

Social Categorization, Moral Disengagement, and Credibility of Ideological Group Websites

Shane Connelly,¹ Norah E. Dunbar,² Matthew L. Jensen,¹ Jennifer Griffith,³
William D. Taylor,¹ Genevieve Johnson,¹ Michael Hughes,⁴
and Michael D. Mumford¹

¹Department of Psychology, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA, ²University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA, ³Alfred University, Alfred, NY, USA, ⁴Human Resources Research Organization, Alexandria, VA, USA

Abstract. The online presence of ideological groups has enabled the dissemination of group beliefs and ideas through a variety of new media outlets. Websites have offered a way for these groups to share aspects of their ideology and to create a sense of shared identity. While ideological groups have been of interest for decades, little empirical research has examined their online presence. The aims of this study were to compare nonviolent and violent ideological group websites with each other and with nonideological websites with respect to social categorization, moral disengagement, and website credibility, and to examine the relationships of psychological processes to website credibility. A content analysis approach was used to rate 105 websites (violent = 32, nonviolent = 36; nonideological = 37) for aspects of social categorization, outgrouping, moral disengagement, content features of credibility, and structural features of credibility. Violent ideological group websites manifest a greater degree of social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement than nonviolent ideological and nonideological websites. Regression analysis shows that these three variables negatively predict content and structural website credibility for nonviolent ideological groups but do not significantly predict website credibility for violent groups or nonideological groups. Potential limitations include small sample, use of raters (vs. normative website visitors) to evaluate websites, inclusion of only English-language websites, limited number of psychological processes examined and the potential need for more specific website categories. Social identity processes on websites vary for different types of groups and impact perceived credibility of such groups in online environments.

Keywords: ideological groups, psychological processes, ideological websites, website credibility, social identity

The increasing Internet presence of ideological groups has generated interest in understanding more about what these groups do and how they exert influence in online environments. Broadly speaking, ideological groups have clear, persistent, strongly held values and beliefs that serve as a mental model or guiding framework for understanding and interpreting events, information, and the world in general (Mumford et al., 2008; Van Dijk, 2006). Ideological groups have a presence on social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter and develop their own websites designed to serve a variety of information dissemination, advocacy, and community-building goals (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997; Matusitz & O’Hair, 2008; Schafer, 2002; Stanton, 2002). Groups that create a website have the ability to present and promote beliefs, ideas, and opinions to anyone with access to the Internet – especially those who already share the ideology, others who may be exploring alternative ideologies and social identities, and still others who might oppose the ideology. The potential for promulgating ideological views is virtually unlimited.

A number of nonviolent civic, religious, and political ideological groups such as the Sierra Club, the United Methodist Church, and the Jewish Voice for Peace have websites that offer a range of information about their ideologies, mission, history, and current events, and provide opportunities for dialogue with, and involvement in, the group. These groups tend to have prosocial ideologies as expressed in group mission statements like “promoting the responsible use of the earth’s ecosystems and resources” (<http://www.sierraclub.org>) or “working together for peace, social justice, and human rights ... to support the aspirations for Israelis and Palestinians for security and self-determination” (<http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org>). Unfortunately, there are analogous ideological groups such as the Animal Liberation Front, the Army of God, and the English Defence League that sanction violence and hate in service of their ideologies. These group ideologies and associated missions reflect intolerance and contempt.

It is critically important to understand the similarities and differences in the online presence and influence of

nonviolent ideological groups and violent groups that propagate violence, target youths, and provide information and resources that perpetuate hate (Schafer, 2002). First, online access has increased exponentially with the global reach of the Internet and with the high potential for mass replication and proliferation of novel, interesting, or extreme views through varied social media outlets. This may be especially true for younger generations of digital natives, who understand, seek out, and routinely use digital technology. Second, ideological groups seek to influence or even convert neutral observers and do so through a number of means (Frischlich & Rieger, 2013). For example, they create strong online communities that are not immediately recognizable as extremist. Additionally, they may attract youths online, using this forum to promote offline activities such as concerts, volunteer opportunities, or other leisure activities to further socialize and indoctrinate them toward the ideology. At least one study has shown that propaganda from violent extremist groups has been rated as interesting and persuasive despite the fact that this material was also rated as unpleasant, one-sided, and aversive (Frischlich & Rieger, 2013), suggesting that these groups have surmounted an important first persuasive hurdle of getting people to pay attention. Youths whose identities are still forming and who are seeking to “belong” somewhere may be especially vulnerable to, and drawn in by, these kinds of online influences. Their limited life experiences and lower levels of skepticism may increase the likelihood that youths will accept ideological groups as legitimate and credible (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008).

Websites sponsored by ideological groups are of particular interest due to the degree of control groups have over the content and structure of their websites. Prior research has shown that the websites of violent ideological groups are more difficult to access, have more stringent rules and regulations on discussion boards, and offer less user control over online settings and content (Griffith et al., 2013; Jensen et al., 2013). Additionally, these websites may be subject to less monitoring and scrutiny than social media websites, such as Facebook, which have terms of service policies that forbid overt threats and hate speech (Heath & O’Hair, 2009; Facebook terms of service policy), enabling violent groups to advocate their views with less threat of being detected, blocked, or shut down. Websites also enable groups to attract individuals who would otherwise be unable or unwilling to attend functions or meetings but who still express an interest in the group’s ideology and desire to participate in the group (Lee & Leets, 2002).

Some important differences have been identified between violent and nonviolent group websites (Griffith et al., 2013) and discussion forums (Angie et al., 2011), but additional research is needed. Griffith et al. (2013) compared violent and nonviolent group websites from a communication and media-use perspective, examining information variety, types of media used, member characteristics (number of members, average member tenure, amount of active member participation), member control, and website functionality. Violent group websites contained more progroup information, displayed more emotionally evocative images, and had a more tightly controlled online

presence than nonviolent groups. They also used multiple media types such as videos, flyers, newsletters, and music to share information. Online activities of ideological groups have also been studied with respect to psychological processes. In a study of discussion forum messages on a small number of violent ($n = 9$) and nonviolent ideological group websites ($n = 10$), Angie et al. (2011) showed that violent group discussions exhibited social identity formation (i.e., encouraging integration with the group through participation), moral superiority (i.e., conveying a sense of righteousness and superiority of the ideology), self-expression (i.e., discussing/displaying group symbols), dehumanization (i.e., discussing/outgroup members in derogatory ways), ethnic outgrouping (i.e., demonizing ethnic minorities as the cause of current injustices or life conditions), and moral disengagement, to a greater extent than nonviolent group discussions. It is unclear whether these patterns would be similar in a larger set of violent group websites. Additionally, we do not know if these same psychological processes are present beyond the discussion boards and appear on the general areas of these group websites, or whether these processes influence perceptions of website credibility. Examination of group websites is important because this reflects the public face of the group. Furthermore, not all visitors to the website will view or participate in discussions on message boards. Accordingly, the present study had two main purposes. The first was to compare and contrast violent ideological, nonviolent ideological, and nonideological group websites with regard to the presence of several psychological processes, including social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement mechanisms. The second purpose was to evaluate how these psychological processes influence perceptions about the credibility of website content and structure for these groups.

Ideological Groups and Social Identity

People are attracted to ideological groups for a variety of reasons. These groups provide sets of defined beliefs, structure and meaning in life, and predictable social interactions that reduce uncertainty and threat (Hogg, 2007; Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Mumford et al., 2008). Social identity develops through group membership and emotional attachment to a group, with the knowledge that the group is distinct in positive ways from other groups (Hogg, 2003; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007) suggests that self-concept uncertainty motivates people to seek out social identities through group identification. Groups that have a clear sense of purpose, well-defined goals, and internal homogeneity provide unambiguous prescriptions for how members should think, feel, and behave. Individuals with uncertain self-conceptions are attracted to these types of unified and highly cohesive groups, including ideological groups, because they reduce uncertainty. In establishing and maintaining their social identities, ideological groups may encourage social categorization by highlighting the

uniqueness of their beliefs and values relative to other groups (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002) or by proclaiming superiority over groups with competing views (Angie et al., 2011; Parker & Janoff-Bulman, 2013). The anonymity of the virtual community may perpetuate identification with the ideological group by giving individuals the opportunity to routinely socialize with other like-minded individuals and act on extremist views. Virtual communities have the ability to provide social identity, structure, and support for extremist views.

