is rising for a couple of years now, often referred to as the alt-right. This subculture is based on online forums such as the politically incorrect board (/pol/) on the influential discussion board 4chan. At /pol/ world politics are discussed in extreme, hostile, and racist ways. In this way, racist discourse can be reproduced and reinforced via 4chan.

Although 4chan is a highly relevant medium to assess prejudice and online expression, the platform is highly understudied (Hine et al., 2017). Online platforms such as 4chan produce rich data which is very appealing to researchers because it provides unprecedented access to information on racism and related topics (Chaudhry, 2015). Capturing negative attitudes towards immigrants is easier (and safer) than ever before. Compared to other methods to study negative attitudes to groups, such as focus groups and interviews, no interference of a researcher is needed. In this way, online researchers are able to encounter a discussion as it is without the problem of social desirability.

Media portrays 4chan as a hate machine (Knuttila, 2011), but how this 'hate' is voiced is not known. Therefore, this study seeks to map out the anti-immigrant discourse on the /pol/-board of 4chan by answering the following question: How are negative attitudes towards

immigrants expressed by people on the /pol/-board of 4chan? By providing insight into the reasoning of the politically incorrect, this study shows how users make sense of the world around them in interaction with like-minded people online. This study contributes to a better understanding of anti-immigrant discourse on a highly anonymous online platform.

Theoretical Framework

Negative attitudes, sense-making, and justifying ideologies

This study aims to assess how negative attitudes towards immigrants are voiced on the /pol/-board of 4chan. In academia, negative attitudes towards immigrants are conceptualized in different ways (Yakushko, 2009). They can be understood as a form of racism, xenophobia, hostility, and prejudice. My conception of negative attitudes[3] is based on the definition of prejudice from Stephan and Stephan (1993). They define prejudice as negative affect associated with out-groups, in which affect includes both emotional reactions (e.g. hatred and disdain) and evaluative reactions (e.g. disliking and disapproval).

Negative attitudes towards immigrants are highly argumentative because people seek justifications to explain their prejudice (Verkuyten, 1997). Especially in times when the world is changing quickly, people feel an urgent need to make sense of their position and the reality they encounter daily (Verkuyten, 1997). By means of argumentation, people make situations more manageable for themselves.

Immigration is one of the most important processes that changes social reality. When people move from one country to another and settle there, the ethnic and cultural diversity of host countries increases. One way in which natives[4] can give meaning to their position and their

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[3] In this article the terms negative attitudes towards immigrants, prejudice towards immigrants, anti-immigrant attitudes, anti-immigrant sentiment, anti-immigrant discourse, immigrant antagonism, and opposition towards immigrants are used interchangeably because their definitions overlap to a large degree.

[4] In the context of this study, the term natives or country's natives is used to describe the people who are born in that specific place or country and do not have a migratory background.

changing reality is by using ideologies to justify social hierarchies that sustain the hegemony of the ethnic majority group over ethnic minorities (Pereira et al., 2010). In this way, people justify claims of immigrants' inferiority by arguing that immigrants are causing problems to society.

Sense-making is both an individual and a social activity (Weick, 1995). In interaction with like-minded individuals, people can verify and construct their worldview. Today this can happen offline and online. 4chan is such a place where people react to the changing world around them. If anti-immigrant sentiment is often expressed on /pol/, users can find support for their prejudice towards immigrants, because racist ideologies and attitudes are reproduced and legitimized in discourse (Van Dijk, 2000).

Discovering the reasoning behind posts that express anti-immigrant sentiment reveals how users make sense of their reality. In examining how negative attitudes towards immigrants are expressed on /pol/, two theories will function as main explanations: social identity theory and integrated threat theory.

Us versus them

Because prejudice is directed towards an out-group, it is important to understand how people create social in-groups and out-groups. To understand how immigrants are categorized as the out-group and how this categorization leads to prejudice, we have to take insights from the social identity theory (SIT) into account.

SIT explains how individuals categorize their social world (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals group people into differentiated social categories of 'us' and 'them' based on all kinds of characteristics such as ethnicity, culture, and political affiliation. According to SIT, people identify with groups because they want to maintain a positive sense of themselves and distance themselves from other groups to get a positive group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Solidifying the uniqueness of one's group can be established by glorifying the in-group, so-

called in-group favouritism, and/or by derogating the out-group, so-called out-group hostility or discrimination (Brewer, 1999; Hong et al., 2006).

Research on anti-immigrant sentiment and social categorization is often focused on the role of nationalism. Following SIT, identification with social groups is the main source of in-group favouritism and out-group derogation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Many studies found that the more people identify with their (national) in-group, the more they make the effort to preserve their own culture and its distinctiveness from other groups, and the more they show negative attitudes towards immigrants (Martinovic & Verkuyten, 2013; Mummendey et al., 2001; Pehrson, Brown, et al., 2009; Velasco González et al., 2008).

However, other researchers claim that the link between national identification and out-group derogation is more complex. For example, Meeus et al. (2010) argue that to understand anti-immigrant attitudes, it is important to take the representation of the in-group into account. Only when people define membership to the national in-group in ethnic terms (shared ancestry, culture, language) rather than civic terms (citizenship and participation in society), high identification with the national in-group tends to lead to negative attitudes towards immigrants (Pehrson, Vignoles, et al., 2009).

SIT helps to explain how negative attitudes are expressed; by differentiating between the in-group ('us') and the out-group ('them'). These group boundaries can be maintained by glorifying the in-group and/or by derogating the out-group. When applying the theory to this study, 4chan-users possibly make use of these social categorizations when they express their negative attitudes towards immigrants. To understand how people justify the differences between the in-group and out-group with regards to their position in the social hierarchy (i.e. the superiority of the in-group and the inferiority of the out-group), we have to turn to the integrated threat theory.

