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ABSTRACT

Digital media platforms have been implicated in the recent rise of far-right extremism. This study proposes that these platforms afford emotional processes that lie at the core of far-right movements. Drawing on Randall Collins' interactional framework and the literature on cultural trauma, we investigate the emotional processes triggered by traumatic experiences within far-right online communities. As a case, we examine how the white supremacist community Stormfront responded to the 2008 election of Barack Obama, by analyzing the complete datasets of discussion on the forum through a combination of computational methods and qualitative analysis. Our findings suggest that the community functioned as a "emotional refuge", where members collectively interpreted and transformed their emotional reactions, thereby shaping an emotionally energized collective with a focused target of collective action.

Introduction

The far right has in recent years seen a global resurgence, aided by digital communication technology. Social media platforms have been described as offering valuable tools for far-right extremists, such as efficient means of mobilizing (Mundt, Ross, & Burnett, 2018), spreading their hateful messages (Castaño-Pulgarín, Suárez-Betancur, Vega, & López, 2021; Farkas, Schou, & Neumayer, 2017; Ganesh, 2020), recruiting members (Ekman, 2018), and creating networks and coalitions (Caiani, Della Porta, & Wagemann, 2012; Veilleux-Lepage & Archambault, 2019). But social media not only offer tactical tools for these movements; they also serve as communitarian space for negotiations and identity-formation within movements (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022). Studies on platforms such as Gab and Stormfront have demonstrated that such online spaces can provide a form of sanctuary for constructing counter-narratives to mainstream ideas (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2021) and for developing a collective identity (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Jasser, McSwiney, Pertwee, & Zannettou, 2021; Koster & Houtman, 2008; Perry & Scrivens, 2016).

Research suggests a reciprocal relationship between online discussions and offline events, as online discussions have been found to drive real-world violence (Müller & Schwarz, 2021; Karell et al., 2023), while offline events have in turn been shown to impact online hate (Bliuc, Betts, Vergani, Iqbal, & Dunn, 2019; Kaakinen, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2018; Williams, Burnap, Javed, Liu, & Ozalp, 2019). For example, Van der Vegt, Mozes, Gill, and Kleinberg (2021) found that the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville led to changes in social identity performance on YouTube. Similarly, the 2008 election of Barack Obama led to significant changes in the political strategies of hate blogs and online communities in the US (Sela, Kuflik, & Mesch, 2012). A vast literature hence suggests that digital media have fundamentally transformed contemporary far-right movements.

Within this extensive literature examining how far-right movements have been altered by digital mediatization, a recently emerging literature suggests that digital communication has strong affective dimensions (Eberl, Tolochko, Jost, Heidenreich, & Boomgaarden, 2020; Stark, 2020; Weeks & Garrett, 2019). However, while emotions are typically seen as lying at the core of political movements (Collins, 2009; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2009), research has yet to investigate the role social media play for channeling and transforming emotional experiences within far-right

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movements. The current study thus aims to contribute to this literature by examining the emotional processes through which traumatic experiences and perceived threats are transformed into collective identity and solidarity within the far right.

As a case for studying these movement mechanisms, we focus on the reactions evoked by the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama among members of Stormfront.org, one of the world's oldest and most prominent hate forums for white supremacists. While Obama's election was broadly celebrated as the triumphant climax of centuries of historical progress, some white Americans instead experienced it as profoundly unsettling – as a threat to something unspoken at the very core of their identity (Jardina, 2019). This event, as an extensive body of literature has shown, served as a symbolic catalyst, triggering a backlash against progressive cultural values, energizing and propelling far-right movements that have, in recent years, seeped into the political mainstream of US politics (e.g., Belew, 2018; Kimmel, 2017; Neiwert, 2017; Metzl, 2019). The event thus offers a powerful lens into how online platforms afford emotional processes that lie at the heart of backlash-driven far-right mobilization.

By drawing on this case, and building on the literature on *cultural trauma* and the interactionist framework of Randall Collins, this paper seeks to understand how social media enables the emotional processes through which extremist movements process feelings of despair and confusion into a sense of community and purpose, and charge members with emotional energy to engage in violent political action. According to Collins, communities are key to how individuals experience and process events. Individuals who are strongly embedded in communities are better equipped to cope with crisis, whereas those who lack these resources may react by seeking new communities and narratives to make sense of their experiences. We use this differential as an analytical tool to draw out the emotional mechanisms and processes enabled by online platforms.

By using a combination of statistical analysis, natural language processing and qualitative analysis on a unique database comprising of 10,172,069 posts from 99,988 members and stretching over 20 years,

the article is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How did the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama affect user activity and recruitment on Stormfront?

RQ2. What are the differences in emotional responses to the election between members that joined the community directly after the election, and long-term members?

By throwing light on the emotional affordances that link social media and extremist movements, we aim to contribute to insights on how the radicalizing implications of digital media can be addressed.

Far-right, emotions, and digital media

In the literature on political movements, online communities tend to be conceptualized as "counter-publics:" spaces for sharing controversial opinions, setting agendas, and framing political issues (e.g. Holm, 2019; Renninger, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015; Travers, 2003). This notion has implied a rationalist bias, leading to an insufficient focus on a range of other communicative modes, including the affective, poetic, and humorous (see also Dahlgren, 2005). Consequently, there is a limited body of research exploring how mechanisms of emotional processing are manifested in digitally mediated movements – this gap is especially apparent in studies of reactionary movements.

