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Virality of #Chadolf #Kitler: Ambivalence in Chiaroscuro

Abstract: In the dual dynamic of digital communication studies and digital discourse analysis, the aim of this chapter is to understand the ambivalence of the memetic circulation of #Chadolf #Kitler on online social media. A corpus of 447 publications, sometimes ambiguously associating cat images with Nazi symbols, was extracted from Twitter, Instagram and TikTok to analyse these forms of anthropomorphism. The essay provides insights into the diverse ways in which such imagery has been reappropriated to serve distinct ideological positions.

Keywords: online social media, Nazism, viral images, participatory culture, memes

The cat has been an integral part of geek culture since the 1990s as a symbol of alternative expression. Cats have also become an effective "click factory" and are now seen as representative of the viral circulation of cute content. As part of the broader phenomenon of virality via online social media, the thread that guides this research is the circulation of images of #ChatonsMignons ("cute cats" – this is the name of the research project investigating the viral nature of images) (see Simon 2024a). The cat is considered a "trivial object" – in the meaning used by Yves Jeanneret (2014), "trivium" meaning "crossroads" – since it stands at the crossroads of a variety of different social media uses. It is an icon of a digital culture that is constantly being reinvented. Cats play a central role in various political communication strategies (see Jakubowicz 2021) and are also a central figure in memetic social experiences – the process of reproducing and sharing memes – within online communities. This can be referred to as "remixed cat culture", in reference to work on participatory culture (Bourdaa 2021; Jenkins 2013 [2006]) and remix culture (Allard 2016; Le Crosnier 2020). The image of the cat plays a key role in the construction of "digital identities" (see Cardon 2008; Georges 2009). Finally, the virality of #ChatonsMignons can be explained by their affective dimension – they can represent fun, desire, empathy –, which is a key ingredient in the attention- and emotion-seeking capitalist model of online platforms (see Alloing and Pierre 2017; Maddox 2022).

The viral phenomenon of #Chadolf #Kitler is a somewhat unique case study within this research project. A corpus (not exhaustive and not statistically representative) of 447 publications ambiguously associating cat images with Nazi symbols was compiled from Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. The images shared represent cats with a small black moustache and/or with right foreleg raised, alluding to

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Adolf Hitler. The corpus includes publications from January 2012 to March 2022 – 2012 being the oldest result possible from the advanced search on Twitter and Instagram (see Tab. 1: Corpus overview). The following keywords were used for the searches: Chadolf, Catolf, Kitler, Kittler, Kittler cat, Kittler kitty, Führer cat, Hitler cat, Cat Hitler, Fascist cat, Gato nazi, Chat nazi, Nazi cat. Various types of content are represented in this corpus, including still images, iconotexts or more elaborate remixed forms (mashups on TikTok). The assimilation of the figure of Adolf Hitler, the Nazi salute and Nazism is achieved through different memetic reappropriations, revealing distinct positions.

#Chadolf #Kitler imagery became popular as a result of the website "Cats that look like Hitler", founded by two Dutch journalists Koos Plegt and Paul Neve in 2006. The phenomenon was then widely publicised in Europe, Australia, and North America (on radio, television and even cinema: It was also referred to in the film *The Social Network*)[1]. Looking at Google search trends on the subject, we can see that virality peaked in 2006[2]. But interest in #Chadolf #Kitler is still very strong today – as evidenced by the proliferation of publications linking cats with the Hitler on 4chan, Reddit, Facebook and YouTube, as well as Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. The virality of #Chadolf #Kitler – which is just one in a long line of online phenomena – can be explained by both the horizontality of exchanges (variations and peer-to-peer sharing) and the verticality of circulation. This verticality plays out at different levels, since it is driven by social media devices[3], by the media – which play an amplifying role (see Pailler and Schafer, 2022; Schafer and Pailler, 2022) –, and by heritagization platforms such as Know Your Meme.

To gain a better understanding of this viral phenomenon, this chapter brings to light various semio-discursive features specific to #Chadolf #Kitler publications, which we believe contribute to an understanding of memetic virality – the third level of virality proposed by Shifman (2014), explained below. It also sheds light on several levels of ideological commitment, both in agreement and in opposition to Nazi dogma – #Chadolf #Kitler can be intended as a light-hearted piece of fun or can actually serve to promote a neo-Nazi movement.

1 See the summary presented on the Know Your Meme website: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/kitler.

2 Searches for "kitler", "cats like hitler" or "hitler cat" peaked in 2006: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=kitler,cats%20like%20hitler,cat%20hitler.

3 On the importance of the role of techno-discursive affordances, technical discourses and algorithms, see boyd (2010); Ghliss, Perea and Ruchon (2019); Paveau (2017); Wagener (2022, 22).