Integrated threat theory

The integrated threat theory (ITT) provides insight into the factors that are related to negative attitudes towards the out-group (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). ITT can be used to understand the source of anti-immigrant sentiment. All sorts of concerns about immigrants threatening cultural identity, security, economic competition, and crime lead to negative attitudes towards immigrants (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017).

ITT comprises two threats: realistic and symbolic. Realistic threats are threats to the existence, political or economic power, and the physical or material well-being of the in-group (Vedder et al., 2016). Symbolic threats are feelings that the in-group's values, morals, and beliefs are threatened by the out-group (Vedder et al., 2016). These threats do not have to be real, merely perceiving the threats can lead to prejudice towards immigrants (Velasco González et al., 2008). In the original model, negative stereotypes were conceptualized as a separate threat, but there has been some debate whether negative stereotypes are better understood as antecedents of realistic and symbolic threat (Stephan & Renfro, 2002).

Empirical research found that symbolic threat plays a bigger role than realistic threat in predicting negative attitudes towards immigrants (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Sides & Citrin, 2007; Sniderman et al., 2004). Differences in cultural values are more strongly associated with negative attitudes towards immigrants than the fear of labour market competition (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007). Moreover, it has been found that people associate different threats with different immigrant groups (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017; Velasco González et al., 2008). Jeannet (2020) for instance showed that immigrants from Central and Eastern European countries are particularly considered as a threat in economic terms rather than cultural terms in Western Europe.

Combining the insights from SIT and ITT, we can argue that people create a distinction between the in-group and the out-group. By claiming that members of the out-group pose a

threat to the in-group's existence, political or economic power, and the physical or material well-being (realistic threat) or to the in-group's values, morals, and beliefs (symbolic threat), people justify their negative attitudes towards immigrants. Together, social categorization, perceived threats, and negative stereotypes reinforce these negative attitudes.

Context

The 4chan.org homepage

The online context: 4chan, anonymity, and ephemerality

In this study, the reasoning behind negative attitudes towards immigrants is examined on the politically incorrect board of the online platform 4chan. 4chan.org is a large English language online discussion board that is very influential in today's digital culture. It is known for its creation of memes, obscene posts, and some offline activism (Bernstein et al., 2011). 4chan was

created by Christian Poole in 2003 and started as a discussion board on Japanese anime (Knuttila, 2011). Nowadays the format has been extended to over seventy boards on a wide range of topics.

4chan stands out in its high level of anonymity compared to other online platforms (Bernstein et al., 2011). Anonymity and 'anonymity of speech' are important for 4chan's culture (Knuttila, 2011). 4chan has no registration policy, which means that there are no accounts. Most users post with the name 'Anonymous' (Bernstein et al., 2011). The exception on the almost complete absence of identity markers is the use of small flags on some boards to show the poster's country of residence.

Ephemerality is another distinctive feature of 4chan. The platform is so popular that threads have a lifespan of minutes to a few hours. Every time one refreshes the page, new posts appear. For a long time, once a thread disappeared from 4chan, it was gone. During the past few years, people have created archive systems to store posts from some of the boards for a short period of time (Hine et al., 2017).

The characteristics of the design of 4chan, anonymity and ephemerality, have several consequences. Due to its anonymity, posts cannot be traced back to their creator. Knuttila (2011) argues that the high degree of anonymity on 4chan "*lowers personal responsibility and encourages experimentation*". Due to its ephemerality, only the posts that are commented on most often, survive longer than seconds. Ludemann (2018, p. 93) states that, because the posts are not permanent, users are encouraged to make more posts and make them "*as potentially inflammatory as possible*". Taking this all together, the implications of 4chan's design are encouraging the explicitness and frequency of the posts. It is very important to acknowledge the particular nature of the design and its consequences when interpreting posts on 4chan.

Alt-right

The dominant discourse on 4chan is often associated with the alt-right ideology (Hine et al.,

2017). The alt-right is a "*loosely defined digital subculture*" (Kelly, 2017, p. 68) that is characterized by its non-conformism (Nagle, 2017), opposition to political correctness, and belief that the superior white population and culture is threatened by "*the evils of liberal multiculturalism*" (Hartzell, 2018, p. 23). Some memes that originated from 4chan are used for political campaigns (Nagle, 2017). For instance, the most popular 4chan-meme Pepe the Frog became the alt-right symbol. It is very important to understand these memes because they enable the spreading of alt-right arguments to a broad audience. Because the sharing of memes is very popular among younger generations, the impact of memes on the political views of younger generations can be immense.

Research question

From the theories on negative attitudes towards immigrants, we know that people use argumentation to make sense of their changing reality. People make social categorizations between 'us' and 'them'. In making these categorizations people explicitly position their own group at the top and the out-group at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The arguments people use to justify their negative attitudes towards immigrants can be based on the threat they perceive. From these theories, we do not know how negative attitudes are expressed in an online world with little moderation and a high degree of anonymity and ephemerality. This study will seek to answer the following question:

How are negative attitudes towards immigrants expressed by people on the /pol/-board of

4chan?

The aim of this study is to find patterns in the reasoning of 4chan-users when they voice negative attitudes towards immigrants on /pol/. The following theoretical insights might be useful when analysing the data and finding out what ways of expression stand out of the posts.

1) Based on social identity theory, I expect that users employ categorizations by a) glorifying the in-group and/or b) derogating the out-group in expressing their anti-immigrant attitudes.

2) Based on integrated threat theory, I expect to identify perceived threats in the way users express their anti-immigrant attitudes. The threat immigrants pose as perceived by users, can be directed towards a) the material well-being, existence, and political or economic power of the in-group, or b) the values, morals, and beliefs of the in-group.

