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Final Thesis

*Social Media and Far-Right: Humor, Normalization and
Pathways to Extremism – A Case Study in Western
Europe*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Presentation of the problem: far-right humor as a security threat

In recent years social media have drastically changed how political ideas are created, shared and normalized. In this context, the far right has developed a very effective communication strategy, and that is the systematic use of humor, irony and memes to disseminate racist and exclusionary narratives in certain ways that feel accessible to the public (Schmid, Schulze, & Drexel, 2024). This capacity to mainstream radical ideas through humor is not accidental but is part of a broader ideological strategy: memes, slogans and other forms of digital pop culture frequently function as a “testing ground” for extremist ideas, introducing radical content in a form that feels acceptable. This movement is called *metapolitics*, a concept framed by far-right thinkers that explains that in order to achieve political power, first the “cultural battle” must be won. (Göpfert & N'Guessan, 2025)

A relevant phenomenon of this dynamic is *Save Europe* movement, a transnational online campaign based on the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. Internet creators use music, edits and memes with racist and anti-immigrant messaging, there are now dozens of popular Save Europe playlists and YouTube channels dedicated to this style with millions of views (Press-Reynolds, 2024). What makes this phenomenon a problem is that it reaches large young audiences with minimal friction: the content spreads across Twitter, TikTok and Instagram precisely because its humorous and aesthetic framing lowers the real ideological threshold, allowing narratives based on the Great Replacement conspiracy theory to circulate as entertainment. The following paragraphs will show that this dynamic is not only cultural but has important implications for radicalization processes and international security.

Researches have suggested that extreme-right memes could influence radicalization with prolonged exposure to the trivialization of hateful, violent or racist beliefs. People may eventually accept more violent extremist ideology as a result of normalizing the content ((ISD), *Memes & the Extreme Right-Wing*, 2023). Moreover, far-right actors employ and politicize popular memes on purpose to make people more susceptible to radical points of view, and when hateful content comes with humor, people perceive it as less negative because humor allows lighthearted interpretations (Schmid, Schulze, & Drexel, 2024).

This whole normalization of far-right narratives through memes and digital humor is not merely a cultural problem, it also represents a growing threat to international security in Western Europe. According to Europol's EU TE-SAT 2025 (Riehle, 2025), the involvement of underage and young people in violent extremist activities continued to grow in 2024, with algorithmic-driven content reinforcing radical ideas and leading to a dangerous normalization. Europol reported 14 right-wing terrorist attacks between 2020 and 2022 occurred, and in July 2024 the EU added for the first time the far-right group *The Base* to its terrorist list (Renard & Rekawek, 2024). At the same time platforms such as TikTok, Twitter and Facebook allow extremists to reach younger audiences through emotionally charged content, contributing to a radicalization process (The Soufan Center, 2025).

This study will focus on this mechanism, humor as a vector of normalization, applied to the Save Europe movement on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter, among users from 16 to 23, in a Western European context during 2025.

1.2 Research question and sub-questions

This thesis is guided by the following main research question: *How does the use of humor and irony on social media by far-right actors and movements contribute to the normalization and legitimization of racist and exclusionary narratives among young people in Western Europe?*

There are two sub-questions for the analysis:

- What rhetorical and aesthetic strategies are most commonly used to frame racist narratives as humor?
- Are there hierarchies within racist humor? Are certain groups targeted more systematically than others and why?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Far-right discourses: legitimization, normalization and expansion of extremist ideas

In order to understand how far-right ideas are spread and become socially tolerated requires moving beyond a focus on elections or internal structures. The current far-right does not operate exclusively through parties or movements looking for

immediate political power, instead it engages in a long-term cultural struggle aimed at reshaping what is considered common sense in public discourse. This strategy is called “metapolitics” and its theoretical roots trace back to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony. The idea that political power depends not only on force but on shaping common sense, cultural meaning and morality. Far-right thinkers like Alain de Benoist appropriated this logic: instead of looking for immediate political control, the real battle is fought through education, public debate and media (Fernández, 2025).

The new European far right adopted this approach during the 1970s. The far-right nowadays is exploiting algorithms, finding niche audiences and amplifying its messages on an unprecedented scale. Social media has become the main place on which metapolitical battles are fought, and humor and memes are among its most effective weapons (Kooistra, 2024) (Bures, 2023). There are some studies that explain how far right movements uses humor, and how freedom of expression serves to justify the dissemination of messages where humor and aggression coexist (García-Latorre, 2025).

This process of ideological expansion works through a mechanism called “strategic mainstream”, which is the use of less extreme or culturally familiar communication formats, like memes, to introduce radical ideas to wider audiences (Schmid, Schulze, & Drexel, 2024). Like this, general audiences are not likely to identify instantly the far-right origin as it appears as a gradual process (Feischmidt, 2015). The result is a gradual process of legitimization in which exclusionary and violent ideas are progressively normalized, not throughout propaganda but cultural saturation.

2.2 The Great Replacement conspiracy theory: origins, ideology and online spread

The ideological core from which Save Europe movement derives its core narratives is the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. It is a debunked white nationalist far-right conspiracy theory created by Renaud Camus which declares that, with the complicity of elites, the ethnic French and white European populations are being replaced by non-white peoples, especially from Muslim countries, through mass migration, demographic growth and a drop in the birth rate of white Europeans (Project, n.d.).

Renaud Camus described in his 2012 book *Le Grand Remplacement* that Europe’s elites are engaging in a “genocide by substitution”, framing the concept as a form of “reverse colonization” with an “ethnic and civilizational substitution”. He even traces back to Medieval theories that justified Al-Andalus as the conquest of the Muslims (Bossen,

2024). The conspiracy theory's power lies in part in its ideological flexibility: depending on the context, it can be deployed to demonize a wide range of out-groups like Muslims, Jews, especially in Europe, African Americans or Latinos in the United States. Usually, the initiative from the elites are thought to be under Jewish conspirators, making it also anti-Semitic (Jenkins, 2026). This adaptability matches with the meme culture, where its core anxieties can shift for different national contexts and audiences.