There are however reasons to believe that online spaces may serve a significant emotional function within movements. Research from other fields, including addiction studies, has shown that engagement with online communities can affect interpersonal relationships, personal empowerment, and recovery capital in online support communities (Best, Bliuc, Iqbal, Upton, & Hodgkins, 2018; Bliuc, Best, Iqbal, & Upton, 2017; Ishii & Ogasahara, 2006). Similarly, studies on *affective publics* have linked social media to various emotional processes, positing that social media

galvanizes publics through collective feelings of intensity, belonging, and connection (e.g. Döveling, Harju, & Sommer, 2018; Farkas, Schou, & Neumayer, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015). This literature highlights how discursively constructed digital affect culture can engender a sense of belonging. Social media have also been linked to intensified *affective* polarization, that is, the strengthening of negative feelings for the political outgroup (Törnberg, 2022).

Emotional processes lie at the core of far-right and reactionary movements, which are often fueled by strong emotional reactions to perceived threats to a group's interests, identities, or values (Almeida, 2019; Wright, 2007). Typically, these threats are embodied in a disruptive or triggering event that is usually abrupt and highly publicized, such as environmental accidents, political repression, or police violence. Such events can serve as a "moral shock" that challenges the group's values and upsets their self-image and identity (Snow & Soule, 2010; Warren, 2010). If left unprocessed, these shocks can render individuals passivized by anxiety and despair. However, in certain cases, groups of individuals can "channel their fear and anger into righteous indignation and individual or collective political activity" through complex emotional processes remain under-explored (Jasper, 2008, p. 107).

Hence, while social media platforms have been recognized as spaces for emotional processing, and these processes have been characterized as central to far-right movements, the role of digital media in the emotional processes of far-right movements have received scant attention. There is still limited knowledge on the nature of these processes, particularly with regard to how a shock is processed and transformed into the energy that drives a movement.

This study seeks to address this knowledge gap by examining the role of online communities in affording space for emotional processing within the far right. By investigating how members on Stormfront responded to the 2008 presidential election of Obama, this paper examines online communities as arenas for emotional processes that transform the experience of threats and traumas into movement energy. We argue that digital spaces can function as a form of digital therapy

groups, or an "emotional refuge" (Reddy, 2001), where individuals who have experienced threats to their identity can come together to share and articulate their feelings. This involves [i] creating and disseminating narratives that provide meaning to feelings of anxieties and despair, but also [ii] the social processes through which these narratives are constructed, which can help transform passive feelings into emotional energy, and a sense of collective identity, which in turn drives movement action. To cast theoretical light on these processes, we now draw on the literature on *cultural trauma* that we integrate with the interactionist framework of Randall Collins.

Processing and transforming traumas

Emile Durkheim described how collective trauma arises from a social crisis that threatens a community's way of life, leading to feelings of helplessness, moral confusion, and a sense of loss (Durkheim, [1912] 1915). For Durkheim, this concept primarily emphasizes the impact of traumatic events on the social integration and moral fabric of a society, causing disruptions to its social order and collective consciousness. Jeffrey Alexander's (2004) conceptualization of *cultural trauma* builds upon Durkheim's ideas but accentuates the role of narrative construction and symbolic representations in shaping collective memory and understanding of traumatic events. Cultural trauma theory holds that certain events have indelible and enduring effects on collective identity, as they represent an "acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" (Alexander, 2004, p. 10). Alexander describes cultural trauma as a social process involving the disruption of the cultural basis of a social order, eliciting emotions such as anxiety, fear, distrust, pessimism, and insecurity (see also Eyerman, 2004, 2022; Sztompka, 2004).

Cultural trauma is fundamentally different from psychoanalytic notions of trauma (Caruth, 2016; LaCapra, 2014): unlike psychological trauma, cultural trauma is created through the "symbolic extension" of victimhood from the individual to the collective level. It is primarily experienced through various mediated forms, including narratives, testimonials and witness accounts,

propaganda and news coverage. Cultural trauma theory thus opposes naturalist theories that understand trauma as inherently associated to large-scale events, such as war and atrocities, by instead arguing that cultural traumas are "made, not born" (Smelser, 2004, p. 37).

While characterizing the election of the first Black president in the US as traumatic for white supremacists may appear hyperbolic or even provocative, its technical meaning does not imply any objective severity of the event itself, but any events that challenge the self-narrative of a community. In this context, we argue that the election posed a challenge to the core self-understanding of certain whites as belonging to a "superior race," by questioning foundational narratives of identity that are ubiquitous in the United States, with deep roots in the historical context of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. As we will observe in the empirical analysis that follows, the election incited an unprecedented surge in user activity on Stormfront, with many users expressing intense emotions of shame, resignation and helplessness in their posts subsequent to the election.

We respond to cultural trauma by constructing *trauma narratives*, that seek to impart meaning and coherence to feelings of pain, suffering, and confusion triggered by the trauma (Eyerman, 2022). These narratives tell a story of what happened to "us:" who is culpable, and what should be done to repair "our" collectivity. The process of "trauma work" is inherently filled with contention, as various stakeholders engage in debates over the legitimacy and endurance of certain trauma narratives. Smith (2005, p. 18) describes trauma narratives as narratives that "allocate causal responsibility for action, define actors and give them motivation, indicate the trajectory of past episodes and predict consequences of future choices, suggest courses of action, confer and withdraw legitimacy, and provide social approval by aligning events with normative cultural codes." By providing a framework of meaning that assist people in making sense of the world, trauma narratives thus weave individual experiences of fear, anger, and suffering into collective stories aimed at repairing a collective identity.

Trauma narratives require articulation and communication to be disseminated, which has traditionally been done by organized groups of committed actors and intellectuals, using their privileged positions as knowledge holders to speak to the public to narrative the significance of historically significant events (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2011). However, the formulation and articulation of trauma narratives can also occur in a more decentralized manner through the collective negotiations between users on online platforms. In these cases, we argue, the social and interactive process of formulating a trauma narrative, in which people come together to share their emotions and experiences, can itself be a powerful tool for healing and strengthening collective identity and in-group solidarity. To elaborate on this, we will now turn to Randall Collins' theories on interaction rituals.