Methods

Design

In order to find out how negative attitudes towards immigrants are expressed on /pol/, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. Content analysis makes it possible to analyse the 4chan-posts and identify patterns in the reasoning of the users. By looking beyond the directly observable communication, content analysis can trace the symbolic qualities of communications (Krippendorff, 1989), such as the reasoning of the politically incorrect I analysed. 4chan's politically incorrect board is a space where users can discuss world politics in ways that deviate from what is considered to be 'politically correct' (Ludemann, 2018), which makes the board particularly well-suited to monitor anti-immigrant sentiment.

Study population and field site

This study analysed threads from the /pol/-board of 4chan. In 2011 /pol/ was created to remove the increasing amount of racism from 4chan's news board. Previous research on /pol/ found that 12% of the posts contained hateful terms compared to 6,3% on the sports board (Hine et al., 2017). It is not accurate to categorize all /pol/-users as members of the alt-right, but they are often considered to be part of this subculture (Hine et al., 2017).

Despite the fact that 4chan's rules prohibit minors to visit the platform, due to the high level of anonymity there are no viable ways to check the age of users. The analysed posts can

thus be posted by minors. However, what can be determined to a certain degree is the country from which the posts originate. The international popularity of the board is revealed by the flags that accompany posts.

Data collection procedures

Data was collected by copy-pasting relevant threads on the /pol/-board of 4chan.org during the first week of April 2020. The board was checked twice daily (morning and evening) to make the dataset as varied as possible, taking into account time zone differences. With copy-pasting, only the content of the posts, flags, and memes were transferred, but ID codes were not copied. The flags were copied because they could reveal interesting patterns in country-specific use.

Threads were selected using the following inclusion criteria. The post that started the thread must a) include a reference to (im)migrant(s), refugee(s), migration or a synonym of these terms and discuss it as its main subject and b) have at least 10 replies. The post needed to have at least 10 replies because posts with less replies are not representative for the analysis of a discourse. Negative comments towards Jewish or black people were not selected, as it is not appropriate to indiscriminately categorize them as 'immigrants'.

The data collection was conducted systematically. First, the first and second page were checked on relevant threads. Second, the search engine 'Search OPs…' was used to filter the original posts on the key terms: immigrant, migrant, refugee, and migration. Often used terms to refer to immigrants such as 'invader' were added to this list during data collection. Finally, the browser was refreshed and the first and second page were checked again.

The data collection lasted 7 days and 22 threads were collected. 11 threads were collected in the mornings and 11 in the evenings. The average amount of threads per day was 3.1. The amount of posts per thread ranged from 11 to 256, with a mean of 82.6 posts per thread. The majority of the threads (77,3%) were collected by using the search engine 'Search OPs…' and 'immigrant' was the term that generated most threads (58,8%).

Data analysis and data management

The data was analysed through qualitative content analysis using NVivo. The first step of the analysis was to read the selected posts. Relevant sentence(s) or word(s) were coded using 'open coding'. Subsequently, when patterns in the data could be discerned, data was coded using 'axial coding'. So, by open coding the data was segmented in meaningful codes, and by axial coding these codes were reassembled to form meaningful categories (Boeije, 2010). A feedback loop was used, so that the codes and categorization were revised several times during the entire study. Finally, during the data collection and analysis, interim insights or important ideas for the course of the study were recorded in meta-notes.

Data is managed according to the FSBS protocol[5]. The Word-files containing relevant threads and the NVivo project are stored on two protected institutional drives: the U-drive and the Surfdrive of Utrecht University. The data will be stored for at least 10 years after publication. After this period of time, the data will be deleted. The data will not be shared with other parties and only be accessed by this study's executor and supervisor. Based on the description of the research methods, other researchers can replicate this study by using new data. If the data is requested for verification, data will only be shared under a data transfer agreement.

Ethics

It is important to acknowledge and reflect on the unique ethical challenges that research on 4chan raises. Even though 4chan is a publicly available online forum, users may not consider that their posts could be used for research purposes. Therefore, no personal data (e.g. ID-codes and usernames) aside from flags is collected in the data collection. These flags are of such a high level of identification (and may be manipulated using VPN), that identification based on

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[5] This is the protocol of the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social & Behavioural Sciences of the University of Utrecht.

these flags is not possible. 4chan does not work with accounts, posts are made anonymously, and inactive threads are removed from the website, making it impossible to trace back posts to individual users. Hence, obtaining informed consent was not possible. By censoring any identifying information from the content of the posts in the dataset, potential risks to 4chan-users were further reduced.

Results

Users described /pol/ as a place where users "*discuss things freely and openly*"[6] (T22)[7]. According to a user the board is not extreme or radical because "*if there are certain ideas with which you do not agree, that doesn't make those ideas 'radical' or 'extreme'. It just means people have different opinions.*" (T22). Another user explained why the board is so popular: "*This is a place where you can openly admit to harsh truths because what you say is anonymous and the board culture encourages offensiveness. It draws a lot of people because you can suddenly communicate openly about these big things in your life that you always could see but could never really say.*" (T22). Immigration is one of those 'harsh truths' users discuss on /pol/.

Us versus them

Users on /pol/ make social categorizations of 'us' and 'them' as explained by SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Even though the out-group was deemed socially inferior to the in-group, the composition of out-group(s) as well as the in-group was contested rather than static.

Who are 'they'?