Violent and nonviolent ideological groups are likely to differ in their use of social categorization. Violent ideological groups not only define themselves through a specific ideology or worldview, but are also willing to take more extreme actions to promote, defend, and protect that worldview from outside threats. Hogg and colleagues (2010) suggest that this may be the appeal of extremist groups to individuals high in identity uncertainty or who feel their own self-concept is threatened. The willingness of these groups to aggressively defend and promote their agendas, sometimes through violent actions, provides a sense of security and can promote greater identification with and loyalty to these groups (Hogg, 2005, 2007; Hogg et al., 2010). Other research has suggested that different dimensions of social identity may differentiate violent and nonviolent groups (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). Subjective identification with, and attachment to, a group's ideology is one aspect of social identity characterized by internal focus on the group of interest, something that fosters critical evaluation of the group's actions (Leidner, Castano, Zaiser, & Giner-Sorolla, 2010), which may explain why many ideological groups never become violent. Alternatively, social identity can be rooted in glorifying the group, emphasizing the superiority of the group relative to other groups, and showing unquestioning deference and loyalty to the group's ideology, leadership, rules, symbols, and actions (Roccas et al., 2006). This aspect of social identification is not conducive to critical internal evaluation, enabling a group to justify hate and other acts of violence toward others who do not share their views. In light of this, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Violent ideological group websites will display more extreme social categorization in the form of group differentiation, group superiority, and disagreement with dissenting views than nonviolent ideological and nonideological group websites.

Ideological Groups and Outgrouping

Ingroup glorification is associated with other psychological processes also likely to differentiate violent and nonviolent ideological group websites, such as outgrouping. A number of theories identify potential threats that motivate outgrouping (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). For example, realistic group conflict theory (RGCT) suggests that competition for

scarce resources results in bias toward outgroups (Bobo, 1983; Sherif & Sherif, 1969). Symbolic threats to group values and beliefs have also been shown to increase intergroup bias, negative stereotypes, and racism (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2000). Threats to a group's perceived value or to its distinctiveness as a group can also lead to denigration of the source of the threat, which is often an outside group that holds different or opposing views (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This tendency toward positive evaluation of one's own group and negative evaluation of outgroups, known as intergroup bias, has been linked to the self-enhancement and the self-esteem of individual group members (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Ideological groups may exhibit intergroup bias more than nonideological groups because the beliefs and values at the very core of these groups' existence are susceptible to symbolic and perceived group value threats, especially when the ideology falls outside of mainstream or normative societal views. One form of outgrouping often seen in violent ideological groups is discrimination and hate toward ethnic minorities (Angie et al., 2011; Hogg, 2003; Moghaddam, 2005; Pittinsky, Shih, & Trahan, 2006). The ideologies of some hate groups are framed around "protecting" the ingroup from the threat of destruction by the enemy rival ethnic group. Violence in these groups is often viewed as a justifiable means to various ends such groups have in mind (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). These extreme forms of outgrouping are the consequence of decreased self-sanctioning or self-reprimanding associated with moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999).

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Violent ideological groups will display outgrouping, in the form of seeing outgroups as enemies, negatively comparing the outgroup to others, and distorting information about the outgroup, to a greater extent than nonviolent ideological and nonideological group websites.

Ideological Groups and Moral Disengagement

Moral agency has both proactive and inhibitive components, in that individuals and groups can initiate actions that are right, just, and humane, or refrain from actions that are wrong, unjust, and inhumane (Bandura, 1999). Social cognitive theory (SCT) suggests that inhibitive or self-regulatory aspects of moral agency need to be activated in order for people to recognize and do what is right (Bandura, 1989). However, there are a number of ways people can bypass self-regulatory processes, resulting in selective disengagement from reflection on unethical behavior and self-sanctioning both before and after the behavior has occurred. First, reprehensible behavior and the consequences of such behavior can be cognitively restructured or framed in ways that make it seem acceptable or even morally correct. Cognitive restructuring mechanisms include moral justification (e.g., killing an enemy

that threatens one's way of life or survival), euphemistic language (e.g., eliminate a target vs. kill a person), advantageous comparison of the reprehensible behavior with other more destructive or widespread atrocities, and disregard for or distortion of the consequences (e.g., a group uses hateful language without acknowledging the violence and discrimination that results from this). Second, moral agency can be weakened by lessening personal responsibility for one's actions through displacing responsibility onto leaders or authorities (e.g., "I was just following orders"), or diffusing responsibility through division of labor or group decision making such that no one person feels accountable. Third, it is easier to commit violent or unjust acts against others who are made to seem less than human or when attributions of blame are assigned to these victims. A quote cited by Akins (2006) from a Ku Klux Klan website exemplifies many of these moral disengagement mechanisms:

Enemies from within are destroying the United States of America. An unholy coalition of anti-White, anti-Christian liberals, socialists, feminists, homosexuals, and militant minorities have managed to seize control of our government and mass media... We shall liberate our nation from these savage criminals and restore law and order to America. (Akins, 2006, p. 129)

Extremist ideological groups may manifest greater moral disengagement than more mainstream ideological groups and nonideological groups on their websites. First, the extreme beliefs and views held by these groups make it difficult for them to work through normal political and social channels to accomplish goals (Akins, 2006). Consequently, these groups may turn to coercive or violent actions to perpetuate their ideologies. For example, the Animal Liberation Front is an international underground group that engages in unlawful destruction of facilities and removal of animals from laboratories and other locations in support of their animal rights and liberation ideology. Website content can be framed in ways that enable group members to morally justify violent actions. Second, the ideologies of some extreme groups are grounded in hatred toward other groups. Identifying one or more groups of enemies that threaten the ideological values of the group provides fertile ground for dehumanizing others, blaming outgroups, and selectively interpreting or distorting outcomes of group actions. The Ku Klux Klan's White supremacy, anti-immigration ideology exemplifies these types of hate groups. Third, members of these groups who are highly identified with the group ideology are likely to be loyal to the group and its leaders (Angie et al., 2011; Hogg, 2003; Roccas et al., 2006). Calls to action on group websites make it easy to displace or diffuse responsibility for individual actions. In light of these observations, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Violent ideological group websites will display moral disengagement mechanisms to a greater extent than nonviolent ideological and nonideological group websites.

While websites offer many opportunities for ideological groups to disseminate ideas and motivate members to support the group, little is known about how the psychological processes on these websites are related to aspects of website credibility.

Ideological Website Credibility and Psychological Processes

Information credibility has been conceptualized as the believability of information and/or its source (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), and it is assumed that credibility assessments involve both objective judgments and subjective receiver perceptions (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010). Research on the credibility of websites suggests that at least two general categories of factors are important in understanding website credibility: content features and structural features (Metzger, 2007; Metzger et al., 2010; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). Initial research highlighted five content criteria potentially important for assessing the credibility of a website: information accuracy (free of errors), authority (credentials and/or qualifications of website author), objectivity (fact vs. opinion), currency (information is up-to-date), and coverage or scope (depth of information) (Alexander & Tate, 1999; Brandt, 1996). Structural features of a website may also inform credibility judgments. Aesthetic qualities of the website, opportunities to examine or provide feedback, contact information, website architecture that facilitates navigation, and attractiveness and dynamism of a website have been shown to influence user assessments of credibility (Hong, 2006; Metzger, 2007; van Birgelen, Wetzels, & van Dolen, 2008).

Metzger's review of online credibility research (Metzger, 2007) noted that several studies using a variety of samples demonstrated that Internet users rarely or occasionally engaged in fact-checking or verifying kinds of behavior to evaluate website credibility. More recent research has suggested that evaluation of credibility may be less tied to information accuracy than it is tied to perceived trustworthiness. Metzger, Flanagin, and Medders (2010) suggest that rather than evaluating the credibility of website information in a cognitively effortful manner, credibility assessments rely on social information and cognitive heuristics. Their focus group study findings showed that credibility assessments were influenced by social heuristics such as social information pooling (e.g., user-generated comments, testimonials, reviews, reputation systems), social confirmation of personal opinion (e.g., users share similar interests, personalities, viewpoints), interpersonal recommendations (referrals from friends), cognitive heuristics such as endorsements of the website (expert opinions, ratings, links to other credible sites or groups), and confirmation of expectancies (e.g., appearance as expected, information consistent with own views).