1 Virality and Memetics of #Chadolf #Kitler

1.1 Deviations from the Participatory Turn

Defined as early as the 1990s by Jenkins (2013 [2006]), participatory culture refers to the reappropriation of "works" from mainstream mass culture by creative communities to create their own culture. Remix culture is seen as a particular form of participatory culture characterised by its playful, transgressive dimension (see Allard 2016; Le Crosnier 2020). It can be described as a playful and/or transgressive shared creative experience exploring different processes of transformation: image hijacking, viral circulation of memes,[4] composition of mashups and production of music covers. Sarcasm and irony, creativity and one-upmanship are all drivers of this remix culture. Its transgressive dimension also encourages a culture of pseudonymity.

Participatory culture (including remix culture) is one of the ethical foundations of digital culture, initiated by web creators. It encourages emancipatory participatory actions that open up the world, encouraging civic engagement, digital sociability, freedom of expression and creativity. But this creative utopia also has a flip side: The participatory turn is now also characterised by limits and dangers. This paradox has been highlighted by several researchers interested in how online social media can go wrong[5]. Forms of political or ideological fanaticism, obvious or disguised hate discourse and circulation of fake news are all well and truly present within online social spaces. These practices are also unfolding in a context where the power of influence of Big Tech is growing, and where the data collected by these web giants can be used for strategic purposes in the interest of states: stigmatising humour, viral circulation of racist, sexist, or homophobic memes, harnessing participatory momentum for electoral purposes, etc. Sarcasm and irony, creativity and one-upmanship are therefore also drivers of more strategic forms of participation.

Hate discourse used with discriminatory motives often exploits a semantic blurring, taking advantage of collusion and complicity to make content more viral. Several studies have focused on the analysis of humour in a political and/or ideological context (see Charaudeau 2015; Quemener 2018). As Patrick Charaudeau (2006) explains, humour is an act of discourse that is established in a specific com-

4 The meme, as a *technographisme* (Paveau 2017), is a more or less playful and/or transgressive born-digital multisemiotic production. Its semiotic process is based on a combination of various multisemiotic components: verbal – oral or written –, visual – still or animated –, and sound – sound effects or music.

5 See Badouard (2017); Bauer (2023); Cardon (2010); Casilli (2010); Coleman (2022); Escande-Gauquié and Naivin (2018); Mercier (2018a, 2019); Simon (2019).

munication situation, where the contract established with the target audience varies depending on the existing relationship of complicity. Humorous discourse mobilises discursive procedures that have a "social value", i.e., they depend on the communication situation (identity of interlocutors, relationship of complicity, affective disposition that can vary according to state of mind, etc.). This aspect of complicity with the audience is not always clearly identifiable: Is it black humour with a simply playful dimension, or with a polemical, critical, or cynical aim? While, in the context of the virality of publications, the question of complicity or connivance is much more blurred because it cannot always be controlled: A simple joke can be reused as a tool for criticism and vice versa.

The research question explored in this study is in line with reflections on the ambiguity of humour and, more specifically, the ambivalence of memes in this context[6]. In the case of #ChatonsMignons memes, the ambiguity is all the stronger because they are not intended to be taken at face value. The incongruity of the connection between cats and Hitler is inherent in the discourse (on this inherent ambivalence, see Philips and Milner 2017).

What are the dynamics built into the memetic reappropriations of #Chadolf #Kitler on social media, and how does the incongruous anthropomorphism that arises from the surprising association of two seemingly "incompatible" elements – cats and Hitler – serve different ideological positions? These central questions underpin this semio-discursive and "argumentative analysis".

1.2 Replication and Variation of the #Chadolf #Kitler

Limor Shifman (2014) differentiates three levels of "success", or virality, of images: viral success, memetic success, and viral and memetic success. Not all images or videos that enjoy great popularity are constructed as memes. They are just successful images shared in a powerful way (images of anonymous cats with atypical expressions or postures, for example). Memes also benefit from different forms of success: Ultra-famous memes are scattered across the web without being adapted (as in the case of faithful reproductions of photographs of cat-celebrities, such as Grumpy Cat). These are taken up and repeated iteratively, without any strong reappropriation on the part of the user. On the other hand, some memes are the object of strong creative reappropriation.

6 See Askanius and Keller (2021); Billig (2001); Donovan, Dreyfuss and Friedberg (2022); Marcoccia (2022); Ridley (2020); Wagener (2013); Yoon (2016).

Meme generators play a central role in the transformation process. A number of cat images can be used to create an infinite number of image macros: Crying Cat, Cute Cat, Vibing Cat, Smudgelord Cat, and so on. The virality of #Chadolf #Kitler is achieved through two of these levels of "success": replication (linked to memetic success) and variation (linked to viral and memetic success). The distinction between "replication" and "variation" was proposed by Maude Bonenfant (2014).

Replication relays the viral meme almost identically. It is a simple copy, a duplicate that is faithful to the original meme. On social media, this way of relaying memes relatively faithfully is characteristic of accounts that republish content. They replicate successful memes, with or without credits for shared images. They thus play the role of an "infomediary". The various #Chadolf #Kitler images presented in Tab. 2 are representative of this replication without strong intervention.

