Social Media Engagement and Mobilization to Extremist Violence

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Social Media Engagement and Mobilization to Extremist Violence

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ABSTRACT

“Social Media Engagement and Mobilization to Extremist Violence”

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This thesis investigates how engagement with extremist communities on social media correlates with increased violent mobilization among radicalized individuals. It argues that as individuals strengthen their ties to extremist groups online, they increasingly identify with these communities and adopt behaviors endorsed by them. This paper explores various levels of online engagement, from passive interactions to more active involvement, as well as factors to mobilization exhibited as observable behaviors both in person and online. Comparative analysis of two violent and two nonviolent adherents of the Boogaloo ideology reveals ten unique mobilizing indicators in violent cases. When compared against the social media engagement behaviors, it was found that higher engagement behaviors like direct communication with extremists enabled top mobilizing indicators such as specific attack planning, lending support to the main hypothesis.
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Introduction

On January 6th, 2021, thousands of Trump-supporting protesters descended upon the U.S. Capitol to contest the results of the 2020 Presidential election. Among them were members of several far-right domestic extremist groups, namely the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Boogaloo Bois (Thompson and Fischer 2021). In addition to Trump utilizing his Twitter platform to incite followers to riot at the Capitol (Zengerle, Cowan, and Chiacu 2022), these extremist groups also leveraged social media to organize their destructive attack in the days leading up to the incident. By posting calls to action on Facebook, Twitter, Gab, and Parler, using these social media platforms to coordinate meetups, and sharing open source mapping of the Capitol Hill area to plan their attacks, these individuals were able to infiltrate the nation’s capital in an unprecedented way (Davies 2023; Timberg, Dwoskin, and Albergotti 2021; Thompson and Fischer 2021). Demonstrating a high degree of planning and coordination, offenders planted two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) near the separate headquarters of the Democratic and Republican National Committees the evening prior to the event to draw attention away from their anticipated advance (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] 2021; House of Representatives Judiciary Committee 2023), launched bombs at law enforcement to force them into a bottlenecked tunnel (Department of Justice [DOJ] 2023; Reilly 2023), and utilized militaristic tactics (Biesecker, Bleiberg, and Laporta 2021) to make their way up the steps and into the Capitol building. They also beat security officers with stolen riot shields and batons, flagpoles, stun guns, and pepper spray, toppled barricades, broke windows and doors to invade the Senate chambers, and flashed firearms around the crowd to incite further chaos (Zengerle 2021; Dreisbach and Mak 2021).
While the Capitol insurrection will long be remembered as a day that American democratic institutions were sorely tested and yet held firm, the motivations and sentiments underlying the attack point to a larger and more worrisome trend towards violent domestic extremism in the United States. Increasing political polarization, radicalization, and intolerance of dissenting opinions are all symptoms of the violent extremism epidemic which can be directly supported and fostered by social media (Timberg, Dwoskin, and Albergotti 2021). Social media is a powerful tool in a world increasingly built on networks that extend far beyond our immediate surroundings. Although terrorists have always found ways to utilize the latest technologies, the speed, reach, and anonymity of social media allows terrorists to radicalize individuals with an unprecedented ease (Waskiewicz 2012; Zeiger and Gyte 2020).

Since 2016, America has seen a stark rise in radicalization to violent extremism, particularly among far-right racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVE). According to the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset, the rate of radicalization to RMVE groups rose from 40% in 2016 to 87% in 2021 (Jensen, Kane, and Akers 2021). Additionally, the speed in which radicalization to violent mobilization occurs has significantly increased from 21.5% of far-right offenders mobilizing in less than 1 year in 2016 to 44.9% in 2021 (Jensen, Kane, and Akers 2021). Low barriers to entry and little content moderation on social media sites, compared to traditional IP websites, means that terrorist content can spread more quickly, widely, and remain online longer than through other forms of online propaganda dissemination (Waskiewicz 2012; Zeiger and Gyte 2020). This has led to a higher proportion of individuals being radicalized through social media than through other means in the present era (Jensen, Seate, and James 2018). Overt methods of social media radicalization include sharing videos and images of terrorist
acts, war, or violence, extremist memes, manifestos, and ideologies, religious justifications, and instructions for building weapons or carrying out attacks. While these are the most obvious means, there remains a much more insidious and covert method – establishing social bonds with extremist groups.

This paper will examine how engagement with extremist communities on social media increases the likelihood of violent mobilization among those who are already radicalized. I argue that extremist communities on social media provide social bonds that supersede, replace, or weaken an individual’s bonds to conventional society, increasing the probability that delinquent behaviors may surface which were previously constrained by normal social bonds. Consequently, once the social bonds connecting an individual to an extremist group become stronger than other prosocial bonds, the individual will not only base a larger portion of their identity on the extremist community, but they will also begin adopting more delinquent behavior as encouraged by the extremist community. Online behavior being examined ranges from low level engagement, such as ‘likes’ and ‘shares’, to higher level engagement which includes disseminating propaganda on multiple platforms, posting original content, and using social networking sites to communicate violent intent or plan attacks with other group members (Zeiger and Gyte 2020). Higher engagement can be defined as more active participation on social media, while lower engagement is considered more passive and less participatory (Schivinski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski 2015; Muntinga et al. 2011).

This theory builds on both social learning and social control theories of delinquency by proposing that communities on and offline can either constrain or encourage violent extremist behavior. Social control theory proposes that delinquency, or non-conformity, is intrinsic to human nature, and therefore socialization to
normative behaviors (social control) constrains innate proclivity to delinquent behavior. “Socialization is represented by a bond comprised of four major elements – attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief – which an individual forms to society” (Wiatrowski 1981). With beneficial socialization, the stronger the individual’s bonds are to conventional society, the less delinquent the behavior. Rather than focusing on how society constrains delinquent behavior, social learning theory posits that delinquent behaviors are learned based on observation of one’s environment (Akins and Winfree 2017). Social media, in this context, provides opportunities for observational learning of extremist behaviors through reinforcement in online environments, while lack of normative socialization can cause individuals to instead form delinquent social bonds with extremists on social media (Akins and Winfree 2017). In sum, the type of communities that we surround ourselves with and the strength of our bonds within those communities, both on and offline, can predict the likelihood of adopting violent, deviant behavior.

Some of the most recent work presented by long-standing researchers in the field points to a gap in the literature concerning connections made between the on and offline worlds of extremists (Scrivens, Gill, and Conway 2020; Scrivens et al. 2021) and emphasizes that examinations of terrorist behavior, as in what they do and how they do it, may be more valuable than trying to determine their motivations (Horgan 2023). Additionally, it has been suggested that future research should broaden focus away from terrorist psychology to examine their larger network of friends, family, and associates to better understand how community-based initiatives can help deter or prevent terrorist violence (Horgan 2023). Lastly, as has been said before by some of the most notable names in terrorism research, not all who radicalize will commit extremist violence and not all who commit extremist violence have been radicalized
Therefore, the question at the center of this thesis is: among those who are radicalized and engaged in social media extremist communities, how can we identify online behaviors that predict whether radicalized individuals will mobilize to violent extremism?