In terms of structural website features, research by Fogg (2003) showed that people most frequently use site presentation criteria (graphics, readability, navigation ease,

functionality) to evaluate credibility, followed by content features (e.g., breadth, accuracy, bias), source motives (e.g., did source have something to gain), and source reputation (e.g., name recognition, third-party endorsements). These findings were consistent with results of other studies (Eysenbach & Köhler, 2002; Rieh, 2002).

In considering credibility assessments of ideological websites, several points are important to bear in mind. Given that some viewers of ideological websites are seeking to confirm or adopt a social identity, their evaluations of credibility may be particularly susceptible to social confirmation and cognitive expectancy biases. If ideological websites provide social confirmation of one's personal views or are a good match with one's beliefs and values, they are likely to be viewed as more credible (Metzger et al., 2010). Alternatively, if the content or structural features of an ideological website run counter to one's expectations for that website, this expectancy violation is likely to reduce credibility. These biases have implications for how psychological processes on a website might relate to perceived ideological match or expectancy violation. For instance, the presence of social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement on violent ideological group websites is likely to match the beliefs and values, and confirm the expectations, of individuals seeking to adopt or confirm this kind of extreme identity. However, individuals looking to identify with nonviolent ideologies may find the presence of social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement processes on nonviolent websites incongruent with the beliefs and values highlighted on those sites, which could adversely influence credibility.

These psychological processes could be related to website credibility even for viewers not seeking identity or affiliation with the group. Violent ideological groups may recognize the need to include certain content and structural features that will make the group seem credible to a broader range of viewers in the face of the extreme ideas, beliefs, and values that comprise their ideologies. When outgrouping, social categorizing, and moral disengagement are infused within a violent ideology and are present on a group's website, credibility features aimed at boosting goodwill, expertise, currency, and trustworthiness may also be more pervasive. This would not necessarily hold true for nonviolent ideological group websites which may not see as much need to appeal to viewers other than through their ideology. While goodwill is likely to be part of nonviolent ideologies, features reflecting currency or expertise may not be highlighted to the extent they are on violent ideological websites.

Accordingly, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement will correlate positively with website content credibility features for violent ideological groups and negatively for nonviolent ideological groups.

It is less clear how social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement might relate to structural features of website credibility for different types of ideological

groups. Given that structural features influence credibility (Metzger et al., 2010) and that these features are particularly important when individuals first visit a website (Davern, Te'eni, & Moon, 2000), this may be important to examine. Here again, violent ideological groups may see the need to use structural website features to attract and retain visitors, such as how well the website is organized, suggesting a positive correlation of structural features and negative psychological processes. However, ideological groups in general may focus more on the ideas they are expressing and promoting and less on structural website features, so the relationship between psychological processes and structural features may be weak.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Will psychological processes on ideological websites be related to structural website features related to credibility for violent and nonviolent ideological groups?

The present study used content analysis to compare violent and nonviolent ideological group websites with each other and with nonideological group websites, on three sets of key variables: social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement. Additionally, this study sought to clarify whether and how these website characteristics relate to content and structural credibility website features and if these relationships differ across website types.

Method

Website Identification and Classification

Websites for actual groups represented at a national or international level were considered for inclusion in this study. Community or regional groups were not included because the size and visibility of such groups is likely much smaller. Websites eligible for consideration had to identify with a group that meets face-to-face or otherwise facilitates member connection and interactions through the computer-mediated contact. Three types of group websites were identified for this study: violent ideological, nonviolent ideological, and nonideological. A list of websites from prior research (Griffith et al., 2013) was used as a starting point, and other websites were identified through following links within these websites and through keyword Internet searches. Keyword search terms were based on the names of known ideological and nonideological groups (e.g., "the Ku Klux Klan" and "American Civil Liberties Union") and ideological issues (e.g., "animal rights"). An initial list of 120 websites was compiled for evaluation. Information from the "About Us," "Mission Statement," or "Statement of Purpose" area(s) of each website were reviewed and rated on several criteria by three trained coders to determine whether a website was ideological or nonideological. These criteria included whether the website (1) articulates a mental model about the goals the group seeks to obtain that is rooted in events of the past; (2) ties

interpretation of events to the mental model; (3) focuses on a few, core transcendent goals largely centered on a return to a past idealized state; and (4) rejects beliefs that are not congruent with the mental model. An overall mean across raters and criteria was computed for each website, and means were transformed into *z*-scores. Groups with a *z*-score greater than 1.00 were classified as ideological, and groups with a *z*-score less than -1.00 were classified as nonideological.

Examination of *z*-scores showed that several groups did not cleanly fall into a single category, and therefore those groups were removed from consideration. These groups included Oxfam International, Amnesty International, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Hare Krishna Society, Amitabha Buddhist Society, Students for a Democratic Society, Project Reason, La Leche League, Free Believers Network, Muslim Aid (UK), U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance, and American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). Additionally, face validity of group types was also taken into account to ensure that ratings matched overall impressions of the groups' ideological/nonideological standing. In several instances, groups received ratings that were incongruent with overall perceptions. These groups included the National Audubon Society and Save Our Wild Salmon. These groups showed ideological tendencies in some areas of the website while remaining nonideological in nature regarding other criteria. These groups, similar to those listed above, did not fit distinctly within one category and thus might have had an unintended influence on relationships between predictors and key outcomes. For that reason, these groups were also removed from the sample.

Ideological websites were identified and classified as violent if they met one or more of the criteria described by Griffith et al. (2013): (1) the website sanctions violence, (2) the website is associated with one or more other groups known to sanction violence, (3) members of the group represented on the website have been linked to acts of violence, and (4) the website or group has been classified as a hate group and/or a violent group by a reputable third party source (e.g., the Southern Poverty Law Center). Overall, this process resulted in a sample of 105 groups, with 68 groups categorized as ideological (violent = 32, nonviolent = 36) and 37 groups categorized as nonideological. The final list of selected websites was reviewed by three experts on ideological groups. The list is shown in Table 1.

Development of Content Rating Scales and Coding Process

Concurrent with developing the criteria for categorizing websites and the website list, we reviewed the literature addressing the topics of social categorization, moral disengagement, ideological groups, website characteristics, and credibility. Based on this review, definitions and rating metrics for the content coding were developed for key variables in each of these categories. Rating metrics were based on

the literature or were borrowed or adapted from previously validated metrics (Angie et al., 2011). The format of each rating scale included the construct definition along with a 5-point rating scale with examples anchoring the low, middle, and high end of the scale. Example ratings scales are provided in the Appendix, including one aspect of social categorization (superiority), one aspect of outgrouping (information distraction) and one aspect of moral disengagement (misrepresenting consequences).

Once rating scales were developed, six doctoral student coders from the Departments of psychology and communication were divided into two groups of three. Each group was randomly assigned to rate either the predictors or the criteria for the coding assigned that week, in an effort to minimize same source method bias. Thus, predictors and criteria for a given website were always rated by different groups of coders. Coding took approximately 4 months.

Rater Training

Raters were trained together in several ways prior to the coding. First, they were instructed to use a "surfing" perspective when scanning and reading the websites for information related to the variables of interest (Rains & Karmikel, 2009). Content analytic studies of websites often focus on the home page and other specific areas of the website to identify relevant information (e.g., Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003; Zhou, Reid, Qin, Chen, & Lai, 2005). A study by Griffith et al. (2013) analyzed website content at both primary and secondary levels within websites, demonstrating the need for exploring beyond the home page. This and other evidence has suggested that website study designs should include at least a second-level analysis (Symonenko, 2006). Accordingly, raters were instructed to expand their search for information relevant to the rating scales to the second level of each group's website and, if need be, to examine additional levels – for example, some of the structural credibility information such as contact information was found several levels into the website.

A second aspect of rater training involved frame-of-reference training (Bernardin & Buckley, 1981) to familiarize the coders with the variables of interest, the coding process, and rating errors that sometimes occur, such as central tendency and halo errors. Raters were provided with a complete set of rating scales for evaluating the predictors and criteria of interest. They practiced applying the rating scales on approximately eight ideological and nonideological websites not included in the present sample. After rating several websites independently, raters met to compare and discuss similarities and differences in how they applied each rating scale. When discrepancies existed, the relevant definition and scale anchors were reviewed and clarified, and discussion continued until the raters reached consensus regarding the application of that scale. Coding practice lasted for approximately 3 weeks until raters reached acceptable levels of interrater agreement.

