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Attitudes Towards Racism in KKK Forums: Denouncement, Avoidance, and Neutralization

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Denouncement, Avoidance, and Neutralization

by

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Abstract

Recent research has attempted to better understand the complexity of modern terrorism, which seems evermore present in our worldview. However, the scope of the literature lacks representation of far-right ideology, and that of White supremacists within the campaign. Specifically, the potential fear of being labeled as a racist has been recognized as both an obstacle to communicating racial issues and as a potential driver behind the self-imposed social exclusion of White supremacists, which may further contribute to their radicalization rigidity around race-relevant political issues. The current study is an inquiry into the internal perceptions and conceptualizations of racism among members of the Ku Klux Klan. This study examined occurrences of fear-related sentiments used by KKK members surrounding their racist ideology within a large corpus (1.8 million words) of written exchanges in an online forum concerning current events. For detecting expressions of fear of being labeled as racists, the corpus was concordance for any occurrence of the word-stem *racist*. The results suggest that the concept of racism is both complex and diverse among seemingly like-minded KKK members who subscribe to White supremacy tenets. Furthermore, for a group that explicitly endorses racist beliefs, both the fear of being labeled as racists and the implicit negative connotations to racism were surprisingly high. These complex formulations of racism were embedded within the group's denial and neutralization of any 'true' racism in their sentiments, attitudes, or behaviors. This study's results are relevant to the construction of ecologically-valid counter-messaging campaigns that engage with the empirically-derived, internal attitudes of White supremacists.

Attitudes Towards Racism in KKK Forums:

Denouncement, Avoidance, and Neutralization

Since the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, an increasing amount of research has

been devoted to studying the methods, motivations, and perpetrators of modern terrorism

(Jackson, 2007; Reid & Chen, 2007; Young & Findley, 2011). However, the literature has been

disproportionately focused radical Islamic terrorism. This bias has resulted in far-right terrorism

being largely ignored. Weinberg and Eubank (2008) argue this is reflective of governments

disregarding the role of terrorist groups on the Right because typically they are hard to

distinguish from non-terroristic defenders of the state who support constitutional values, albeit

radicalizing these principles. Notwithstanding this and problems defining right-wing terrorism,

especially in the legal sense, far-right extremism poses a serious threat to the United States and

its people (Blee, 2007).

Some of the insights into the danger posed by far-right extremists in the United States

comes from studies that used the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), an ongoing project that has

collected data on 375 far-right-related homicides that involve over 600 victims since 1990, 140

of which were deemed ideologically motivated (Freilich, Chermak, Belli, Gruenewald, & Parkin,

2014). An example of an ideologically-motivated far-right extremist crime within the purview of

the ECDB is a skinhead murdering an African American individual in order to start a race war.

In total, over 60 far-right failed or foiled plots were reported between 1995 and 2005. Over 100

different organizations were connected to these incidents, half of which were attributed to far-

right extremist groups. While being a member of a hate-motivated group is not in itself illegal in

the United States, these groups are nevertheless often labeled as domestic terrorist organizations,

such that the mere presence of the campaign may terrorize the American community. Eighty five

percent of state law enforcement agencies indicated the presence of right-wing groups in their

communities, with 82 percent denoting the existence of race hate groups (Riley, Treverton,

Wilson, & Davis, 2005). Since ideologically-motivated crimes are often perpetrated following a

call to action, studying these groups before they exert their influence is needed to complement

the criminal database approach in studying far-right extremism.

  The current study concerns the ideology of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The KKK is one of

the oldest hate groups in the United States, dating back to the post-Civil War reconstruction era

of the late 19th Century (Cunningham, 2013). Although membership waxed and waned over the

years, evidence indicates that their ideology and membership are still considerable (Southern

Poverty Law Center, 2018). One study found that 72 percent of law enforcement agencies within

the United States reported a presence of the KKK within their jurisdiction (Freilich, Chermak, &

Simone, 2009). While the importance of studying far-right terrorism is widely accepted, very few

studies have empirically examined the thinking patterns and argument structure of far-right

ideology.

  Most research on right-wing ideology has been on a meso-level analysis, examining the

overall community or organization. The existing literature mostly examines the evolving

conceptualization of the far-right movement (Chermak, Freilich, & Suttmoeller, 2013; Smith,

2000), the role of law enforcement in the policing of hate groups (Chermak, Freilich, & Simone,

2010; McGarrell, Freilich, & Chermak, 2007), and the general criminological statistics regarding

the terrorist movements (Chermak, Freilich, Parkin, & Lynch, 2012; Gruenewald, 2011).