Even though it has been debunked, it has proven to have had real-world consequences. The fears of this theory become true have motivated white supremacist violence and resulted in mass shooting in Europe, New Zealand and the United States (Orgaz, 2019). The rhetoric has been adopted by European conservative leaders, including Marine Le Pen, the French leader of the National Rally party, and Viktor Órban, ex-president of Hungary (Walker, 2019). The South African billionaire Elon Musk, who owns the social network X, posted a tweet on December 2025 stating that “73% of children in Brussels, the capital of Europe, are not European! The Great Replacement has already happened” (Musk, 2025). These examples show how an initially marginal conspiracy theory can transition into formal political discourse through a sustained cultural exposure.

Deriving from the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, the most recent and socially diffuse version is *Save Europe*. Instead of being a formalized movement, it works as a transnational discursive framework mainly based on memes, hashtags and short videos on TikTok, Instagram and Twitter. The creators of this content use music and TikTok memes with an anti-immigrant messaging and explicit neo-Nazism. There are plenty of Save Europe-theme playlist and YouTube channels with millions of views, having also adopted as an unofficial anthem the 1999 Gigi D'Agostino song *L'Amour Toujours* (Europa, 2024) (ProxymusMUZIX, 2025) (Yatriot☆, 2024). Its aesthetic is not incidental but constitutes its main mechanism for normalizing and spreading these ideas among young audiences (Press-Reynolds, 2024).

2.3 Humor as a political and ideological vector: the Overton window and “Schrödinger’s joke”

In order to understand why humor is so effective when it comes of being a vehicle for far-right normalization, we need to understand two theoretical concepts that are very relevant to know: the Overton window and the notion of “Schrödinger’s joke”. Memes

work as a condensed ideological items that shape political common sense through social media (Shifman, 2014). Phillips and Milner (Phillips & Milner, 2017) identify their effectiveness for the far-right ideas in their ambiguity, content always dismissible as “just a joke”.

Political scientist Joseph Overton created the concept of the Overton window, which describes the scope of concepts that the public is open to accept at any given time (Conceptually, n.d.). This “window” is not static though: it changes in response to context, political events, cultural change and media discourse. Currently, online communities and media platforms have played a role in altering the Overton window, changing once taboo conversations into more acceptable topics, and this normalization can create an environment where hate crimes and acts of domestic terrorism are more likely to happen (Mens, 2025). Moreover, humor plays an important role in this process. The far-right’s capacity to normalize extreme concepts through humor is intentional: it serves as a component of a larger ideological approach, with memes and various digital pop culture elements acting as experimental platforms for these ideas, presenting radical content in an acceptable manner, as participants tone down the explicit presentation to minimize audience pushback (Schmid, Schulze, & Drexel, 2024) (Göpfert & N'Guessan, 2025).

This dynamic is captured in the concept of “Schrödinger’s joke”, introduced by the researcher Erin Stoner. The encapsulation of political ideology in humorous or ironic media circulated among a group as a collection of inside jokes and references serves as a crucial mechanism in the radicalization process: humor amplifies an “us versus them” storyline that encourages social othering, while the “memeification” of actual violence helps in desensitization by framing severe content as ironic or trivial, making it more consumable (Stoner, 2023).

The dual nature of this irony is deliberate. Irony provides deniability, a relevant benefit for alternative right initiates within a contested and highly controversial space: the distinction between seriousness and satire becomes vague and uncertain, allowing racist, sexist or xenophobic content to be created and consumed and at the same time enabling a hasty retreat when the speaker comes under fire. This mechanism, as Stoner (28) says, creates content that is simultaneously a joke and not a joke, hence “Schrödinger’s”, making it difficult to classify or moderate. The ambiguity is not a flaw in the communication strategy, it is the most important element (Munn, 2019).

2.4 Radicalization as a gradual process: exposure, familiarity and lowering of moral barriers

The last theoretical step of this study is the understanding of radicalization not as a sudden change, but as an gradual process. Here it is important to understand the role of humor, which works through repetitive exposure rather than through a direct persuasion.

Academic literature widely recognizes that online radicalization acts as a risk factor immersed in wider social dynamics instead of serving as a direct trigger for violence. Whittaker (2022) states that online radicalization involves individuals adopting extreme beliefs and sometimes engaging in or supporting violence after an extended exposure to internet content and communities. Radicalization happens progressively: individuals gradually embrace the identities, feelings and views of a group, conceptualizing their problems as injustices caused by others and gradually justifying the use of political violence against them. Although the internet itself doesn't lead to radicalization, it facilitates the dissemination of extremist notions, allows individuals to create communities based on these beliefs and promotes conspiracy theories and skepticism towards institutions (Marwick, Clancy, & Furl, 2022).

This gradual logic is especially relevant to content that is based on humor. Every meme, video or sarcastic post do not radicalize in isolation, instead, continuous exposure creates a cumulative desensitization effect. Extended exposure to the minimization of hateful, violent or racist beliefs can lead individuals to normalize the content and become increasingly accepting violent extremist ideas. As people immerse themselves in extreme online communities, they may also encounter "shock memes" with graphic violence, which could possibly weaken their psychological resistance to violence ((ISD), Memes & the Extreme Right-Wing, 2023).

On a personal level, this process can be understood through the idea of moral disengagement: the way of how individuals slowly set aside their typical ethical boundaries when interacting with or sharing content that would have previously appeared unacceptable (Bandura, 2016). Being exposed to extremist material online is seen as a risk factor for developing attitudes that endorse violent radical actions. However, this is typically viewed as only a risk factor to radicalization, not a direct cause, with studies focusing on how online behaviors could gradually contribute to radicalization (Cubitt & Morgan, 2024).

As this study will focus on the 16-23 age, this process is significant. Based on the Impressionable Year Hypothesis (Krosnick & Alwin, 1989) the 16-23 age range is characterized by heavy receptivity to ideological influence, making repeated exposure to normalized far-right humor especially consequential. According to Europol's TE-SAT 2025, content influenced by algorithms reinforces extremist beliefs, leading to a dangerous normalization and desensitization to harm in youth, as they are more significantly impacted by a mix of psychological weaknesses, social isolation and dependence on digital platforms. Far-right humor is present in this vulnerable area, not as obvious propaganda, but as a slow, subtle adjustment of what appears normal, funny or acceptable (Riehle, 2025).