I attempt to answer this question by constructing a small-N comparative case study of two violent and two nonviolent individuals who identify as adherents of the Boogaloo movement. Considered as a plausibility probe into the argument that higher social media engagement with extremist groups is correlated with increased probability of violent mobilization, this study investigates the social media behaviors of Boogaloo members and compares them against their behavioral indicators of violent mobilization. A comparison between the determined mobilizing indicators of the nonviolent and violent case studies found that there were ten mobilizing indicators unique to violent cases, suggesting that these behaviors can be used to ascertain those radicalized individuals who are more prone to violent mobilization. When compared against the social media engagement behaviors, it was found that higher engagement behaviors like direct communication with extremists through social media enabled top mobilizing indicators such as specific attack planning and that these peer-to-peer interactions encouraged further violent mobilization. Therefore, the results produced by this study lend support to the hypothesis that higher engagement correlates with increased probability of violent mobilization among radicalized individuals.
Review of the Literature

Defining Radicalism, Extremism, and Terrorism

First, it is important to understand what radicalism is, and how it differs from extremism and terrorism. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, there are a number of important distinctions between them. In the post-9/11 world, “radicalization” has frequently been used to refer to “the human developments that precede terrorist attack”, directly tying the process of radicalization to terrorism in a way that causes many casual observers to conflate the two terms (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017, 205). While the term “radicalism” is frequently employed in common discourse, finding a common definition can be more problematic. In one definition, a group of researchers from the National Consortium for Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at University of Maryland explain that radicalism is “best understood as a set of complex causal processes in which multiple factors work together to produce extremist outcomes” (Jensen, Seate, and James 2018, 1067). Similarly, a team of researchers from Harvard define radicalization as “the social and psychological process through which an individual or group adopts extreme beliefs, ideas, or opinions” (McBride et al. 2022, 3). While these definitions emphasize that radicalization is a complicated process, they do not clearly explain what extremist outcomes are or how they differ from radical ideals. With a definition more explicitly connecting radicalism to violence, renowned terrorism researcher Martha Crenshaw defines radicalization as “a willingness to use or support violence as opposed to peaceful pursuit of radical change [that] is a mix of psychological, sociological, political, and economic processes” (Crenshaw 2011, 5). Using language closely aligned with Crenshaw’s definition, the Canadian Security
Intelligence Service (CSIS) defines radicalization as “a highly individualized process through which a person becomes convinced that violence is a legitimate (and eventually individually obligated) means to advance their ideological cause or beliefs. It is influenced by factors such as personal history, peer pressure, grievances, charismatic ideologues, and international events” (CSIS 2018, 4). Also emphasizing that radicalization promotes violent outcomes, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) defines radicalization as a “process by which individuals come to believe that their engagement in or facilitation of nonstate violence to achieve social and political change is necessary and justified” (ACLU 2012, 1). However, none of these definitions completely clarify the difference between radicalism and extremism or explain at which point the process of adopting radical ideas shifts to acceptance of violent extremism.

In attempt to resolve this definitional question and clarify the distinction between extremism and radicalism, Astrid Botticher searches for an academic consensus definition by comparing the historical and concept analysis approaches to these definitions as proposed by German researchers. In categorizing the structural properties of these definitions into a matrix, the author arrives at several key differences. The main distinction is that “radicalism can be situated at the edges of the democratic consensus while extremism lies outside” (Botticher 2017, 76). To elaborate, radicalism can be conceived as a socio-political doctrine that proposes emancipation from authoritarian and hierarchical rule, advocates for individual and collective freedom, and opposes the political establishment status quo (Botticher 2017). Radicals are open to rational arguments on how to achieve their goals and are not fundamentally violent or anti-democratic. Although they will employ violent measures if the ends justify the means, radicals are not necessarily in opposition to
human rights and are likely to avoid actions with high human collateral. Extremists, on the other hand, are violently opposed to liberal democratic society, alternate ideologies, the rule of law, and diversity in all forms. They embrace violence as a legitimate expression of political action and make mass violence a central component of their operations without any regard for human rights or concepts of equality (Botticher 2017). ‘Extremism’ is so called because the ideologies and actions of extremists exist at the extreme end of the socio-political spectrum, exceeding the bounds of what is considered socially permissible or morally reasonable.

Botticher’s clarification of these definitions points to the fact that there is a more direct relationship between extremism and terrorism than there is between radicalism and terrorism. Crenshaw’s earliest work supports this relationship, noting that “terrorism differs from other instruments of violence in its ‘extranormality’ [in that] it lies beyond the norms of violent political agitation that are accepted by a given society” (Crenshaw 1972, 384). Further expounding upon the distinctions between extremism and terrorism, premier radicalization to violent extremism (RVE) researcher Randy Borum states that there are multiple pathways to extremist violence and terrorism but not all of those pathways are preceded by adoption of radical ideology. In fact, Borum claims that “most people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists – even those who lay claim to a ‘cause’ – are not deeply ideological and may not ‘radicalize’ in any traditional sense” (Borum 2014, 8). Crenshaw (2011) also supports this view, stating that “[radicalization] is distinct from recruitment to the ranks of an organization, although it is often assumed that the two go together. Not all those who are recruited into militant groups have radical beliefs, and not all ‘radicals’ are recruited to join” (Crenshaw 2011, 6).
Making a clearer distinction by looking at the targets of violence rather than its perpetrators, McCauley and Moskalenko (2009, 240) state that “It is important to note that radicalism is not the same as terrorism: terrorists are the subset of radicals who use violence against civilian targets.” Similarly, Doosje et al. (2016) emphasize that terrorism is an act of violence typically aimed at non-combatants with the intention of inciting political or behavioral change in the target population. Clearly, attacks against innocent civilians and noncombatants can be considered as exceeding the bounds of what is acceptable to society at large. In this way, terrorism can be considered as existing at the far, violent end of extremism, rather than as the inevitable result of radicalization.