Building on Durkheim, Collins (2004, 2009) emphasizes that during times of crisis and trauma, people tend come together and synchronize their thoughts and actions, finding support and comfort in community. Traumatic experiences thus tend to elicit collective manifestations, or community rituals, manifesting through demonstrations and other forms of collective action, as well as through interpersonal communication (although this has been less studied). As Collins argue, participating in these types of collective manifestations, or interaction rituals, may serve to transform traumas into emotional energy and group solidarity, as the "ritualized sharing of instigating or initiating emotions which brought individuals to the collective gathering in the first place (outrage, anger, fear, etc.) gives rise to distinctively collective emotions, the feelings of solidarity, enthusiasm, and morality" (Collins, 2009, p. 29). Participants in (successful) interaction rituals thus develop a mutual focus of attention and become animated by each other's micro-rhythms and emotions. According to Collins, the results of these interaction chains are group solidarity, emotional energy (feelings of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, initiative for action), symbols that represent the group, and feelings of morality.

The emotional effects of community are mediated by participants perceived emotional synchrony. In this context, Jasper (2008) makes a useful distinction between *reciprocal emotions* and *shared emotions*. He defines reciprocal emotions as the emotions individuals experience in

response to the emotions of others within a group or social context. These emotions potentially bolster social bonds and facilitate cooperation among group members by fostering a sense of empathy and understanding. For instance, when one person expresses anger or sadness about an issue, others may reciprocate these emotions, leading to a shared emotional experience that can strengthen group cohesion and propel collective action. These emotions form what Goodwin (1997) has referred to as the "libidinal economy" of a movement, yielding many of the pleasures of protest.

In contrast, shared emotions refer to collective emotional experiences that emerge from a common cause or event, such as a shared trauma or victory. These emotions encapsulate the group's collective sense of outrage toward external entities, such resentment toward government policies. They can foster unity and solidarity among group members, reinforcing their collective identity and commitment to a common goal. Shared emotions can also serve as a potent catalyst for collective action, as individuals are motivated by their emotional affinity with the cause and their fellow group members. Jasper contends that the power of shared emotions derives from their collective expression, with shared and reciprocal emotions reinforcing each other and enhancing solidarity within a movement or community. As Jasper puts it:

> Each measure of shared outrage against a nuclear plant reinforces the reciprocal emotion of fondness for others precisely because they feel the same way. They are like us; they understand. Conversely mutual affection is one context in which new shared emotions are easily created. Because you are fond of others, you want to adopt their feelings. (Jasper, 2008, p. 187)

Both Jasper's notions of reciprocal and shared emotions, as well as Collins' concept of interaction rituals underscore the significance of emotional exchanges in shaping social interactions and collective action. In this light, reciprocal emotions can be seen as a driving force behind the formation and perpetuation of interaction ritual chains. As individuals engage in social encounters and exchange emotional cues, they generate and maintain reciprocal emotions, contributing to the emotional energy that fuels the interaction ritual chain. Meanwhile, shared emotions can be understood as an outcome of successful interaction rituals. When participants in an interaction ritual achieve a shared emotional mood, they experience shared emotions that fortify group cohesion and solidarity. This sense of unity and belonging, in turn, encourages continued participation in interaction ritual chains and bolsters collective identity.

To summarize thus far, we propose that the construction of trauma narratives be considered as a *social process*. Both the trauma narratives themselves and the participation in the collective processes (or interaction rituals) that generate them potentially impart meaning and coherence to feelings of pain, fear, and confusion. It is therefore reasonable to infer that potentially traumatic events could impact different groups or individuals within a community or movement differently, and similarly that the mechanisms by which these traumas are addressed could vary. Individuals or groups with access to pre-developed narratives and a strong sense of community support may be better equipped to cope with crisis and trauma. In contrast, those who lack these resources may react differently. In the subsequent sections, we will empirically investigate these processes by comparing long-term users from new users on Stormfront.

Research design

Stormfront is a white supremacist and neo-Nazi online community and forum that has existed since the mid-90s. It stands out as one of the earliest and most significant websites for promoting far-right ideologies, racial supremacy, and hate speech on the internet (Conway, Scrivens, & McNair, 2019). The Southern Poverty Law Center (2014) has described Stormfront as "a magnet and breeding ground for the deadly and the deranged," stating that its members have been linked to approximately 100 murders since its inception. Despite the diverse range of members, the majority of Stormfront's members are united in their adherence to a white supremacist ideology, which is symbolized on the site by a prominent logotype featuring a Celtic cross, a symbol that was used by Norwegian Nazis during World War II to symbolize white supremacy. The forum has been shut down by US authorities at multiple occasions due to spreading hate and inciting violence.

While Stormfront has now been surpassed in terms of user activity and overall influence by other far-right forums such as Gab, Parler, and 8chan/8kun, it remains a unique resource for studying movement processes. Its unrivaled longevity provides an opportunity to investigate long-term emotional and social processes over years and even decades, and to compare reactions among diverse participants within the community. Its pseudonymity and data access (as opposed to most recent online platforms) enable researchers to access the full corpus of discussions, and to trace individual users over time. Stormfront thus stands as a unique model for examining the sociotechnical entanglement between media platforms and social movements. Our decision for centering our analysis on the 2008 election of Obama stems from its recognition as a symbolic trigger for the nationalist backlash in the US over the past decades. As we will demonstrate below, this event had an immense impact also on Stormfront in particular, resulting in an unprecedented surge of user activity and evoking intense emotional responses from its members. This makes it a unique case for examining the synergistic relationship between movements and social media in enabling the intricate social and emotional dynamics that drive extremist mobilization.

To analyze the Stormfront data, we used a mixed-method approach that involved both computational methods and qualitative analysis. We scraped the forum using custom web crawlers, anonymized the data, and stored it in a local database. The full corpus includes 10,172,069 posts from 99,988 members, covering a period of 20 year. To begin, we used statistical analysis to examine the impact of the 2008 election on the activity of different user groups on the community. Next, we used computational methods and qualitative in-depth analysis to analyze the posts.