3. Literature Review

3.1 Online radicalization: state of the art and gaps

Over the last decade, interest in online radicalization has increased, yet the field remains characterized by some methodological and conceptual tensions. The dominant agreement is that the internet does not cause radicalization in any direct or mechanically sense, but that it is used as an accelerant and facilitator within wider social and psychological dynamics. Although the internet does not directly cause radicalization, it can facilitate the spread of extremist beliefs, enable people with such interests to create communities and encourage conspiracy theories and distrust in institutions (Marwick, Clancy, & Furl, 2022).

Initial studies tended to focus on jihadist movements, especially IS and Al-Qaeda, which dominated the policy agenda during the 2010s. However, as Conway (Conway, 2020) documents, more organized content moderation targeting terrorist organizations led a shift of attention: far-right movements proved far more resilient to deplatforming due to their closeness to mainstream cultural formats, including memes. Since then, research attention has slowly shifted toward far-right online ecosystems.

Even with this change, significant gaps still continue to exist. The access to extremist content online is seen as a risk element for attitudes that support violent radical actions, although it is generally viewed as a contributing element instead of a direct cause, with ongoing research examining how online behaviors progressively lead to radicalization (Whittaker, 2022). Importantly, previous research rarely measures changes in attitudes caused by frequent exposure to humorous extremist content. As Özen Odağ

(Odag, Leiser, & Boehnke, 2020) notes, little is known about the psychological dimensions of platform use among young audiences: why users look for certain content, what do they do with it and how they distinguish between satire and sincere ideology. This study does not directly examine the users' motivations for seeking this content, based on interview data to focus on how young audiences receive and interpret humor-based far-right content (Cubitt & Morgan, 2024).

3.2 Far-right extremism in Western Europe: Save Europe and other movements

Academic work on far-right extremism in Western Europe has focused on 3 areas: definitional debates distinguishing the radical from extreme right (Muddle, 2019), structural explanations for its mainstream (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) and digital far-right communication strategies using humor (Shifman, 2014). The rise of far-right movements and parties in Western countries has led to an extensive research, but a definitional inconsistency still continues to be a challenge. Miranda Leibe (Leibe, 2021) states that there is a lack of a widely recognized EU-level definition of right-wing extremism, creating a gap that allows the proliferation of ambiguous, unclear content that avoids detection and moderation efforts.

Studies consistently indicate that support for far-right movements among young people in Western Europe has increased in recent years. In the 2024 European elections, 16% of German voters under 25 supported the far-right party AfD (Pfeifer, 2024), meanwhile, 30% of young French voters chose Marine Le Pen's National Rally (Vinocur & Goury-Laffont, 2024), a pattern partly shaped by social media networks such as TikTok, which allows far-right actors to customize messages aimed directly at the youth while promoting interaction, connection and identity development. The voting data indicated a broader cultural change where the far-right concepts have moved from the outskirts into the center of political discussions among the youth, appearing again the concept of the Overton Window (Canney, 2024).

The *Save Europe* movement occupies a unique and particular position within in this context. According to Press-Reynolds (Press-Reynolds, 2024), online creators use music, edited short videos and TikTok memes to share content that combines neo-Nazi imagery with aesthetic appeal, gaining millions of views in platforms that have difficulty categorizing this type of content and tag it as harmful. *Save Europe* is not really an official organization but a transnational dialogue framework based on the Great Replacement

conspiracy theory, as mentioned earlier, and is working via hashtags, accounts and communities rather than a centralized system. This diffuse and aestheticized nature complicates its study, and until now, minimal academic focus has been directed specifically at it, and this thesis aims to fill this gap.

3.3 Memes, humor and hate speech: which research exists and what remains understudied

The most relevant body of literature of this study mainly focuses on the intersection of humor, memes and hate speech in the far-right online discourse. This is a growing but still underdeveloped field, and its important findings can both inform and motivate this study.

Schmid, Schulze and Drexel (2024) provide the most comprehensive framework. Their study shows that the far-right uses humor to connect with their supporters while also reaching out to a broader audience, and that humor used to mask hateful messages causes recipients to view the content as much less aggressive, something that has important consequences for content moderation and investigations into radicalization. Moreover, Schmid's (2024) previous studies indicated that humor indicators in memes generate uncertainty regarding the seriousness of their hateful messages, providing a justification to interpret them differently, a mechanism that facilitates gradual normalization and aligns with radicalization pathways that begin with ironic and "legal but harmful" material (Munn, 2019) (PIPS, n.d.).

A real-life example of this phenomenon happened in Germany in 2023. A group of young people on Sylt island was recorded reciting a neo-Nazi chant to the melody of a well-known Eurodance song, *L'Amour Toujours*. Instead of provoking public disapproval that could prevent those actions, this episode created a meme and turned it into an online phenomenon, illustrating how racist phrases can lose their historical weight and transform them into humor (Thurau, 2024).

However, significant gaps still remain. As we have been discussing, since humor exists within legal and cultural grey areas, tech companies and lawmakers find it challenging in order to regulate meme-driven content, and national legislation regularly fails to keep pace with the fast developments and cultural uncertainties of memes, letting harmful content to spread without no restrictions. Also, current research seldom links content analysis with reception: the majority of studies mainly focus on the elements of

memes instead of how young audiences truly understand and internalize them (Marwick, Clancy, & Furl, 2022). This research addresses both gaps by integrating qualitative content analysis with interview data from the 16-23 age group, providing a fuller understanding of the normalization process as it functions at both production and consumption stages.

4. Methodology

4.1 Justification for the inductive qualitative approach

This study adopts a qualitative methodology with an inductive approach. The reason for this is that it follows from both nature of the research question and the state of existing literature. Since the central aim is to understand *how* humor functions as a normalization mechanism rather than to measure *how much* radicalization occurs, quantitative methods would be inadequate as they can capture frequency and reach, but not meaning, framing or the subtle rhetorical work performed by irony and aesthetics.