Memes created by variation meet the definition of memetics in a restricted sense, as a playful and/or transgressive shared creative experience exploring different processes of transformation (diversions, mashups, covers, etc.). With variation, users intervene directly on shared content and reappropriate it to a greater or lesser extent, with varying degrees of alteration, creative approaches and subjectivation.

As the result of a process of variation, #Chadolf #Kitler is part of a series of creative (to differing degrees) reappropriations which have proven more or less successful in terms of audience. Virality is therefore defined not only in terms of quantity (the number of publications) but also in terms of the variety of variations. The dynamics of virality are more closely linked to the reasons that drive users to act collectively in adapting memes. Virality can also be linked to the "cognitive-emotional" dimension proposed by Albin Wagener (2022, 60), considered the driving force behind the memetic process. The feeling of belonging to a community is decisive in this dynamic since it encourages users to participate while seeking recognition and self-worth.

1.3 Variations on #Chadolf #Kitler Memes

A number of methods of adaptation can be observed within the #Chadolf #Kitler memes created by variation, and these can also intersect: variation of set formulas, routinised at text level (enunciative, semantic, multilingual markers, etc. – examples include the use of a "me" to introduce an image of a #Chadolf #Kitler), variation in the images inserted (still images or videos annotated, retouched, compiled) and variation in the sounds and music inserted (cut, slowed down, compiled).

Hypernarrativity, characterised by the breakdown of stories within the hypertextual device[7], is then exploited in different ways in these forms of variation. It is present through anthropomorphism (see Goudet 2016; Goudet, Paveau and Ruchon 2020) as a process for creating a narrative in which the cat becomes the main protagonist. Prosopopoeia makes it possible to portray a #Chadolf #Kitler expressing himself through verbal language (speech bubble, as in Fig. 1) or non-verbal language (mimics and the Nazi salute). Anthropomorphism is also used to distance the ideological dimension. Selfies taken with Hitler-like cats create personal narratives of self-staging. Hypernarrativity is again seen in the process of citing existing narrative "works". References to fictional narratives often serve to soften or exaggerate a reality, with the overall aim of creating complicity.

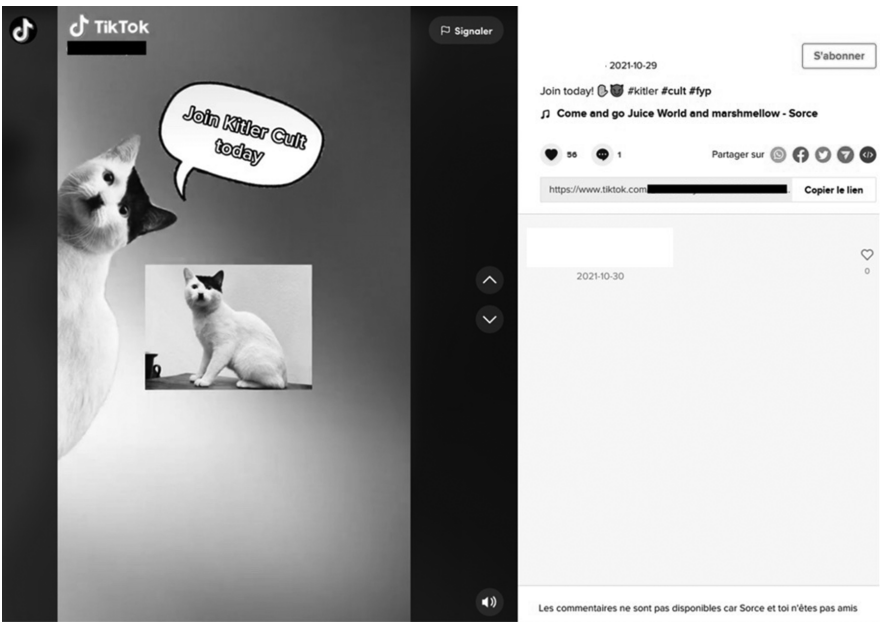


Fig. 1: Anthropomorphism and prosopopoeia: anonymised screenshot of a TikTok publication.

#Chadolf #Kitler memes constitute yet another mosaic of other quoted, transformed discourses, whether text, image, or music. Interdiscursivity (see Simon 2020; 2021) means making use of elements that have already been said, seen or heard. Abnormal juxtapositions, known as incongruities, are often made from an

7 See Boursier (2021); Lejano, Ingram and Ingram (2013); Wagener (2022); Simon (2022).

interdiscursive perspective. The success of #Chadolf #Kitler memes lies in this incongruity.

