How “the left” meme: Analyzing taboo in the Internet memes of r/DankLeft

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Abstract
This article explores how “the left” meme and the character and emotional reception of taboo-breaking therein via the case of r/DankLeft—a USA-centric Marxist, Anarchist, and Democratic Socialist Internet meme community. It asks: what themes do popular r/DankLeft Internet memes relate to, how does taboo feature within popular r/DankLeft Internet memes, and can any differences in the ways in which taboo-related r/DankLeft Internet memes are received be discerned. In turn, it carries out a thematic analysis of 366 popular memes, a multimodal critical discourse analysis of 41 taboo-related popular memes, and a comparative sentiment analysis of the comments these and other memes have received in r/DankLeft. The article finds that popular memes in r/DankLeft primarily relate to perceived threats to its community of users. It also shows that taboo-breaking does feature in r/DankLeft memes and that when it does correlative patterns emerge in terms of popularity and emotional reception.

Keywords
Digital culture, discourse analysis, Internet memes, left-wing, radical left, Reddit, sentiment analysis, taboo-breaking, thematic analysis

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Introduction

During the 2016 USA presidential election, the phrase “the left can’t meme” became prominent on and spread outward from 4chan’s infamous /pol/ (short for “politically incorrect”) discussion image board. The phrase, asserting that left-wing Internet memes are more awkward and embarrassing than humorous, soon became an Internet meme itself.¹ It subsequently gained popularity among a wider array of right-wing actors, including those on the far right, predominantly in the USA but also in other anglophone countries, across Europe and throughout the rest of the world. These actors tend to suggest that their left-wing counterparts cannot meme because of their allegiance to notions of political correctness and their unwillingness to adopt the sort of outspoken, offensive, or absurd perspectives considered humorous among the far right. The perceived memetic failings of “the left”—a nebulous label that serves right-wing and far-right actors in totalizing a political outgroup, but which is also regularly used by different left-wing and radical left actors themselves—have thus been related to an emotive or affective rather than technological deficiency. For instance, one right-wing commentator argued that left-wingers are limited in the provocative humor they can use to break social norms because their beliefs characterize such norms: “It’s not that the Left can’t meme, it’s just that Left-wing beliefs don’t trigger taboos, even quite extreme Left-wing beliefs” (West, 2021).

While a growing body of recent research now addresses the use of Internet memes by right-wing and especially far-right actors, much less has studied how left-wing and radical left actors meme. This article addresses this by studying different samples of Internet memes from the subreddit r/DankLeft—a USA-centric, left-wing Internet meme community that describes itself as being for Marxists, Anarchists, and Democratic Socialists. Exemplary of more radical left-wing beliefs, r/DankLeft is used in this article to explore how left-wing online communities meme, rather than to evaluate the validity of the contention that they cannot. In doing so, this article pays particular attention to taboo-breaking and its emotional reception. It is guided by three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What themes do popular Internet memes in r/DankLeft relate to?

RQ2: How does taboo feature within popular r/DankLeft Internet memes?

RQ3: Can any differences in the reception of taboo-related r/DankLeft Internet memes be discerned?

In using r/DankLeft as a case, “the left” with which this article is most concerned is the contemporary USA radical left that is an amalgam of individuals and groups adhering to various iterations of Marxist, Anarchist, and Democratic Socialist ideologies (as emphasized in the subreddit’s self-description) alongside compatible others (see Buhle et al., 1998). This is a left that has its roots partly in the USA counter-cultural New Left that arose in the 1960s and shifted focus from the traditional left-wing concern of labor issues to a wider spectrum of matters centered on a vision of a future class-less society based on social justice, equality, and mutual cooperation, free from exploitation of man and nature (see Roszak, 1969). The USA specificity of the case should be noted in terms of the absence of major left-wing political parties in the country but also because, for example,
the country’s contemporary radical left actors—now as in the 1960s—are arguably less encumbered by a “vintage rhetoric of radicalism than their European counterparts” and thus potentially further inclined to adopt a “more flexible, more experimental, though perhaps also a more seemingly bizarre approach” (Roszak, 1969: 5). This may have consequences for these actors’ memetic production and any taboo utilized therein. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that their memes contribute to transnational left-wing digital cultures (see Merrill and Copsey, 2022) via platforms such as Reddit that are not restricted to users of any specific national background or setting. The study of r/DankLeft thus has relevancy for other politically similar cases beyond those centered on the USA.

The article proceeds by reviewing the relevant literature. Then taboo is introduced as a concept that can broaden understanding of memetic success. Thereafter the case, data sample, and methodological approach are outlined before several analytical procedures are carried out. First, a thematic analysis of the most popular Internet memes from r/DankLeft is used to map what themes are associated with successful Internet memes in this subreddit (RQ1). Then, within this subsample, taboo-related Internet memes are identified and subjected to a closer multimodal critical discourse analysis (RQ2). Finally, a comparative computational sentiment analysis of the subreddit comments that three different sets of Internet memes (popular taboo-related, other popular, and all other) have received is carried out to establish any emotional differences in their reception (RQ3).

These analyses reveal that popular memes in r/DankLeft primarily relate to perceived threats to its community of users including most prominently, in the USA, those posed by dominant state and market actors. They also show that taboo-breaking does feature in r/DankLeft memes, including in relation to the promotion of violence, and that correlative patterns emerge between the memetic use of taboo-breaking and the popularity and emotional reception of the memes in the subreddit. These findings are summarized in a concluding section where possible lines of future research are also indicated.