However, with the advent of the internet and the subsequent proliferation of online communities,

the possibilities for analyzing in detail the individual interpretation and application of the far-

right ideology have grown considerably. How one member understands their extremist group's

doctrine can shed light on the potential for future calls to action, or performance of a terrorist act, a much larger and more complex phenomenon.

An example of this line of inquiry which has been largely underrepresented in the literature, is the analysis of the linguistic and rhetorical appeal of ideological racism. One of the likely factors underlying this state of affairs is the fear of being labeled as a racist, which has emerged in recent years as a recurrent modifier of political attitudes and societal expectations concerning minorities. Thus far, the literature has mostly focused on the effects of this concern in well-intentioned individuals who are fearful of appearing as racist out of interpersonal sensitivity and consideration (Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010). The current study aims to add to the literature on the way in which a group of right-wing extremists experiences and justifies their beliefs. This study is part of a larger effort to understand the meaning of racism in the mind of right-wing extremists and to construct empirically-based, and thus more efficient, counter-messaging campaigns to mitigate the influence of their ideology and its aggressive ramifications. To this aim, this project analyzed instances in which the concept of racism appeared naturalistically in the course of general online discussions of current events in a popular KKK forum.

Terrorism and Far-Right Ideologies: Definitions and Key Characteristics

Since most acts of ideological violence are perceived or dubbed 'terrorism,' studies of violent extremism are often hampered by the great difficulty defining the concept of terrorism (Hoffman, 2006). While terrorism often has a negative connotation, definitions differ depending on the priorities and interests of the institution using the designation. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has a purpose of solving crime that is both political and non-ideological in nature, thus has the most universally cited definition of terrorism: "The unlawful use of force or

violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a Government, the civilian

population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" (U.S.

Department of Justice, n.d., p. 3). Hoffman (2006) suggests a definition that considers many

concepts accepted within the field of terror studies. His definition states that terrorism entails

political aims and motives, is overtly violent or threatens victims with the use of violence, and

constructed to have severe psychological effects on the victim and those outside the direct

targeted attack. The act is committed by an individual or organization that is motivated by an

ideology and conducted by a nonstate entity.

This study utilizes a broader definition of the concept of terrorism, as it concerns far-right

ideology. Instead of focusing on the manifested events and acts committed by these groups, the

study of an extremist ideology encompasses a wide range of beliefs and motivations. In general,

far-right extremists in the United States are individuals or groups who present as fiercely

nationalistic, anti-global, apprehensive of centralized authority, and/or hypersensitive to

individual freedom. They often subscribe to conspiracy theories in which their personal freedoms

or "ways of life" are being threatened, or that they need to be prepared for an attack against

themselves or their nation, so preparing for survival is paramount (Chermak, Freilich, Parkin, &

Lynch, 2012; Freilich & Chermak, 2009). While these organizations have, in the past, often

physically gravitated toward each other to form like-minded communities, today they frequently

make use of the Internet, a platform that aids in fueling similar belief systems.

The Ku Klux Klan and its Ideological Affiliation to Far-Right Extremism

The KKK is one of the oldest hate groups in the United States. They committed crimes

beginning in the late 19th century and gained peak popularity in the 1920s. The current political

landscape, globalization, and progressive advances allows for the group to thrive in the present

day as well (McVeigh, 2009). While only a small number of individuals subscribing to its racist doctrine actually commit crimes, there is always the potential for KKK mobilization. Thus, it is ever more important to gain a better understanding of their mindset in order to counter any conceivable threats.

Between the 1920s and the 1960s, the KKK organization was involved in various acts of violence inflicted on others whom they deemed to be challenging the existing racial order (Beck, 2000). Such examples of the acts committed during this time include lynching, abductions, and killings of Blacks, or those in support of the Black civil rights movement (Law, 2016). During the 1920s, the KKK operated in public view, openly marching and assembling (Blee, 2009). This candidness garnered many supporters and onlookers. However, it is interesting to note that the individual members hid their identities by donning the famed white masks and hoods. The historical KKK used methods of intimidation, such as burning crosses, to ensure that others knew of the group's presence. As Blee (2009) notes, "Klansmen and Klanswomen gained power through strategies of hiding and making themselves visible" (p. 12). Alas, over time due to multiple highly public scandals, mainly anti-Klan organizations publishing lists of group membership, the KKK slipped into hiding.