I decided to choose the inductive approach because, as the literature review demonstrates, the specific intersection of humor, the *Save Europe* movement and the 16-23 demographic in Western Europe remains understudied. The inductive approach is specifically appropriate because it allows analytical categories to emerge from the empirical material itself, which is essential when studying a recent phenomenon like Save Europe. Instead of a pre-established theory against data, this study will move from empirical observation, like posts, memes and videos collected from the platforms, towards broader analytical patterns and theoretical contributions. This will allow findings to increase from the material itself, which is especially valuable when studying a phenomenon whose formats and references evolve rapidly. Whittaker (2022) emphasizes that online radicalization must be understood through its context, which require interpretive tools rather than only quantitative methods and similarly, Stoner (2023) adopts qualitative and mixed-method designs when analyzing the ideological functions of far-right humor, precisely because the ambiguity of ironic content resists straightforward classifications.

4.2 Case study: Save Europe on X, TikTok and Instagram

The methodological design is organized as a single case study focused on the Save Europe movement across 3 platforms: Twitter/X, TikTok and Instagram. As Yin (2018)

argues, a case study design is well-suited to research questions beginning with “how” or “why”, where the researcher has limited control over the phenomenon and the limits between the subject and its context are not clearly defined.

I chose *Save Europe* for 3 reasons. First, it represents a contemporary and digitally manifestation of the Great Replacement ideology, making it directly relevant to the theoretical framework developed in section 2. Second, its communication strategy is built almost entirely around humor, irony and aesthetic formats, like memes, edited videos and music, which makes I an ideal object for studying the mechanism this thesis is trying to analyze. And third, as established in the literature review, it remains understudied, meaning that this case study has the potential to generate genuinely new knowledge.

These 3 platforms were chosen because they operate through different logics of content distribution. Twitter/X enables rapid viral spread, the formation of ideological communities through reply chains and most importantly: its censorship is limited so sensitive content abounds. TikTok’s algorithm architecture is very sensitive and exposes users beyond their existing feed, widening potential reach among young audiences. Instagram combines visual aesthetic appeal with a community formation through reels and accounts. Analyzing the same movement across all 3 platforms allows a comparative understanding of how platform architecture shapes the form and reach of far-right humor. (Schmid, Schulze, & Drexel, 2024) (Stockhammer, 2025)

4.3 Data selection criteria: public content, 16-23 age group, 2025 timeframe

The body of material examined in this study is made up of content that is publicly accessible and released in 2025. Only public accounts and posts are included. The 2025 timeframe was selected to make sure that the analysis reflects the current state of the phenomenon, particularly given the evolving nature of online far-right communication strategies undergo continuous transformation. 80 posts were examined during this process from the 3 platforms, including memes, reels and short videos (approximately 30 from Instagram, 30 from TikTok and 20 from Twitter/X).

The content was selected through a combination of keywords, including hashtags and topics associated to *Save Europe* and the Great Replacement rhetoric, and the identification of accounts with significant followings among the target. The focus on the 16-23 age group is justified due to its disproportionate exposure to algorithm

radicalization pathways as identified by Europol (Riehle, 2025) and as *Save Europe* content circulates predominantly within youth-oriented digital cultures.

In order to complement the content body, 7 interviews were made with individuals aged between 16 and 23 from Spain, Italy, Germany and Hungary; who had encountered *Save Europe* content on at least one of these 3 platforms. These interviews provide primary data on how young audiences perceive, interpret and relate to the humor content that has been analyzed.

4.4 Content and discourse analysis

In this study 2 analytical techniques are combined. The first one is qualitative content analysis, applied to the collected posts, memes and short videos. This involves the systematic identification of recurring patterns in the use of humor, irony and aesthetics, as well as the classification of the racist, misogynistic and xenophobic narratives that these formats are used to communicate. Categories were developed in an inductive way from the material itself.

The second technique is discourse analysis, used to examine how narratives of victimhood, cultural superiority and civilizational threat are constructed and legitimized within the content. Discourse analysis is particularly suited to this material because it attends not only to what is said, but how it is said. Together, both techniques allow for a connection between form and ideological content, making a more complete account of the normalization process than either method could provide alone.

4.5 Ethical considerations and limitations

This study works within established ethical guidelines that should be taken into account for research involving social media content and human participants. All social media material analyzed is publicly available and no private accounts are included. Content is discussed and described without any amplification or reproduction of harmful material. Interviewed participants provided informed consent. : In accordance with ethical research protocols, all participant data has been anonymized through the assignment of pseudonyms, which are used exclusively throughout the analysis to protect individual confidentiality.

Several limitations must be taken into account too. First, the focus on public content means that more private or encrypted far-right spaces like Telegram channels are

excluded from the analysis, likely leading to an underrepresenting the most extreme aspects of the spectrum. Second, the 2025 period limits historical comparison. Third, the interview sample of the 7 participants – 4 men and 3 women – is not representative and does not allow for generalization.

5. Analysis

5.1 Rhetorical and aesthetic strategies: how racism is framed as humor

The analysis of Save Europe content across X/Twitter, TikTok and Instagram shows a collection of rhetorical and aesthetic strategies designed to make exclusionary narratives appear culturally familiar, entertaining and shareable. These strategies do not work in a random way: they reflect a calculated logic of ideological framing in which the humor, irony or aesthetic appeal actively serve to neutralize the perceived threat of the content.

The most widespread format identified across platforms, and particularly dominant on Instagram, is the edited short video or “edit”, which is a clip combining footage of European landscapes, historical imagery or cultural references with popular electronic music or remixes, most commonly *L’Amour Toujours* by Gigi D’Agostino, *I Don’t Know* by Erika de Bonis, *Little Dark Age* by MGMT Track and *Bitter Sweet Symphony* by the Verve, overlaid with text advancing anti-immigration or civilizational threat narratives (europevivalproject, 2025) (xallefarx, 2025). The choice of music is not incidental, these are songs with emotional associations in European popular culture like the genres Italo dance or Eurodance, and their use creates warmth and pride within which the ideological message is delivered.