Drawing on the theory section above, we can postulate that users already embedded in the community are likely to process Obama's election differently compared to users who join the community in response to the election. To investigate this, we constructed two sub-corpora. The first incorporates all posts on the forum within a two-week period following the 2008 election (Nov. 3rd – Nov. 16th) authored by members who registered during the same period ($N = 3,130$). This period was set to capture the activities of new users on the platform.

The second subcorpus comprises all posts by long-term members, defined as those who have been contributing to the forum for more than 12 months and written a minimum of 50 posts during this same period ($N = 24,804$). By scrutinizing the differing responses of these user groups to the election, we can thereby elucidate the processes by which the community processes cultural trauma.

To analyze these sub-corpora, we employed z-tests, which are statistical tests for comparing the means of two large samples when variances are known. This allowed us to identify words and bigrams that were statistically over- and under-represented in each subcorpus (excluding stop words). We then used social network analysis to illustrate the resulting word collocations.

To analyze the sentiments expressed by these two user groups, we used the Vader sentiment analysis model, which is designed specifically for social media texts (Gilbert & Hutto, 2014). This lexicon-based model is sensitive to both the polarity and intensity of sentiments. For this step, we used the same subcorpora as above, but only included posts that contained at least one of the following keywords: Obama, Obongo, president*, white_house, Osama, election, elected, leader, joined, join, new member, last night, obamination, win, register (N: 5975). This allowed us to focus on the sentiments that were specifically related to the election. This list of keywords was created iteratively by identifying words that were commonly used in relation to the election.

To further explore the identified patterns and discern specific emotions and motivations, we conducted a qualitative analysis of a smaller sample of the most positively and negatively charged posts. We selected the 200 posts expressing the strongest positive and negative sentiments within each subcorpus, resulting in a total of 800 posts, which we determined to be sufficient for reaching data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This type of purposive sampling allowed us to examine any major differences in emotional expressions between the two user groups. We analyzed the posts using *theory-guided coding* (focusing on nuances in emotional expressions) combined with

inductive open coding (Charmaz, 2006) to maintain sensitivity to unexpected themes.

The quantitative sentiment analysis thus provided both a measure of overall sentiments expressed and a "content map" that enabled the selection of samples for closer qualitative inspection. This research design allowed us to combine the analysis of broader patterns with in-depth examination of the reasoning and emotions behind the responses of the different user groups.

There are several ethical considerations to consider when working with the large amounts of user-generated data available online, particularly when dealing with sensitive personal data such as political opinion. In the case of Stormfront, the size and magnitude of the forum make it difficult to obtain informed consent from its users. However, Stormfront is characterized by a high level of accessibility and publicness, as there is no requirement for registration to access the site, and users are aware that their comments may be scrutinized by authorities, the media, and researchers. We therefore consider Stormfront to be a "public space," and individual consent is not required, which is in line with the praxis in the field and the guidelines provided by the British Psychological Association (BSA, 2017) and the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, & Charles, 2020). Nonetheless, we recognize the importance of protecting the privacy and integrity of the users. Therefore, quotes from individual users have been slightly altered so that they cannot be traced back to their sources. The project has been assessed and approved by the [Regional] Ethical Review Board.

Findings

We begin by examining the impact of the 2008 election of Obama on user activity on the forum, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. The data reveals a gradual rise in the number of new members per month until approximately 2006, followed by a gradual decline over time. A similar trend is observed for the count of first posts. As depicted in Figure 1, the election of Obama in 2008 brought about a significant disruption to this pattern, inciting an unprecedented surge in community activity. The number of first posts skyrocketed, and the forum witnessed an unprecedented influx of newly registered members in the days around the election. These patterns are further corroborated by Google Trends analytics, which indicate a pronounced surge in Google searches for "Stormfront" during the days following the election. In stark contrast, other significant events, such as Obama's reelection in 2012, the presidential election of Trump 2016, and Biden in 2020, had negligible impact on recruitment and posting activity.

Analysis of posting activity reveals that the forum became increasingly dominated by long-term users over time, with posting activity following the Obama 2008 election primarily driven by established members. However, while older posters were prevalent in terms of the number
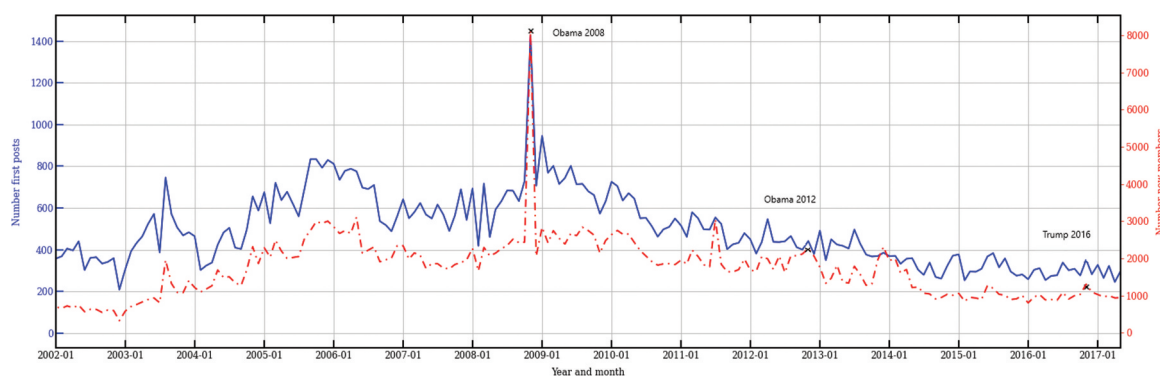