Overall, the out-group /pol/-users often referred to was 'immigrants'. Most users claimed that immigrants cause all kinds of problems to the native's society, which was usually referred to as 'our country' or 'our society'. Therefore, most users argued that they want immigrants to return to their homelands. Users think that immigrants do not belong in the West, as some users

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[6] Linguistic errors and profanities were removed from quotes or censored in quotes by the author.
[7] The code behind quotes indicates from which thread the quote originates.

phrased it "*no one invited them*" (T20) and "*we shouldn't force everyone to live in the same country*" (T5). Users even used the terms 'subhumans' or 'animals' to describe immigrants (T2, T5, T6, T9, T12, T15, T19, T20 & T22). When users do not categorize immigrants as humans, they clearly place immigrants at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Even though users categorized immigrants as the out-group, they did not always refer to 'immigrants' as a homogeneous group; they often made subcategories. Illegal and non-white immigrants were for instance valued more negatively than legal and white immigrants (T2, T4, T6, T7, T9 & T20). Users also made a distinction between refugees and economic migrants (T16 & T19), whereby refugees were seen as more in legitimate need and deserving, and economic migrants as a bigger value to society but opportunistic. Female migrants were preferred above male migrants, because migrant women were sexualized and perceived as beautiful by users (T2 & T6). Furthermore, some specific immigrant groups were preferred or ill-favoured to others. For instance, Indian migrants were favoured over Latin American ones because, according to users, Indian migrants do not typically settle and try the best at their jobs whereas Latin American migrants breed 'welfare babies' and are lazy (T8). Even within immigrant groups, users made sub-groups. For instance, the sub-group of 'good immigrants' included well-educated (T16 & T22), well-off (T22), well-behaved (T12), and well-integrated (T2) immigrants.

Immigrants are not the only social group that users considered to be the out-group. People with other worldviews were often valued negatively and referred to as 'they'. This group consists of communists ('commies' T6, T13 & T14), liberals (T6), democrats (T4 & T20), social justice warriors[8] (T2 & T6), and the (progressive) left (T3, T7, T9, T13 & T20). The media were also antagonized because users believed that immigrants are protected by the media. The media is suspected to suppress news that incriminates immigrants, because it can cause

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[8] A derogatory term used to describe 'a person who expresses or promotes socially progressive views' (Oxford dictionary, 2006).

racist beliefs against the immigrant population (T9 & T15). For instance, most users claimed that the ethnicity of a perpetrator is only mentioned in the media if the perpetrator is white (T9 & T12). Finally, the establishment was also categorized as an out-group. The police allegedly do not report crime committed by immigrants, because they are afraid of racism accusations (T12). Politicians were accused of using immigration for their own benefit. Some users believe that politicians promote immigration to get more votes (T1) and that they only care about the benefit of immigration to the country's economic growth at the expense of the well-being of the native citizenry (T4 & T5).

Who are 'we'?

Immigrants, people with a different worldview, the biased media, and the establishment were categorized as the enemy. They were considered to be inferior to and very different from 'us'. But who belongs to the in-group users referred to? When users referred to 'us' or 'we', they often meant 'the white race/people' (all threads) or 'the (pure) Aryan race' (T12 & T20). Users constantly classified certain ethnic groups as non-white, such as Latin Americans (T2 & T12). The in-group of 'whites' was explicitly claimed to be superior over the out-group of 'non-whites'. As one user put it: "*White is good, white is right. Jews, nigs[9] and spics[10] are sub class and always will be.*" (T2).

Just as the out-group, the in-group was not perceived as a homogenous group by everyone. White people that belong to the in-group are considered to be male right-wing ethno-nationalists. Although most users think that white women also belong to the in-group of the white race, they were often blamed for their alternative worldviews. For example, users argued that women "*vote to let them [immigrants] in*" (T11) and women will not be protected by white men for immigrant harassment because "*they're the ones who wanted countries to be diverse*

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[9] A derogatory term for black people.
[10] A derogatory term for people from Latin-America.

sh*tholes, let them deal with the repercussions." (T11). Users believe that men need to be strong and "*ridicule and call out any and all weakness we see in our fellow men.*" (T12). Some users claimed that there is no place for people who defend or even tolerate immigrants while, in their view, immigrants ruin their country (T9 & T12). These people are considered to be part of the problem (T17).

Across all threads a considerable divide could be identified between American and European users. Americans were often excluded from the in-group because they were considered to be 'incapable of being right wing' (T2), less pure than European 'Aryans' (T5), pro-race mixing (T2), more diverse than European countries (T4), and siding against Germans in the second World War (T5). One user even claimed that: "*The West won't know peace until America and all Americans are wiped out.*" (T2). Europeans were on their part blamed for continuing their support for governments that "*will attack them in support of the invaders [immigrants]*" (T9), having more serious problems with immigrants (T12), and not acting out when immigrants misbehave (T12). Some users believe that only one ideal can survive in the future: Europeanism or Americanism (T4).

Besides this dissension, users voiced a substantial call for unity. Some users argued that white people should collectivize: "*If we were at least willing to collectivize and assert our interest it would still be possible to secure some territory or sovereignty as our own.*" (T5). These users believe that "*the entire West is in the same boat*" (T12), "*strength (is) in numbers*" (T11), and "*united we stand, divided we fight pointless wars*" (T5). According to one user, even the divide between worldviews can be bridged for a common goal: "*No matter our differences, we need to stand as Brothers against our ancient enemies... we can squabble among ourselves later.*" (T9).

Can immigrants become part of us? Civic nationalism versus ethnic nationalism

One of the analysed threads (T14) started with the question: "*Give me one (1) good reason why civic nationalism shouldn't be the foundational ideology of America?*". Civic nationalism is a form of nationalism that defines national belonging on the basis of participation in society (Smith, 2001). Following civic nationalism, immigrants can be members of the nation if they adhere to the traditional liberal values of freedom, equality, and tolerance, regardless of their culture or language (Stilz, 2009). The user argued: "*I'd any given day pick a talented Asian/Indian/African over a redneck from Alabama*" (T14). This post initiated a discussion on whether immigrants could belong to the national identity or not.