These explanations strike at the core difference between radicalization and terrorism, which is that the former is a process while the latter is an observed action. Elaborating on this difference, Borum’s definition of radicalization “refers to the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs” while he labels terrorism as an “action pathway” that leads to engagement in violent extremist actions (Borum 2011, 9). Put another way, radicalization is the process of adopting radical beliefs which are not inherently violent, while terrorism is the strategic choice to commit violence for the sake of extremist (re: non-normative; socially or politically unacceptable) convictions. As an example, some Muslims may be sympathetic to jihadi justifications for violence without feeling compelled to commit violent jihad themselves, while many jihadi terrorists are compelled to violence by reasons other than strong commitment to jihad or belief in a deeper ideology (Borum 2014). Some of these reasons include internalized in-group versus out-group perceptions, the need for social belonging, a focus on past suffering, a desire to bring about a glorious future, or the
conviction that violence is the appropriate response to perceived injustice by intolerable regimes (Crenshaw 2011; Smith et al. 2019; Shuurman 2020).

Radicalization and Mobilization to Violent Extremism

Radicalization and mobilization are two interconnected yet distinct concepts in understanding the progression towards violent extremism. As discussed, radicalization refers to the ideological shift from a nonviolent belief system to one that justifies and advocates for the use of unlawful violence to effect societal or political change. It is a deeply individualized process influenced by various factors such as personal history, peer pressure, grievances, charismatic leaders, and global events (ACLU 2012; McCauley and Moskalenko 2017; CSIS 2020). This transformation often leads individuals to perceive violence as a legitimate means to advance their ideological agendas.

Once an individual has embraced extremist ideology and is willing to resort to violence, they have effectively become mobilized. Mobilization occurs when an individual progresses beyond radicalization and begins to take concrete steps towards engaging in violent extremism or terrorism (CSIS 2020). It is characterized by observable behaviors and actions indicating preparation for terrorist activities, such as acquiring resources like finances or tactical equipment, engaging in combat training, or planning attacks (National Counterterrorism Center [NCTC] 2021). Mobilization represents a notable shift in behavior, as individuals transition from holding extremist beliefs to actively preparing for or participating in violent actions. Unlike radicalization, which primarily involves ideological transformation, mobilization
focuses on the practical aspects of carrying out violent acts or providing material support for violence.

While radicalization lays the ideological groundwork, mobilization involves the operationalization of those beliefs into tangible actions. Individuals who have undergone radicalization may eventually enter the mobilization phase, where they actively pursue their extremist goals through violent means, while many will remain in the radicalization phase without ever fully mobilizing to action. Ultimately, this exploration into the differences between radicalization and violent extremist mobilization points to a clear distinction between actions and beliefs.

*Exploring the Difference Between Violent and Nonviolent Extremists: Comparative RVE Theories*

Continuing this line of reasoning, we must investigate why some radicalized individuals mobilize down the path to violence while others with the same views do not, and whether internal or external factors have more of an effect on the RVE process. The difference between those with “moderate” (nonviolent) versus “extremist” (violent) views is often not the ideology or its goals, but how moderate or extremist camps determine the appropriate strategy for achieving those goals (Schmid 2014). Despite this divergence of strategy, terrorism expert Alex P. Schmid argues that “the distinction between so-called nonviolent extremists and violent extremists is illusionary” (Schmid 2014, 6). In his comparison between nonviolent and violent Islamist perspectives, Schmid elaborates on the distinct trajectories that different Islamic sects have taken as people have migrated away from the traditional center of Islam in the Middle East and integrated more into Western societies, both in terms of their fundamental values and willingness to cooperate with Western governments.
This cooperation reveals a tactical choice divergence between nonviolent and violent extremists, where seemingly moderate Islamic factions may outwardly engage in dialogue with Western governments while internally rejecting Western values to avoid open confrontation. Conversely, Islamic extremists are characterized by their outright and often violent opposition to Western ideals and unwillingness to negotiate with Western governments. This strategic divergence illustrates that Islamic nonviolent “moderates” and violent “extremists” may actually agree on the same fundamental principles and yet disagree on how to implement them.

Expounding on the difference between violent and non-violent extremists, the group of researchers from START examines the RVE processes of extremists in the United States by comparing various theories of radicalization. These theories include individual level psychological models such as the quest for personal significance theory and social identity theory, as well as group-based recruitment theories like social movement theory, and cost-benefit models (Jensen, Seate, and James 2018). After examining various studies based on these theories, the researchers identified ten top-level causal constructs grouped according to conceptual similarities that were used to determine several pathways to violent extremism. These ten constructs are: personal crisis, community crisis, psychological vulnerability, psychological rewards, physical vulnerability, material rewards, recruitment, group biases, communicating group norms, and cognitive frame alignment (Jensen, Seate, and James 2018).

Ultimately, the researchers conclude that the two most salient conditions which are present across all identified pathways are individual cognitive frame alignment and a sense of community crisis (Jensen, Seate, and James 2018). Cognitive frame alignment refers to the mental gymnastics that extremists often
perform to rationalize and justify violent behavior, reflecting a frequently noted incongruity between internal acceptance of violent extremist beliefs and external pursuit of violent action (Jensen, Seate, and James 2018). However, the researchers note a much less significance for this condition, unlike the condition community crisis which demonstrated a much higher level of significance. The significance of community crisis implies that “perceptions of community victimization may separate violent from nonviolent radicals”, supporting social movement and grievance-based theories that connect extremist violence to discrimination (Jensen, Seate, and James 2018, 1082). This determination also supports the research hypothesis that social bonds formed through increased engagement with extremist groups can play an important causal role in the decision to commit violence. While these results are not conclusive or fully explanatory, they show that the RVE process is complex, multifaceted, and innately tied to personal perceptions.

As Borum (2014) has posited, it can be difficult to distinguish between violent and non-violent extremists due to the fact that their underlying motivations may remain the same despite the way either group decides to act on those motivations. Thus, many theories focus on determining whether these motivations are informed by individual or social circumstances (Torok 2013; Hassan et al. 2018; DeBruyn 2021). A psycho-social theory which has been explored by multiple authors is “the quest for personal significance” which argues that extremists are motivated by the fundamental human desire to be seen as important and to have the respect of others, a desire which can turn violent when joined with an ideology that justifies terrorism as a means of gaining a sense of significance (Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski 2017). In particular, the quest for significance theory highlights the universal human needs for belonging, respect, control, and understanding. Social rejection can frequently lead to aggression,
and this loss of status combined with isolation and desire for revenge can become a recipe for violence (Conway et al. 2019).

In their study testing the personal significance model of radicalization, Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski (2017), who are also researchers from START, examine ideologically motivated violent criminals from the United States to find that loss of personal significance as rendered through economic or social failures (such as unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, trauma, and abuse) can be a strongly motivating factor to violent extremism (Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski 2017). The researchers hypothesize that the greater the loss of personal significance, especially in individuals who have previously engaged in illegal criminal behavior, the more likely they will be to attempt to regain significance through violence (Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski 2017). This hypothesis combines aspects of both individual and social level motivations to violence and ultimately finds that that “the use of violence can be in part predicted by a set of conditions that evoke a common psychological state of personal insignificance” (Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski 2017, 827). These conditions include two specific threats to individual feelings of insignificance: economic failure and social detachment, as determined by indicators such as job loss, social rejection, or abuse, that can increase an individual’s likelihood of violent action. Such findings emphasize the critical role that social networks play in motivating violence.

