



Messaging Matters:

Ideological Influence Online

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How do extremists influence followers through social media rhetoric?

How do identity-based posts on social media influence consumers?

PROJECT OVERVIEW

NCITE researchers at the University of Oklahoma are studying the rhetoric and messaging strategies used by extremist ideological groups, both violent and nonviolent. Their rigorous methodology combines an analysis of archived messages from extremist groups with new experimental studies to understand the impact of those messaging strategies. By providing insights into the types of messaging these groups use, the team's findings will help homeland security practitioners understand the flow of extremist ideologies and anticipate potential mobilization to violence.

Extremist groups increasingly use online platforms and messaging to influence followers. This influence can take a variety of forms, including:

- **Recruiting** and **engaging** members
- **Highlighting** social identities
- **Increasing** communication about extremist issues
- **Deepening** commitment to extremism
- **Inciting** violent action



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Acknowledgment and Disclaimer: This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-02-01. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security or the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

The research has yielded two key findings:

1 Violent and nonviolent ideological groups use different types of messaging in their communications with followers

2 Messaging matters

Violent and Nonviolent Ideological Groups Use Different Types of Messaging

There are key differences in the language used by violent and nonviolent groups, as seen below:

	VIOLENT IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS	NONVIOLENT IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS
Use language that...	Justifies the group’s perspective and emphasizes differences with outgroups	Focuses on group agency and future possibilities
Foster a shared sense of social identity through...	Negative emotions and fear	Positive emotions
Justify their actions by focusing on...	Authority and moral purity	Fairness or care

It is also important to consider trends in activity on public microblogs, such as Twitter. Many groups **increase messaging on these platforms around the time of contentious events** (e.g., presidential elections), which can contribute to more rapid spread of extremist ideologies. Additionally, **religious rhetoric increases in the lead up to violent events**. This trend was observed prior to multiple jihadi attacks, as well as before the Jan. 6, 2021, riots at the U.S. Capitol.

Messaging Matters

Exposure to a social media feed about an ideological topic can change how strongly people feel about it. Thus, those who post frequently will likely exert more influence than those who post less regularly.

Social media feeds full of tweets about inherent social identities, such as race, tend to stir up more negative emotions in followers than feeds that talk about chosen social identities like political affiliation. Those negative emotions can help people remember specific messages and increase the likelihood that they share, like, or retweet them.

But when social media feeds talk about both types of social identities – inherent and chosen – messages appear to lose their effect. The tweets become harder to remember, and people are less likely to share them. This observation may be an important step toward mitigating extreme online rhetoric: **When a group invokes one social identity, reminding or invoking other social identities may blunt the message’s effect.**

How people perceive and share extremist content is impacted by 1) consistency of the message and 2) others’ engagement with the content. People are better able to remember specific tweets or messages when they are exposed to a social media feed with a variety of topics (e.g., immigration, climate change, religion). However, **people perceive a group as more credible, and are more inclined to share their content, when the group’s social media feed focuses on only one topic and has high levels of engagement such as retweets and likes.**

METHODS

Archival Analysis of Online Messaging

The researchers based their analysis on four archival datasets of communications from international and domestic extremist ideological groups on websites and social media platforms. They also compiled a dataset of violent events in which groups participated. The first communication dataset was comprised of posts from environmental activists on a platform called Biteback. The other three datasets contained tweets related to immigration, tweets from jihadi militants and sympathizers, and tweets from 70 domestic extremist ideological groups. The team looked at language usage across datasets, retweet rates, and timing of postings in relation to significant events. They used simple dictionary-based text analysis as well as text mining, topic modeling, and other statistical analyses.

The datasets used in these analyses were publicly available and use was approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researchers encrypted all Twitter sources and handles mentioned in tweets, and all of the social media data was anonymized. Additionally, the focus of this research was on aggregate trends in public microblog use across groups. No verbatim tweets or messages were (or will be) reproduced in published manuscripts or presentations.

Experimental Studies

The researchers also conducted two randomized controlled online experiments to examine how the presence of social identity information, such as minority or political identity content, influences attitudes and reactions to tweets. They also conducted an additional experiment to examine how coherence (i.e., inclusion of one topic versus several), amplification (i.e., evidence of likes and retweets), and user verification influence attitudes and reactions to tweets. They created simulated Twitter feeds with different ideological perspectives and measured participant responses to these manipulations. Each study was focused on a different controversial topic: voter identification, the death penalty, or gun rights.