**Memetic weaponization from Right to Left**

The idea that “the left can’t meme” arose within what the USA far right call “The Great Meme War.” This “war,” waged in support of Donald Trump following the start of his Republican nomination campaign in June 2015 until his election in November 2016, is often accredited as facilitating Trump’s entry into the White House and his labeling as “the world’s first meme president” (Dafaure, 2020; Tuters, 2019: 37). Scholars at the time drew on Dawkins’ (1976) original definition of memes as transferable units of culture in suggesting that Trump’s campaign consisted “almost entirely of memes,” whether spread offline or online (Milner and Philips cited in Dafaure, 2020). While separating these two routes of memetic spread masks a more complicated reality (see Merrill and Lindgren, 2021)—, the Great Meme War was largely fought online using Internet memes. Internet memes (hereafter referred to as memes) are digitally mediatized units of culture whose meaning hinges on repetition and variation—including, perhaps most commonly, image-macros—images with overlain text (Milner, 2016).

The war was largely one-sided. It was predominantly characterized by memetic attacks on Trump’s political opponents, their ideologies, and supporters rather than the reverse.
Thus it is arguably better described in terms of right-wing and far-right Trump supporters and activists memetically attacking mainstream political targets (irrespective of the Trump campaign’s mainstream credentials) in order to shape public opinion rather than as a direct confrontation between them and their left-wing counterparts. Still, such confrontations did occur later. After a masked militant left activist punched far-right figurehead Richard Spencer in the face while he was giving an interview during Trump’s inauguration, the video footage of the incident was quickly memeified under the rallying cry of “Punch a Nazi.” While this suggests an evolution of left-wing memetic tactics, research on the political use of memes, which has in general been itself overshadowed by that concerned with non-political participatory culture, has recently come to be biased toward the investigation of right-wing and far-right actors, settings, and examples. In other words, following the “reactionary turn” of many digital subcultures, academics have become overly occupied with right-wing and far-right memes, reversing an earlier, more optimistic, research trend that theorized memes “in terms of a radical (and radically progressive) ‘dissensus’ against the dominant political order” (Tuters and Hagen, 2020: 2221; see also Milner, 2016).

While the study of memes that more broadly contribute to hateful far-right ideology predates 2016 (see Oboler, 2012) studies since then have analyzed not only The Great Meme War (Dafaure, 2020; Heikkilä, 2017) but also the use of memes by a variety of far-right actors specific to different national and transnational settings (see Askanius and Keller, 2021; Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019; Merrill, 2020; Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo, 2021; Trillò and Shifman, 2021). Leaving aside these studies’ nationally specific findings, they collectively indicate how different far-right groups use memes to normalize their ideas and recruit support by shifting what opinions are considered socially acceptable (Dafaure, 2020; Smith, 2019; Trillò and Shifman, 2021; Tuters and Hagen, 2020). Drawing on Mouffe’s (2013, 2018) political theory of agonistic pluralism, which emphasizes the potential benefits of conflictual politics, Tuters and Hagen (2020; see also Heikkilä, 2017), for example, use the concept of memetic antagonism to understand how the far right’s use of memes helps normalize toxic and hateful discourses by rendering their antagonist nature more nebulous and effacing their extremist origins.

Research has also emphasized the humorous, cynical, sarcastic, and ironic character of far-right memes insofar as these qualities provide opportunities to shift public discourse partly through provocations that are colloquially referred to as “trolling” and “triggering” (Ebner, 2019). In these and other ways, far-right actors have used memes as “discursive weapons,” namely to convey different discourses that damage and inflict harm on or “stigmatize or further marginalize a group, person, or agencies” (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Smith, 2019: 306). Relatedly, it has been highlighted how memes help far-right actors to build a sense of in-group belonging while constructing out-groups. In this respect, Tuters and Hagen (2020), like others, emphasize the emotional capacity of far-right memes to help constitute political collectives of “us” and “them.” Meme can thus help create online political collectives by emotionally stimulating political engagement and discussion via persuasion or provocation. As Denisova (2019) states, memes can:

induce a fiery, inflamed desire in a user, a desire for them to click the buttons (like, share, post) or type on their keyboard (comment, tweet). . .affective arousing foments people to not just watch, listen or read, but actively partake in online communication. (p. 22)
In political settings then, an effective meme is an affective meme. This contention is supported by those that have approached emotion (and affect)—predominantly within the study of left-wing social media activism—as a connective energy that when discursively mediated via digital platforms helps create “networked publics” (Papacharissi, 2014). The progressive political utility of memes in a more diffuse sense has earlier been studied in left-wing settings including the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wallstreet protests of the early 2010s (see Tuters and Hagen, 2020). However, and despite the fact that the far right are not themselves impervious to memetic counter attacks (as “Punch a Nazi” highlights), little research has addressed the more contemporary memes that have originated from “the left” since 2016.

Exceptions include Zienkiewicz’s (2020) study of PixelCanvas where left-wing actors collaborated to counter the appearance of far-right memes on an online game that allows players to color one pixel every minute on an infinite digital canvas. Bowen (2020) has also shown how memes contribute to the construction of a left-wing socio-political identity by studying the Sassy Socialist Memes Facebook page. Arkenbout (2022) meanwhile has interviewed Dutch left-wing meme makers who use Instagram and characterized their understanding of a successful political meme as: relevant and current; recognizable yet rich in symbolism, controversial and capable of evoking emotion, and accessible to wider audiences while conveying in-group knowledge.