Despite the centrality of White supremacist sentiments in the KKK ideology, the two notions are not interchangeable. The United States has a long and complicated relationship with White supremacy. From the American Civil War to the civil rights movement, purposeful racial inequality has a history of influencing the legal and social climate of the nation. Further, the distinction between White supremacy and the KKK may arguably be gradually diminishing. Due to the consolidation of many smaller hate groups into larger ones, the sophisticated recruitment

of youth, and leaderless cells that are more difficult to track, far-right terrorist campaigns and their radical activities might currently be on the rise (Bostdorff, 2004).

While African Americans have traditionally been the target of KKK hate, Jews, Catholics, and more recently Hispanics and Asians, have all been the subject of KKK discrimination. Today's KKK aims to hold on to the traditional Klan's emphasis on White, Christian supremacism and patriotism (Blee, 2009). The group frequently makes news due to their hateful speech and racist displays at public events, such as rallies and protests, which are also used to increase recruitment. Despite the KKK's historical involvement in antiracial acts, not all members commit such acts of terrorism. That being said, all members by definition are Christian subscribers and submit to some level of racist beliefs, whether through overt militant approaches, or through the more covert defenders of 'White rights.'

Social and Individual Determinants of Far-Right Xenophobia

Ideologies arise from a particular environment and socio-political climate (Law, 2016). Social factors can be interpreted as an internalized threat and can subsequently affect an individual's belief system. Certain perceived threats have been shown to elicit the most violent racist reactions (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002). Research indicates that the most evocative threat includes scenarios at the personal level, such as forced interaction with other races, because the circumstances in this nature are most concrete and relatable. In an online sample, Meddaugh and Kay (2009) found that opposition to interracial marriage was the most upsetting circumstance for extremists, followed by migration of minorities into traditionally white communities. While this distress does not necessarily mean that a terrorist act will result, these findings shed light on the instances that help strengthen the racist belief system and drive them to advocate for a racial hate crime. When White supremacists speak of the "other," it is usually done so in a tyrannical

manner, or with the belief that privileges and rights are being taken away from Whites and subsequently given to the "other." This perception strengthens a racist mindset and influences the individual's ability to conceptualize racism. However, their own insights are often accompanied by a tendency to make justifications for their beliefs and for any hateful actions in which they partake.

Blee, DeMichele, and Latif (2017) propose two main forms of racism, primarily in relation to the evolution and spectrum of the U.S. racist movement: everyday racism and extraordinary racism. First, everyday racism encompasses entrenched customs that involve discrimination and minor acts of aggression toward racial minorities. Examples include ignoring certain racial groups or stereotyping all individuals of a race as being the same. This is similar to Dovidio and Gaertner's (2000) aversive racism, a modern concept that includes individuals who exhibit racist behavior, but nevertheless profess to value egalitarian ideals, and understand themselves to be unprejudiced. These individuals endorse undesirable beliefs about non-Whites, and subsequently act in ways that are discriminative. However, they attribute their actions to reasons other than racism, such as historical precedence. The second type of racism, and the one that leads to more organized and egregious acts of violence, is extraordinary racism. This form of racism includes "the extreme commitment to rigid racial hierarchies that is found in modern U.S. racist movements" (Blee, DeMichele, and Latif, 2017, p. 258). In turn, violence is used as a means toward a racial end or to build solidarity among individuals with similar beliefs.

Far-Right Extremism and KKK Online

Since the advent of the Internet and the ability to easily connect to it at home, White supremacists and other far-right groups have been exploiting its capabilities and convenient properties to communicate and bolster their cause with like-minded individuals worldwide. The

use of online forums gained appeal due to their ease of use, supposed lack of overwatch and regulation, and their abilities to link members to other like-minded groups of people and to disseminate ideological material (Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003). Research has found that individuals in ideologically-motivated hate groups utilize the Internet, mainly via message-board forums, for strengthening individual ideology formation and to increase personal engagement through participation (Angie et al., 2011). The online environment provides open self-expression opportunities, allows for social identity formation, enhances moral engagement, and solidifies acceptance of ideological leadership and group structure. In other terms, online forums facilitate the formation of social identity. Social identity formation refers to the influence of small groups on an individual's identity, solely from membership of a shared social category, and that this identity can be discovered and examined through intragroup communications (Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005). Moral engagement, on the other hand, involves an individual's attempts to avoid internal guilt by creating justifications for socially unacceptable acts (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 2002). Individuals in violent ideological groups (i.e., hate groups) tend to use both of these psychological processes in addition to others that are indicative of their violent nature, such as dehumanization, moral superiority, and ethnic out-grouping to rationalize their distinctive belief system. For example, the conventions of online syntax combined with the hateful manner of the KKK leads to anonymity, which in turn has been shown to increase the likelihood of outward aggression due to the physical distance between the speaker, the audience, and any potential victims (Zimbardo, 2008).