However, a counterpoint to the quest for personal significance theory from the (other) START researchers is that the data testing this theory has only considered violent extremist examples and has not assessed whether the need for personal significance is present among nonviolent radicals, making it difficult to discern whether personal significance has a causal role in mobilization from violent belief to violent action (Jensen, Seate, and James 2018). Considering that these authors found a
sense of community victimization to be a strong factor in motivating violent extremism, it stands to reason that additional research into the salience of community bonds formed through extremist social media engagement, such as this study presents, could help fill the gap in comparing violent and nonviolent extremists’ quest for personal significance.

In continuing comparative studies of violent and nonviolent extremists, researchers examine both individual psychological factors and social factors in attempts to determine the root cause of violent extremist behavior. Regarding the latter, social learning and social control theories draw from criminological frameworks to assess how some radicals are drawn to violence while others are not. Putting these theories to the test in a small-N study, Holt et al. (2018, 125) compare “two far-right and two jihadist perpetrators, with one engaged in violence and the other non-violent activity in each ideological grouping.”

The study highlighted that online communication with extremist groups had played a role in the RVE process as a “source of social connections and messaging that enabled acceptance of radical ideas” (Holt et al. 2018, 142). These findings support the researchers’ hypothesis that social factors have a significant effect on the decision to commit violence and point to the fact that the connection between social media and radicalization bears further examination as a potential causal pathway to violent extremism. The work of Holt et al. (2018) greatly inspired the methodology of the present study and provided a promising framework for the proposed theory that social media engagement is a significant factor in encouraging violent mobilization.
The Effect of Local Communities

Evidence from an analysis titled *How Community Ties Influence Terrorist Targeting of Civilians* by Risa Brooks at START shows that violent extremist groups which are embedded in local communities are generally more constrained in their offensive capabilities and targeting decisions than those groups which are isolated from local communities. Taking the examples of the PIRA and Hamas, the study found that these groups are more likely to “compromise strategic or ideological priorities in order to avoid alienating local communities” due to the fact that these groups rely on the support and good will of surrounding constituents to maintain the secrecy and security of their base of operations (Brooks 2013, 1). In contrast, groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which lack a strong connection to the local Sunni communities in which they operate, are less responsive to community influences or criticism, allowing them to attack targets without concern for civilian causalities and resultant social reprisal (Brooks 2013).

The analysis emphasizes the importance of local community connections in constraining violent extremist actions and showcases that those groups which are decentralized and/or online-based may feel more justified in causing collateral damage to civilian and local targets. An example of this can be seen in the way that members of decentralized groups such as the Boogaloo Bois, Proud Boys, and others frequently mobilized within their state of residence during the BLM protests to attack local law enforcement or government targets (Sottile 2020; Stall and Wolfson 2021). Conversely, members of decentralized autonomous organizations like the Boogaloo Bois may also be likely to travel to non-local areas to commit violent attacks for reasons such as not wanting to be noticed by familiars, desire not to cause local harm, or in support of group members who are non-locally based. More critically, members
of these groups have been willing to travel across state lines to support collective actions seen as politically or ideologically important to their cause, like Stop the Steal rallies and the Jan. 6 Capitol Breach (Sottile 2020). All this implies that loyalty to the group or cause may supersede ties to local communities among groups without strong location-based connections.

Building on the social learning theory of deviant behavior adoption, research examining the effects of exposure to communal violence finds that highly violent communities can lead to a lack of trust for social and political sources, heightened “us vs. them” mentality, and “black and white thinking”, all of which contributes to an increase in extremist violence (Finkel et al. 2020). This is especially prevalent in areas like the Sahel where living conditions are poor and social dysregulation runs rampant, leading to weak institutions that generate a decrease in social and political trust (Finkel et al. 2020). As a result, terrorist groups operate with relative impunity and can foster allegiance by providing resources and security that the government cannot, stimulating radicalization to violent extremism as individuals begin to place their trust in VEOs rather than legitimate institutions. Additionally, these groups exacerbate exclusionary attitudes towards outgroups, creating “a sense of collective grievance” used to foster bonds with the terrorist group and alienate individuals from outgroups and other prosocial communities (Finkel et al. 2020).

A sense of collective grievance is generated through social interactions with like-minded individuals in extremist groups, eventually leading to social identification with those who share the same opinions, norms, and mores (Smith et al. 2019). This method of social identity formation constitutes a major aspect of the social psychological process of radicalization. McCauley and Moskalenko (2017, 240) conceive of the radicalization process as a “conveyor belt” that begins with grievance
and ends with violence. The adoption of group level grievances on the part of a radicalizing individual thus has a great impact on their eventual decision to violently mobilize. Building on Horgan's (2005) three-stage theory of progression to terrorist action, the third stage states that "community support for violent action that affords status to militants can help motivate violence" (McCauley and Moskalenko 2017). This central point emphasizes the important role that community can play in the adoption and acceptance of extremist views that can lead one down the gradual path from material involvement to violent action in support of extremist ideals.

**Group Influence and Social Identity**

Many researchers in the field of terrorism studies suggest that, after decades of trying to understand individual-level motivations and mechanisms underlying the process of becoming a terrorist, focusing only on such factors is much like not seeing the forest for the trees (Akins and Winfree, Jr. 2016; Smith et al. 2019; Horgan 2023). Instead, more recent research suggests that analyses of group dynamics, situational social interactions, and terrorist behaviors may be a more fruitful means of investigation into the reasons why people choose to join violent extremist groups.

Violent extremism can be conceived as a form of collective action, as psychological engagement with extremist groups has been shown to be an essential step in the process of radicalization and mobilization (Smith et al. 2019). Psychological attachment to the extremist group can contribute to the social identification of an individual as a member of that group. Once an individual bases their social identity on extremist group membership, physical isolation is no longer a barrier to participation. In recent years, this phenomenon has been significantly
supported by connections formed on social media and the Internet, allowing “lone wolves” or lone actors to be physically distant yet remain psychologically connected to the extremist group which provides support and encouragement for their violent actions (Smith et al. 2019). For this reason, group socialization has shown to be a pivotal part of the radicalization and mobilization process. In fact, several researchers submit that social interactions within groups are not just a factor, but the most central component of the radicalization process (Smith et al. 2019; Sageman 2008).