However there remains the common view that while left-wing memes (alongside other forms of left-wing digital culture) might be just as radical as their far-right counterparts, they are mostly motivated by an ultra-sensitive and self-humbling quality that contrasts strongly with the shocking irreverence of those originating from the right (see Nagle, 2017). This diagnosis is so prevalent that calls persist for left-wing actors to “learn to meme” (see Watson, 2019). Some even offer suggestions as to how left-wing actors should best use memes to counter the far right online. Ebner (2019), for example, calls for left-wing responses to the far right online that “dare to break taboos” and “transcend the limits of conventional debates” (p. 179).

**Taboo and taboo-breaking**

The word “taboo,” derived from Polynesian (tapu, tabu, kapu), refers to something forbidden because it is considered consecrated or contaminated. Extensively studied by Western academics in the early 20th century (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939), as a concept it now denotes strongly inhibited or prohibited expressions or acts that are simultaneously psychological and social, behavioral, and linguistic (Kallis, 2021; Leach, 1989). Taboo thus has discursive power and emotional potential with taboo-breaking, in challenging established societal conventions and boundaries, often causing shock and disgust (Leach, 1989).

Taboo-breaking cannot be understood without understanding that which it breaches namely, “the mainstream” of what is considered normal and acceptable. The notion of “the mainstream,” while frequently referred to in public discourse and academic literature, is often employed simplistically (Kallis, 2015). Consequently, attention is not always given to how it gives “taboo” as well as “extremism” their relational meaning in different ways. The latter, is “situated outside” and is thus excluded from the mainstream. Taboo meanwhile is decided upon within, and protected by, the mainstream.
Thus, labeling an opinion, an act, or a person extreme or taboo-breaking in different ways defines the mainstream. This gives the mainstream its moral weight and normative function as the abode of decency by highlighting the borders between the tolerable and the unacceptable. Within its confines, the mainstream encompasses a multitude of ideas, beliefs, and behaviors acceptable to the majority of people that makes the public into a recognizable political community at a given time and space. While broad enough to harbor conflicting and overlapping opinions, the components “main” and “stream” indicate dominance, constancy, movement, and direction. To adhere to the mainstream is to “go with the flow” and yet, beneath the surface, there may be undercurrents, which if sufficiently strong can divert the mainstream (Picciotto, 2002: 322).

The borders between the tolerable and the unacceptable, between the mainstream and the extreme, the acceptable and the taboo, in other words, can shift. These designations are dynamic not only across time but also across cultures and spaces. Different societies, groups, places, and epochs have different taboos (and taboo-breakers), mainstreams, and extremes. In this sense, they are relatable to the dynamics of common sense discussed by Gramsci (see Liguori, 2021). Opinions, behaviors, and concepts once excluded may be adopted as the new common sense, and thereby move society and the public in new directions, pushing previously sanctioned norms out to the furthestmost margins of the mainstream to become the new extreme. Something that was previously considered taboo might become commonly acceptable and vice versa (Kallis, 2013). Testing taboo can thus serve to redirect the mainstream and to potentially enable marginalized or extreme currents to gain new acceptability and prominence. Repeated transgressions of taboo may see the level of outrage diminish, indicating that the underlying norms protecting the once unquestionable matter may have changed.

In this respect taboo-breaking connects with the sorts of transgression and non-conformity that was initially embraced by left-wing actors and resisted by those on the right. From the 1960s onwards, new youthful left-wing movements and actors set out to alter “the total cultural context” within which daily politics took place and successfully redirected mainstream attitudes by transgressing what are today mostly considered outdated taboos related to, for example, the acceptability of gender equality, sexual liberation, and abortion rights (Roszak, 1969: 5). This taboo-breaking to some extent laid the groundwork for the new so-perceived “politically correct” mainstreams of many liberal western democracies that are now experiencing a backlash characterized by the breaking of their own taboos by newly emboldened far-right actors, especially online. Nagle (2017) has discussed this in her controversial and highly critiqued (see Gleeson, 2017) but still informative account of the far right’s “online politics of transgression” within which taboo-breaking is implicitly conveyed as a pinnacle of transgressive behavior.

Although it has often approached “taboo” as a self-explanatory phenomenon and without the conceptual detail provided above, other recent research has also suggested the political importance attached to taboo-breaking by contemporary far-right actors online, connecting it to their tactical use of humor, trolling, and triggering. Taboo-breaking here has been related to “dark and edgy” far-right humor (Wagner and Schwarzenegger, 2020); the “ironic” use of taboo symbols including Nazi iconography (Tuters, 2019). Titley (2019) has also shown how “taboo news” has become a commodity among a transnational far right online and Berntzen and Ravndal (2021) have studied
how digital and other far-right responses to the 2011 Norwegian terror attacks reflected varying conformity to a macro-cultural taboo against violence. Connecting with their projected self-image as victimized, far-right actors also sometimes discursively frame themselves as taboo—in some instances to relativize taboo so to weaken its power and allow a shift in public opinion.5

Taboo-breaking has not been discussed explicitly with regards to far-right memes. However, it has been acknowledged to be channeled through humor—one of the most emphasized objectives of far-right memes (see Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019). More generally, Emerson (1969) has highlighted how individuals are usually not held as accountable for humorous gestures and thus taboo-breaking discourses can be normalized through jokes. In turn, the discursive leeway granted by the guise of humor and differing judgments regarding whether something is funny or not means that “negotiations regarding humor involve ‘unofficial arrangements about taboo topics’” (Emerson, 1969: 170).6

Through humor, far-right taboo-breaking more generally can thus dodge accountability and in doing so more easily normalize hateful provocations and discourses that seek to inflict harm on targeted individuals or groups by shifting opinions about what is acceptable behavior toward those individuals or groups (see Smith, 2019). Through humor, taboo-breaking thus connects with the trolling and triggering tactics that far-right actors employ when using memes as discursive weapons (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). Reflecting this, although rarely explicitly acknowledged and comprehensively explored as such, the far-right discourses that are weaponized via humorous memes are often also of a taboo-breaking nature. As Fielitz and Ahmed (2021: 6) note, “recent generations of far-right extremists have chosen transgressive humor and (supposed) satire as central weapons in the fight against liberal democracy and its ‘political correctness’, which is depicted as prudish and patronizing.”