Table 1. Ideological groups by category

Nonideological	Nonviolent ideological	Violent ideological ^a
Amateur Entomologists' Society	American Baptist Church	Aggressive Christianity Missionary Training Corps
American Association of Retired Persons	American Cause	Alpha 66
American Astronomical Society	American Civil Liberties Union	Americans for Truth About Homosexuality
American Botanical Council	Americans United	Anarchist Federation
American Cancer Society	Center for Bioethical Reform	Animal Liberation Front
American Diabetes Association	Christian Exodus	Army of God
American Fisheries Society	Coalition to Stop Gun Violence	Aryan Nations
American Heart Association	Coffee Party	The Barnes Review
American Meteorological Society	Council of Conservative Citizens	Creativity Movement
American Red Cross	Earth First!	Earth Liberation Front
American Sewing Guild	Federation for American Immigration Reform	English Defence League
American Trucking Associations	Freedom from Religion Foundation	The Family International
Amnesty International	Friends of the Earth	Ezzedeen Al-Qassam Brigade (Hamas)
Asian American Arts Alliance	Hadassah	Heterosexuals Organized for a Moral Environment
Association of Woodworking and Furnishing Suppliers	Independent American Party	Imperial Klans of America
Atomic Age Alliance	IslamiCity	Institute for Historical Review
Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America	Islamic Society of North America	Jewish Defense League
British Beatles Fan Club	Jewish Voice for Peace	Kingdom Identity Ministries
Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder	John Birch Society	Ku Klux Klan
Doctors without Borders	Latter Day Saints (Mormon) Church	League of the South
Habitat for Humanity	Libertarian Party	National Alliance
Jenny Craig	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People	National Association for the Advancement of White People
Lions Club	National Coalition for Men	National Democratic Front
Mensa	National Organization for Women	National Socialist Movement
Mustang Club	National Rifle Association	Negotiation is Over
National Association for Amateur Radio	NOH8 Campaign	Operation Rescue
National Association for the Self-Employed	ONE Campaign	Power of Prophecy
National Association of Miniature Enthusiasts	ProLife Action League	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
National Association of Rocketry	Sierra Club	Prairie Fire Organizing Committee
National Street Rod Association	Socialist Party USA	Sovereign Citizens
Photographic Society of America	Tea Party Nation	United for a Sovereign America
Shriners International	Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations	Volksfront
Society of Professional Journalists	United Methodist Church	Westboro Baptist Church
Special Olympics	United Pentecostal Church International	
Teamsters	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops	
US Tennis Association		
Yellow Ribbon Club		

Note. ^aIt is not recommended to visit violent, ideological group websites without extensive antivirus protection software and encryption service enabled on your computer.

During the coding process, rater agreement was empirically evaluated on a weekly basis between coders in each group, and any agreement problems were addressed. If agreement was low for a given week's coding (e.g., more than 25% of the rating scales had agreement below .60) coders were retrained, and the websites were recoded. Interrater agreement was calculated with an r^*_{wg} to estimate the degree of interchangeability of raters (Lindell & Brandt, 1999). This measure of reliability refers to the degree to which ratings made by coders are nearly identical (Kozlowski & Hattrup, 1992). Raters typically had very similar ratings, and this lack of variance made r^*_{wg} more suitable for assessing reliability than intraclass correlation interrater reliability estimates. The latter estimate will be artificially suppressed when ratings across coders lack variability (Stemler & Tsai, 2008; Tinsley & Weiss, 1975). Inter-coder agreement was acceptable for all measures including site credibility ($r^*_{wg} = .68$), structural credibility ($r^*_{wg} = .80$), social categorization ($r^*_{wg} = .76$), outgrouping ($r^*_{wg} = .75$), and moral disengagement ($r^*_{wg} = .95$).

Psychological Processes Rating Scales

Several psychological processes were measured by aggregating coder ratings on a number of metric rating scales. The *social categorization* scale ($\alpha = .93$) comprised four items: group differentiation (the degree to which the group compares and contrasts itself with others on its website), superiority (the extent to which the group expresses its own superiority and entitlement), disagreement with dissenting views (the degree to which the group rejects views differing from their core beliefs), and deindividuation (the degree to which group members are encouraged to view themselves as part of a group rather than individuals and to behave in ways consistent with group expectations). The second psychological process scale, *outgrouping*, consisted of three items ($\alpha = .96$). These were seeing outgroups as enemies (the extent to which the website portrays the world as black and white and that groups/individuals who do not share their views are enemies), information distortion (the degree to which the website misrepresents news and information about outgroups to serve ingroup beliefs and purposes), and negative social comparisons (the extent to which the website expresses negative social comparisons with the outgroup). The *moral disengagement* ($\alpha = .95$) scale was based on four of Bandura's (1999) dimensions: dehumanization (the degree to which the website deemphasizes human qualities and discourages compassion and sensitivity with regard to outgroups), misrepresentation of consequences (the extent to which the website distorts the relationships between the actions they advocate and the effects of those actions), euphemistic labeling (the extent to which language is sanitized to lessen the emotional intensity of the reality of the group's message or actions promoted), and displacement and diffusion of responsibility (the extent to which the website assigns blame to other groups or avoids taking responsibility).

Website Credibility Rating Scales

Website credibility was assessed on website content credibility and website structural credibility. *Content credibility* ($\alpha = .91$) refers to the extent to which the website attempts to appear as if providing credible content (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; McCroskey & Young, 1981). This scale contained five items: trustworthiness (extent to which the group website attempts to appear honest and reliable), fairness (the extent to which the group website attempts to appear objective and balanced), expertise (the extent to which the group website attempts to appear qualified and intelligent), goodwill (the extent to which the group website projects unselfishness and concern for others), and currency/recency (the extent to which information on the website is up-to-date). These were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *to a great extent*), and ratings were averaged across items and raters to form an overall score. *Website structural credibility* ($\alpha = .76$) refers to the structural composition of websites (Eysenbach & Köhler, 2002; Fogg, 2003; Metzger, 2007; van Birgelen et al., 2008). This scale contained six items: website organization, website architecture, and overall cleanness, which were rated on 5-point scales, and presence of privacy policy (Yes = 1, No = 0), presence of contact information for the group (Yes = 1, No = 0), and whether the website included a third-party endorsement (Yes = 1, No = 0). Item scores were averaged across items and coders to create an overall score for structural credibility features.

Covariates

Two other variables were assessed as controls in this study. To control for differences in the range of information provided on the websites about the groups, information diversity was assessed. This was a one-item rating of the degree to which the website provided a wide range of information about the group, ranging from 1 (*very narrow scope of information*), to 5 (*contains information about many topics relevant to the groups and the group's goals*). The second control variable indicated whether or not (Yes = 1, No = 0) the website fostered an online community where visitors could participate in discussion forums, comment on articles, or comment on blog posts. A yes response was assigned if one or more of these kinds of community activities were available.