Social media platforms have been shown to be excellent facilitators of group socialization and community building in online spaces. In his study on the community building mechanisms in far-right online spaces, Jonathan Collins examines how far-right groups’ use of fringe social media sites like Gab Social contributes to the formation of isolated and insular social networks (Collins 2024). Gab Social became popular with a largely white, male, and right-wing audience in response to increased content moderation on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter that restricted “free speech” by removing pandemic disinformation, conspiracy theories, and threatening anti-government messages during the social and political upheaval of 2020 (Collins 2024). As a result, these individuals were driven to create their own communities on fringe social media like Gab and Parler, which provide “safe havens” for hate speech, far-right content, and uncensored means of communication (Collins 2024). Through a mixed method approach of digital netnography and qualitative content analysis of these communities’ “narrational devices and multimedia”, the research found that these narratives contributed to the formation of a far right “meso-identity” and alternative worldview which promotes “pseudo-realities”, an established “us vs. them” mentality, and a sense of belonging among members (Collins 2024, 10-13). On the whole, Collins’ study lends validity to
the idea proposed in this paper that connections formed on social media can be a facilitative factor in generating community bonds that encourage adoption of extremist ideologies.

*The Role of Social Media in Online Radicalization and Potential Mobilization*

While there is certainly a connection between social media and radicalization, trying to determine the causal relationship between social media use and violent extremism is more complicated as the radicalization process can be observed through online and offline means but violence can only be perpetrated through offline means. Thus it is important to determine whether offline or online methods have a greater effect on radicalization overall. Several studies have attempted to answer this question, drawing from the theories presented earlier in this paper.

Taking a more individualized psychological approach, Hollewell and Longpre (2021) examine the relationship between social media and self-radicalization. Using college students from the UK as their sample, the researchers create measures for emotional intelligence, psychological involvement on social media, loneliness, and attitudes towards terrorism and political violence. The study finds that a positive attitude towards terrorism and political violence is correlated with several factors: “a lack of empathy and a low self-esteem (emotional intelligence), a high involvement into social media (social media psychological involvement), [and] an understanding of alternative ways to use the Internet (VPN & Dark Web)” (Hollewell and Longpre 2021). Noting that the Internet and social media have created a dramatic shift in the way terrorists and extremists disseminate their propaganda, the study shows that the proliferation of extremist content on social media can have a normalizing effect on
radical ideals by confirming existing beliefs and providing a sense of community for the disaffected seeking connection online. While this study demonstrates that there is a connection between social media and radicalization, it does not provide any causal explanation.

Considering the multiple pathways approach, a study of 235 convicted extremists from across the spectrum in England and Wales provides strong evidence for the increasingly influential role of the Internet in radicalization. Four key aspects of Internet radicalization are compared in the study: 1) the role of the Internet in the radicalization of convicted extremists, 2) whether the method of radicalization is consistent with the way convicted extremists typically use the Internet, 3) changes in Internet use by convicted extremists over time, and 4) if Internet use in radicalization is varied across cases concerning age, sex, ideology, and violent or nonviolent offense (Kenyon, Binder, and Baker-Beall 2022). Three radicalization pathway groups were determined from this analysis: online, hybrid, or face-to-face. Although the Internet became increasingly connected to radicalization over time, rising from 35% of extremists subjected to some degree of online radicalization in 2005 to 83% in 2017, offline influence was also present in the radicalization process of 88% of extremists (Kenyon, Binder, & Baker-Beall 2022). The result is that the hybrid pathway group constituted the largest pathway group at 48%, followed by the offline pathway group at 40%, while the online only group represented the smallest pathway group at 12% of the sample (Kenyon, Binder, & Baker-Beall 2022). These results show that while the Internet has certainly affected and increased access to extremist content, some combination of online and offline factors must typically be present to radicalize individuals to violent extremism.
In another study comparing online and offline interactions with extremist content, Bastug, Douai, and Akca (2018) develop a theory of “demand side” online radicalization. Most studies focus on the “supply side” of online radicalization, concerning how extremist propaganda is disseminated and received in online spaces, but the exploration of what drives people to seek out and engage with that content, described as “demand side” radicalization, is the phenomenon the authors attempt to explain. Based on a comparison of various radicalization theories, the authors investigate the underlying factors that motivate individuals to become “active participants” in extremist thinking and behaviors, exploring how psychological and social needs converge to push individuals towards extremist beliefs.

Utilizing a sample of 47 Islamic jihadist extremists from Canada, the study reveals the Internet played a role in the radicalization of approximately 76% of cases (Bastug, Douai, and Akca, 2018). This supports the findings of Kenyon, Binder, and Baker-Beall (2022) who determined that 83% of extremist subjects engaged in some level of online radicalization. Furthermore, the Bastug, Douai, and Akca (2018) study supports the point made by Hollewell and Longpre (2021) that social needs such as a desire for community are a driving force behind why individuals seek connection on social media sites. In both cases, the path to radicalization started with a quest for knowledge and companionship that manifested through increased engagement in with extremist groups and content on social media.

Additional studies suggest that the Internet acts as a “facilitative tool that affords greater opportunities for violent radicalization and attack planning” (Gill et al. 2017). This supports the idea proposed by Kenyon, Binder, and Baker-Beall (2021) that some combination of online and offline interaction with extremist content is necessary for radicalization to violent extremism, but the exact causal mechanisms
that lead to violence still remain under investigation. How and why individuals seek extremist answers to their personal questions is demonstrated through these studies to be a complex mix of personal, social, and psychological factors.

As the name “social” media would imply, many of the studies analyzing the impact of social media on radicalization approach the problem from a group-level or psycho-social perspective. But regardless of the underlying mechanisms, a central takeaway from these studies is the observable influence that social media has had on rising rates of radicalization. The anonymity, speed, and accessibility of the Internet provides numerous advantages for extremist groups and those interested in their messages (Zeiger and Gyte 2020). Social media also offers a convenient and wide-reaching community for many who are excluded from normal social groups, as evidenced in the findings on how Gab Social contributed to the formation of far-right fringe communities and shared social identity among those like-minded individuals (Collins 2024).

Interestingly, another study examining the relationship between social media and offline social behaviors focusing on far or hard-right social media sites like Gab, Parler, and Truth Social found that increased social media activity on these sites can predict an increase in subsequent civil unrest (Karell, Linke, and Hendrickson 2023). Due to the insularity of such sites, discursive messaging replaces independent information sources with “platform elites” who control the flow and type of content present on these platforms (Karell, Linke, and Hendrickson 2023, 2). In other words, platform elites endorse certain forms of information among their followers while limiting the reach of mass media sources and outside public discourse, creating an ‘echo chamber’ type environment where hard-right social media users can consume information that they view as resonant and legitimate compared to other traditional
media sources (Karell, Linke, and Hendrickson 2023). Users attracted to such sites feel like their views are being shared with other like-minded individuals, contributing to the formation of meaningful connections between users and extremists that they might not otherwise have come in contact with. This in turn generates an increased sense of social identification with extremist groups and a shift in perceptions of behavioral norms to be more accepting of extremist actions, allowing some to begin sliding down the slippery slope of radicalization. Ultimately, the study found that an uptick in discourse surrounding the acceptance of hard-right rhetoric preceded many users’ involvement in civil unrest events taking place within an 8-10 week timeframe from when these discussions took place on hard-right social media (Karell, Linke, and Hendrickson 2023).