For many far-right actors, taboo-breaking has thus come to partly stand for political incorrectness and a form of free speech. A self-styled, far-right taboo-breaker thus typically claims to be brave, even heroic, by assuming the position of an underdog that daringly confronts a powerful but unjust system of mainstream opinion (see Nagle, 2017). However, with the course of the mainstream increasingly shifting toward the right in recent decades (Mondon and Winter, 2020), this is no longer always the case. Should their taboo-breaking be tolerated instead of met with disgust, this would indicate that it had become “mainstreamed” and may even be a mere reproduction of commonly shared opinions making up the new normal. As the frames of the acceptable change, it may set the stage for left-wing actors to increasingly adopt the position of taboo-breaker once more.

While dwarfed by the recent literature on far-right memes, some recent studies dedicated to left-wing memes suggest they too can be animated by transgressive, taboo-breaking humor as illustrated by the “LOL you go to Gulag” example (Bowen, 2020). Such similarities highlight the need for more evenly balanced research dedicated to memes originating from opposite ends of the political spectrum—connecting with academic debates about the differences and similarities of right-wing and left-wing digital activism more broadly (see Freelon et al., 2020). At the same time, the discussion of taboo is absent from the piecemeal discussions of measures of left-wing memetic success (see Arkenbout, 2022). Aligning with this article’s RQs, there is thus a need to better
understand if and how left-wing memes break taboos and, if so, which taboos and with what consequences.

Methodology

In this article, the USA-centric r/DankLeft subreddit is used as a case because it allowed access to a wide range of left-wing memes and a platform architecture that enabled these memes’ popularity to be measured within the context of its user community. r/DankLeft, which describes itself as a subreddit with “the most dank and most left memes,” was created on 15 May 2019 and at the time of writing had over 185,000 subscribers. Many of these steadily subscribed to the subreddit in its first two years during a period when Reddit banned several notable right-wing and left-wing subreddits including r/The_Donald and r/ChapoTrapHouse in June 2020. Reddit’s policy of quarantining or banning subreddits in line with its content policy, which includes restrictions about the incitement of violence and the promotion of hate, should be kept in mind throughout this article’s analysis as this may have shaped the production and reception of memes in r/DankLeft even if this policy is not always comprehensively and consistently enforced. More recently, r/DankLeft has continued to attract subscribers albeit at a slower rate. Posting to r/DankLeft peaked at over 50 posts in a day in July 2019 but has leveled-off since then. These posts continue to attract comments, which peaked at over 1400 comments in a day in August 2020.

A total of 22,095 posts and 164,156 associated comments as well as metadata including scores and comment counts were computationally collected from the subreddit on 30 August 2022. This was done using the Pushshift Application Programming Interface (API) using a combination of two open-access Python API “wrappers” called PSAW and PRAW. Using the score and comment count metadata, a list of 404 popular posts was created that had both a score of at least 1000 and at least 100 comments. From these, it was possible to download 366 memes—the shortfall explained by missing images. These memes were then reconnected with their metadata, post content, and 23,510 associated comments that had already been collected.

The 366 memes were then thematically analyzed by the first author (RQ1). After all were viewed for familiarization purposes, initial codes were generated for each based on their textual and pictorial content. These codes were then collated into potential themes that were reviewed and refined three further times before being named and defined (see Braun and Clarke, 2006). This led to the identification of two main themes and eighteen sub-themes of which up to five were then attributed to each image. These themes are introduced and their co-occurrence discussed in the first analysis section.

Using multimodal critical discourse analysis (RQ2), taboo-related discourses were then identified and analyzed across the popular 366 memes by the first author. This involved the combined manual interpretation of each meme’s pictorial and textual elements by viewing each meme both in isolation and within the specific online context of r/DankLeft in relation to the comments they received (see Ledin and Machin, 2019). Using Fairclough’s (1989) three-dimensional model of discourse, the memes were approached as “texts” where taboo-related discourses could be identified at the micro-level in images, words and their combinations. In turn, r/DankLeft was approached as the meso-level
“institution” where these memes contributed to discursive practices involving their sharing and discussion. Finally, the wider macro-level, social setting was acknowledged where specific sociocultural practices conditioned the broader reception of the memes. This exercise was operationalized by keeping in mind general USA and political community-specific norms likely to be relevant to r/DankLeft and by paying attention to instances where memes discursively revealed certain matters to be taboo among certain groups. This led to the creation of a further sub-sample of 41 popular memes that were taboo-related. These memes and the nature of the taboo that they encompass are discussed, in relation to various examples, in the second analysis section.