The Wojak meme template constitutes the second dominant aesthetic strategy. Wojak figures, which are emotionally expressive cartoon faces widely used in internet culture, appear consistently across Save Europe content on Instagram to represent in-group members (typically white Europeans) and out-group targets (immigrants, Muslims or “globalists”) in scenarios that dramatize the Great Replacement through humor (mibus1978, 2025) (voxeuropae1, 2026). The use of an established meme template provides the content with cultural legitimacy and internet fluency: it indicates membership in a broader digital culture rather than in exclusive far-right spaces, reducing the barrier for engagement.



Figure 1.

A third strategy is the use of classical Roman imagery, especially busts in black and white, as a visual symbol of idealized European identity. These icons appear consistently across Save Europe content on Instagram (voxeuropae1, 2026) (meme_legi0n, 2025) and it is used on multiple levels: it invokes a prestigious Western civilization heritage, it aestheticizes whiteness through the language of classical art and it connects the movement to other internet cultures such as the “gigachad” meme archetype, also drawing on idealized masculine imagery. Hence, the Roman bust works as a cultural ambiguous symbol, both recognized as art history to one audience and as white identitarian to another, capturing the same productive ambiguity that defines the humor of the movement in a broader sense.

The fourth strategy is coded language and symbolic substitution, which allows hateful content to spread below moderation limits while still being understandable to the intended audience. A few of the most recognizable instances are the phrase “well well well”, the usage of the juice box emoji (🧃) as the reference to Jewish people, which serves as a substitution based on phonetic similarity between “Jews” and “Juice” combined with the song *Hava Nagila* as an ironic soundtrack for antisemitic content (basedpainter, 2025) (americafirstftw, 2025). Likewise, the hashtag # 🇸🇦ncer, combining the Islamic crescent moon symbol with the word “cancer”, serves as a signal of anti-Muslim feeling that avoids keyword-based moderation systems (equipotesto, 2025).

These substitutions are perfect examples of what Stoner (2023) terms “Schrödinger’s joke”: the content is at the same time a joke and a sincere expression of hatred, with the ambiguity providing deniability.

Finally, the explicit self-identification as humor while promoting radical content deserves special focus. An important portion of the posts analyzed combine openly racist or far-right narratives with hashtags such as #meme, #funny or #darkhumor (shopunwokeism, 2025) (save.europe_1, 2025). This tagging is not accidental, it pre-frames the content as entertainment before the viewer has processed its ideological dimension activating a reception mode instead of political assessment. As R.M, one interview participant, explained: “Dark humor can sometimes be used as a way to highlight what people really think happened during a tragedy or about a political statement” (R.M., personal communication, June 6, 2026), suggesting that for some young consumers the humor actively works as a license to engage with content they might otherwise reject.

5.2 Hierarchies within racist humor: are all groups targeted equally and why?

One of the central sub-questions of this research asks whether far-right humor distributes its hostility equally across social groups or whether hierarchies exist in who is targeted, how and with what intensity. The evidence found across all 3 platforms reveals a clear and consistent hierarchy of targets that is anything but random: it aligns precisely with the ideological focuses of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory and its *Save Europe* derivation. Muslims are consistently ranked highest across the 3 social media, followed by Black migrants, the Jewish and finally political opponents.

Muslims are by far the most frequently targeted group. Anti-Muslim content appears on all 3 platforms with the highest recurrence, the most explicit language and the greatest engagement metrics (meme_legi0n, 2025) (whitesonlyhere, 2025). The framing combines narratives of civilizational threats: Islam seen as incompatible with European values, with demographic anxiety directly based on the Great Replacement ideology. Muslims are represented not only as culturally different but as an existential replacement force. The hashtag #🇸🇰ancer embodies this: it turns a sacred symbol into a metaphor, dehumanizing an entire faith community to a joke.

Black people and African immigrants make the second group of targeting, with content focusing mainly on irregular migration, specifically the contrast between migrant

arriving by boat and other categories of migrants. One of the most relevant findings is the explicit differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees: Ukrainian refugees displaced by war are represented sympathetically and with empathy, as fellow Europeans deserving protection, while migrants crossing the Mediterranean in boats are dehumanized, criminalized or made the subject of violent humor (bornwhite, 2025). This distinction is not incidental, it reveals the racial logic under the neutral language of “migration management”: the hierarchy is not between legal and illegal migration, but between white and non-white migration.

Jewish people occupy a different position in the hierarchy: they are not targeted as a demographic replacement group but as a conspirational elite responsible for engineering the replacement of white Europeans. The framing “we need to let millions of foreigners who hate us into our country” accompanied by coded Jewish references (americafirstftw, 2025) (basedpainter, 2025) reproduces the classical antisemitic narrative of Jewish manipulation of Western societies, on a meme culture. This frames antisemitism as ideologically essential, the hidden hand behind the replacement, rather than as a direct demographic threat. This explains why it appears less frequently but with a qualitative different character.

“Wokes”, communists or political opponents form the lowest tier of explicit targeting, being portrayed as domestic enemies who are complicit with the replacement agenda rather than its agents. Their presence in the content is mostly satirical, they are ridiculed rather than dehumanized, which reflects their role in the ideological framework as insiders than threatening outsiders (emperormartinn, Our continent is called Europe 🇪🇺 #EU #europe #european #vril #agartha #catholic #templarmartin, 2025) (emperormartinn, 2026).

This hierarchy has direct implications for understanding how far-right humor works as a normalization mechanism. As P.S noted in his interview, the identification of in-group and out-group in this content is rarely impartial: “there are specific far-right pages that use these memes as a political tool to spread hatred toward certain groups of people” (P.S., personal communication, June 5, 2026). The structure of targeting ensures that audiences are gradually socialized into a worldview in which some groups are more threatening, less human and more hostile than others. This process occurs through continuous and accumulating exposure instead of through one compelling action.