In terms of images, #Chadolf #Kitler publications can refer to existing offline content (series, films, literary works, etc.) or online content (video games, images of ordinary cats that have become famous, cat-lebrities, etc.). An example of an offline reference is the addition of the character Alf – the cat-eating alien – to the foreground of a photograph of a #Chadolf #Kitler lying on a barbecue (Twitter, 2020–06–03). A TikTok publication uses excerpts of a cult scene from Episode VII of the *Star Wars* saga featuring the power-drunk villain General Hux assembling an army. The character is depicted in a serious, severe and authoritarian tone. The mashup uses several still images of #Chadolf #Kitler, and the text is very incisive. It performatively invites TikTokers to join the "Kitler" cult (TikTok, 2022–03–17). In these two cases, the way in which the text is quoted does not have the same argumentative impact: The reference to Alf creates a form of playful complicity, whereas the *Star Wars* cult scene serves a more serious persuasive purpose.

Among the online references, we note a visual comparison that is made between a #Chadolf #Kitler and the hijacking of this #Chadolf #Kitler, with the addition of the pixelated image of Minecraft glasses (see Fig. 2). This comparative meme is accompanied by the text "Classy cat // Chadolf" (Twitter, 2020–10–06).

Fig. 2: Visual comparison of #Chadolf #Kitler: anonymised screenshot of a Twitter publication.

Other references are made in the spirit of the web, with cats depicted with laser beams invading the planet; laser beams are in fact very present, although a specific reference cannot be identified. The Instagram publication depicts the "catpocalypse" in a caption inserted alongside the image, together with the hashtag #nazicat (2017–08–11). In Elyse J. White's book (2020), two types of memes are identified, relating to two distinct periods: Typical cat memes that became well-known between 1995 and 2004 (Happy Cat, Serious Cat, Crying Cat, Long Cat, Sad Cat, etc.) and cat-lebrities from 2012 to the present day (Grumpy Cat, Lil Bub, Hamilton The Hipster Cat, etc.). In the first category, the identity of the cat that actually existed is of little importance. The majority of images used in #Chadolf #Kitler memes fall into this first category. Five images based on this principle can be found extensively in our corpus. Names have been given to these images of cats, which have been widely adopted, such as "villain Chadolf" or "long-haired Chadolf" (see Tab. 2). Two of the web's best-known cats – Grumpy Cat and Nyan Cat, a meme created by Chris Torres in 2011 – are also reproduced or hijacked (see Fig. 3). A single image macro – part of the memory of cat fan communities – is used to construct a #Chadolf #Kitler meme. This is the Woman Yelling at a Cat macro, in which Smudgelord Cat is replaced by #Chadolf #Kitler.

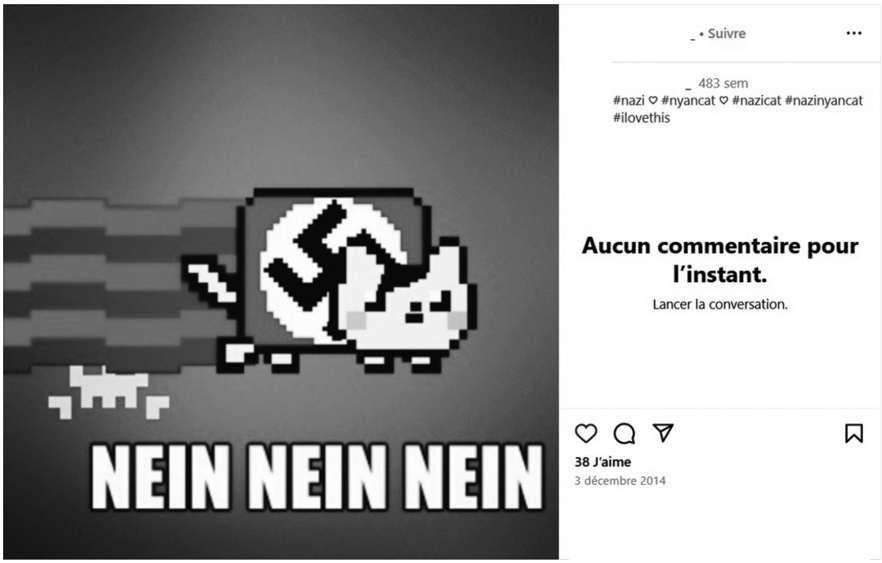


Fig. 3: Variation on the Nyan Cat meme: anonymised screenshot of an Instagram post.

In line with various works on discourse analysis (see Genette 1982; Lugrin 2006; Jost 2022), we can distinguish different types of reappropriations by variation. First, the original discourse can be explicitly "visible" – this is variation with preservation of the original discourse. It is modified (cropped, increased) but clearly recognisable. Second, the variation may be an extensive transformation of the original discourse, which is no longer recognisable (forms of imitation or homemade allusive realisations[8]). These categories are not entirely separate; some creations merge these two types of transformation.