Finally, a comparative computational sentiment analysis was carried out by the third author (RQ3) using Google’s Perspective API (https://perspectiveapi.com). Perspective uses machine learning to identify abusive comments online by providing scores for different textual attributes. The following Perspective-defined attributes were used: toxicity (rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comments that are likely to make people leave a discussion); severe toxicity (very hateful, aggressive, disrespectful comments or otherwise that is very likely to make a user leave a discussion or give up on sharing their perspective); insult (insulting, inflammatory, or negative comments toward a person or a group of people); profanity (swear words, curse words, or other obscene or profane language); identity attack (negative or hateful comments targeting someone because of their identity); and threat (an intention to inflict pain, injury, or violence against an individual or group). Phrases are scored based on the perceived impact that the analyzed text might have in a conversation. While designed for automatic content moderation, Perspective can also serve as a sentiment analysis tool that can measure the emotional character of the discursive content with which it is presented. Perspective was deemed a suitable choice given its remit to detect online abuse and the earlier research that linked the far right’s strategic use of taboo-breaking online to digital hate. Perspective was used to score three different samples of user comments. First, to provide a general sentiment baseline for the r/DankLeft community, it was run on the comments associated with the full sample of 22,095 posts minus those from the 366 popular posts (140,646 comments in total). It was also run on the comments from the 366 popular posts, minus those from the 41 taboo-related posts (20,931 comments in total) as well as on those from only the 41 taboo-related posts (2,579 comments in total). Comparing the sentiment analyses of these three samples enabled the relative differences in the reception of the taboo-related memes to be foregrounded.

r/DankLeft was not anonymized out of respect for its contextual specificity. Still, for ethical reasons, no comments are fully reproduced in the analysis and wherever possible opportunities to identify the subreddit’s users have been minimized. The memes that are reproduced are so in the spirit of fair use copyright exemptions as further justified by their aggregated appearance in a table or the detailed analysis of their content and composition.

**Popular left-wing memetic themes**

Two main themes characterized the popular memes. The first—“Identifying and Refuting Threats to ‘the Left’”—was found on 204 occasions and referred to political figures, ideologies, and philosophies considered to negatively threaten “the left” as it is perceived
in r/DankLeft. This theme was indicated by general references to Capitalism (including Anarchist-Capitalism), Nazism, Fascism, Neoliberalism, and Liberalism. The second main theme—“Defining and Promoting ‘the Left’”—was found on 111 occasions and referred to political figures, ideologies, and philosophies considered to positively characterize “the left” of r/DankLeft. Within this theme, general references to Marx, Marxism, Communism, Anti-Capitalism, Anarchism, and Anti-Fascism featured prominently. The differing prevalence (see Table 1) of the two main themes indicates how, in r/DankLeft, popular left-wing memes address what its left-wing community opposes or is threatened by more than that community itself. This possibly reflects the character of the subreddit as an established political community composed of users who likely already identify as left-wing rather than a potential recruiting ground. Still, it also highlights that left-wing memes such as those of their right-wing counterparts serve to build a sense of community partly through the construction of (oftentimes threatening) out-groups as much as prioritized in-groups (cf. Arkenbout, 2022; Tuters and Hagen, 2020). Eighteen sub-themes were also discerned across the sub-sample. All themes are described in Table 1.

A comprehensive comparison of these themes with those that characterize right-wing memes lies beyond the scope of this article and its research design but certain similarities and differences can be suggested. First, some themes, such as those connected to populist anti-elite and anti-government sentiments or the use of the past might be broadly synonymous across both albeit projected from opposing political perspectives and with different motivations (cf. Heikkilä, 2017; Merrill, 2020). Other themes can be said to feature in both right-wing and left-wing memes but as points of direct contention including those related to race, gender, and the climate (cf. Bogerts and Fielitz, 2019; Dafaure, 2020). Finally, a further set of themes may be more unique to the left-wing character of r/DankLeft’s posters and users including those related to working and housing conditions.