5.3 Platform dynamics: how Twitter, TikTok and Instagram amplify normalization differently

A key result of this study is that the identical ideological content is different between platforms, not because the ideology changes but because each platform's architectures (moderation policies, algorithmic logic and users) influence how the content is presented, distributed and received. Each platform also attracts different user profiles: Instagram's 16-23 users lean towards visual and lifestyle material, TikTok's young audience passively receives algorithm-driven content and Twitter/X attracts more politically engaged users where explicit ideological content is more normalized (Stockhammer, 2025).

Instagram is the most significant platform for *Save Europe* content among the 16-23 demographic. Posts within the corpus gather between 200,000 and 5 million views, a reach that eclipses similar content on TikTok and X. Several features explain this. First, Instagram's reels algorithm prioritizes emotional engagement and time-on-screen over topical relevance (karma, 2026), meaning that aesthetic content, like well-edited videos with popular music, reaches far beyond the follower base of the originating account. Content moderation on Instagram is relatively permissive for content that avoids explicit slurs or calls to violence, which means that coded or ironic content flows freely. As one interviewee observed, Instagram is the platform where this content is "least censored" and where "you can find anything, from the least extreme dark humored content to the most extreme one" (R.M., personal communication, June 6, 2026). The result is an environment in which neo-Nazi imagery, Great Replacement narratives and dehumanizing humor co-exist with a lifestyle content and music, normalizing their presence as part of the ordinary social media routine among young users.

Twitter/X presents a different profile. Content within the corpus on this platform is less meme-based and more explicit, with a higher proportion of direct political statements, fake news sharing and openly hostile commentary. The moderation environment on Twitter/X has become more permissive since the ownership changes in 2022 (International, 2025), and several of the accounts with the highest reach on the corpus, including Elon Musk, amplify narratives that align with Great Replacement themes to audiences of millions (Musk, 2025). The humor on Twitter/X is less aesthetic and more aggressive: irony and sarcasm are used, but the content is closer to explicit political messaging than an entertainment format like on Instagram. This suggests that

Twitter functions less as a gateway platform and more as a space for already engaged audiences to consume and share more ideological content.

TikTok occupies an intermediate position. When the term “Save Europe” is entered into TikTok’s search function, the platform shows an automatic warning: “this phrase could be associated with hate behaviors”, a moderation intervention that is absent on the other 2 social media. In order to access Save Europe content, users must write misspellings such as “Save Europa”, and the platform automatically misspells Great Replacement-related search terms in its autocomplete function. Even with these interventions, the hashtags continue to work as usual, exposing the limits of keyword moderation. Moreover, TikTok is the only platform where counter-content appears alongside extremist content, like videos debunking the Great Replacement conspiracy theory (mira_is_psyched, 2025). This produces a more polarized but also a more disputed information environment than Instagram. This result aligns with A.’s observation that “platforms push content that gets small but very fast engagement”, suggesting that TikTok’s algorithm can amplify counter-narratives as well as extremist ones (A., personal communication, June 8, 2026). This dynamic was captured by S.M., who observed that TikTok content is “much softer, maybe even more dangerous as it is harder to recognize it as a political content” (S.M., personal communication, June 8, 2026), a characterization that aligns with the platform’s tendency to add ideological themes into lifestyle and entertainment formats.

5.4 From mainstream humor to radical spaces: pathways and access content

In addition to the content, this research reveals a dynamic through which humor-based *Save Europe* material on mainstream social media acts as a pathway to more radical environments. This pathway operates through 2 interconnected mechanism: algorithm escalation and direct cross-platform linking.

The algorithmic escalation mechanism is present in the platform architectures described above. As users engage with aestheticized, humor-framed far-right content, platform algorithms register the engagement and progressively serve more ideologically intense content. This dynamic was recognized by many interview participants. R.M. described how liking content “plays a huge part on having it on my for you page” (R.M., personal communication, June 6, 2026), while A. noted that content can go “from almost no visibility to becoming viral very quickly” once it achieves fast initial engagement (A.,

personal communication, June 8, 2026). The result is an incremental escalation in which a user who begins by engaging with nostalgic European landscape edits set to popular music may progressively find material celebrating figures associated with far-right violence, justifying mass deportations, or explicitly endorsing the Great Replacement narrative.

The cross-platform linking mechanism operates more subtly in this corpus. Rather than explicit links to radical platforms, the gateway function is achieved through a progressive intensification of content within the platforms themselves: accounts that begin with aestheticized landscape edits and popular music gradually introduce more explicit ideological content, like the Great Replacement narratives framed as fact, glorification of historical far-right figures, and openly antisemitic material within the same feed and the same aesthetic register (bornwhite1, 2025). The migration is not necessarily toward external platforms but toward deeper layers of the same ecosystem, where the humorous context is gradually thinner and the ideological substance becomes more clear.

P.S.'s account of the Modena incident illustrates how this gateway dynamic works in practice at the level of individual content consumption. A real-world violent event, in this case the car attack, was portrayed by far-right accounts online as an Islamic attack, creating a wave of meme-based content reinforcing Great Replacement narratives, before factual reporting established that the perpetrator had no Islamist connections whatsoever

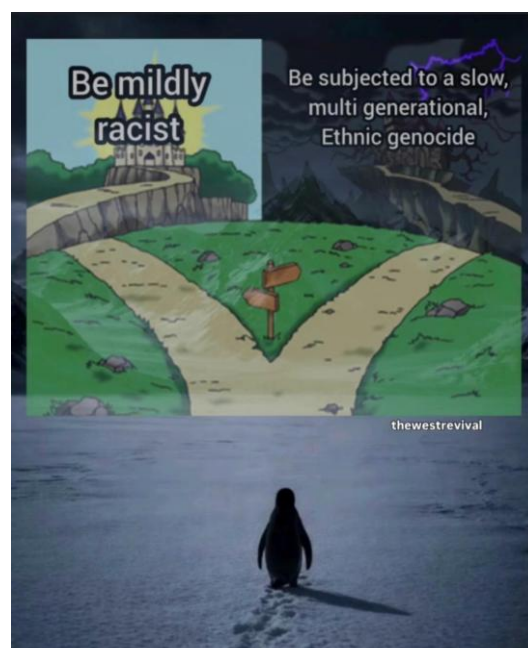


Figure 2.