The users who supported civic nationalism were overruled by the users that adhere to ethnic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism is a form of nationalism that defines national membership based on shared ancestral origin, language, and culture (Muller, 2008). Following ethnic nationalism, immigrants cannot become part of the national identity, because they do not have a shared heritage with the country's natives. Ethnic nationalism can be recognized in the following posts: "*Common ancestry matters*", "*Man's nature is to separate things that aren't itself. The ethnic groups will always be in conflict. Many multiple reasons for this from skin colour to IQ.*", and "*Civic nationalism works only when everyone is civil. Competing ideologies and cultural norms makes for a very un-civil society.*" (T14).

Summary of findings

Following the results, it is clear that /pol/-users categorize people into the in-group and the out-group. However, this categorization cannot simply be defined as a division between a country's natives and immigrants. More complex in-group and out-group definitions were applied. Overall, the out-group was negatively evaluated and the in-group positively. The negative evaluation of the out-group was more often identified than the positive evaluation of the in-

group. The majority of the users can be characterized as ethnic nationalists that position immigrants at the bottom of the social hierarchy, even calling them subhumans or animals.

Integrated threat theory

Users derogated the out-group and glorified the in-group by voicing perceived threats and stereotypes. When immigrants are represented as being different from and inferior to the in-group, group boundaries are solidified and the social hierarchy is sustained. By arguing that immigrants pose a threat to the in-group's values, economic power, or well-being, users justified their prejudice.

Realistic threat

The biggest realistic threat that users voiced is the economic concern of labour market competition. As one user expressed: "*Immigrant laborers mean less available jobs for nationals. They should be expelled. Governments can give monetary help to poor countries, but their people should stay at home.*" (T20). Users shared their own experiences too. One user wrote that his brother in law with four kids was laid off. He wondered: "*Why do we need to import Mexicans to make his life even harder?*" (T20).

According to most users, immigrant workers pose a threat to the native workers because they offer cheap labour, not because they are more productive: "*They aren't good at anything, but you can hire 4 of them for the price of 1 white guy.*" (T7). Users found several solutions to the threat they believe immigrants pose to their labour market position. One user suggested that employers should conduct a mandatory verification of the eligibility of their employees (T2). Another user wrote that he decided to ignore the resumes of immigrant workers and to only hire people born in America (T7).

However, some users argued that the threat is not affecting everyone equally. They argued that it depends on the immigrant group, on which job level competition takes place. Following these users, Indian immigrants replace middle class and mainly tech jobs (T8), Latin

American immigrants replace the working class by taking jobs below graduate level (T8), and Irish immigrants already replaced the upper class by taking jobs as professors at elite universities (T6). In addition, some users think that native workers have to blame themselves for being replaced: "*If you're working at a place that's willing to sacrifice it's efficiency and stability to hire braindead pajeets[11], that's a sign you're at the wrong job.*" (T8).

Other economic concerns which users expressed were focussed on immigrants' use of public services. Immigrants were accused of being a "*parasitic load on our resources*" (T20) because they were believed to "*leech off welfare*" (T19) and some users believed that "*there is nothing they can offer that is of value*" (T19). Users think it is wrong that immigrants are "*dependents for life*" (T19) because, according to a user, one cannot rely on others to help 'one's own race' (T19). Some users also think that undocumented immigrant workers do not deserve government assistance. As one user put it: "*This [undocumented immigration] is like breaking into someone's house and hiding in the basement then complaining to the police that they aren't feeding you*" (T20).

Furthermore, most users believe that the system fails the country's natives and gives preferential treatment to immigrants. Posts such as "*Who cares about the native population right?*" (T4) were quite common. For example, users think it is unfair that during an epidemic and lockdown, the borders will never be closed for refugees and money is being sent to help refugees, while 'regular European citizens' need to stay at home (T5 & T13). Most users believe that "*we [the West] can't just be carrying all the weight here*" (T20). Migration is seen as a "*selfish and risky decision*" (T20), so most users think that immigrants cannot expect help from natives when problems arise. They feel strongly that it is not the responsibility of the host countries to take care of immigrants. Some users wrote that they cannot express their feelings

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[11] A derogatory term for Indian people.

of injustice, because if they would they "*will be labelled racist and be blacklisted for life.*" (T17).

Another realistic threat that was frequently expressed by /pol/-users, is the threat immigrants pose to the existence of the in-group. Users fear to be replaced or outnumbered by immigrants, because they believe that immigrants have a higher birth-rate (T6 & T16). As one user explained: "*When my grandma was growing up whites were 90% of the country. When my mom was growing up 70%. Now I'm here and the birth rate is like 40%*" (T5). Users posted screenshots of articles and population and birth-rate statistics to prove that white replacement is not a myth (T5). When the ethnic minority becomes the majority, users believe that the country will be destroyed, because the carrying capacity for old age pensions will not be sufficient when immigrants do not work and sit on welfare (T5).

The final realistic threat that could be identified from the posts is the threat that immigrants pose to the security of the in-group. According to users, immigrants are rapists (T1, T5, T9, T12, T13, T16, T19 & T20), thieves (T12 & T20), killers (T9, T12, T13 & T15), and terrorists (T1, T13 & T19). In a thread about a British 7-year-old that was murdered by a Somali immigrant, a user wrote: "*Are young girls the price we pay for diversity, so many raped and murdered. Time to see some cultures for what they are.*" (T12). Users agree that white people too commit crimes, but they believe that immigrants commit crimes more frequently and without a sense of shame (T9).