The co-occurrence of the twenty themes further sheds light on what makes a popular left-wing meme within r/DankLeft. Visualizing the themes’ co-occurrence as a network (see Figure 1) illustrates how the two main themes regularly co-occurred in single memes often via strategies of comparison, dialogue, and contradiction and how many of the sub-themes co-occurred in single memes and regularly featured alongside one of the two main themes. The network visualization again conveys that popular left-wing memes are often geared toward identifying and refuting threats to “the left” as it is conceived in r/DankLeft but adds nuance to this interpretation by indicating the sorts of actors that feature most prominently in this respect. These include governments, political parties, and electorates; the police, military, and intelligence agencies; the wealthy, super-rich, and multi-national corporations; and to lesser extent mainstream education, media, and popular culture. The visualization also helps convey the importance of gender and race-related topics while also indicating several more specific concerns of peripheral significance within the popular meme sample (working conditions, technology, housing, environment, religion, and so on). Finally, it makes it possible to identify the connections between other constellations of themes including more inward-looking themes related to left-wing self-reflection, the use of direct action, degrees of left-wing unity, and ideas of free speech and others that are more outward-looking and geographically or chronologically expansive (USA in the World, the World Beyond the USA, and History and Memory).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying and Refuting Threats to 'the Left'</td>
<td>Identifies and counters political figures, ideologies, and philosophies considered to threaten “the Left.” Commonly characterized by general references to Capitalism (including Anarcho-Capitalism), Nazism, Fascism, Neoliberalism, and Liberalism.</td>
<td>204</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defining and Promoting 'the Left'</td>
<td>Defines and endorses political figures, ideologies and philosophies considered to positively characterize “the Left.” Commonly characterized by general references to Marx, Marxism, Communism, Anti-Capitalism, Anarchism, and Anti-Fascism.</td>
<td>111</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government, Electoral and Party Politics</td>
<td>Conveys the perceived limits of mainstream politics primarily in the USA partly in terms of the lack of truly left-wing options.</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Police, Military and Intelligence Agencies</td>
<td>Characterized by left-wing critique of the police, military, and intelligence agencies and wider debates about state endorsed violence, law, and justice.</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genders, Sexuality and Bodies</td>
<td>Encompasses views on LGBTQIA+ issues, masculinity, reproductive rights, and healthcare more generally.</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Wealthy, Super-Rich and Big Business</td>
<td>Establishes the wealthy, super rich, and their business as targets for left-wing critique and involves the discussion of taxation and economic exploitation.</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education, the Media and Popular Culture</td>
<td>Relates to primary, secondary, and tertiary education; mainstream and social media coverage and political orientation; and popular culture more generally.</td>
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<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Racism and Anti-Immigrant Discrimination</td>
<td>Departs from a left-wing, anti-racist perspective and exposes various forms of racism and anti-immigrant discrimination in connection.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Reflection</td>
<td>Relates to r/DankLeft users’ self-reflections on their personal left-wing politics and encompasses self-parody, -deprecation, -censorship, or -moderation and restraint.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA in the World</td>
<td>Concerns the global position and reputation of the USA often in connection with its foreign policy and geopolitical interventions.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Memory</td>
<td>Revolves around interpretations of the past that support “the Left”, as well as those that weaken its opponent, and relates to the politics of memorialization.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Wing Direct Action and Militancy</td>
<td>Concerns “the Left” utilization of direct action and militant tactics including the use of physical force and armed resistance.</td>
<td>23</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The World Beyond the USA</td>
<td>Covers the discussion of foreign affairs separate from USA influence and involvement.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Wing Unity and Division</td>
<td>Addresses the solidarity or in-fighting experienced between different fractions of “the Left” including Marxists, Anarchists, and Democratic Socialists.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Working Class and Labor</td>
<td>Concerns the labor conditions and struggles of the working class.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td><img src="https://via.placeholder.com/150" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology, Transport</td>
<td>Relates to the discussion of various forms of technology, transport policy, and energy politics.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Example Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Energy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing, Homelessness</td>
<td>Addresses the issues of tenancy rights, housing, and homelessness often via critique of landlords and property owners.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Example Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Tenancy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion and Conspiracy</td>
<td>Concerns religious topics of discussion (Christian Communism and Anti-Semitism) and also relates to right wing conspiracy theories.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Example Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment and Climate</td>
<td>Relates to environmental issues including climate change.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Example Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free speech and Political</td>
<td>Discusses free speech and political correctness in relation to a range of positions across the political spectrum.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Example Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: LGBTQIA+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or sometimes questioning), intersex, asexual, and others.

Taboo-related left-wing memetic discourses

The 41 taboo-related memes indexed how taboo relates to, and can differ according to, multiple scales and audiences. At a macro-level, memetic taboo-breaking was identified relating to the acceptable use of violence as is also common among the far right (cf. Askanius and Keller, 2021). Like “Punch a Nazi,” some of the popular memes called for, inferred, or vindicated the use of violence against those considered to threaten the left-wing ideals of r/DankLeft. This was often morally justified in terms of self-defense and the prevention of greater forms of violence (see Copsey and Merrill, 2020). One example remediated from the 2012 Australian action-comedy television series Danger 5 combines references to gender-based and political violence. It shows a Nazi female character exclaiming “You hit a woman?!” and one of the series’ main characters, responding “I hit a Nazi” (see Figure 2). A dozen other examples infer armed violence either via common
meme templates that feature guns (including “Always Has Been” and, from *The Simpsons*, “Apu Takes Bullet”) or through the remixing of other content (such as climate activist, Greta Thunberg’s 2019 misinterpreted suggestion to put world leaders “against the wall” if they failed to act on climate change; see Figure 2). That gun ownership is so common in the USA complicates the identification of just being armed as taboo-breaking; but in this context, taboo arguably relates to who specifically can be armed. In a few instances, these impulses crescendo into suggestions of deadly violence. Again, this is achieved through meme templates and remediated content. In one example, the “Orange Jacket Guy” meme template is used to shun the words “Trump 2020” but approve those of “Trump 1946-2020”—insinuating a desire for Trump’s death (see Figure 2). There are also memes that break the taboo of disrespecting the dead whether that be the former UK Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, or USA military personnel. Because they insinuate violence and harm, these few examples indicate that taboo-breaking can also be weaponized in left-wing memes albeit not to same degree as has been shown of those originating from the far right (cf. Askanius and Keller, 2021). In addition, the character of r/DankLeft as a cohesive political community suggests that this may also have
been done more as means to construct and buttress group identity (cf. Arkenbout, 2022; Bowen, 2020). Still, the perseverance of violent memes, albeit of a more moderate character, in r/DankLeft despite Reddit’s policy against such content suggests the fluctuating borders of acceptability that are central to changing notions of taboo as well as the potential context specificity that determines whether something is considered taboo (e.g. in breach of Reddit’s content policy) or not.