Outside of involvement in hard-right centered social media spaces, radicalizing information can be found across various social media platforms, like YouTube, Twitter, and predominantly Facebook. In one study investigating YouTube recommendations’ impact on extremist radicalization, it was found that those who were radicalized had already been exposed to extremist content prior to their engagement with more extremist content on YouTube (Shaw 2023). This implies that algorithmic recommendations on social media do not have as strong an influence on the type of content that users choose to interact with as may have been supposed. However, social media can still be utilized by extremists to spread propaganda, increase solidarity, or plan violent acts (Shaw 2023). Most compellingly, Shaw (2023, 2) explains that “engaging with and contributing to communities of like-minded extremists may not have caused these individuals to adopt such radicalized beliefs in the first place, but the social support that they found online may have catalyzed them to adopt even more extreme views and to take actions they once might have
considered taboo.” In regard to the current study, these observations support the proposed relationship between social media engagement and how social bonds formed on social media can influence the process of violent radicalization and mobilization.

**Hypothesis**

Considering the information presented and discussed in the literature review, there is much evidence to support the idea that social bonds and group identities formed through engagement with extremist groups both on and offline can promote the adoption of violent mobilizing behaviors. This is especially true for those who are already radicalized and have begun seeking significance, connection, and affirmation of predisposed beliefs through interactions with extremists on social media. The ‘echo chamber’ effect of social media contributing to radicalization has been discussed by Karell, Linke, and Hendrickson (2023), but other studies into the causal effect of social media engagement with extremist groups as a factor in violent mobilization are fairly limited. Thus, this study seeks to add to the growing body of literature by examining the correlation between social media engagement behaviors and violent mobilization behaviors exhibited by individuals currently in the process of radicalization to violent extremism.

Therefore, the proposed hypothesis is:

**H1:** Higher social media engagement with extremist groups increases the probability of violent mobilization among radicalized persons.
Methods

This study can be considered as a plausibility probe into the theoretical argument that social media facilitates mobilization to violent extremism. Taking the form of a small-N comparative case study approach, primary data has been gathered from open-source databases, court documents, and news reports. The case selection process began by choosing an RMVE group that is active in the U.S. based on highest number of attacks between 2010-2020 as reported in the Global Terrorism Database. Parameters of search included: successful attack, casualties (1-10), meets Criteria I, II, and III\(^1\), and demonstrated group affiliation (no lone wolves; must be associated and attributed to particular group). Searches using this method found that the Boogaloo movement best fits the extremist group of interest. Using “boogaloo” as the main search term, offenders were selected from press releases on the Department of Justice website, then cross-referenced with open-access court documents and news reports to find more detailed information on individual behaviors both on and offline. A final important selection criterion is that the case study individuals must have explicitly expressed membership or alignment with the Boogaloo movement.

Two violent offenders involved in harmful attacks or specific attack planning and two nonviolent offenders from the same group who were convicted of material support or other nonviolent offenses were chosen as the case study subjects. In order to classify each individual as either violent (fully mobilized) or nonviolent (violently motivated), their behaviors were operationalized based on the stages of violent

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\(^1\)Criterion I: The act must be aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal.

Criterion II: There must be evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) than the immediate victims.

Criterion III: The action must be outside the context of legitimate warfare activities, i.e. the act must be outside the parameters permitted by international humanitarian law (particularly the admonition against deliberately targeting civilians or non-combatants).

Source: Global Terrorism Database.
mobilization provided in the National Counterterrorism Center’s (NCTC) *U.S. Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators* booklet (2021). This behavioral categorization guide was created by NCTC based on information derived from a robust selection of FBI investigations into terrorist incidents, peer-reviewed academic studies, and shared analyses between law enforcement professionals and the Intelligence Community (NCTC 2021). The first edition was produced in 2015 and has been updated in 2017, 2019, and most recently in 2021 to include new insights learned from novel cases (NCTC 2021). The booklet is intended to help law enforcement, communities, families, and researchers detect and identify mobilizing behaviors in persons of interest. It includes descriptions of observable behaviors which can apply to numerous ideologically motivated extremists in the United States, making it a sound choice for analyzing the behavior of various domestic and homegrown violent extremists and for differentiating between the progressive stages of violent mobilization.

The *Mobilization Indicators* booklet groups mobilizing behaviors by color and severity according to the stages individuals undergo in the process of violent mobilization. There are 42 distinct behaviors listed in the booklet, with indicator numbers 1-7 coded red for mobilization to violence, numbers 8-27 coded orange for engaging in preparation, and numbers 28-42 coded yellow for developing motivation (NCTC 2021). These behaviors suggest how close an individual may be to mobilizing to violence based on likelihood and imminence of potential attacks. Furthermore, the indicators are categorized not only by attack potential, but also by six main behavior types, which are: financial, ideology, intent, relationship, tactics, and travel (NCTC 2021). Although these categorizations provide meaningful context, their distinction did not factor into the behavioral analysis of this study. Accordingly,

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2 See Appendix A, Mobilizing Indicators Reference Card, for full list of mobilizing indicators.
as the purpose of this thesis is to determine what separates those who fully mobilize from those who merely idealize violence, individuals who exhibited a majority of behaviors coded for mobilization or preparation will be classified as violent. Individuals who exhibited a higher proportion of motivation indicators will be categorized as nonviolent.

As for those classified as nonviolent or motivated to extremism, a number of motivation indicators such as expressing desire or willingness to die for a violent extremist ideology, professing intent to harm or threatening violence against particular targets, posing with weapons and imagery associated with violent extremism, peacefully protesting while armed, and legally owning firearms are all actions protected by the First and Second Amendment. Therefore, these behaviors are not considered sufficient to classify an individual as fully mobilized, despite their distasteful or threatening nature. Especially considering the limitation that all individuals were involved in criminal proceedings to some extent, individuals classified as motivated or nonviolent may have shown violent proclivities, yet did not fully engage in mobilizing behaviors like actively planning detailed violent attacks.