In the examples cited above, textual elements preserve the original discourse. But there are also reappropriations that depart strongly from the original discourse, which are interesting to analyse in connection with the argumentative dimension of publications. On TikTok, many publications share videos of cats stretching their right forepaw up (see Fig. 4). In our view, two images inspired this trend: the "long-haired Chadolf" and, more directly, the "Chadolf video". The assimilation to the Nazi salute is created by variation in a participatory chain, with many people filming their own #Chadolf #Kitler stretching. This strong reappropriation is subjective in the sense that it corresponds to a very personalised vision of the initial meme. The user's domestic cat is photographed in an intimate environment. The initial #Chadolf #Kitler is not immediately recognisable. This strategy of misappropriation, which may go unnoticed, discreetly serves the Nazi ideology. A TikTok publication amplifies this allusive dimension with a video of a cat with a ginger coat, which therefore does not have the physical characteristics of the #Chadolf #Kitler. The allusion to the Nazi salute is central here and the accompanying text guides the interpretation: "#chat #hitler #nazi".

Finally, musical interdiscursivity offers analytical perspectives, especially in the case of TikTok mashups. Interdiscursivity can be used to create an offbeat nostalgia (comic effect linked to the "cheesy" side of the song used), it can participate in the creation of narrative tension, and it can also be used to promote an ideology. In our analysis of #Chadolf #Kitler, intermusicality plays an important role. *Erika*, a marching song used by the Nazi army – which was spotted 24 times in our corpus – is widely used on the TikTok platform. Various techniques are used to transform the sound (cutting and/or editing the musical extract, slowing down the speed or singing the melody), leading to new "original sounds" (this is the term used by the platform). These are then renamed and circulated. As far as

8 We propose the notion of a "homemade" meme as referring to a variation the aim of which is far removed from the original meme (see Simon 2024b). Homemade memes are the result of a process of reappropriation and are an extreme example of the process of variation, owing to a high degree of subjectivity and creative originality. Homemade memes are usually based on images of original cats (pet cats photographed or filmed in private).

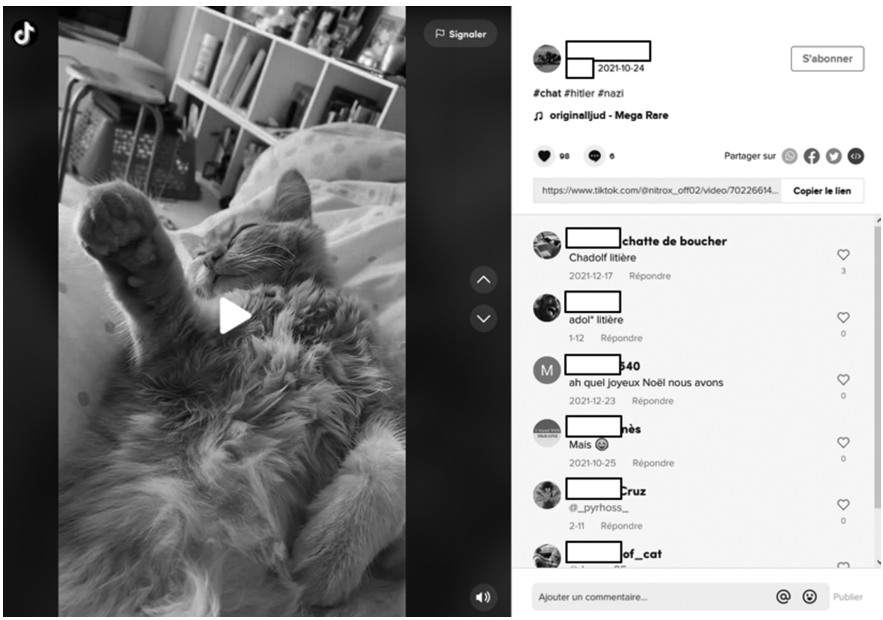


Fig. 4: Homemade #Chadolf #Kitler meme: anonymised screenshot of a TikTok post.

Erika is concerned, this is viral music. And the variations are manifold. In one mashup in particular, *Erika* is associated with cute music widely used to represent cats. An intermusical comparison is made memetically: cute music resonating with a cute kitten video vs. military music accompanying #Chadolf #Kitler (2022–08–23).

To conclude this section on intermusicality, we also wish to mention the musical hijacking of Nyan Cat's music. We did not come across it directly in our corpus, but it corresponds to the hijacked GIF (see Fig. 3) shared as a still image. A voiceover is added to the soundtrack, hammering out "Nein, Nein, Nein" over and over again. The video behind the gif was created in 2012 and has since generated 1.3 million views on YouTube[9] alone.

9 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKNtaM_J_Cg.

2 Argumentative Positioning of #Chadolf #Kitler Publications

Reappropriations of #Chadolf #Kitler are wide-ranging within the social networks studied and can shed light on the "argumentative dimension" of discourses in a context of viral sharing.

In the book by Ruth Amossy (2000), the emphasis is on discourse with an "argumentative dimension", whose aim is not explicitly to persuade. This point of view, which broadens the definition of argumentation, sees discourse as fundamentally oriented, in that it aims to share a vision of things, an attitude, a questioning. Discourses with no explicit argumentative aim – such as academic discourse, for example – are fundamentally bearers of a vision and values that we seek to share. Based on this line of reasoning, it follows that the very choice to share images that refer to Nazism upholds values (for or against Nazi ideology), even if the persuasive aim is not explicit.