Another taboo-related discourse discernible within the popular memes was indicated by posters’ self-reflection on the taboo status of their political perspective within the USA setting. This reflects how, in the USA, the explicit political identifications of r/DankLeft—Marxism, Anarchism, and Democratic Socialism—are often considered taboo more broadly. For example, the expectation vs reality meme template “Disappointed Black Guy” was used to convey how the family of one of r/DankLeft’s posters were excited by “hearing socialist policies” but disappointed by “hearing the word socialism” (see Figure 3). Similarly, the “Apes Together Strong” meme (from the 2011 film Rise of the Planet of the Apes) appeared with the caption: “me trying to explain my political ideology to people without using ‘scary’ words like communism, socialism, or anarchism” (see Figure 3). On three occasions, memes used popular phrases that downplayed their poster’s political standpoint including “I’m actually something of a leftist myself,” “I’m kinda left-leaning,” and in response to the question, “so tell me about your political views,” “lol you know, kinda lefty.” These self-moderated statements often appeared in ironic contrast to the images in the memes. One showed a soviet general entering battle, flanked by tanks, missiles, bombers, barrage balloons, and numerous Soviet Union flags. Another featured a collage of communist and anarchist political figureheads and symbols (see Figure 3). These memes highlight how taboo-breaking underpins some of r/DankLeft posters’ understanding of their political identity as unacceptable to the political mainstream and, in turn, reveal similarities with the far right’s self-projection as taboo (see Note 8).

These memes discursively connected with others that conveyed how r/DankLeft users may have re-evaluated political philosophies such as communism despite their taboo character in the USA. For instance, one before and after meme conveyed how one poster previously viewed communists (through visual reference to a 1939 Viennese propaganda image from an Anti-Bolshevik exhibition) as armed skeletons surrounded by fire in comparison to how they viewed them now via an edited stock-image of man wearing a communist pin, smiling and pointing at himself in the mirror (see Figure 4). This example also hints toward the recruiting potential of left-wing memes that might be used in more
diverse digital settings (see Arkenbout, 2022). Communist and specifically soviet imagery was also used to question contemporary USA values, such as by proposing a war on Christmas (see Figure 4), or even to reimagine the country as a communist state. Exemplifying the latter was a meme in the style of a political poster that showed Bernie Sanders in soviet-esq military uniform framed by the words “USSA SANDERS 2020” in a soviet-style font (see Figure 4). In turn, this communist reimagining of the USA resonated with other memetic discourses that opposed the USA state and its apparatus, not least the police and military. Some such discourses likened the USA police to a private military (see Figure 4) and justified violence against police officers and property. Others insinuated that the military served a USA totalitarian regime.

In connection with the taboo element of anti-military and anti-police memes, another form of taboo was discernible when posters seemed to agree with their adversaries. For instance, one meme conveyed the confusion felt by a poster when breaking
the politically specific taboo of agreeing with Trump when in 2018 he suggested that military personnel who died in war were “losers” and “suckers” (see Figure 5). Another meme using the “Double Soda Pour” meme template similarly acknowledged the taboo-related contradiction of disagreeing with the use of militant police tactics except in those scenarios when they were used against far-right groups (see Figure 5). These latter examples suggest a willingness among some users of r/DankLeft to break taboos and memetically transgress issues of political correctness, demonstrating the sorts of counter speech that some have claimed is needed to counter the far Right (see Ebner, 2019).

One meme, which appeared twice in the popular sample, conveys the relationship between taboo-breaking and political correctness along with the left-wing adoption of right-wing memetic tactics even more clearly. The meme intentionally contrasts USA right-wing nationalist symbolism, such as the USA flag, the bald eagle, and AK47s with an explicitly anti-USA and taboo-breaking declaration (see Figure 6).

As one commenter suggested this meme exemplified the use of the far right’s own tricks against them. In doing so, it complicates the idea that all quarters of “the left” are hamstrung by their allegiance to political correctness and also subtly indexes the pluralistic and dynamic nature of taboo. In fact, this meme’s manifold taboo-breaking was too much even for some of r/DankLeft’s users. Some disagreed with elements of its
declaration. For instance, several users felt uncomfortable with “fuck the troops” because they acknowledged that historically people have been unwillingly drafted into the military or been forced to enroll due to socio-economic reasons. This led to suggested alternatives such as “fuck the military” or “fuck the military industrial complex.” Others questioned whether the r/DankLeft community should associate itself with 9/11 jokes because of the offense this might cause to those innocent civilians directly impacted by the attacks. Even if r/DankLeft users’ response to the meme (in both instances of its posting) were mostly positive, these specific reactions stand in contrast to the characterization of far-right online cultures of transgression as liberated from political consciousness (see Nagle, 2017). Radical left actors can intentionally use taboo in their memes but this example suggests that when they do they, do so in a more self-reflective manner.

The emotional reception of left-wing memes

The comparative sentiment analysis of the comments generated by the popular taboo-related memes, the other popular memes, and all other memes from r/DankLeft suggests that taboo extenuates each of the six selected textual attributes that the Perspective API identifies with online abuse (see Figure 7).

While the variances in each of the attributes differ, collectively they indicate that the popular taboo-related memes provoke the strongest emotional (or affective) response in their comment threads. Furthermore, for five of the six attributes a pattern emerges that suggests that the non-taboo-related popular memes generate more emotional responses than the other (non-popular) memes. In all attributes, the taboo-related popular memes generated even higher emotional responses. Thus it can be suggested that the popular memes (as measured by Reddit score and number of comments) generally trigger the greatest emotional response (as computationally measured by the six Perspective attributes) and that in taboo-related memes (as identified through multimodal critical discourse analysis) this response is amplified. Without inferring causality (it cannot be said whether taboo and taboo-breaking makes a meme popular), this pattern suggests a correlation between taboo and taboo-breaking and the popularity and emotional reception of memes. Taboo and taboo-breaking receive greater emotional responses and greater emotional responses correlate with popularity. In turn, this further confirms the potential that taboo
and taboo-breaking may hold within left-wing mемetic efforts to gain popularity and resist their opponents on the right (see Ebner, 2019). In short, taboo matters.