Based on information from secondary sources such as open-source criminal complaints, indictments, sentencing documents, and news reports, a qualitative analysis of the online behaviors of these individuals will be conducted, ultimately leading the development of a social media engagement scale. Social media engagement behaviors are classified based on three escalating dimensions of engagement as determined by the consumer online brand related activities (COBRA) scale of social media engagement. Those dimensions are consumption, contribution, and communication (Muntinga et al. 2011). Consumption is the most minimal, frequent, and passive level of engagement, comprised of behaviors like viewing posts,
videos, or other content without participation (Muntinga et al. 2011). Contribution is the next level of engagement, and although more active in terms of peer-to-peer and peer-to-content interactions, is non-generative and limited to participation in media created by others. Interactions such as likes, shares, or direct messages can be considered contribution level engagement behaviors (Muntinga et al. 2011). Creation is the most active and interactive dimension of engagement, centered around original posts and media generated directly by users or the brand. Created content can be contributed to and consumed by others, making it the strongest form of engagement and interaction (Muntinga et al. 2011). “Content” refers to any form of media that can be found online, such as: memes, photos, videos, text posts, comments, messages, and audio files. In the context of this study, the extremist group can be considered as a ‘brand’ that both creates content and interacts with users, viewed here as members or followers of the extremist group.

**Table 1. Social Media Engagement Behaviors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior 1</td>
<td>Joining/following extremist pages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior 2</td>
<td>Liking and commenting on extremist content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior 3</td>
<td>Using social media or messaging apps to communicate directly with extremists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior 4</td>
<td>Disseminating/sharing extremist content on one or more platforms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior 5</td>
<td>Posting/uploading original extremist content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior 6</td>
<td>Using social media or messaging apps to organize or plan attacks, including planning to take communication offline.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Considering this, the behaviors selected for inclusion in this study are those that are possible on social media and directly related to extremism.

The additive scale of social media engagement codes behaviors using a binary method of either 0 or 1 depending on presence of this behavior as derived from secondary sources and described in the case studies. The frequency and intensity of these behaviors will not be factored into the score as these qualities could not be derived for all cases. The scale of engagement can be explained as a six-point Likert scale, where: 0 = no engagement, 1 = very low engagement, 2 = low engagement, 3 = some engagement, 4 = moderate engagement, 5 = high engagement, and 6 = very high engagement. For example, if all six behaviors were found within the given evidence for a single case, the additive social media engagement score would be ‘6’ and would therefore indicate very high engagement. Thus, by adding the number of engagement behaviors exhibited by each individual case, the level of social media engagement can be determined and represented by the total engagement score. Following the determination of each case’s engagement score, the next step is to identify which engagement behaviors are most strongly correlated with violent mobilization. This can be accomplished by comparing which engagement behaviors were exhibited by the two violent offenders versus the two non-violent offenders, and then comparing each individual’s engagement score to their mobilizing indicators. Through this method, we can attempt to confirm the research hypothesis that higher social media engagement with extremist groups increases the probability of violent mobilization among radicalized individuals.
Limitations

Considering that all primary data was derived from open sources, including Department of Justice official press releases, public court documents, and news reports, one of the main limitations of this study is that all individuals examined were arrested and involved in subsequent criminal proceedings. Being that the Boogaloo movement is heavily based around support for Second Amendment rights and love of firearms, all of the case study individuals were in possession of firearms at the time of their arrest and all individuals were charged for unlawful possession or illegal misuse of said firearms, in addition to other possible offenses. This lack of variety could present a potential skew of the data as this researcher was unable to find individuals who did not possess weapons or had not been arrested as part of the nonviolent case study set.

On the topic of available data, as court documents, press releases, and news reports constituted a significant source of information and more violent crimes generate higher volumes of this sort of information, it follows that those individuals classified as “violent” had a subsequently higher amount of available data. There was much less data, especially regarding detailed background information on social media use, relating to individuals classified as “nonviolent” for the purposes of this study. Thus, the case studies for violent individuals are much more comprehensive and nuanced than the cases for nonviolent individuals, which could contribute to a lack of robustness in the data set.

Another limitation is that due to privacy concerns, data could not be taken directly from social media sources, such as personal Facebook profiles or Twitter feeds. Any data relating to social media use was therefore derived from approved
open sources, typically as part of court documents containing specific evidence for criminal proceedings. As such, it is difficult to ascertain the full extent of social media involvement for those individuals whose primary data did not contain these specific types of evidence.

**Case Studies**

*Booga-who?: Examining the Origins and Motivations of the Boogaloo Movement*

Originating in 2012 within the pro-weapons enclave of 4chan's /K/ forum, the term "boogaloo" gained traction in 2019 amidst escalating anti-government sentiments (Stall and Wolfson 2021). Initially inspired by the 1984 dance film "Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo," it evolved through memes poking fun at unwanted sequels into "Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo", becoming co-opted by accelerationist anti-government groups to refer to an impending second American civil (Thompson 2021; Kriner and Lewis 2021; Kenes 2021). Eventually, it was simplified to just "boogaloo", which has come to imply both armed resistance against governmental authority and a belief that this resistance will foment a second civil war in the U.S (Kenes 2021). As this irreverent linguistic progression clearly shows, the Boogaloo movement is characterized by a distinct lexicon of symbols, memes, and terminology that serve to galvanize and unify its members. Among these are symbols such as the Hawaiian shirt, which emerged as a covert identifier for Boogaloo supporters in reference to the "big luau", a play on words alluding to the "boogaloo" itself. Rhyming terms like "big igloo", “big luau”, and “bungalow” are often used interchangeably to refer to the impending civil conflict, while phrases like "boogaloo boys," "boog bois," or simply "boogs" serve as colloquial monikers for movement
participants (Thompson 2021). In cheeky reference to these coded terms, the Boogaloo movement has adopted symbols such as igloos and the Hawaiian-flower pattern to subtly advertise their allegiance to the ideology (Kriner and Lewis 2021). The Boogaloo flag employs both of these symbols, illustrated as a black and white American flag with an igloo in place of stars and a single Hawaiian floral stripe (Kenes 2021).³ Their adaptive use of coded languages and symbols on social media during the turbulence of 2020 allowed many Boogaloo pages to fly under the radar of content moderation and detection by law enforcement through couching calls to violence inside jokes and memes (Kriner and Lewis 2021; Kenes 2021). This specialized vocabulary and symbolism not only facilitates communication within the Boogaloo community but also acts as a form of linguistic and subversive resistance, challenging conventional norms and asserting a distinct cultural identity.