Four main themes are seen in the verbal content of online hate group communication: education, participation, invocation, and indictment (McNamee, Peterson, & Peña, 2010). The educational theme includes critiques of the educational system calling for members to serve as

teachers to help reinterpret history due to the public-school system being a product of

government funding. The participation theme includes messages encouraging adherence to the

group, and creates a sense of solidarity and activism. Frequently, groups claim divine superiority

in order to create a sense of obedience, as can be seen in the invocation theme. Finally,

indictment communications blame other groups for various offences, such as demonizing racial

minorities.

      Similar to other group formations, online White supremacists advocate for in-group and

out-group distinction, where the in-group members gain support and the out-group members

encounter hostility. Affiliates of hate groups are able to build a community through opposition of

other groups, particularly those of other races, and through a resentful message of hate that deters

differing points of view (Bostdorff, 2004). The Internet provides an opportunity to reach a wide

audience in hopes of mobilizing supporters and spreading their beliefs. This process is

accomplished by attracting individuals who feel a void in their sense of identity and yearn for a

community to which to belong (Nabers, 2009).

      A recent focus of far-right extremism literature denotes the sense of community within

the online setting, which provides a safe space and an environment that supports a typically

inacceptable population. While many groups differ in their specific ideologies, most share a

worldview of White pride and a condemnation of other races (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Burris,

Smith, & Strahm, 2000). These similarities are drawn upon by members to interact with a

conversational style structure and frequent recognition of each other. As public support for the

KKK is negligible, the virtual communities allow the group to maintain its membership covertly,

allowing for potential recruitment. By advocating for in-group support, members engage in

encouraging others' expressions of opinions, as long as they coincide with the group's message

and show respect to original and regular members. Using racist symbols and sharing classic or modern racist literature can also foster a common environment (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003). "White racists often fear for their own survival and that belonging to supremacist groups gives them comfort and reassurance" (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002, p. 180). This is a common theme within the literature; far-right extremists use their singular-minded community as a means of justification of their beliefs by quoting their peers and leaders as evidence of support.

It is important to note that in online forums of hate groups in the United States, several factors may limit the free expression of the members, especially in regards to sensitive or controversial topics. These can include (a) the strong general emphasis in the United States on normative behavior, including political correctness (Morris, 2001); (b) suspicion of the government and the media, who are viewed as controlled by the liberal agenda (Lee, 2005); and (c) the unfalsifiable conspiracy theories in which the United States government monitors its citizens' communications (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). The KKK uses online communication to maintain a relevant campaign and to prevent the extinction of their hateful ideology.

Methodological Obstacles to Studying Racism in Racist Groups

One of the perennial obstacles to the open discussion and examination of racial tensions in the United States seems to revolve around the fear of the speaker being labeled as a racist. This fear has been mentioned in a few populations or scenarios. According to Monin and Miller (2001) the fear of being labeled racist is "a constant source of anxiety in mainstream America and can be traced back to the powerful social norms against the expression of prejudice that has emerged in recent decades" (p. 33). White people recognize the anti-racist norm and monitor their external expression of opinions that could be misinterpreted. In turn, well-intentioned

individuals not only avoid voicing potentially racist feelings, but sometimes show preferential treatment to non-White people. Most commonly, the phenomenon has been realized in educational settings, such as educators' intentional or unintentional preferential treatment based on race (Tatum, 1999). By creating an environment in which authority figures fear the racist label, the communication between school and home on race relations becomes unhealthy. While studying the existence of aversive racism in well-intentioned individuals, researchers found that people do not engage in conversations about race, nor state the 'safe' opinion that is deemed politically correct; in turn they do not reveal their true opinions on race (Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010). They also found that White people report high levels of anxiety regarding their social desirability while discussing race-related topics. Sue and Constantine (2007) emphasize a "politeness protocol" (p. 136) in which individuals in social situations are discouraged from openly sharing their opinions in fear of being perceived as racists. Thus, anxiety manifests as a defensive response in White individuals. Unfortunately, the fear of being labeled a racist has serious consequences in the real-world. News articles can be found pointing to this fear as a cause of stopping police from dealing with child abuse, sexual exploitation, and cases of forced marriages (Howell, 2014; Maidment, 2017; Sharman, 2017).