Analyses

Basic descriptive statistics were calculated for the constructs of interest for each website category (nonideological, nonviolent ideological, and violent ideological). Simple *t* tests were conducted to test the first three hypotheses, using unpooled estimates for the few instances when homogeneity of variance was violated. Correlations and

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for psychological process and credibility by website type

	Nonideological (<i>n</i> = 37)		Nonviolent, ideological (<i>n</i> = 36)		Violent, ideological (<i>n</i> = 32)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social categorization (overall) ^{abc}	1.45	0.51	3.06	0.70	4.13	0.49
Group differentiation ^{abc}	1.47	0.80	3.10	1.12	4.38	0.56
Superiority ^{abc}	1.47	0.59	2.71	0.89	4.15	0.85
Disagree with dissenting views ^{abc}	1.59	0.77	3.67	0.91	4.54	0.53
Deindividuation ^{abc}	1.38	0.62	2.74	0.85	3.47	0.71
Outgrouping (overall) ^{abc}	1.20	0.54	2.62	0.99	4.16	0.55
Outgroups as enemies ^{abc}	1.17	0.67	2.50	1.20	4.20	0.71
Information distortion ^{abc}	1.17	0.34	2.70	0.90	4.06	0.76
Negative social comparisons ^{ac}	1.47	0.80	3.10	1.12	4.38	0.56
Moral disengagement (overall) ^{abc}	1.16	0.29	2.22	0.76	3.43	0.59
Misrep. consequences ^{abc}	1.18	0.39	2.19	0.96	3.35	0.69
Displace/diffuse responsibility ^{abc}	1.12	0.30	2.35	0.97	3.36	0.75
Euphemistic labeling ^{abc}	1.23	0.30	2.40	0.78	3.56	0.76
Dehumanization ^{abc}	1.14	0.51	1.95	0.79	3.42	0.80
Content credibility (overall) ^{abc}	3.90	0.60	3.48	0.70	2.33	0.59
Trustworthiness ^{abc}	4.08	0.64	3.50	0.85	2.46	0.72
Fairness ^{abc}	3.51	0.56	2.75	0.84	1.64	0.58
Expertise ^{abc}	3.96	0.85	3.30	0.80	2.52	0.79
Goodwill ^{bc}	4.04	0.82	3.51	1.05	2.03	0.80
Currency ^{bc}	4.04	0.87	4.34	0.55	3.02	1.15
Structure credibility (overall) ^{bc}	2.65	0.41	2.59	0.37	2.03	0.43
Website organization ^{bc}	4.05	0.71	3.93	0.59	2.98	0.95
Website architecture ^{bc}	3.41	1.02	3.39	1.02	2.26	0.89
Cleanness ^{bc}	3.71	0.75	3.72	0.74	2.59	0.98
Contact information	1.66	0.15	1.64	0.15	1.57	0.26
Privacy policy	1.59	0.23	1.53	0.24	1.46	0.29
Third party endorsement ^b	1.47	0.29	1.45	0.33	1.35	0.15

Notes. ^aSignificant mean differences between nonideological and nonviolent ideological websites; ^bSignificant mean difference between nonideological and violent ideological websites; ^cSignificant mean difference between nonviolent and violent ideological websites; unpooled estimates for the *t* statistic were used when homogeneity of variance was violated.

hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test H4 and the research question.

Results

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations at the scale and item level for the psychological processes and credibility constructs. With regard to social categorization, *t* tests showed significant differences in the overall scale mean and item-level means. Consistent with H1, violent ideological group websites ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.49$) showed greater social categorization than nonviolent ideological ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.70$) websites, $t(66) = -7.43$, $p < .001$. Both categories of ideological websites had higher mean levels of social categorization than nonideological group websites ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 0.51$), $t(71) = -11.19$, $p < .001$ (nonviolent), $t(67) = -22.037$, $p < .001$ (violent). The pattern of means for outgrouping and moral disengagement

was similar, with the violent websites showing the highest levels ($M_o = 4.16$, $SD = 0.55$; $M_{md} = 3.43$, $SD = 0.59$) and the nonviolent ideological websites ($M_o = 2.62$, $SD = 0.99$; $M_{md} = 2.22$, $SD = 0.76$) and nonideological websites ($M_o = 1.20$, $SD = 0.54$; $M_{md} = 1.16$, $SD = 0.29$) showing significantly lower levels, $t(66) = -7.99$, $p < .001$ (violent vs. nonviolent outgrouping), $t(67) = -22.45$, $p < .001$ (violent vs. nonideological outgrouping), $t(66) = -7.24$, $p < .001$ (violent vs. nonviolent moral disengagement), $t(67) = -19.76$, $p < .001$ (violent vs. nonideological moral disengagement). These results supported H2 and H3. Interestingly, the nonviolent ideological websites evidenced modest amounts of social categorization and outgrouping, suggesting that ideological groups in general use these processes in forming and maintaining distinct social identities. Content and structure credibility were higher for the nonideological ($M_c = 3.90$, $SD = 0.60$; $M_s = 2.65$, $SD = 0.41$), $t(67) = 10.92$, $p < .001$ (content), $t(66) = 5.98$, $p < .001$ (structure) and nonviolent ($M_c = 3.48$, $SD = 0.70$; $M_s = 2.59$, $SD = 0.37$), $t(66) = 7.28$,

Table 3. Nonideological website correlations for psychological processes and website credibility

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Social categorization	–						
2 Outgrouping	.86**	–					
3 Moral disengagement	.85**	.92**	–				
4 Information diversity	.27	.12	.07	–			
5 Online community	.06	–.07	.02	–.14	–		
6 Website content credibility	.05	–.08	–.12	.60**	–.05	–	
7 Website structural credibility	.19	.03	.09	.53**	.18	.67**	–

Note. $n = 37$. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Nonviolent and violent ideological website correlations for psychological processes and website credibility

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Social categorization	–	.70**	.52**	.00	.19	–.39*	–.43*
2 Outgrouping	.84**	–	.78**	–.10	.28	–.25	–.20
3 Moral disengagement	.77**	.82**	–	–.19	.24	–.31	–.10
4 Information diversity	–.16	–.26	–.17	–	–.45**	.41*	.35
5 Online community	.15	.27	.31	.11	–	–.23	–.37*
6 Website content credibility	–.65**	–.76**	–.59**	.12	–.42**	–	.47**
7 Website structural credibility	–.45**	–.65**	–.46**	.22	–.30	.82**	–

Note. $n = 36$ for nonviolent ideological websites (below the diagonal); $n = 32$ for violent ideological websites (above the diagonal). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

$p < .001$ (content), $t(62) = 5.51$, $p < .001$ (structure) websites compared with the violent ideological websites ($M_c = 2.33$, $SD = 0.59$; $M_s = 2.04$, $SD = 0.43$).

Correlations among the study variables by website category are shown in Tables 3 and 4. Social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement showed large, positive correlations for nonviolent ideological websites (avg. $r = .81$) and nonideological websites (avg. $r = .88$). Correlations for the violent ideological websites were also fairly large (avg. $r = .67$), with social categorization and moral disengagement showing the lowest correlation ($r = .52$). These psychological processes showed no relationship to website content credibility or structural credibility for the nonideological websites. However, they showed modest to large negative relationships with credibility for the nonviolent ideological websites, with an average correlation of $-.67$ for content credibility and $-.37$ for structural credibility. Comparatively, outgrouping and moral disengagement were not significantly related to either type of credibility for the violent ideological websites, while social categorization showed modest negative correlations with content credibility ($r = -.38$) and structural credibility ($r = -.43$).

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test H4 and RQ1, as shown in Table 5. Separate regressions were conducted for website content credibility and website structural credibility for each website category, with covariates entered in Step 1 and the three psychological processes entered in Step 2. Consistent with the zero-order correlations and H4, standardized beta coefficients indicated that social categorization ($\beta = -.14$), outgrouping ($\beta = -.78$), and moral disengagement ($\beta = .23$) accounted for significant variance in website content

credibility for nonviolent ideological groups, $R^2\Delta = .48$, $F(5, 31) = 3.72$, $p < .01$. The positive beta for moral disengagement was likely due to suppression effects given the high intercorrelations of these variables. With regard to the violent ideological websites, H4 suggested that these psychological processes would contribute positively to ratings of website content credibility. However, neither the covariates nor the psychological processes accounted for significant variance in website content credibility for the violent websites. Taken together, these findings partially supported H4 and suggest that these types of negative processes hurt content credibility perceptions more for nonviolent websites than for violent ones.

Regression analyses examining the relationships of psychological processes to website structural credibility showed a pattern of findings similar to the content credibility regressions. Covariates were not significantly related to ratings of structural credibility for either type of ideological website. However, as indicated by the standardized betas, social categorization ($\beta = .14$), outgrouping ($\beta = -.86$), and moral disengagement ($\beta = .14$) accounted for significant variance in website structural content for the nonviolent ideological websites, $R^2\Delta = .41$, $F(3, 32) = 7.37$, $p < .001$. Again, the positive betas are likely due to suppression. The psychological processes did not account for significant variance in website structural credibility for the violent ideological websites.