What is more, this trend is taking place against a backdrop of strong reappropriation by a multitude of players on an international scale. The participatory movement is therefore not neutral. #Chadolf #Kitler is situated in a discursive space that is "saturated" – in the Bakhtinian sense – with previous positions and stimulated by value systems that are constantly being reappropriated.

In this section, we summarise the categories uncovered in an article on "shocking images" (Simon 2023), for which accompanying texts (*discours d'escorte*) play a key role. The image/accompanying text combination constitutes what Marie-Anne Paveau calls the "technodiscursive unit" (Paveau 2017). For this study, a number of markers were identified as significant from the point of view of the argumentative positioning of digital discourse. However, in many cases (12% for Twitter, 25% for Instagram and 11% for TikTok), we did not have enough information to be able to give a clear interpretation of the orientation of the publications, even after looking at the user's biography or publication feed. As for the rest of the publications, the argumentative positioning varies from case to case (see Tab. 3). In around a third of publications, we can speak of a pro-Nazi argumentative stance (category *a.* corresponding to hate discourse, where TikTok is over-represented with 65% of publications) and in another third, we can say that the discourse assumes a point of view close to Nazi ideology, but that the discursive means used are diverted (category *b.* Concealed hate discourse, where Twitter publications are more strongly represented: 50%). The other three categories are as follows: *c.* Neutral positioning (neither pro-Nazi nor anti-Nazi, where Instagram has a strong presence with 34% of publications), *d.* Weak denunciation of forms of violence close to Nazi ideology (only 3.5% of publications in total),

e. Strong stance against Nazism or a related extremist ideology (4.5% of the total corpus, with Twitter strongly represented).

2.1 #Chadolf #Kitler as Fuelling Hate Discourse

The analysis reveals that around 16 percent of the publications studied and shared on Twitter genuinely assume an antisemitic and pro-Nazi point of view. Indications of this are both textual (use of the untransformed words "Adolf Hitler", "Jew", "jew", etc.) and image-based (archive imagery depicting Hitler or other Nazis in uniform; image hijacking with a collage of the Nazi armband on the cat's paw explicitly showing the swastika). The intention is openly assumed by anonymous accounts that sometimes include the word "Nazi" in their pseudonyms or exploit the nationalist symbolism of the French flag (in a nationalist French context). Nyan Cat is turned into #Nyanzi, with a swastika and skull and crossbones in the background (see Fig. 3).

The depiction of so-called "Nazi cats" is also a means of supporting certain political figures, such as Éric Zemmour, leader of a French far-right party. The publication "Cats with Zemmour" (2021–11–04) uses the image of the cat we called "villain" (see Tab. 2) in a participatory reply thread, where everyone contributes their own image referring to the Nazi regime. Publications shared via this thread all use offbeat images to defend the French future presidential candidate (a building seen from the sky in the shape of a swastika, for example). Scathing humour is exploited to foster participatory complicity in a militant context.

Some content may have been created out of pure antisemitic provocation (e.g., a photograph of a live cat resting on a barbecue called a "Jewish cat", [2020–06–03]), while other content expresses forms of violence, particularly in the conflictual context of Russia's attack on Ukraine (e.g., the sharing of a photograph of a cat being grilled on a barbecue, [2022–02–24]).

Nine percent of Instagram posts are argumentative. We find archival images of Nazi soldiers photographed alongside a cat (2017–11–14). Cats are personified as Nazis with the addition of swastika armbands or scarves (2017–09–07).

Most of the publications in our corpus that were shared on TikTok are pro-Nazi propaganda (65%). Some convey explicit and performative hate messages, based on a clear desire to harm a third party (example of a text sung and displayed on the screen: "*You're gonna die* [image of the Israeli flag]. *I'm gonna kill you* [image of a #Chadolf and photo of Hitler as a child]", [2021–11–09]).

On all three networks, hashtags not only play an indexing role; they also serve as a means of affective expression and position-taking[10], as in the case of the distorted hashtags #meinkrampft, #natzi or even #hxtler, which constitute forms of "crypto-language" to escape censorship (Saemmer 2019, 129).

2.2 #Chadolf #Kitler as Concealed Hate Discourse

On Twitter, half the publications in our corpus can be considered concealed hate discourse[11]. Not all of them are humorous. Concealed hate discourse is often characterised by the use of short formats and a laconic style. In the study of accompanying text, it is important to consider the enunciative postures of tweeters, who often more or less discreetly express agreement or disagreement. The French pun "Adolf Litter" (extended to an image game), for example, is widely circulated. Marking reactions as humorous is a way of defusing the serious dimension and removing responsibility. The hashtags #meme, #lol, #haha and #funny create distance. The memetic formula "Gets me everytime" was used by a tweeter introducing the hashtag #cathitler above a visual comparison depicting a cat with a black moustache on the left and a portrait photograph of Adolf Hitler on the right (2012–12–10).