Figure 1. This figure shows the number of registered members per month in red, and the number of members per month who made their first contribution to the forum. There is a significant number of members who register on the forum but never post – the total number of members on the forum is around 350,000 whereas the number of members who have at some point posted is around 100,000.
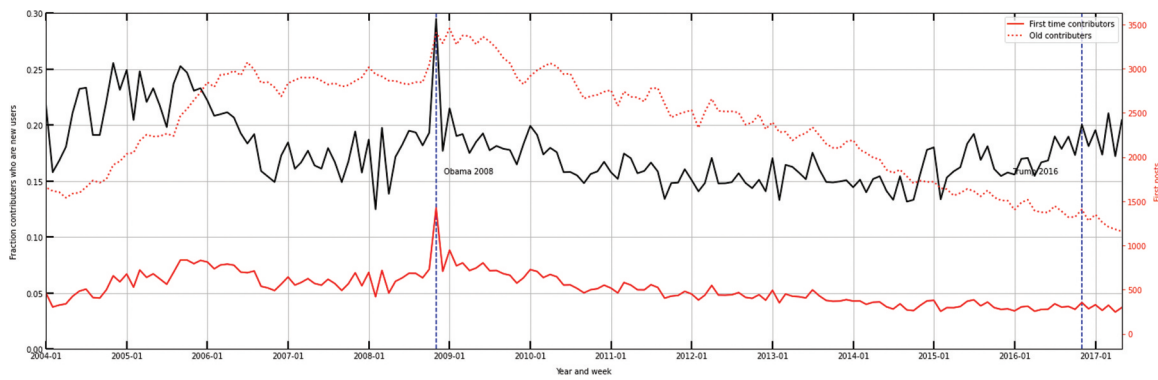
Figure 2. This figure gives a sense of the fraction of active members who are returning, as compared to members who are contributing for the first time. The figure shows the number of monthly contributors split by whether the month marked their first contribution or not. The dotted red line shows the number of old contributors, while the red line shows the number of contributors who is contributing for the first time. The black shows the fraction of the members contributing during the week that were contributing for the first time.

of posts, the election of Obama brought a significant influx of new contributors to the forum. Figure 2 presents the fraction of unique contributors per month who posted for the first time compared to those who had previously posted. As the graph shows, while there was a surge in active long-term members, the election of Obama in 2008 also resulted in a larger surge in contributions from members who had not previously posted on the forum, increasing from 15–20% to 30% of the active members in that month. We can conclude that the presidential election of Obama led to an unprecedented rise in new members of the community and a significant increase in new posters as a proportion of active contributors.
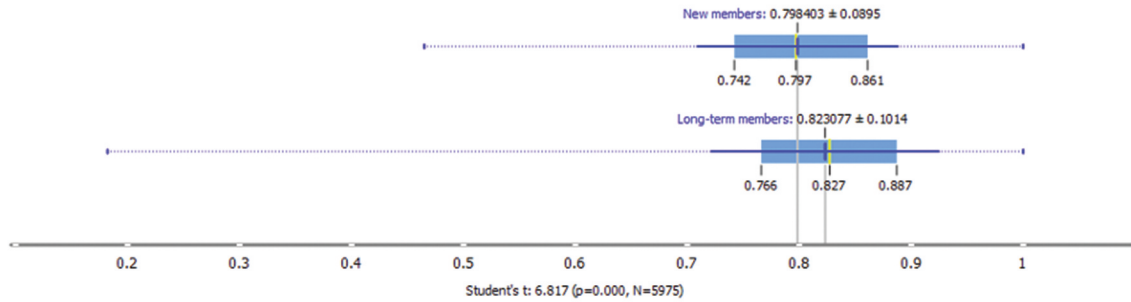
In the next step, we focus on the content of the posts in the wake of the election to comprehend the significance of this event for the community members. The objective of this analysis is to gain insights into the underlying cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which identity threats affect the members. Given that we anticipate that different groups of individuals within a movement possess varying abilities and capacities to cope with traumatic events, we will compare the content of the posts by both new users and long-term members of the community, utilizing text analysis and social network analysis. Furthermore, we will explore the emotions expressed by different members in the wake of the election, as well as the rationales and motivations they provide for joining the forum.

Long-term users

Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate the main differences in the response of long-term members and new members to the election of Obama. The networks depict the word collocations that were most distinctive in each sub-corpus, represented as discursive networks. Arguably the most noteworthy aspect is that that long-term members appear to possess a relatively established sense of collective identity, as demonstrated by a strong emphasis on the in-group (Figure 3). There is a significant overrepresentation of combinations of the word "we" and words such as"whites,""America," "nationalists," "fighting," "act," "control," "want," "secure," "lose." Furthermore, the presence of derogatory expressions and word collocations indicating an out-group suggest a pronounced sense of adversary and us-versus-them mentality. Jews are clearly identified as the main out-group, with top-ranked word pairs such as "Jews their," "Jewish media," "Jewish influence," "Jews us," "Jews control," etc. This thematic shift in focus toward Jews as the main out-group can also be observed more broadly in the forum, reflecting its strong antisemitic tendencies. In previous studies, we have demonstrated how such a shift to community-specific vernacular is the outcome of an ideologically driven socialization process within the community (see Authors 2022).

Other prominent patterns that distinguish this sub-corpus include a focus on expansive political topics, notably the Second Amendment (e.g., "voted amendment," "gun owners," "firearm

Figure 3. Collocation network of posts by old-term members on the forum. The figure shows word bigrams that are overrepresented in the corpus.

ammunition," "second amendment"), as well as the financial crisis, Wall Street, illegal immigration, and a diverse array of political figures and groups, including Sarah Palin, Rahm Emanuel and KKK. There is also a tendency toward using various derogatory expressions, specifically targeting black people.