(P.S., personal communication, June 5, 2026). The humor and speed of the meme response ensure reaction guaranteed wide circulation before the rectification could take hold, demonstrating how far-right humor functions both as a sustained normalization strategy and as an immediate response mechanism for leveraging news events to reinforce pre-existing ideological frameworks.

5.5 Why social media? Structural features that enable far-right humor to spread

The findings presented in the earlier sections are not random regarding the platforms where they were noted, they come from particular characteristics of social media that make these environments favorable for the dissemination and acceptance of far-right humor. 3 characteristics deserve special emphasis.

First, algorithmic amplification based on engagement is constantly rewarding emotionally charged content regardless of its ideological character. Far-right humor is advantaged in this environment as it generates strong affective responses including amusement and group solidarity. As A.C. observed “most people’s minds are being manipulated by the memes”, even if the individual consumer does not feel personally affected (A.C., personal communication, June 8, 2026). The aggregate effect of millions of individual choices in engagement create a media landscape where extremist content can gain visibility without needing direct promotion.

Second, the architecture of irony and coded language exploits a fundamental limitation of automated moderation systems, which are designed to detect explicit calls to violence or hate speech but cannot identify ideological content communicated through humor or cultural reference. The 🇪🇺 emoji, the #🇪🇺ancer hashtag, the incorrect spelling of “Save Europa” on TikTok, represent adaptations to moderation demands that maintain the communicative role of the content while making it invisible to automated detection.

Third, the social expectations of sharing on these platforms turn passive consumption into active participation. When users like, comment or share on humor content from the far-right, even without R.M. suggests, they contribute to its algorithmic amplification and its perceived as socially acceptable. Sharing a meme indicates to others within one’s network that the content is engaging, slowly altering the perception of what is considered typical political humor. S.M described this shift: content that “some years ago was a red line” is not shared openly and without shame, suggesting that the normalization process is already sufficiently advanced among young Western European

users to have altered the perceived social cost of engaging with far-right humor (S.M., personal communication, June 8, 2026). Her account of the algorithmic mechanism is equally direct: “as soon as you interact once with them, it will appear repeatedly”, confirming that a single engagement is enough to trigger sustained exposure (S.M., personal communication, June 8, 2026). Moreover, E.I. highlighted that on Instagram this type of content appears “every 3-4 scrolls”, while on TikTok it is far less visible. Most importantly, even users who find the content amusing may avoid liking it to protect their digital footprint but keep sending it privately, a behavior that shows algorithmic self-aware while perpetuating circulation of the content at the same time (E.I., personal communication, June 6, 2026).

6. Discussion

6.1 Findings in relation to the theoretical framework

The findings presented in the earlier section offer important support for the theoretical framework explained in section 2, while also introducing distinctions that refine and complicate its fundamental arguments.

The analysis confirms that Save Europe content operates precisely as the metaphorical strategy described by Gramsci’s far-right theory would predict: instead of seeking immediate political conversion, it works at the level of cultural common sense, slowly normalizing exclusionary narratives through aesthetic appeal, humor and repetition.

The concept of Schrödinger’s joke, introduced by Stoner (2023), is perhaps the most validated theoretical tool in this study. The coded language identified like the 🇪🇺 emoji, the # 🇺🇸 cancer, #funny or #meme all create the same basic mechanism: content that is both a joke and a genuine ideological claim, where the ambiguity offers deniability for the creator and a reduced barrier for understanding by the audience. Crucially, as S.M. observed, this ambiguity can appear beneath the level of conscious awareness: viewers may not realize that they are processing ideological content precisely because humor triggers a different mode of cognitive reception (S.M., personal communication, June 8, 2026). This finding aligns with Schmid et al.’s (2024) experimental evidence that humor cues notably reduce the perceived hostility of hateful content and extends it to a realistic social media environment.

The hierarchy of targeting identified in section 5.2 adds an important dimension to the theoretical framework. The Great Replacement ideology does not treat all out-groups equally: Muslims are constructed as the primary civilizational threat, Black migrants as the demographic replacement force and Jewish people as the conspirational architects of the process. This hierarchy is not accidental but reflects the internal logic of the theory and its reproduction through humor suggests that far-right meme culture is not only entertainment with some ideological side effects but a complex system of ideological education functioning via cultural immersion.

The gradual radicalization model proposed in section 2.4 is supported by the interview data, particularly the consistent accounts of algorithmic escalation: many participants described how a single interaction with far-right humor content triggered a progressive exposure to more intense materials. This confirms Whittaker's (2022) description of online radicalization as a cumulative risk factor instead of a discrete event, and suggests that the 16-23 demographic is particularly vulnerable due to their social media use is high and often uncritical in the sense that S.M. described: engaged but not necessarily politically informed enough to consistently identify the ideological dimension of this humorous content. Also B.F.'s tentative acknowledgement that "seeing it repeatedly can influence how one perceives certain topics, even if indirectly" (B.F, personal communication, June 1, 2026) is important in this regard: even a participant who does not identify as politically influenced by this content recognizes the possibility of indirect attitudinal effects, suggesting that the normalization process may operate beneath one's self-awareness.

6.2 Implications for state responses and content moderation

The findings of this study bring relevant implications for how states and social media platforms approach the challenge of far-right online radicalization, and they suggest that current responses are mismatched with the phenomenon they are trying to address.

The first issue would be that content moderation systems are designed to identify explicit hate speech, calls to violence or known extremist symbols, but those ones are systematically avoided by the communication strategies that have been documented in this study. Coded language, ironic framing and the co-tagging of extremist content as humor makes automatic detection mostly ineffective. As S.M. perceived, the difference

between a joke and propaganda in this context lies in the perception of the receiver, not in the content itself (S.M., personal communication, June 8, 2026), a distinction that automated systems cannot make. This suggests that effective moderation of far-right humor needs some contextual and a culturally informed human review rather than keyword-based automation, which has big implications for platforms operating at scale.