With regard to the nonideological groups, standardized betas indicated that information diversity ($\beta = .60$) was the only variable that accounted for significant variance in website content credibility, $R^2\Delta = .36$, $F\Delta(2, 34) = 9.36$, $p < .001$, and website structural credibility, $\beta = .57$,

Table 5. Relationships of social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement to website credibility across website type

	Nonideological websites ^a (n = 37)	Non-violent ideological websites ^b (n = 36)	Violent ideological websites ^c (n = 32)
<i>Website content credibility</i>			
Step 1 Information diversity	β .60**	β –	β –
Online community	.03	–	–
	$R^2 \Delta$.36	–	–
	R^2 Adjusted .32	–	–
Step 2 Social categorization	–	–.14	–
Outgrouping	–	–.78**	–
Moral disengagement	–	.23	–
	$R^2 \Delta$ ns	$R^2 \Delta$.48	–
	R^2 Adjusted ns	R^2 Adjusted .41	–
<i>Website structure credibility</i>			
Step 1 Information diversity	.57**	–	–
Online community	.26	–	–
	$R^2 \Delta$.35	–	–
	R^2 Adjusted .31	–	–
Step 2 Social categorization	–	.14	–
Outgrouping	–	–.86**	–
Moral disengagement	–	.14	–
	$R^2 \Delta$ ns	$R^2 \Delta$.41	–
	R^2 Adjusted ns	R^2 Adjusted .35	–

Note. ns = not significant; F values for Website Content credibility steps 1 and 2: ^a $F_{change1}(2, 34) = 9.36, p < .001$; $F_{change2}(3, 31) = 3.87, p < .69$; ^b $F_{change1}(2, 33) = 3.70, p < .04$; $F_{change2}(3, 30) = 11.54, p < .001$; ^ccovariates and predictors did not significantly contribute to content credibility for violent websites. F values for Website Structural credibility steps 1 and 2: ^a $F_{change1}(2, 34) = 9.06, p < .001$; $F_{change2}(3, 31) = .46, p < .72$; ^b $F_{change1}(2, 33) = 2.19, p < .13$; $F_{change}(3, 32) = 7.37, p < .001$; ^ccovariates and predictors did not significantly contribute to structural credibility for violent websites.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

$R^2 \Delta = .38, F \Delta(2, 34) = 9.06, p < .001$. Social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement did not significantly predict website content credibility or website structure credibility after controlling for information diversity and the presence of an online community.

Discussion

This study extends the research on the online presence of ideological groups in some important ways. First, it provides evidence that psychological processes important to social identity formation and ethical behavior are embedded within general areas (i.e., home pages, “About Us” pages) on websites developed by ideological groups. Ideological groups are important sources of social identity for some individuals. Their online public faces, as manifested through their websites, show the presence of social categorization (highlighting group distinctiveness and superiority) and outgrouping (diminishing outside groups) processes known to influence the development and maintenance of social identity (Hogg, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Additionally, websites of ideological groups also included content reflecting a number of moral disengagement mechanisms – mechanisms that reduce self-sanctioning and can increase the probability of

unethical behavior. Our comparison of the degree to which these psychological processes were present on violent and nonviolent ideological group websites indicated substantially higher levels of social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement on the violent sites. These findings are consistent with and extend prior findings with ideological group discussion forums and message boards (Angie et al., 2011). To some extent, all ideological groups in this sample appeared motivated to engage visitors and encourage group members online to initiate and enhance identification with the group. However, use of these processes was more pronounced on violent websites.

A second contribution of this research is that it highlights the relationship of psychological processes to website credibility and, by extension, group credibility for the different categories of websites examined. The psychological processes of social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement were unrelated to the websites’ structural and content credibility for nonideological groups. This may be because the source of social identity for these nonideological groups comes not from a rigidly defined set of beliefs and values, but from shared activities, interests, and goals. Research on social identities in online communities has suggested that in addition to the social exclusion aspect of social identity, online groups have more positive ways of fostering a sense of cohesion such as promoting a shared repertoire of activities and artifacts and mutual engagement

of community members (Pape, Reinecke, Rohde, & Strauss, 2003).

Alternatively, we expected and saw that social categorization, outgrouping, and moral disengagement were negatively related to website content and structural credibility features for nonviolent ideological groups. Interestingly, these groups use psychological processes that likely increase social identification, but that may ultimately undermine their credibility, at least with the ratings used in this study. The very nature of these processes may contradict important beliefs and values held by nonviolent ideological groups, something that may be fairly noticeable to viewers of these websites. Thus, the means through which nonviolent groups communicate their ideological positions appear to be an important part of how the group is viewed. At the bivariate level, these processes were also negatively correlated with website content and structural credibility for the violent groups, but the relationships were not as strong. When used together to account for variance in website credibility, these processes did not significantly contribute to the credibility of violent websites.

Theoretical Implications

Parker and Janoff-Bulman (2013) note that outgroups are fundamental to ingroup identification (i.e., social identity) for morality-based groups. While most ideological groups have some level of belief that their views, values, and beliefs are “right”; the implied or stated consequences of not endorsing and following the ideology range from being labeled as socially unjust to condemning one’s soul for all eternity. Thus, there is a range of “morality” implied by different types of ideologies. Angie et al. (2011) found some evidence that violent ideological group discussion boards contained significantly more religious content than nonviolent ideological groups. This suggests that social identity formation is not the same for all types of groups. Some processes are emphasized much more than others in ideological groups, and those sanctioning violence are likely to engage in certain processes more than others. Additionally, social identity motivations of the individuals seeking to identify with ideological groups may influence credibility assessments (Hogg, 2007; Thoroughgood, Padilla, Hunter, & Tate, 2012). Hogg (2007) suggests that the need to reduce self-uncertainty (about one’s cognitions, perceptions, feelings, behavior, etc.) through social categorization is higher in some individuals. These individuals seek out ideological groups that provide meaning, strong sets of values and beliefs, and clear norms for behavior that reduce this uncertainty. Thoroughgood et al. (2012) suggest that there is a susceptible circle of followers who are more likely to seek out destructive leaders and their groups. One category of followers consistent with attraction to ideological groups are the “lost souls,” or those individuals who seek to identify with a leader because they lack self-concept clarity, have poor core self-evaluations, have basic needs that are unmet, and are experiencing distress in their personal life. A second category of followers includes the “acolytes,”

or individuals whose values and goals are congruent with the leader’s/group’s. They see the ideological leader as a source of expert power able to pursue those values and goals. We only explored three psychological processes here that might contribute to the social identity of such groups, but there are likely others that will also show differences across these types of groups.

Psychological processes associated with social identity formation in ideological groups may also impact perceived credibility of such groups in online environments. If the group’s ideology is inconsistent with the psychological processes used to convey it, its credibility may be harmed, which would reduce the group’s ability to attract new members. Additionally, persistent use of ideology-inconsistent processes could erode member support for the group because this could create conditions for deidentification. Alternatively, group members could get used to these inconsistencies over time through moral disengagement processes, which justify the ethicality of exclusionary social categorization processes. Such disengagement may make the psychological processes seem more consistent with the ideology over time, and credibility doubts could decrease. Examining the credibility of violent ideological group websites over time from the perspective of group affiliates would be an interesting area for future research.

Practical Implications

Ideological groups are undoubtedly important to the fabric of modern society, reflecting a wide variety of political, religious, and social ideals. Nonviolent ideological groups have the potential to promote prosocial values, provide meaning, and facilitate just ethical behavior. However, to the extent that the group uses psychological processes that undermine its credibility, members and potential members may remain less than fully committed to, and even skeptical about, the group. Nonviolent groups may want to capitalize on other ways to enhance social identity that do not involve negative comparisons with outside groups.

Findings in this study also suggest that the credibility of violent ideological groups can potentially be undermined when their use of negative psychological processes is highlighted publicly. For example, online media outlets, traditional media, watch agencies, and others have called attention to the violent nature of these types of groups, but have not yet focused on the type of psychological manipulation that can occur. Some violent ideological groups are moving toward a sanitized public face and Internet presence. Greater public awareness of this sanitization could embolden these groups, potentially increasing their credibility with group members and affiliates. Alternatively, public awareness of such facades could result in increased skepticism and vigilance of those outside the group. Additionally, identifying whether these changes are associated with a reduction in psychological and/or physical violence is also needed to understand these trends.

Reform for some violent groups may be possible through interventions aimed at increasing awareness of

moral disengagement and providing support for greater self-sanctioning. Unfortunately, certain ideologies are grounded in violence against other people and groups, such that reducing or eliminating the violence necessarily would change the ideology. It remains to be seen whether these groups can adapt their ideological views so that violence is not seen as the only means to maintaining the ideology.