New users

In contrast to long-term users, new members were less inclined to identify themselves with a clearly defined in-group, as the absence of "we" in the word collocations indicates (Figure 4). Rather, they describe themselves as individuals belonging to a broader category or a certain ethnic group. The single most frequent word collocation in this corpus is "I white," followed by "I American/people/

nationalist/race/country." There also appears to be a stronger tendency among these members to express their personal opinion ("I believe/think/ agree/disagree/values/desire"). Interestingly, there may also be a tendency among new members to focus on green sustainability ("renewable technology/energy," "green buildings," "green fuels" etc.).

The sub-corpus is characterized by the overrepresentation of various emotional expressions, particularly feelings of "desperation," "shock," "sickness," "disgust," "hate," "vile" and "fear." This pattern is further supported when examining single words, revealing a high (relative) frequency of strong emotional words. Another distinctive pattern are bigrams that indicate feelings of racial pride, with common word collocations such as "superior race," "proud white," "white pride," "racial pride." Instead of Jews being the main out-

Figure 4. Collocation network of posts by new members on the forum.

group, new members seem to focus mainly on racial issues concerning Black persons. There are, in fact, no highly ranked words or word pairs relating to Jews in the sub-corpus. The reason for this is likely that the core group of Stormfront is focused on a more traditional strand of Nazi ideology which views Jews as the dominant outgroup, and Black people as merely "puppets" of a broader Jewish agenda.

In addition, there are two distinctive clusters of word collocations in this sub-corpus. The first concerns various family-oriented words such as "husband children," "I father," "I husband," "white father," "child I," "husband I." "I daughter," "my wife," "fear children." The second cluster includes words that seem to concern the motivations of these members to

join the forum. For instance, "I've lurking/reading/years," "likeminded people," "I friends," "identical superiors," "own people," "white friends," "stick own."

The analysis above has revealed the broader patterns distinguishing each corpus. In the next section, we attempt to extend, validate and explain these patterns by employing sentiment analysis combined with qualitative text analysis.

Sentiments and emotional expressions

The results of the sentiment analysis confirm previous findings and indicate that new members tend to use significantly more emotional expressions than long-term members in the period following the election (see Figures 5abc). This[1]
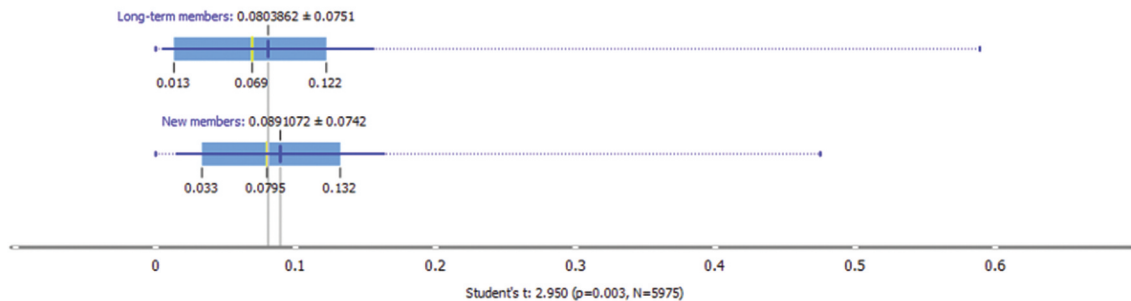
Figure 5. Abc. Yellow vertical line through the box represents the median at the 50th percentile.Percentile.The vertical blue line represents the mean. Left line of the box is the 25th percentile and the right line is the 75th percentile. The whiskers include the full variance and all outliers are included.

trend is evident in both positive and negative emotions. Statistical analysis using t-tests[2] shows that new users express significantly more positive (5.3, $p = .000$ …) and negative (2.950, $p = .003$) emotions, while older users express significantly more neutral sentiments (6.817, $p = .000$). These findings suggest that new users are more emotionally driven and express stronger sentiments about the presidential election. The analysis was repeated on the full sub-corpora (i.e.,without using the list of keywords) with similar results, albeit with somewhat lower values, as expected since this corpus covers a broader spectrum of topics than the presidential election.

To explore these patterns further and gain insights into the types of emotions and motivations

expressed by the members, we selected a smaller sample of posts for qualitative analysis. We selected the 200 posts expressing the strongest positive and negative sentiments, respectively.

Long-term members' emotional expressions

Analyzing the posts containing the strongest negative sentiments expressed by long-term users, shows that long-term members exhibit a relatively jaded attitude and display relatively few emotional outbursts. This may be a strategic choice, as these members may attempt to contain their emotions to avoid appearing politically naive. Instead, these posts express bitterness, anger, and frustration, rather than depression, disgust, or disgrace. As one user succinctly captures this sentiment: "I'm upset, not depressed."

> First a Negro president and now a damn queer mayor. God how low can these fools get?! Maybe its time to say to hell with trying to save it and just let America self-destruct.

> this is horrible, i knew it would happen so i was not shocked or vexed to the point of frustration, im just sad that the white majority and its leaders have lost pride and any care for their heritage.

In line with previous results, long-term members typically approach the election by focusing on broader political issues or topics such as Jews, Second Amendment rights, and international issues, with discussions characterized by a relatively neutral parlance (in the context of a far-right forum). They view the election as an unfortunate and regrettable event, but not unexpected, and rather a predictable result of the "prevailing Jewish order." For instance:

> Are we losing sight of the fact that Obama is just a figurehead puppet? Do you really think that Obama controls anything? International jewry is the greatest threat, hands down. Obama is an impotent house negro, nothing more.

When examining the most positive posts within this sub-corpus, these typically contain a high degree of irony and sarcasm. For instance: "Exposure to diversity is the surest cure for tolerance. I'm glad Obama won." Such expressions are more common among established members

compared to new members. Additionally, other positive posts include friendly and inviting posts, welcoming new members to the community, and expressing a general optimism about the large influx of new members to both the community and to the white nationalist movement overall. In this way, older members attempt to create affective bonds with the newcomers: "I'm glad to see many new members! Welcome to SF!"