Second, the findings specific to each platform suggest another implication: the unequal distribution of moderation effort across platforms creates displacement effects instead of a true reduction. TikTok's more aggressive intervention, like warning messages or deliberate misspelling of search terms, does not eliminate *Save Europe* content but pushes users towards Instagram, where the same content circulates with a far greater reach and far less friction. The coordinated moderation standards across platforms, most probably enforced by regulatory measures like the EU's Digital Services Act, show more promise than addressing each platform individually. The EU's Digital Services represents a powerful transformative regulatory instrument because it legally obliges platforms to assess and mitigate systemic radicalization risks for the first time, rather than relying on voluntary moderation commitments (Stockhammer, 2025).

So the prevention and counter-extremism policy, the implication is equally clear: interventions targeting the 16-23 demographic must engage with the mechanisms through which normalization operates rather than treating radicalization as a process derived from explicit ideological persuasion. Media literacy programs that equip young people to identify the ideological dimension of ironic and humorous content, also called humor literacy, represent a more appropriate response than messaging campaigns that treat potential radicalizers as rational actors evaluating political arguments.

6.3 Limitations and future research questions

There are several limitations of this study that must be taken into account in order to assess the scope and transference of its findings. The qualitative design, while appropriate for the research, does not allow casual claims: this study documents normalization mechanisms and their effects but cannot establish that exposure to *Save Europe* content directly produces measurable changes. Future research combining content analysis with survey data or experimental designs would be better positioned to establish those lacking links.

The interview sample of the 7 participants, while analytically rich, is not representative of the 16-23 Western European demographic as a whole, even though people from several Western European countries have been chosen. The thematic patterns identified should not be generalized beyond the scope of this study. The same geographic scope might also be a problem as it is limited by the language and platform accessibility, which leans toward English-language content, which is the most common one to find. Future research should incorporate multilingual analysis, including French, German and Italian.

Finally, the quick evolving nature of far-right online communication means that the formats, codes and platforms found in this research may shift in the short term.

7. Conclusion

This thesis had the purpose of investigating how the use of humor and irony on social media by far-right actors and movements such as Save Europe contributes to the normalization and legitimization of racist and exclusionary narratives among young people in Western Europe during 2025.

The main research question has a triple response: far-right humor legitimizes extremist narratives through an aesthetic design that makes ideological content feel culturally familiar and entertaining, through algorithmic amplification that ensures repeated and escalating exposure and through the structural ambiguity of irony, which allows radical ideas to be communicated and internalized without triggering the resistance that explicit propaganda would produce. This process is not the result of a single piece of content but rather a combination of content and platform-enabled exposure that slowly shifts perceptions of what feels acceptable, funny or politically normal.

The first sub-question asked what rhetorical and aesthetic strategies are most commonly used to present racist narratives as humor. The analysis identified 5 principal strategies: short videos or “edits” combining vibrant music with ideological text and images, Wojak meme templates encoding in-group and out-group dynamics, classical Roman icons and imagery aestheticizing white European identity, coded language and symbols designed to evade moderation systems and the deliberate tagging of extremist content with humor-indicating hashtags. All of these strategies create a system in which form and content reinforce each other, producing material that feels both entertaining and ideologically charged.

The second sub-question asked whether hierarchies exist within racist humor and why certain groups are targeted more systematically than others. The answer is clear: a lucid and ideologically structure exists, with Muslims as the main target of civilizational threat narratives, Black immigrants as the demographic replacement force, Jewish people as the conspirational architects of the replacement and political opponents as domestic enablers. This hierarchy is not subjective, it reveals the internal logic of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory and its reproduction through humor constitutes a form of ideological education visible in a cultural saturation rather than an obvious persuasion.

These findings bring direct implications for international security, platform regulation and prevention policies as well. Current content moderation systems are currently mismatched with the phenomenon that they are trying to address, as coded language and irony avoid automated detection. Coordinated responses across platforms and media literacy programs focusing on humor as an ideological tool represent more promising directions than existing methods.

As far-right violence continues to rise across Western Europe and its ideologies migrates into mainstream digital culture, understanding how humor normalizes extremism is not an academic exercise but a security necessity.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Search terms and hashtags used for data collection

Term/Hashtag	Platform(s) used	Frequency in corpus
Save Europe	Instagram, X	High
Save Europa	Instagram, TikTok	Medium
Great Replacement	All three	High

Great replacemen theory	TikTok	Low
Remigration	Instagram, X	Medium
White genocide	X	High
Ethnic replacement	Instagram	Medium
L'Amour Toujours	All three	High
Hava Nagila	Instagram	High
#SaveEurope	Instagram, X	High
#GreatReplacement	Instagram, X	High
#Remigration	Instagram	Medium
#  ncancer	Instagram	High
#Immigration	All three	Medium
#WhiteEurope	Instagram, X	High
#SaveEuropeNow	Instagram, X	Medium

ANNEX: Declaration of Use of Generative AI Tools

Academic Year: 2025-2026

Master's Programme: Master in International Security Management (MISM)

Student Name: Elvira Victoria Fernández Sánchez

I declare that generative artificial intelligence tools have been used as support tools in the preparation of this Master's Final Thesis.

YES NO

1. Ethical and Academic Use

Have you included sensitive or personal data when using AI tools? If yes, specify:

No

Have you used AI tools to replace your own work without critically reviewing the generated content? If yes, specify:

No

Have you followed the academic recommendations and guidelines regarding the use of AI tools?

Yes

2. Technical Use of AI Tools

Please indicate the AI tools used (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude, Gemini):

Claude

Please mark the applicable uses:

Text generation

- Reformulation / editing
- Translation / proofreading
- Structure suggestions
- Methodological support
- Bibliographic search or citation support
- Audiovisual content generation
- Other uses (please specify)

I confirm that the final content of this thesis has been fully reviewed, corrected, and validated by me as the author. The use of AI has not replaced my own critical analysis, personal reflection, or intellectual work.

Signature: Elvira Victoria Fernández Sánchez