This fear of being labeled a racist phenomenon has yet to be studied in a group of individuals who subscribe to a racist ideology, though research has attempted to better understand extremists' examinations of their own belief system. White supremacists tend to exemplify themselves as a maligned minority whose reason for being racist is to protect the 'traditional American' values, and specifically, the White population (Beck, 2000). Beck uses the competition-based theory of race relations to describe this phenomenon. This theory states that members of the dominant group (White) will react poorly if they perceive that their privileged

status is compromised by a minority group ("Others"). White supremacists often deny that the

term 'racist' applies to them. Research has shown that reasons for this phenomenon include that

White supremacists view themselves as the victim of discrimination (Berbrier, 2000), theological

justifications (Hoffman, 1995), or the use of moral rationalization and their lack of understanding

as to what racism actually is (Berbrier, 2000; Tsang, 2002). Gerstenfeld, Grant, and Chiang

(2003) found that of the online communities they examined, 21.7% portrayed opinions that the

group was not racist, or that they did not hate anyone.

Berbrier (1999) found that White supremacists use stigma transformation techniques in

their discourse. The first technique that was routinely found was redefinition, or "the rejection of

the negative label with the intent of continuing the deviant behavior" (p. 412). Furthermore, a

second technique of evasion occurs when White supremacists do not embrace the racist label,

"they either reject it and/or try to deflect the negative impact of labeling by offering a differing

view of reality" (p. 412). While the extremists embrace their arguments of hate and violence,

they deny that their opinions have anything to do with racism or White supremacy. In turn,

evidence was found that supported the White supremacists' use of stigma transformation through

the use of transforming racism (i.e. racism is simply the fact that race matters) and transforming

social interactions (i.e. claims that the group does not spread hate, and instead attempts to

embrace mainstream morals).

The Current Study: Overview

The majority of research to date on far-right terrorism ideology focuses on group

grievances and member interaction, while nearly ignoring individual thought processes of those

with a hateful ideology. While a good proportion of ideologically focused literature is conducted

using online environments due to ease of access, it has been aimed at the reinforcement of hate

group identity, the reduction of external threats, and the recruitment of new members. The

present study aims to address this gap in the literature by systematically examining the internal

perceptions and conceptualizations of racist ideology of the KKK's presence online and

investigating the occurrence of a fear of being labeled a racist in a group that has a historically-

based ideology rooted in racism.

Method

Research Design

The present study utilized an exploratory, descriptive archival research design, in which

posts and comments from a specific KKK discussion forum were subjected to qualitative coding

to explore if and how the fear of being labeled a racist is present in the posts. The forum of a

specific group from the far-right ideology was chosen for the current study because it allows for

an intensive examination of the target phenomenon of fear of being labeled a racist, as opposed

to a more general analysis in a more wide-ranging forum, such as Stormfront, a general hate site

for White nationalists and other racial extremists.

Procedure

The corpus used in the current study is a collection of original postings and comments

obtained from a discussion forum on a KKK group website. In accord with the conventions of

the field, the exact website name will not be mentioned here out of legal and security

considerations (Cohen, Holt, Freilich, & Chermak, in press). Registered membership is needed in

order to view and post within the forums, which was obtained by the author's research advisor.

Following common procedures for research on hate groups, the forum was accessed from an

unidentifiable computer behind the firewall of a public university using an incognito window of

an internet browser.

This website was selected for the study because it involves members identifying as belonging to or subscribing to similar beliefs as one specific ideological group and contains active forums with many new posts by multiple members each day. An initial observation was conducted by the research team to gain familiarity with the website and the issues discussed within each topic thread of the forum. The current study made use of the postings within the "Current Events" topic thread, once it was observed to be the longest, most frequented forum (4.77 posts per day), whereby ideological discussions were more likely to be expressed.

A team of research assistants copied the original postings and subsequent comments into a continuous text corpus onto a Microsoft Word document to retain its metadata, a procedure known as 'scraping' in the computer and digital studies fields. The scraped data includes postings in the topic thread from April 08, 2010 to April 22, 2015. The finished sample included 2560 topics (8116 posts). Next, the corpus was stripped of the metadata and set in a standardized Unicode file for further analysis. To ensure that the analysis only included substantive communications, all irrelevant information, such as website-specific text (e.g. title and headings) and continuously repeated text (e.g. member's signature) was excluded from the completed corpus. The final corpus includes the remaining posts, comments, and quotes, totaling 1.8 million words.