Symbolic threat

Besides posing a realistic threat, immigrants were also believed to pose a threat to the in-group's values, morals, and beliefs. Users claimed that the values and beliefs of immigrants are very different from their own, which they believe makes it impossible to live together. Immigrants were accused of Islamizing Europe (T19), causing decreased public trust and a lack of cultural cohesion (T16), being uncivil (T5), and being ungrateful to the host society (T9). Furthermore,

it bothers users that immigrants are racist to them, by being rude, unhelpful, and by insulting white people (T17). Users strongly believe that immigrants hate and resent white people (T12, T19 & T20). Users fear that immigrants undermine their in-group essence. This fear led some users to call for a distinct and solid Euro-American culture (T2). These users think that white people need to be reminded of their heritage, culture, and ancestors (T2).

Some users made a distinction between first generation immigrants and second+ generations. As one user put it: "*Honestly, I don't have much of a problem with them if they're 2nd or more generations. They integrate pretty well if they grow up here, they work hard, they're family oriented, funny as f*ck, hot women, alpha bros. They're pretty damn American in their own Spic way.*" (T2). As long as immigrants have the same values, norms, and morals as the native population, they are accepted by most users (T2, T6, T8 & T19), but if immigrants do not choose to assimilate, they must leave the country (T2). One user calls this the 'American or Out-initiative': "*Any non-citizen that fails to integrate in American society and adopt the American lifestyle may be removed from US soil. The dumb, the apathetic, and the foreign nationalists will be sent back. Only the worthy may remain.*" (T2).

Negative stereotypes

Users also mentioned negative stereotypes that were used to derogate immigrants and to prove immigrants' inferiority. An often-mentioned stereotype was that immigrants are stupid, have a low IQ, and are not talented (T2, T4, T6, T9, T14, T16, T19 & T22). Other stereotypes are that immigrants have a weird appearance (T9, T12 & T19), are badly behaved drunks (mainly Irish immigrants T6), and inbreed (T1, T9 & T19). The final stereotype that was mentioned, is that immigrants smell bad (T6, T8, T16 & T19) and have no hygienic practices (T6, T9 & T15). The last mentioned stereotype could also be interpreted as a realistic threat because it was often linked to the coronavirus. Users claimed that immigrants are more often infected by the virus

than natives, because immigrants have no hygienic practices (T8 & T10). Therefore users believed that immigrants threaten the physical well-being of the in-group.

Summary of findings

In the analysis of the posts, perceived threats were identified when users expressed anti-immigrant attitudes. Both threats ITT mentions, realistic and symbolic (Stephan & Renfro, 2002), were voiced by 4chan-users. With respect to realistic threat, users indicated that they think that immigrants pose a threat to their labour market position and their resources. Some users think that it is a problem that immigrants make use of public services, because they are not deserving and they are given preferential treatment. Besides these economic concerns, some users fear to be replaced by immigrants and think that immigrants pose a threat to their security. Regarding symbolic threat, the majority of users think that immigrants are hostile to natives and have very different values, morals, and beliefs, thereby undermining the in-group's essence. In order to be accepted by most 4chan-users, immigrants must assimilate to the in-group's values, morals, and beliefs. Negative stereotypes were also used to derogate immigrants. For example, by claiming that immigrants have a low IQ, users prove their superiority. The results show that threats and negative stereotypes serve as justifications to legitimize the prejudice of users and secure their dominant position in the social hierarchy.

What are we going to do about it?

The question of how to cope with the threat that immigrants pose to the in-group, was often discussed on /pol/. Questions such as "*When is enough enough?*" (T9) and "*For how long will we allow this?*" (T15) were often voiced. Some users think or hope that the problem will be solved eventually because of the coronavirus (T2, T4, T5, T6 & T9) or by the consequences of "*the coming economic depression*" (T2), but the vast majority of users strongly believe violence is needed to solve the problem that immigrants pose to their societies. As two users put it: "*Those people only understand one language. Violence.*" (T9) and "*It won't change until these*

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'immigrant communities' are set ablaze and butchered in retaliation" (T12). Two users even discussed whether gas chambers or nuclear weapons were more effective in killing immigrants (T19). Moreover, some users believe they need to start a racial or civil war to attain the ethno-state they desire (T2, T4, T5 & T10). Other ways to achieve an ethno-state that users proposed are deporting immigrants (T2, T8, T10, T12, T14 & T20), outbreeding immigrants (T2) or having sexual intercourse with immigrant women (which they call 'bleaching their women' T2).

Less violent solutions were also coined. Users suggested voting for the far-right (T2), stop having contact with non-white people (T2), becoming openly racist (T2 & T17), and teaching white children about their dominant place in society to help them antagonizing non-white people (T11). Finally, a considerable group of users thinks that the violent actions are bold claims, but nothing will happen because people would not dare to take action. According to one user the problem is that "*we have a generation of 'men' who have never been in an actual fight*" (T12).

Positive attitudes towards immigrants, immigrant on /pol/, and no blind trust

A remarkable finding is that, besides the multitude of negative attitudes, some users voiced positive attitudes towards immigrants. For instance, a couple of users defended immigrants because they think immigrants are not posing a threat. As one user argued: "*Most refugees are women and children. Most of you aren't even going to ever bother getting the jobs or doing the things those children will have to do when they get older*" (T3). One user tried to delegitimize the claims users made about the threats immigrants pose to their in-group: "*Always remember: We live in first world countries and have opportunities that most people born on this planet don't. Things aren't as good for us as they were for our parents. But billions of people in the third world would still kill to have the opportunities that you do right now.*" (T2). Other users think that everyone is responsible for their own actions no matter the colour of one's skin (T12).

If one member of a group commits a crime, not the entire group is to blame and must be held accountable (T12). Lastly, some users indicated that they have friendships or romantic relationships with immigrants (T6, T8 & T17).