Overall, the analysis suggests that the election of Obama was not a significant disruptive event or a moral shock for the long-term members on the forum. These individuals already had well-established grievances and the event did not challenge their identities or force them to reconsider basic beliefs. Instead, the election of Obama allowed the long-term users to enforce their world-views, strengthen their solidarity, and their sense of "we-ness."

New members' emotional expressions

In contrast, the election was a shocking event for new members, who expressed intense emotions and profusely discussed their feelings, which resembled a form of emotional venting.

> I'm even too shocked to feel sick or disgusted. It's a scary time for the white race, scarier than ever before… Right now, I think my mind is a blur of emotions, and I cant think logically about how this situation might be fixed.

As demonstrated by the sentiment analysis, new members express intense positive *and* negative emotions, which may appear paradoxical. Investigating the 200 most negative posts in this sub-corpus, we find a wide spectrum of emotions, with despair, resignation, shame, disgust and nausea particularly prominent. This is evinced by expressions such as: "Last night made me sick to my stomach;" "I'm heartsick and saddened;" "I vomit in my mouth a bit;" "I want to puke." Words such as "disgrace," "disgusting," "despicable," "shocking," "sickening" are markedly prevalent, a trend that was also apparent in the z-test. These types of "visceral, bodily feelings, on a par with vertigo or nausea" (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2009, p. 16) are commonly associated with moral shocks.

Emotions of disgust, shame, and disgrace were typically expressed by new members as a reaction to the fact that a person belonging to an allegedly "inferior" race won the presidential election, and that white people now are "subordinated to Blacks." As illustrated by the two following posts, many members describe it as particularly upsetting and "disgraceful" that a Black person will now occupy the same position as a series of "dignified" white presidents before him.

> The national disgrace! To elect a representative of a sub-human black race that is so hostile and hateful to the white people; that is the ENEMY of the white people; that is despicable and disgusting; that is so inferior to the white people; that is so destructive to the society; that never belonged among the white people. Shame on you!

> To think that Barack Hussein Obama will join the likes as FDR, Eisenhower, Washington, Jefferson, and Reagan, is an absolute disgrace to those men of great stature and noble bloodline. Makes me want to fuc**ng puke.

Many new members thus struggle with the contradiction that a person from an alleged "inferior race" could hold a position of power and framed the election as an imminent threat to the white race. While long-term members solved this apparent contradiction by focusing on Jews as the out-group – with Obama as merely seen a "Jewish puppet" – the new members primarily emphasize Black people as the main concern and the chief out-group. The election therefore posed a fundamental challenge to the new members, who based their identity and self-value on social comparison with other races and devaluation of Black people.

The election is repeatedly and explicitly described as a turning point for new members of the forum, influencing their decision to register and become active in the community. Many expressed a need to "take action" and "do something" in response to the event, but also a desire for comfort, moral support, and a way to make sense of their upset. For instance: "I have been reading for some time, but this was the final tipping point, I felt compelled to register and post;" "over the years my concerns has grown this was a tipping point." The elections served as a moral shock that motivated these individuals to join the community, and they often cited concerns about the safety of their families, particularly their daughters and children, as a reason for their involvement.

> I just found this site and joined right away. I just want to say I am afraid of what is happening in America. I have three children and I am scared to death . . . They will breed with our daughters until our blood no longer runs pure and we will be gone.

Shared emotions: transforming dread into outrage

Emotions are not just instinctive reactions to external events. Movements are themselves also a distinct setting in which emotions can be created or reinforced. Many new members shared personal stories of past injustices, alleged oppression, offenses, assaults, and violence allegedly performed by Black people, which served to fuel a sense of moral outrage. These stories typically included an idealized victim – often a young woman or daughter – who has allegedly been assaulted. For instance:

> Last night made me so sick to my stomach. One of my female friends was robbed of all her things. I saw black teens harassing white cops, saying they arent **** and don't matter. I think I vomited in my mouth.

Such stories represent what Jasper refers to as *shared emotions* and reflect how new members of the community collectively nurture anger and outrage toward outsiders. They identify concrete and specific adversaries, thus turning attention from the specific "disaster" of a member of an "inferior race" winning the election and the resulting feelings of grief and despair, to focusing instead on the corruption and dangerous nature of their enemies – thus enhancing the protestor's sense of threat. In this way, the indignities of daily life are transformed into a shared grievance with a focused target of collective action. According to Gamson (1992), to sustain collective action, the targets identified by the frame must successfully bridge the abstract and the concrete. This process is particularly evident in some of these narratives: while the stories depict concrete and actual events that involve Black people, at the same time they emphasize that violence and immoral acts are embedded in their very nature as Black people. In this way, the members connect broader sociocultural forces with human agents who are appropriate targets of collective action.

Through cognitive reframing, the members transform passive emotions, such as dread,

hopelessness, fear, resignation, shame and disgust, into active emotions, such as moral indignation and outrage, which provide better and more stable grounds for both action and collective identity. While resignation can dampen perceived opportunity for change, emotions such as anger, indignation and pride are commonly associated with political agency (Jasper, 2011). In contrast, the established long-term members do not need this: their grievances are firmly established – they are already angry and emotionally charged for action.

Reciprocal emotions: nurturing a collective identity

Examining the 200 posts by new members that are classified as most positive, these can be broadly sorted into two categories: [i] personal presentations where members describe themselves, and [ii] affective emotions relating to their experiences of social bonding, togetherness, and social support.

In the former category, new members present themselves to the community, describing themselves as "proud whites" and expressing pride in belonging to a "superior race." This tendency to emphasize pride was evident also in the quantitative analysis and may have served to transform deactivating emotions, such as shame or depression, into activating emotions such as anger, outrage, and indignation, which encourage action. Pride and shame are moral emotions of self-approval or self-disapproval that involve a feeling of connection or disconnection from one's social bonds, and emphasizing pride and superiority may serve to further strengthen a sense of community among the members.