On Instagram (29.5%), the image of the cat associated with the Nazi regime is also strongly represented in an indirect way. A photo montage on Instagram depicts a photo of a Nazi figure looking at a black *maneki neko* (literally "inviting cat": A Japanese symbol of a lucky cat with its right arm raised) (2013–04–23). Another photograph shows an aggressive-looking black and white cat. The text "Der Nyan Führer" is added to the image, and the accompanying text reads "Meanwhile, not far from Germany" (2013–09–18). In a final, seemingly humorous example of implicit ideological commitment, we see a photograph of a cat watching TV. The cat stretches out in front of the screen showing Hitler performing a Nazi salute. The text reads "Never leave your cat alone/Adolf Hitler 1939 #heil, #nazicat #nazi #nazimemes #adolfhitlermemes #adolfhitler #adolf #hitler #castofinstagram #cats" (2017–12–04). Several Instagram publications showcase Nazi cat figurines (see Fig. 5). The personified cat wears a collar adorned with an iron cross, a military cap with the golden eagle, a cane sporting a skull and crossbones, or a Ger-

10 On the use of hashtags, see Cervulle and Pailler (2014) or Mercier (2018b).

11 Fabienne Baider and Maria Constantinou (2019) offer a good explanation of the methodological difficulties that can be encountered in studies of concealed hate discourse, insofar as it is not explicitly discriminatory, but is a "discursive or semiotic manifestation that can implicitly or covertly incite hatred, violence and/or exclusion of the other" (12).

Fig. 5: Pop objects by #Chadolf #Kitler: anonymised screenshot of an Instagram post.

man army semi-automatic pistol. The hashtags #ToyLover #Kitler accompany these photographs, suggesting that there are communities of fans who make and exchange pop objects in reference to the German Reich.

Humour is also used extensively on TikTok (17%) to disguise ideological positioning. In one post, a cat is filmed with a voiceover speaking in different languages: "Kitty kitty kitty" [on-screen text "In American: kitty kitty kitty", the cat sleeps], "not working", "tsits tsits tsits" ["In Hungarian: tsits tsits tsits"], "no" ["no + interrogative *emoji*"], "Stardenburdenhardenbart" [German expression used to attract the attention of animals – highly intensified voice, exaggerated German accent; on-screen text: "In German: Stardenburdenhardenbut!" and in the image, the cat stands up], "yea, German always works". The accompanying text is "catolf" (2021–10–27).

2.3 Neutral Positioning

Only 4 percent of the Twitter posts in our corpus are neutral. These come from informational accounts and present news in a disengaged way. On TikTok, neutral publications are rare (3.5%), but on Instagram, different ways of talking

about one's cat (and above all about oneself) can be found, which in a way sideline the pro- or anti-Nazi debate (34%). These are forms of de-ideologisation (see Jereczek-Lipińska 2009; Noël 2020), often achieved through the representation of the self in its intimacy. Selfie photography with a cat named "kitler" has become widespread, without any strong commitment. The preferred register is a form of self-enhancement for the purposes of sociability with other owners of cats of this type.

2.4 Weak Denunciation of Forms of Violence Reminiscent of Nazi Ideology

Twitter (6%) and TikTok (3.5%) offer examples of weak denunciation of forms of violence comparable to Nazism. Narrative is a mode of writing specific to this category. We find publications that deplore the violence that may have been inflicted on cats in a way that is both committed and anecdotal. We are no longer in a playful, funny register. The emotions highlighted are more dramatic. For example, one tweeter uses the reference to Nazi cats persecuting Jewish mice in Art Spiegelman's work to take offence at the presence of a #Chadolf in his garden (2015–04–23). A TikTok publication also creates a form of dramatic narrative in this way by filming a cat located behind the windows of a house from a distance. The zoom in on the cat accompanied by music is worthy of a horror film ("Scary Halloween Sound Effects") and creates a sense of stupefaction, reinforced by the hashtags used: #flippant #flippantquandmeme ("freaky", "really freaky") (2021–10–04).

2.5 Strong Stance Against Nazism or a Related Extremist Ideology

It was mainly on Twitter that publications opposing rhetoric related to Nazi ideology were spotted (12%). Most examples of the criticism encountered need to be seen in the French political context as expressions of opposition to the far-right parties in that country (the Rassemblement National [RN] and the Reconquête! party led by Éric Zemmour). On 23 October 2021, a Twitter account published a photo of a #Chadolf #Kitler accompanied by the following ironic rant: "Urgent: Éric Zemmour has lost his cat, it answers to the sweet name of Adolf. Hysterical, megalomaniac and schizophrenic, he doesn't have an easy-going personality!!!! @BFMTV". The response is the device favoured by Twitter users, as it enables them to create a form of counter-discourse. Adding a mention enables direct interaction with the targeted

tweeter using criticism or mockery. Another publication again uses the interactive device of the Twitter response to denounce Russian propaganda with irony. Letweet shows cats in Russia with the hashtag #RussianCats, surrounded by red heart emojis. The image inserted in the reply shows a cat lying on a 140x200 comforter cover printed with a swastika motif ("wow cute cat!!", [2022–03–05]).