A second interesting finding is that inhabitants of non-Western countries also posted on 4chan. During the analysis users from all over the world were encountered. Two threads (T19 & T22) were even started by a Somalian refugee living in a European country. He verified his identity by posting a picture of his hand holding a piece of paper with the name of the board, the name of the thread, and the date. He indicated that the users could ask him anything. Some users asked sincere questions, such as: "*Do you experience bigotry here?*" and "*Why are you a refugee? What happened?*" (T19), but his post was also met with a lot of animosity. Many questions were posted that played into stereotypes directed at Somalian immigrants, such as: "*Is your mom your sister or your cousin?*" and "*What's your daily rape a girl quota?*" (T19).

The last notable finding is that most users do not blindly trust the information users give and the claims they make. Users were often asked to prove their point and sources were judged by their reliability. Users were condemned if they spread disinformation. To strengthen their argument, users made use of evidence in the form of articles, videos, pictures, links to websites, and statistics. This demonstrates that users are very actively constructing their arguments to convince other users that their opinion or prejudice is justified.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly show that migration is often discussed in an explicit and violent way on /pol/, corroborating results from previous research on the effects of anonymity and ephemerality on 4chan (Ludemann, 2018). Even though previous research revealed that negative attitudes towards immigrants are expressed on /pol/, we know little about how these attitudes are voiced.

Therefore, this study examined the way in which users express negative attitudes towards immigrants. This study demonstrates that insights from SIT and ITT are valuable to understand prejudice in online discourse. In line with SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), users made social categories of 'us' and 'them'. Even though not all users agreed on the composition of these categories, in general the in-group and out-group were defined on the basis of national identity in ethnic terms rather than civic terms. In this way, a country's natives were categorized as the in-group and immigrants as the out-group. This finding is in line with earlier research that showed that defining national membership on the basis of ethnic terms rather than civic terms tends to lead to negative attitudes towards immigrants (Pehrson, Vignoles, et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the findings reveal that users justify their prejudice more often by demonstrating the inferiority of immigrants than by demonstrating the superiority of their in-group. Even though users were frequently concerned with the question who belongs to the in-group (e.g. white people with the same worldview, ethno-nationalists, right-wing, and men), they were more often concerned with defining and derogating the out-group.

In line with insights from ITT (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), users used stereotypes and threats to justify and express negative attitudes towards immigrants. Negative stereotypes (e.g. immigrants have a low IQ) were more often used than positive stereotypes to the in-group (e.g. white people are good, right, and civilized), and realistic threats were more frequently voiced than symbolic ones. The latter finding contrasts with the findings in empirical research that symbolic threat plays a bigger role than realistic threat in predicting negative attitudes towards immigrants (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Sides & Citrin, 2007; Sniderman et al., 2004). A possible explanation can be that the coronavirus pandemic increased the fear of losing one's job, exacerbating fears over economic threats.

The findings of this study also demonstrate that some users only voiced negative attitudes towards immigrants if immigrants posed a threat to the user personally or to their in-

group in general. For example, some users indicated to have no problem with second+ generation immigrants, as long as they assimilate. These immigrants do not pose a symbolic threat to the users' in-group, because these immigrants adopted the in-group's lifestyle and support the same values. This also applies to realistic threats, because some users only express negative attitudes towards the immigrants that are competing with the users for the same job.

Lastly, the results show some interesting additional findings. In academia and society, 4chan is often known for its meme culture and racist content. This study proves that users also voice positive attitudes towards immigrants. Users do not simply share the views of the other users; they challenge each other to prove their statements. Even immigrants themselves and people from non-Western countries participated in discussions on /pol/. Besides the hatred and irony, serious discussions took place on things that matter to users in the offline world.

Strengths and limitations

This qualitative study has revealed important insights into how prejudice is voiced and justified in real-time online discussions without the interference of a researcher in the interactions between users. Nevertheless, this type of research always has to take the possibility of researcher bias into account. Several safeguards were built into the design of this study to minimize the possibility of bias. Data collection and analysis were conducted systematically and reported on transparency. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis memos were kept, allowing for self-reflection and noting of surprising results.

By analysing 1818 posts distributed across 22 threads, saturation was reached. This means that new threads matched the existing axial codes or themes and did not provide new insights. The data gives a broad picture of the types of discussions that occur on /pol/, but these findings can be time specific. Because the data collection took place during the coronavirus outbreak, certain threats could be perceived stronger than they may be ordinarily and people could have spent more time on 4chan because of the lockdown. Longitudinal research could

decide whether the findings are time-specific or representative of anti-immigrant attitudes on 4chan.

Recommendation for future research

This study shows that content analysis of posts on 4chan is a highly relevant medium to study immigrant antagonism. However, the question of how online activity relates to offline attitudes and behaviour remains unanswered. A low degree of moderation and a high degree of ephemerality and anonymity are encouraging the explicitness of the posts. Behind the veil of anonymity, users voice their fears and hatred because on /pol/ they are not subjected to society's social norms. A logical and interesting next step in future research is to conduct in-depth interviews with 4chan-users to examine the influence of online activity on offline attitudes, behaviours, and political views.

Implications and recommendations

The findings of this study have important societal implications. This study shows that on /pol/ prejudice is justified and reinforced by social categorizations, negative stereotypes, and perceived threats. Online prejudice is problematic because online discussions can have a massive impact on someone's opinion and attitude. For example, the ideology that was often encountered on /pol/, white supremacy, justifies the social hierarchy and sustains the hegemony of the ethnic majority over the minority. When (new) users get familiar with these ideas, they possibly start to undervalue and prejudge immigrants based on perceived threats and negative stereotypes. Subsequently, this can affect inter-ethnic relationships and can lead to discrimination, which was exemplified by a user that claimed to ignore resumes of immigrant workers (T7).

Online prejudice cannot simply be reduced by increasing the identification of users by prohibiting anonymization. This could only cause more distrust and anger to the establishment and the prejudicial discourse could easily be relocated to another platform. To effectively

reduce online prejudice, the offline context must be taken into account. As this study shows, social categorizations on the basis of national identity (in ethnic terms) and perceived threats together reinforce prejudice. Changing people's social categorizations and reducing perceived threat would be likely to decrease prejudice.