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. First, while we analyzed three times as many groups as previous studies looking at ideological group websites, the number of groups within each website category was still relatively low, ranging from 32 to 37, reducing the power in some of the analyses. Nevertheless, these sample sizes are sufficient for means testing and bivariate correlations, and the regression results were fairly consistent with the correlations. Second, evaluations of credibility were made by coders rather than individuals seeking to explore ideological groups as a source of social identity. The relationship of psychological processes to credibility should be explored in this type of sample. Third, this study was limited to English-language websites, given that this was the language spoken by the researchers and coders involved in the study. It would be interesting to see if the patterns of results hold in non-English-language ideological websites. A fourth limitation is that we only examined a few psychological processes for ideological websites, and we recognize that others may also be operating such as norm setting and enforcement, emotional appeals, and social conformity. These could be examined in future studies. Additional control variables would also have been desirable, such as website size, age, and location, but this information was not consistently available across all websites. Finally, given the sample sizes, we classified all nonviolent organizations into one category, without differentiating among the specific types of ideological organization or group the website represented. For example, websites reflected religious, environmental, political, and social groups. The same held true for the violent ideological websites, with there being a range of ideological types as well as levels of violence subsumed within our categorization. Future research should explore similarities and differences in distinct types of ideological groups with respect to psychological processes and website credibility.

Concluding Remarks

In an age where social uses of the Internet are expanding exponentially, it is important to continue exploring the presence, nature, and impact of ideological groups that have an online presence. Such groups are capable of exerting substantial influence on attitudes, beliefs, and values, particularly for individuals seeking social support and social identities. While there are many prosocial ideological groups, there are also antisocial, violent ones that continue

to attract people. We hope this research stimulates new understanding and continued study in this domain.

References

- Aberson, C. L., Healy, M., & Romero, V. (2000). Ingroup bias and self-esteem: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4(2), 157–173.
- Akins, J. K. (2006). The Ku Klux Klan: America's forgotten terrorists. *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, 5, 127–144.
- Alexander, J. E., & Tate, M. A. (1999). *Web wisdom: How to evaluate and create information quality on the Web*. New York: Routledge.
- Angie, A. D., Davis, J. L., Allen, M. T., Byrne, C. L., Ruark, G., Cunningham, C. B., . . . Mumford, M. D. (2011). Studying ideological groups online: Identification and assessment of risk factors for violence. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 41, 627–657.
- Ashmore, R. D., Deaux, K., & McLaughlin-Volpe, T. (2004). An organizing framework for collective identity: articulation and significance of multidimensionality. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(1), 80–114.
- Bandura, A. (1989). Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American psychologist*, 44(9), 1175–1184.
- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3(3), 193–209.
- Bernardin, H. J., & Buckley, M. R. (1981). Strategies in rater training. *Academy of Management Review*, 6(2), 205–212.
- Bobo, L. (1983). Whites' opposition to busing: Symbolic racism or realistic group conflict? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45, 1196–1210.
- Brandt, D. S. (1996). Evaluating information on the Internet. *Computers in Libraries*, 16(5), 44–46.
- Davern, M. J., Te'eni, D., & Moon, J. Y. (2000, December). Content versus structure in information environments: A longitudinal analysis of Website preferences. In *Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on Information Systems* (pp. 564–570). Atlanta, GA: Association for Information Systems.
- Dobratz, B. A., & Shanks-Meile, S. L. (1997). *White power, white pride! The white separatist movement in the United States*. New York: Twayne.
- Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (2002). Self and social identity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 161–186.
- Eysenbach, G., & Köhler, C. (2002). How do consumers search for and appraise health information on the world wide web? Qualitative study using focus groups, usability tests, and in-depth interviews. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 324(7337), 573–577.
- Flanagin, A. J., & Metzger, M. J. (2007). The role of site features, user attributes, and information verification behaviors on the perceived credibility of web-based information. *New Media & Society*, 9(2), 319–342.
- Flanagin, A. J., & Metzger, M. (2008). Digital media and youth: Unparalleled opportunity and unprecedented responsibility. In M. Metzger & A. J. Flanagin (Eds.), *Digital media, youth, and credibility* (pp. 5–28) The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fogg, B. J. (2003). Prominence-interpretation theory: explaining how people assess credibility online. In *CHI'03 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 722–723) April. New York: ACM.
- Frischlich, L., & Rieger, D. (2013). *Dealing with the dark side: Negative ingroups and the effects of right-wing and Islamic extremist propaganda videos*. June. Paper presented at the

- 63th annual International Communication Association conference, London, UK.
- Gerstenfeld, P. B., Grant, D. R., & Chiang, C. P. (2003). Hate online: A content analysis of extremist Internet sites. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 3(1), 29–44.
- Griffith, J. A., Byrne, C. L., Nei, D. S., Barrett, J. D., Hughes, M. G., Davis, J. L., ... Mumford, M. D. (2013). Online ideology: A comparison of website communication and media use. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(2), 137–153.
- Heath, R. L., & O’Hair, H. D. (2009). The significance of crisis and risk communication. In R. L. Heath & H. D. O’Hair (Eds.), *Handbook of risk and crisis communication* (pp. 5–30). New York: Routledge.
- Hewstone, M., Rubin, M., & Willis, H. (2002). Intergroup bias. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 575–604.
- Hogg, M. A. (2003). Social identity. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 462–479). New York: Guilford Press.
- Hogg, M. A. (2005). Uncertainty, social identity, and ideology. In S. R. Thye & E. J. Lawler (Eds.), *Advances in group processes* (Vol. 2, pp. 203–229). San Diego, CA: Elsevier.
- Hogg, M. A. (2007). Uncertainty-identity theory. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 39, pp. 69–126). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Hogg, M. A., Meehan, C., & Farquharson, J. (2010). The solace of radicalism: Self-uncertainty and group identification in the face of threat. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46, 1061–1066.
- Hong, T. (2006). The influence of structural and message features on Web site credibility. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 57(1), 114–127.
- Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L., & Kelley, H. H. (1953). *Communication and persuasion: Psychological studies of opinion change*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Jensen, M. L., Dunbar, N., Connelly, S., Taylor, W., Adame, B., Rozzell, B., & Hughes, M. (2013). *Social media on violent ideological group websites*. Paper presented at the Americas Conference on Information Systems, Chicago, IL.
- Jost, J. T., & Hunyady, O. (2005). Antecedents and consequences of system-justifying ideologies. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14(5), 260–265.
- Kinder, D. R., & Sears, D. O. (1981). Prejudice and politics: Symbolic racism versus racial threats to the good life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 40(3), 414–431.
- Kozlowski, S. W., & Hattrup, K. (1992). A disagreement about within-group agreement: Disentangling issues of consistency versus consensus. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 77(2), 161–167.
- Lee, E., & Leets, L. (2002). Persuasive storytelling by hate groups online examining its effects on adolescents. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(6), 927–957.
- Leidner, B., Castano, E., Zaiser, E., & Giner-Sorolla, R. (2010). Ingroup glorification, moral disengagement, and justice in the context of collective violence. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36(8), 1115–1129.
- Lindell, M. K., & Brandt, C. J. (1999). Assessing interrater agreement on the job relevance of a test: A comparison of CVI , T , $r_{WG(j)}$, and $r^*_{WG(j)}$. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84(4), 640–647.
- Matusitz, J., & O’Hair, D. (2008). The role of the internet in terrorism. *Terrorism: Communication and rhetorical perspectives*, 383–407.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Teven, J. J. (1999). Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement. *Communications Monographs*, 66(1), 90–103.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Young, T. J. (1981). Ethos and credibility: The construct and its measurement after three decades. *Communication Studies*, 32(1), 24–34.
- Metzger, M. J. (2007). Making sense of credibility on the Web: Models for evaluating online information and recommendations for future research. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 58(13), 2078–2091.
- Metzger, M. J., Flanagin, A. J., & Medders, R. B. (2010). Social and heuristic approaches to credibility evaluation online. *Journal of Communication*, 60(3), 413–439.
- Moghaddam, F. M. (2005). The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration. *American Psychologist*, 60(2), 161–169.
- Mumford, M. D., Bedell-Avers, K. E., Hunter, S. T., Espejo, J., Eubanks, D., & Connelly, M. S. (2008). Violence in ideological and non-ideological groups: A quantitative analysis of qualitative data. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38(6), 1521–1561.
- Pape, B., Reinecke, L., Rohde, M., & Strauss, M. (2003, November). E-community-building in wilnf-central. In *Proceedings of the 2003 International ACM SIGGROUP Conference on Supporting Group Work* (pp. 11–20). New York: ACM.
- Parker, M. T., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (2013). Lessons from morality-based social identity: The power of outgroup “hate,” not just ingroup “love”. *Social Justice Research*, 26, 81–96.
- Pittinsky, T. L., Shih, M. J., & Trahan, A. (2006). Identity cues: Evidence from and for intra-individual perspectives on positive and negative stereotyping. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(9), 2215–2239.
- Rains, S. A., & Karmikel, C. D. (2009). Health information-seeking and perceptions of website credibility: Examining Web-use orientation, message characteristics, and structural features of websites. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25(2), 544–553.
- Rieh, S. Y. (2002). Judgment of information quality and cognitive authority in the Web. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 53, 145–161.
- Riek, B. M., Mania, E. W., & Gaertner, S. L. (2006). Intergroup threat and outgroup attitudes: A meta-analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(4), 336–353.
- Roccas, S., Klar, Y., & Liviatan, I. (2006). The paradox of group-based guilt: Modes of national identification, conflict vehemence, and reactions to the in-group’s moral violations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(4), 698–711.
- Schafer, J. A. (2002). Spinning the web of hate: Web-based hate propagation by extremist organizations. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 9(2), 69–88.
- Sherif, M., & Sherif, C. (1969). Ingroup and intergroup relations. *Social psychology*, 221–266.
- Stanton, J. J. (2002). Terror in cyberspace: Terrorists will exploit and widen the gap between governing structures and the public. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(6), 1017–1032.
- Stemler, S. E., & Tsai, J. (2008). Best practices in interrater reliability: Three common approaches. In J. W. Osborne (Ed.), *Best practices in quantitative methods* (pp. 29–49). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stephan, W. G., & Stephan, C. W. (1996). *Intergroup relations*. Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark.
- Stephan, W. G., & Stephan, C. W. (2000). An integrated threat theory of prejudice. In S. Oskamp (Ed.), *Reducing prejudice and discrimination* (pp. 23–45). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Symonenko, S. (2006). *Exploring patterns in website content structure*. Paper presented at the Information Architecture Summit (Learning, Doing, Selling). Vancouver, Canada.