**Conclusion**

This article has provided one of the first comprehensive thematic mappings of popular left-wing memes using the USA-centric, Marxist, Anarchist, and Democratic Socialist Internet meme community of r/DankLeft as a case. In doing so, it has revealed that r/DankLeft’s memes often concern perceived threats to that community more than the community itself. These memes, thus, partly help build political collectives of “us” and “them” like many of their far-right counterparts. This also suggests the r/DankLeft community’s confidence regarding its own political identity. The co-occurrence of different themes reveals in turn that in r/DankLeft these threats are popularly associated with a range of actors in the USA context that include: governments, political parties, and electorates; the police, military, and intelligence agencies; the wealthy, super-rich, and multinational corporations; and to some extent mainstream education, media, and popular culture. It also suggests that the themes covered in these particular left-wing memes are both introspective and outward looking.

In turn, several ways in which taboo and taboo-breaking discursively feature in r/DankLeft’s memes have been identified. These relate to: macro-taboos against violence; culture-specific taboos connected to the acceptability of left-wing political orientations and the reimagining of the USA as a socialist or communist state; and politically specific taboos regarding points of agreement with right-wing actors and the explicit adoption of taboo-breaking. In the former, the perseverance of r/DankLeft’s memetic representation of violence, although more moderate than many of their far-right counterparts, also suggests the contextual specificity of what is considered taboo or not within certain subredit communities.

Finally, through the use of Google’s Perspective API, it has been highlighted that these taboo-related discourses matter insofar as correlative patterns emerge between their appearance and the popularity and emotional reception of the memes in r/DankLeft. Taken together, these findings suggest that in (re)turning to taboo and taboo-breaking r/DankLeft’s users may be starting to create and share memes more in the style of their right-wing and far-right counterparts. At the same time, as the political mainstream in the USA arguably shifts rightward and another presidential election approaches, left-wing discourses arguably are becoming more taboo in and of themselves. In turn, it becomes clear that the right-wing does not “own” taboo-breaking—it is not a discursive strategy that is uniquely theirs. While taboo-breaking is not a zero-sum game and actors on both ends of the political spectrum may be engaged in pushing the limits of what is acceptable to the mainstream, taboo-breaking as a memetic tactic is being harnessed by left-wing actors.

The findings and also the limitations of this article point to the need for further research. First, this study is USA-centric and with taboo being culturally determined there is a need for similar studies in other cultural settings. Second, taboo in this article has been identified and studied within a relatively closed and homogeneous meme community. Given that taboo and taboo-breaking is about reflecting and shifting common opinion, there is a need
for studies of taboo-related left-wing memes when they come into contact with wider and competing audiences. For example, more research is needed into how and to what extent taboo-related left-wing memes might gain mainstream political prominence including via the digital practices of mainstream political actors. While the article’s analysis indicates that taboo-related memes are affective and that this correlates with popularity in the setting of r/DankLeft more research is needed to determine whether such memes are effective in the pursuit of left-wing goals. This also leads on to the still unanswered question of how intentional the use of taboo is in left-wing memetic production and whether or not taboo-breaking is considered an explicit tactic among left-wing meme makers and sharers as it arguably is among their counterparts on the right. In this respect there is also scope for a more comprehensive comparative analysis of left-wing and right-wing memes.

Furthermore, while this article explores what is currently still predominantly acknowledged to be a right-wing discursive strategy—taboo-breaking—in a different political context and new digital medium—left-wing memes—in connection to memetic popularity based of Reddit scores and comments, future research would do well to also relatedly explore alternative measures of memetic success. These alternative measures might include virality and may help us to understand whether left-wing taboo-related content spreads. This would also help establish whether taboo-breaking remains predominantly a right-wing yardstick of memetic success, matched or outweighed by other measures of achievement within left-wing memetic contexts. Finally, the use of Google’s Perspective API suggests the potential benefits that such computational content moderation and sentiment analysis tools may bring to future research on political meme culture. Using such tools on larger data sets and sequencing them in different ways with other methods promises, for example, to aid the identification of specific types of memes for further analysis in terms of their emotional or affective reception. In starting to address the bias of political meme research toward right-wing examples and establishing one basis for understanding memetic success within left-wing online communities, this article hopes to inform future research along these and other lines.

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Notes
1. See: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-left-cant-meme
3. For an extensive review of research on far-right memes, see the study by Trillò and Shifman (2021).
4. Gramsci’s ideas have recently been drawn upon by far-right actors in the USA (see Byrd, 2023).
5. An example: Dutton’s discussion of the British National Party as taboo in a 2006 contribution to the far-right, pseudoscientific, and racist journal *Mankind Quarterly* entitled *Ritual, Taboo and Political Protest*.

6. This is captured by the European Commission report entitled ‘It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists’ use of humor’ (Fielitz and Ahmed, 2021).


8. Reddit’s content policy can be viewed at: https://www.redditinc.com/policies/content-policy.

9. An overview of r/DankLeft’s activity can be gained by using Subreddit Stats (https://subred-ditstats.com/).


11. The discrepancy between comment count and actual comments can be explained by instabilities in the API. Despite these instabilities, the sample of popular images and associated comments was deemed sufficiently reliable and sized for this article’s purposes.

12. The exception relates to the profanity attribute. Although it is most pronounced in the comments to the taboo-related memes, it is slightly less marked in the responses to the popular memes than the other memes.

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