The common ingroup identity model (CIIM) proved to be successful in decreasing prejudice (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Research on the model shows that if the national in-group is presented and promoted as dynamic and inclusive, threat is reduced (Riek et al., 2010), and attitudes towards immigrants are improved in receiving countries (Esses et al., 2006). Interventions based on the CIIM, such as an anti-bias education programme, had encouraging results (Houlette et al., 2004). I would propose a comprehensive approach in which an international organisation is established that develops country-specific interventions that increase the promotion of an inclusive and dynamic in-group by important socializing agents such as teachers, parents or even politicians, and monitors receiving country's compliance with these interventions. If this approach is successful, negative stereotypes and perceived threats will lose their legitimacy, and alt-right narratives that circulate on the Internet will be less attractive for people that try to make sense of their social reality online.

Conclusion

By analysing the reasoning of the politically incorrect, this study shows how negative attitudes towards immigrants are voiced and justified on /pol/. Thereby it enriches our understanding of how people voice their opinions on a platform that is characterized by a high level of anonymity and ephemerality. Online discursive places are new contexts to understand how prejudice plays out in everyday interaction. I believe there should be paid more attention to the actual dynamics that take place at 4chan, because even though 4chan has a prominent position in today's digital culture, there is almost a complete lack of research on the website. I hope to open doors to future research on online prejudice and 4chan.

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Appendix: Code tree

Collapsed

Name		Files	References
⊞ Don't accept reliability information & ask for evidence		8	61
⊟ Integrated threat theory		20	322
⊞ Negative stereotypes		15	69
⊞ Realistic threat		18	212
⊞ Symbolic threat		16	41
⊞ Positive attitude towards immigrants or defend		14	136
⊟ Us versus them (social categorization)		22	297
⊞ Civic nationalism or ethnic nationalism (national id)		8	40
⊞ Who are 'they'		21	188
⊞ Who are 'we'		15	69
⊞ What are we going to do about it		18	173
⊞ What is pol		2	4

Expanded

Name		Files	References
⊞ Don't accept reliability information & ask for evidence		8	61
⊟ Integrated threat theory		20	322
⊟ Symbolic threat		16	41
⊞ Own culture need to be distinct and reminded		3	4
⊞ Prefer integration assimilation or not at all		5	9
⊞ They resent us (are hostile etc)		4	4
⊞ Values and beliefs differ		14	24
⊟ Negative stereotypes		15	69
⊞ Breed a lot		2	2
⊞ Drunks (Irish)		1	2
⊞ Dumb-stupid-low IQ-not talented		8	21
⊞ Inbreed		3	4
⊞ Other stereotypes		7	24
⊞ Smell bad & no hygiene		7	12
⊞ Weird appearance		3	4
⊟ Realistic threat		18	212
⊟ Economic concerns		13	104
⊞ Immigrants use public services		9	36
⊞ Labour market competition		7	59
⊞ Other economic concerns		4	9
⊞ They are taken care of (and enjoy benefits) not		10	33
⊞ Threat to existence of the in-group (replacemen		11	36
⊞ Threat to security in-group		12	39

⊟ ◯ Symbolic threat	16	41
⊞ ◯ Own culture need to be distinct and reminded	3	4
⊞ ◯ Prefer integration assimilation or not at all	5	9
⊞ ◯ They resent us (are hostile etc)	4	4
⊞ ◯ Values and beliefs differ	14	24
⊞ ◯ Positive attitude towards immigrants or defend	14	136
⊟ ◯ Us versus them (social categorization)	22	297
⊞ ◯ Civic nationalism or ethnic nationalism (national id)	8	40
⊟ ◯ Who are 'they'	21	188
⊟ ◯ Subcategories immigrants	13	55
⊞ ◯ Legal versus illegal immigrant	3	5
⊞ ◯ Male versus female immigrant	2	4
⊞ ◯ Nonwhite versus white immigrant	4	6
⊞ ◯ Refugee versus economic migrant	2	4
⊞ ◯ Specific immigrant groups (country of origin)	10	29
⊞ ◯ Within imm group some good some bad (or subgroup within group)	5	7
⊞ ◯ Them - SJW, commies, democrats, liberals etc	13	24
⊟ ◯ Them - the media and the elite or establishment	14	60
⊞ ◯ Anti establishment	12	43
⊞ ◯ Media biased	6	17

⊟ ◯ Them- immigrants	13	49
⊞ ◯ Subhuman or animal	5	10
⊞ ◯ They cause all kinds of problems	6	7
⊞ ◯ They should go back dont belong here	8	32
⊟ ◯ Who are 'we'	15	69
⊞ ◯ Male right wing ethno nationalist	8	15
⊞ ◯ Not cowards or people who defend immigrants	4	5
⊞ ◯ Us- the white race	8	14
⊞ ◯ USA versus EU or entire west	7	25
⊞ ◯ We should collectivize	7	10
⊟ ◯ What are we going to do about it	18	173
⊞ ◯ Action-solution is needed	8	28
⊞ ◯ Be clear about hierarchy	3	5
⊞ ◯ Corona	5	7
⊞ ◯ Non-violent ways	9	22
⊞ ◯ Nothing- coward or because system	9	42
⊞ ◯ Violence is needed (kill, retaliate, exterminate, etc)	14	46
⊞ ◯ War (civil or racial)	4	4
⊞ ◯ We need an ethno-state	7	16
⊞ ◯ WTD get used to it will happen	1	1
⊞ ◯ WTD white flight	1	1
⊞ ◯ WTD will repatriate because ec depression (US also poor)	1	1
⊞ ◯ What is pol	2	4