The second category of positive posts included various expressions of social bonding and support, which can be conceptualized as *reciprocal emotions*. Members thank each other for receiving support and being welcomed to the forum. Many claim that the reason for joining the forum was to find moral and social support and a protected space to discuss with like-minded people. As one user puts it: "I came here to converse and find solidarity with fellow White Nationalists."

According to Collins, participation in these positively toned gatherings reinforces common identity and personal and collective self-esteem – similar to de Koster and Houtman (2008) emphasis on

messages as sources of sociability, resulting in communal solidarity. Collective identity refers to both a process and a product. On the most basic level, it is the process by which individuals come to see themselves in others; the product is a common understanding of "we," or seeing the "we" in "me" (Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1985). Through these posts and the succeeding discussions, members create personal bonds of friendship and loyalty, and enhance feelings of trust and solidarity. For instance, as expressed in these two posts: "I'd just like to thank everyone for responding to my posts and for the most part being respectful;" "Very happy to have joined SF, glad to have joined this site, the election has fired up my desire to reach out to other whites."

The election of Obama thus became a combative issue that contributed to the energy and solidarity of the community. As Collins states, this process of emotional arousal and shared emotions, driven by a moral shock or other events, tends to occur over limited time periods. Typically, their peaks are only sustainable for a few days. This corresponds well with user activity on the forum: the sharp peak with many new members and high posting activity only lasted for a limited time.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed that digital media contributes to far-right mobilization by affording emotional processes that are at the core of far-right movements: the transformation of individuals' experiences of threats and trauma into collective movement energy. In developing our understanding of how digital media afford these emotional processes, we have drawn on an empirical analysis of the processes set in motion on Stormfront by the 2008 election of Barack Obama – an event that has become nearly as symbolic of the advancement of progressive values as it has of the reactionary backlash it triggered. The analysis has revealed that different user groups on Stormfront were differentially affected by the election, as they had access to different coping mechanisms in response to this event.

New members experienced the election as a traumatic event, expressing intense emotions of

shame, resignation, and disgust in their posts immediately following the election. Many of these members joined Stormfront as a means of processing this traumatic experience, seeking meaning and social and moral support from like-minded individuals. Once part of the community, they engaged in the development of new (trauma) narratives to provide coherence and meaning to the situation, sharing personalized stories that cast the general shock as a concrete enemy and justified moral outrage by revealing the "corrupt" and "dangerous" nature of Black people.

By supporting and encouraging each other (reciprocal emotions) and collectively diagnosing and describing shared injustices and grievances (shared emotions), the two types of collective emotions merged in the discussions. In this experience of emotional communion, passive and individual emotions become fused into a collective emotion, creating a shared sense of identity and a drive for collective action. The social rituals of narrative construction that developed in the community serve as social glue that bound members together, increased solidarity, motivated individuals to remain active, and provided a foundation for the construction of a collective identity. It is worth noting that the rituals of narrative construction were collective, bottom-up processes that involved many members, rather than being strategically shaped by individual leaders as sometimes described in the literatures on framing and moral shock (Williams, 2004).

In contrast, long-term members of Stormfront reacted differently to the election. While their activity on the community increased in the immediate aftermath of the election, these members exhibited less strong emotional outbursts. They did not experience the election as a trauma: it did not pose a significant threat to their worldviews or their identities. They already had a narrative in place for making sense of the election of a Black president – centered on the belief of Jews as the scheming masterminds, while casting Obama as merely another Black "puppet" – hence protecting and leaving intact their inherent sense of supremacy as white Americans. This suggests that strong ties and social and discursive immersion in a community can, in certain situations, serve as a shock-absorber that protects individuals from the negative effects of traumatic events.

In conclusion, Stormfront provides a space for the creation and dissemination of trauma narratives that render meaning to – and thus enable the processing of – feelings of fear, anxiety, and despair. These narratives assist individuals in making sense of unfolding events by telling a story in which the event can be made compatible with and slotted into a broader framework of understanding – processing what occurred and who is responsible. Moreover, the social process of generating these narratives may also serve to transform passive emotions into emotional energy and a sense of collective identity.

Online communities like Stormfront, therefore, not only provide a platform for the far right to articulate contentious opinions and ideas (Koster & Houtman, 2008), but they also serve as a form of "emotional refuge" (Reddy, 2001): a space for collective emotional work where members can express and collectively interpret feelings and emotional responses in ways that would not be accepted in mainstream society. While previous research has emphasized the role of sociability and interaction in fostering a sense of community on social media, this study has accentuated these communities' central function in facilitating the *emotional* processes that transform a set of individuals into a community, and a community into an active political entity. This speaks to Ganesh's (2018) suggestion that, for the far right, what unites online communities are "forms of intimacy, sense, and feeling that are maligned or considered unacceptable in mainstream society" (Ganesh, 2018, pp. 33–34).

Our findings suggest several routes for further inquiry. In particular, the emphasis on the entanglement between the emotional and relational dynamics suggests methodological innovation is needed to examine the formation of communities through emotional processes. While computational methods such as sentiment analysis and topic modeling are powerful tools for capturing emotional patterns and structures of interactions, they are less effective for examining relational dynamics that evolve in the interaction between individuals, such as emotional escalation. This requires in-depth qualitative analysis or methodological innovation, and there is still more empirical and analytical work to be done here.

To promote future research on this topic, the data used in this study has been made publicly available.[3]

Notes

1. Noticeably, this runs counter to the overall patterns on the forum, as users generally tend to express more negative sentiments over time.
2. Student-t or t-test assesses the statistical significance of the difference between two sample means.
3. The Stormfront dataset is available here: https://doi.org/10.34740/kaggle/dsv/4176720

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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