Retrieved from http://iasummit.org/2006/files/177_Presentation_Desc.pdf

- Tajfel, H. (1982). Social psychology of intergroup relations. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 33, 1–39.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Taylor, D. M., & Moghaddam, F. M. (1994). *Theories of intergroup relations: International social psychological perspectives*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Teven, J. J., & McCroskey, J. C. (1997). The relationship of perceived teacher caring with student learning and teacher evaluation. *Communication Education*, 46, 1–9.
- Thoroughgood, C. N., Padilla, A., Hunter, S. T., & Tate, B. W. (2012). The susceptible circle: A taxonomy of followers associated with destructive leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23(5), 897–917.
- Tinsley, H. E., & Weiss, D. J. (1975). Interrater reliability and agreement of subjective judgments. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 22(4), 358–376.
- van Birgelen, M. J., Wetzels, M. G., & van Dolen, W. M. (2008). Effectiveness of corporate employment web sites: How content and form influence intentions to apply. *International Journal of Manpower*, 29(8), 731–751.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Ideology and discourse analysis. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(2), 115–140.
- Zhou, Y., Reid, E., Qin, J., Chen, H., & Lai, G. (2005). US domestic extremist groups on the Web: link and content analysis. *Intelligent Systems, IEEE*, 20(5), 44–51.

Date of acceptance: August 5, 2014

Published online: January 30, 2015



Shane Connelly (PhD, George Mason University, 1995) is a Professor of Industrial and Organizational Psychology and Co-director of the Center for Applied Social Research at the University of Oklahoma. She has published over 70 journal articles in various outlets such as *The Leadership Quarterly*, *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Human Performance*, and *Ethics and Behavior*. Her research interests include emotions in leadership and workplace contexts, research ethics and ethical decision-making, and communication in ideological groups.

Shane Connelly
Department of Psychology
University of Oklahoma
455 W. Lindsay St.
Dale Hall Tower, Room 705
Norman, OK 73019
USA
Tel. +1 405 325-4580
E-mail sconnelly@ou.edu



Norah E. Dunbar (PhD, University of Arizona, 2000) is a Professor of Communication at University of California Santa Barbara. Her expertise is in non-verbal and interpersonal communication, with special emphasis on dominance and power relationships, interpersonal synchrony, and deception detection. She has published over 40 journal articles and book chapters including those in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, *Communication Research*, *Communication Monographs*, and *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.



Matthew L. Jensen (PhD, 2007) is an assistant professor of management information systems and a codirector of the Center for Applied Social Research at the University of Oklahoma. His interests include computer-aided decision making, knowledge management, human-computer interaction, and computer-mediated communication.



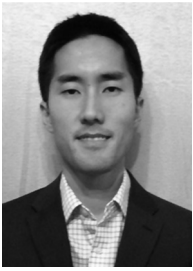
Jennifer A. Griffith (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma) is an Assistant Professor of Management at Alfred University. Her research interests include leadership, emotions, and communication. She has published articles in a number of journals such as *The Leadership Quarterly*, *International Journal of Conflict Management*, and *The European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*.



William D. Taylor is a doctoral candidate in Industrial and Organizational Psychology at the University of Oklahoma. His current research interests include occupational health and safety, risk perception, leadership, and performance management.



Genevieve Johnson is a doctoral candidate in Industrial and Organizational Psychology at the University of Oklahoma. Her current research interests include emotions in the workplace, ethical decision making, leadership, interpersonal and organizational communication, and performance feedback. She has been published articles in various journals such as *Human Relations*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, and *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*.



Michael Hughes (PhD, University of Oklahoma) is an Industrial Organizational psychologist at Human Resources Research Organization, Alexandria, VA, whose primary areas of expertise include test development and validation, and analyses of high-stakes testing data. His research interests also include complex skill acquisition, training, and ideological groups.



Michael D. Mumford (Ph.D., University of Georgia) is a Professor of Industrial and Organizational Psychology at the University of Oklahoma and is a co-director of the Center for Applied Social Research. He has achieved the highest research honor at OU, the George Lynn Cross Research Professor. He has published extensively in the areas of leadership, creativity, and ethics in outlets such as the *Creativity Research Journal*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and *Ethics and Behavior*.

Appendix

Table A1. Example rating scales. Superiority/entitlement: Extent to which the website expresses group superiority or entitlement

1	2	3	4	5
No expression of superiority on the website	Some expression of superiority on the website			Pervasive expression of superiority on the website
Website views everybody (ingroup or outgroup) as equal and does NOT consider itself better than others	Includes a small number of statements expressing strong feelings of superiority or many statements making weak expressions of superiority			Website expresses or implies feelings of superiority (“Our way is the only right way”), entitlement (“We deserve to have things our way”)

Information distortion: Degree to which website misrepresents information relevant to outgroups

1	2	3	4	5
Low	Moderate		High	
Website accurately reports information from newscasts, books, websites, etc. May even question the veracity of reports to ensure accuracy.	Some deliberate misrepresentation of information to support views. Includes taking quotes out of context, putting misleading labels on stories, or spinning stories to seem more negative than they are.			Information distorted to the point of paranoia, where all information is twisted to fit with the ideology or instead is perceived as a challenge or slight.

Misrepresenting consequences: Extent to which the website distorts the relationship between the actions they advocate and the effects the actions cause

1	2	3	4	5
Website does not attempt to reframe or misrepresent consequences	Website somewhat attempts to reframe or misrepresent consequences			Website constantly attempts to reframe or misrepresent consequences
Website discusses consequences associated with group events accurately	Website may attempt to reframe some aspects of consequences associated with group events to make them seem more positive or less negative			Website pervasively misrepresents consequences associated with group events in order to minimize the harm caused or exaggerate positive outcomes (e.g., “We are liberating animals not destroying property”)