For detecting cases in which speakers might express fear of being labeled as racists, the corpus was concordanced for any occurrence of the word-stem racist* (e.g. *racist* and *racists*), using the Wordsmith 6.0 software package (Scott, 2012). Its output consisted of all the incidents of the word-stem within the corpus within the context of 13 words before and after them. The list was placed in alphabetical order first by the indicator word, then by the first and second word to

the right. This method results in no additional context being gathered from the surrounding framework to attempt to control for research bias.

       Coding Procedure. The research team consisted of the author, the author's advisor, and an additional Master's-level research assistant. All researchers were trained on the process of qualitative analysis, and specifically for the coding themes utilized in the current study. In a preliminary examination of the corpus, a general analysis for which *a fear of being labeled a racist* was coded. Next, the current study used three broad categories in which this fear was expressed:

1. An admonishment to avoid expressing certain opinions, for fear of being perceived as a racist, when 'racist' is *explicitly* marked as a negative word. The fear of being labeled a racist is implicit in the call to avoid it. In short, "if you say what you believe you will be called a racist and this is a bad thing."

2. Implicit advice to avoid expressing certain opinion, based on social learning, whereby somebody who is similar to the reader was sanctioned for being deemed racist. Although not directly expressing fear of being labeled as such, the practical implications of this potential conditioning-by-proxy situation are self-evident to the readers. This category's basic outline is "this person was branded a racist and something negative happened to them; something similar can happen to you."

3. A link between Category 1 and Category 2. Specifically, over-generalization of Category 2 social learning-based warnings against being labeled a racist may become pragmatically equivalent to Category 1. This category, therefore, takes the general form of "many people like us have been, and will be, sanctioned when deemed racists."

Other ways in which the word *racist** was used will not be discussed here, as they were

not expressing the target sentiment as directly as the three categories above. These include

sarcastic remarks, philosophical ponderings of the moral relativity of the term (but without

implying fear of being labeled by it), or justifications for racism on various grounds, including

Christianity, self-preservation, or claiming a double standard towards expressing mere facts by

the overly politically correct government and media.

Results

The initial concordance of the word-stem *racist** resulted in a list of 617 instances of the

word-stem used in the forum. Next, a preliminary examination of the sentences with *racist**

found 197 occurrences (32%) in which the fear of being labeled as a racist might have been

expressed either explicitly or implicitly. As seen in Table 1, the qualitative coding for the 197

instances using the three broad categories showed that Categories 1 and 2 were the most

common ways in which forum members showed a fear of being labeled a racist.

Table 1

Frequency of Fear of Being Labeled a Racist

Category	*n*	Percent
1	69	35.0
2	66	33.5
3	18	9.1
Other	44	22.3
Total	197	100.0

Due to the qualitative nature of the coding process, examples of each category used to

examine the fear shown in the forum of the word *racist* shed light on how this fear is being

displayed. Examples of Category 1 (explicit admonishment to avoid) include, [if you say xxx]

"you are going to be screamed at by the media and called a racist, a bigot and anything else they

can think of to call you" and "any white person for that matter even brings up race is branded a

racist and a peice [sic] of white trash." Examples of Category 2 (implicit advice to avoid based

on social learning) include, "It was nothing more than a good-humoured joke but apparently

someone overheard it and made an official complaint because they thought it was racist. Roy was

devastated when he was suspended and was worried he might lose his job" and "white

Republicans are scared silly to criticize [Michael] Steele [the Chairman of the Republican

National Committee] because they're afraid of being called racists." Examples of Category 3

(over-generalization) include, "People of all ages are sick and tired of hispanic culture being

forced down their throats while being call[ed] racist for being proud of their own culture" and "It

is the year 2010 and to this day white folk are called racist if the express there [=their] pride for

there [=their] culture and heritage."

Discussion

Fear of being labeled a racist has only recently emerged as a potentially important

determinant of far-right radicalization and as a sentiment that may underline both the formation

of tight like-minded echo-chambers in which radicalization emerges in the absence of diversity

and heterogeneity of opinions, and the fear- and suspicion-based under-reporting and response

bias in national opinion polls of political sentiments and ideologies. The current study aimed to

examine the implicit attitudes surrounding the word *racist** among KKK members. Semi-

quantitative coding of the content of a large KKK online forum was utilized to explore how this

fear manifested in the members' spontaneous exchanges, and evidence of three distinct themes

were found. In the current study, the fear of being labeled a racist was found to be expressed

mainly in the form of warnings to the audience to avoid the label, rather than explicitly being

avowed or discussed in more nuance. These warnings may take the form of hypotheticals or

actual sanctions that could be (or have been) waged against members who were deemed racists. At first glance, such empirical evidence that White supremacists are fearful of being labeled as racist (an identity that their membership in a racial hate group explicitly supports) can seem contradictory. However, the result is consistent with research that suggests the average person is fearful of this label, thus the question arises, why might we be seeing this phenomenon in this specific population?