Conclusion

The various transformations observed in the #Chadolf #Kitler memes demonstrate a surge in creativity within a participatory culture the communicative purpose of which can be highly ambiguous. This incongruity can be found at textual, hypertextual (with hashtags), visual and musical levels (with remixed versions of the *Erika* song, for example). An argumentative analysis of discourses representing a #Chadolf #Kitler has revealed different forms of argumentative positioning in relation to the question of Nazi ideology, but these can be difficult to interpret.

Users with racist, antisemitic, misogynistic, homophobic, etc., tendencies are constantly creating and reinventing hateful content. The choice of words and images is not left to chance (like with the meme Pepe the Frog [Pettis 2018], which in several countries has been appropriated by the alt-right), and mobilisation is all the more effective in a participatory context. A simple publication of a cat looking like Hitler can be considered in isolation as a joke in bad taste. But if repeated and spread virally, it can become an ideological battleground[12]. The sheer number of reappropriations leads us to believe that #Chadolf #Kitler constitutes, at the very least, a joke, and more probably a form of trivialised violence. Participation is also driven by the tenderness and playfulness of the animal. The strategic use of "cuteness" serves the "banality of evil" (an expression borrowed from the work by Hannah Arendt and central to the analysis by Vincent Lavoie [2020]).

The #Chadolf #Kitler is thus reclaimed as a new paradigm for trivialising violence. The pathos that is created in this form of participatory culture based on anthropomorphism turns very much to LULZ practices (the altered plural of LOL meaning "laughter at the expense of others"; see Allard 2019; Coleman 2022) by

12 The mere creation of the word #Kitler brings into existence a reality that, before it was given a name, did not exist. And the display of black and white cats gives an ideological connotation to an ordinary reality that may not previously have had any particular importance. Nelly Quemener (2009) analyses this performativity of humour in relation to talk-show sketches. In line with the thinking of John L. Austin and Judith Butler, she insists that if something or someone is not named, it does not exist. The performativity of #Chadolf #Kitler's humour must thus be analysed by considering the strength of the sociodiscursive context of participatory culture.

exploiting often very negative emotions (hatred, anger, etc.). This transgressive nature is representative of the collective "fun" that characterises LULZ culture, which originated in alternative networks (4chan, 9gag, Tumblr or Reddit). Transgressive games aim to challenge an established order, whatever the ideological objective. LULZ practices in this case are used to convey racist, antisemitic, homophobic discrimination and violence.

The memetic virality of #Chadolf #Kitler not only serves pro-Nazi ideology, as a good number of publications also exploit ambiguity because it is not always clear whether they are meant to be taken at face value or not. From the vantage point of the person receiving the message, humour is not always detectable, as it depends on a relationship of complicity that is not always established. We would emphasise that all the publications analysed were shared in public mode. The analysis would not have been the same in a restricted or private publication context.

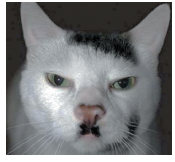
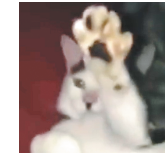
We believe that the virality of #Chadolf #Kitler still has a long life ahead of it. The incongruous analogy created from cats and Nazi ideology is a driver of virality. The question is: To what end?

Appendices

Tab. 1: General quantitative view of the corpus of social media publications (in numbers).

	Date of first publication	Date of last publication	Total publications collected (447)
Twitter	January 16, 2012	March 25, 2022	176
Instagram	January 23, 2012	March 27, 2022	176
TikTok	August 29, 2020	March 18, 2022	95

Tab. 2: Representativeness of images included in #Chadolf #Kitler memes (in %).

	 **"Villain Chadolf"**	 **"Litter Chadolf"**	 **"Long-haired Chadolf"**	 **"Big white Chadolf"**	 **"Video Chadolf"**
Twitter	8.5	17	2	4.5	2
Instagram	4	8.5	0.5	5	2
TikTok	22	12.5	4	8.5	12.5
Total	11.5	12.5	2	6	5.5

Tab. 3: Summary of argumentative positions (in %).

	a. **Pro-Nazi argumentative aim: hate discourse**	***b.*** **Pro-Nazi argumentative dimension: concealed hate discourse**	***c.*** **Neutral positioning (neither pro- nor anti-Nazi)**	***d.*** **Weak denunciation of forms of violence reminiscent of Nazi ideology**	***e.*** **Strong stance against Nazism or a related extremist ideology**	**Difficult to interpret**
Twitter	16	50	4	6	12	12
Instagram	9	29.5	34	1	1.5	25
TikTok	65	17	3.5	3.5	0	11
Total	30	32	14	3.5	4.5	16

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