Explicit Denial of the Racist Label

This study's finding, that KKK forum members view being a racist as a negative label to be avoided, denied, and counter-argued may not be surprising. Previous research found that the average person avoids situations in which they could be labeled as a racist (Sood, 2014). For example, White people might be averse to having conversations about racial topics in order to decrease the chances of being perceived to hold racist beliefs (Blum, 2002). Part of this phenomenon could be explained through our culture's overly negative attitude concerning the use of words denoting 'racism,' as opposed to a deeper understanding of what constitutes racism and how exactly it exerts its pernicious effects on society. As has been mentioned, racism is not a new concept and the word has a long history in the United States. However, recently there has been an increase in the use of the word (Lindahl, 2008), which may correspond with increasing vagueness as to its exact meaning. Blum (2002) makes the argument that the word racist "has become the standard way to condemn and deplore people, actions, policies, symbols, and institutions for malfeasance in the racial domain" (p. 205). In other words, the word racist is a blanket term used to describe anything negative that might seem related to race dynamics. However, up until now, it has been assumed that this negative valence of the word racist excluded White supremacists, due to their subscription to a patently racist ideology. Results from

the current study suggest that KKK members, similarly to the rest of the country, avoid being

labeled with racist terms. As one KKK member stated about this fear, "All that is going to do is

give them a right to call me a racist bigot, and probably spit in my coffee." This finding suggests

that at least some people within the White supremacist movement internalized the 'universal'

negative connotations surrounding the specific word racist, and wish to avoid the label as such

for fear of being mistreated. In the words of one KKK forum member, "…I don't want to be

known as a racist."

This universal attitude toward the word racist might similarly be tied to social

desirability, a theory that might also explain KKK members' minimalization and/or denial of the

attribute. Studies that gauge self-reported racism or race-related constructs, often control for

social desirability due to respondents' attempt to present themselves in the best light might alter

individuals' responses on questions related to their true opinions on racial issues (Kanter et al.,

2017). Even though the number of respondents who self-identify as White stating negative views

on differing races has recently decreased (Bobo & Dawson, 2009), this could be related less to

racial liberalism and more to an increasing unwillingness to admit to having aversive beliefs that

are also unpopular and counter to how the greater community feels (Sood, 2014). While most

existing current research has focused on the average non-extremist, the same reasoning could be

applied to White supremacists. These individuals maintain a relatively normative lifestyle. Thus,

with their apprehension that being labeled as racist might hold negative consequences in their

life, KKK members would be less likely than the average American to express views that would

deem them to be racist because it could be lumped alongside other racially non-normative

attitudes that they may exhibit, thus placing them in yet lower socially desirable position. In

other words, KKK members know that their racist views might cause them to lose their job

because they are labeled as socially undesirable. Fears that follow this rationale have indeed been

frequently encountered in this study.

Implicit Advice Based on Social Learning

The online community setting of the KKK forum allows for members to disengage from

their immediate social environments when they are logged onto the forum. Thus, it is not

surprising that evidence was found to support of fear of being labeled a racist through use of

examples of individuals similar to the reader. An environment is created in which social learning

principles flourish. By fostering an environment in which like-minded people echo similar ideas,

social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) suggests they influence and strengthen each

other's ideology and lifestyle. The group likely has a convergence of beliefs in which the

members feed off of each other's strong racist beliefs expressed in their postings. However, there

is also evidence of learning through modeling. People are more likely to imitate others with

whom they perceive to be similar to themselves, such as subscribing to a membership-inclusive

ideological group. Within this group, members learn by observing the consequences of another

individual's behavior. In the case of the current study, KKK members share anecdotal evidence

of the negative consequences of individuals who received negative punishment associated with

the label of being a racist, such as losing their job or being ostracized from a social group. As

one KKK member stated this fear, "we would be locked up and smeared all over the news like

the biggest racist in the world!"

Over-Generalization of Fear-Based Admonishment

The third theme of fear of the racist label found in the current study was an over-

generalization of identification and admonishment. In other words, individuals strengthened their

in-group participation (whether it be KKK members in general or the larger White community)

and expressed a fear that the group would be labeled racist. This category was frequently

associated with explicit denial for those beliefs. In the eyes of the KKK members, their beliefs do

not constitute as racist, thus the label cannot be applied to them because it is a negative word and

negative consequences would arise if they were. A KKK member states, "The whole U.S. is so

scared of being labeled as a 'racist' because they stand up for what is right that…" One such way

in which this phenomenon manifests is through the claim that their beliefs are fact and therefore

cannot be deemed racist. Through the use of 'fact' and 'examples' that support their beliefs,

KKK members show that there is 'evidence' for all of their statements. However, they also

understand that due to the nature of our society, they will be labeled a racist for continuing to

maintain their beliefs due to the nature that the belief is associated with the larger White

supremacist group.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study examined KKK White supremacist ideology through a linguistic

analysis approach. In particular, it examined the attitudes surrounding racism. To date, the

research on this topic has focused on non-extremist individuals, and the present study aimed to

address the gap in the literature on this phenomenon by investigating members of a hate group.

However, several limitations of this study are noteworthy. First, only one online discussion

forum from one White supremacist group was included in the data corpus. Although this limits

the generalizability of the results, by closely focusing on specific examples of ideologically-

motivated speech, the ecological validity is strong. Future research should focus on applying

these, or similar, methods to other White supremacist, far-right, or other terrorist campaigns. By

examining defensiveness of ideology, the literature on the topic can better understand how

ingrained the organization's belief system is to an individual's personal belief system. This has

vast implications in the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), which involves

interventional action to prevent violent extremist ideology and action, particularly online

(National Security Critical Issues Task Force, 2016).

A second limitation of the current study is that it relies on researcher analyses for the

creation of the variables of fear and admonishment themes utilized and for the qualitative coding

process. The reliance on researcher evaluation makes the analysis vulnerable to biases. The

exploration of the fear of labeling in ideological individuals is exploratory in nature, thus this

method of research was necessary due to the infancy of the research on the topic. However,

attempts were made to minimize researcher bias, including the use of continually checking for

adequate inter-rater reliability. The current study makes use of specific reliable indicator of the

word stem *racist** because the word is intertwined with the KKK ideology. This word stem

allowed for an adequate amount of sampling from the forum for the purposes of this study, but it

also limited the amount of the forum that was coded. While this is not a direct limitation of the

study, future studies should investigate admonishment and neutralization by using different

indicators to see whether the subsequent results will differ.

A third limitation involves the utilization of an online discussion forum in creation of the

corpus. It can be argued that in the anonymous environment of online forums, members

misrepresent their true ideology. KKK members might attempt to over-exaggerate their hateful

beliefs in order to adapt to the general group ideology that is represented online. However, this

limitation is trivial when examining the ideology that is perpetuated in a group environment.

While certain members might overstate their hateful beliefs, other individuals are reading and

interpreting what is being displayed in the forum. This interpretation can lead to the development

of increasingly extremist ideology. In particular, when defensiveness of such ideology is

displayed, others adopt this mindset which can further create an isolation of the group and in turn foster an environment where a call for action is likely.

This study has the advantage of being minimally-invasive; therefore it can gauge the fear of labeling as it occurs naturally in the exchanges of KKK members, thus greatly increasing the ecological validity of the findings. Considering the highly suspicious nature of the organization and its ideology, this naturalistic setting was deemed superior to direct interviews and solicitation of information about this fear and its role in everyday communications and cognitions. Further research is needed to contextualize and to understand the role that these choices of expressive tactics play within the larger far-right ideology, and in particular their contribution to the way in which the KKK is making sense of their grievances and their plight in order to maximize political mobilization and later impact potential calls for action.

Conclusion

The current study adds to the existing findings in the field of White supremacy literature while exploring the implications of fear-based defensiveness of KKK members' racist and hateful ideology. Through the semi-quantitative examination of a large online forum of this study, the fear of being labeled a racist, a phenomenon found in people outside of hate groups, was found in the spontaneous exchange between KKK online forum members. The finding of the themes in which this fear manifests allow for a better understanding of the ideological roots of historical White supremacy. The CVE implications are considerable, for both law enforcement counterterrorism efforts, such as online counter-communication, and social interventions, community social workers and psychologists. By better understanding how hateful ideology manifests, and how KKK members internalize their beliefs, we can hope to prevent future catastrophic events involving far-right terrorist campaigns.

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