Since its inception, the Boogaloo movement has transitioned from an assortment of online gun enthusiasts to a more loosely affiliated collective. It's less a unified ideology and more a shared belief in the imminent arrival of a second civil war, either as a response to political corruption and oppression or as a proactive effort by self-proclaimed "patriots" aiming to forcefully reshape the status quo. A prevalent unifying principle among adherents is the staunch defense of gun rights as enshrined in the Constitution, viewing any attempts to curtail such rights as tyrannical (Stall and Wolfson 2021). It can be characterized as a decentralized accelerationist group with strong anti-government, anti-law enforcement sentiments (Kriner and Lewis 2021). Although operating independently, Boogaloo affiliated cells utilize social media to communicate with other cells across the country. This has been a major factor in both

³ See Appendix B for examples of the Boogaloo Flag.
spreading the ideology and mobilizing adherents (Tech Transparency Project 2022). As Kriner and Lewis (2021, 23) so aptly state, “In each stage of the Boogaloo’s evolution, social media has served as a means of narrative dispersion, a collective myth-building space, and an organizing point for networks dedicated to violent offline activity.” Through social media connections spread across multiple platforms, numerous factions have sprung up across the country, although the total number of Boogaloo members and cells is unknown due to the vast dispersion of these groups across physical and digital space.

Fundamental distrust of authority serves as another defining trait of the Boogaloo movement. This skepticism was notably evident during the summer protests of 2020, as Boogaloo adherents displayed intense animosity towards law enforcement and other figures of authority. Additionally, 2020 saw a significant uptick in offline Boogaloo mobilization, driven by various contentious societal issues including gun control legislation, protests against police brutality, COVID-19 lockdown measures, and the fiercely contested 2020 presidential election (Kriner and Lewis 2021). While militia groups and radical gun rights activists typically frame the “boogaloo” as a conflict against either the government or liberal factions, white supremacists conceive it as a racial conflict or a white uprising (Hesson 2020). However, Boogaloo adherents can be found across the political and ideological spectrum, with many who genuinely supported the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors during the summer of 2020 (Stall and Wolfson 2021; Sottile 2020). For this reason, the movement has forged occasional alliances with left-leaning factions, though these partnerships are often seen as tactical rather than ideological (Stall and Wolfson 2021). As the overarching objective of the Boogaloo movement is to expedite the onset of civil war, members have actively sought to escalate political tensions into open conflict, seizing
on moments such as the 2020 BLM protests following George Floyd's killing by police to provoke clashes with authorities and instigate governmental destabilization (Stall and Wolfson 2021).

Considering the Boogaloo’s central belief that there will be a second civil war in America which will require regular citizens to take up arms against their government, it is unsurprising that many Boogs are also members of local militias who view gun restrictions, COVID-19 lockdown measures, and law enforcement tactics as prime examples of government tyranny that demand armed resistance (Kriner and Lewis 2021). Painted as a successor to the militia movement of the late 20th century, the Boogaloo movement has attracted a number of current and former military members who contribute their combat expertise and firearms knowledge to advance its objectives (Stall and Wolfson 2021; Kenes 2021; Thompson, Hassan, and Hajj 2021). More than 20 Boogaloo sympathizers with military backgrounds have been identified, some facing charges ranging from illegal weapons possession to murder (Thompson, Hassan, and Hajj 2021). Although these individuals represent a small percentage of violent extremists in the United States, cases like Steven Carrillo's Boogaloo-motivated shooting spree emphasize the urgent need for effective measures to address extremism among service members and prevent radicalization within military ranks. Characterized by anti-authority accelerationism and a propensity for violently escalating existing social tensions, the Boogaloo movement's diverse affiliations and tactical alliances underscore its disruptive potential in exacerbating political divisions and amplifying conflicts.
Violent Extremist Case Study #1 – Steven Carrillo

Steven Carrillo is the only known member of the Boogaloo Bois to be charged and convicted of first-degree homicide in two separate incidents, making him the most violent offender to be affiliated with the Boogaloo movement (U.S. v. Carrillo 2020). Both murders occurred within days of each other, with the first murder taking place on May 29th, 2020 and the second murder taking place eight days later on June 6th, 2020 (Department of Justice 2022). In his plea agreement, Carrillo admitted that he had adopted the Boogaloo anti-government ideology in the months prior to these incidents and had therefore planned specifically to harm federal law enforcement as representatives of the government (DOJ 2022). Although federally charged with one count of murder and one count of attempted murder in February 2022, he was not charged with federal terrorism for these crimes (DOJ 2022).

Incidents and Evidence

With his accomplice and getaway driver, Robert Alvin Justus, Jr., Carrillo engaged in a drive-by shooting of two guards outside of the federal courthouse in Oakland, California on the night of May 29th. Officer Dave Patrick Underwood was shot and killed during the attack, while the second guard was critically injured. According to evidence from the criminal complaint U.S. v. Carrillo 2020, Carrillo and Justus originally met on a Boogaloo Facebook group just days prior to the shooting and arranged to meet following a Facebook exchange that occurred at 7:20am on May 28th, 2020. On the Facebook page, Carrillo had posted: “It’s on our coast now, this needs to be nationwide. It’s a great opportunity to target the specialty soup bois. Keep that energy going.” This post was followed by two fire emojis and a link to a YouTube video of a mob violently attacking two California Highway Patrol vehicles. Only 17
minutes later, at 7:37 AM, Justus replied, “Lets boogie.” This exchange led to the duo’s fateful meeting on the evening of May 29th.

After turning himself in to the FBI on June 11, 2020, Justus revealed many significant details about the crime (U.S. v. Carrillo 2020). He stated that he had agreed to meet with Carrillo because Carrillo had offered him a ride to the George Floyd protests that were occurring in Oakland on May 29th, 2020. That evening, Carrillo met Justus at the San Leandro BART station driving the white Ford Econoline van which was to become central to his homicidal activities. After being instructed to remove the license plate from the van, Justus began driving the vehicle as the two roamed around the city looking for suitable targets, although Justus claimed that they had only been looking for parking. Justus also claimed that he had not wanted to participate in the murders but had felt compelled by Carrillo and the fact that he was “trapped” in his van, despite several noted opportunities for escape. Allegedly, Justus had tried to talk Carrillo out of his violent plans after Carrillo had expressed his desire to shoot at several targets like helicopters, police officers, and civilians, before they eventually arrived in front of the guard post at the federal courthouse.

After stepping out of the van to do some quick reconnaissance by foot, Justus re-entered the vehicle. He then drove toward the guard house as Carrillo fired an AR-15 assault rifle from the open side door, felling the two guardsmen. Following the attack, Carrillo was invigorated and exclaimed “did you see how they fucking fell” as Justus drove away from the scene of the crime. The two parted ways in nearby Millbrae shortly after the shooting, Carrillo once again driving his white van with the license plate reattached. Justus and Carrillo both separately tried to hide their involvement in the crime by destroying their clothes and deleting cell phone records.
of their calls and texts. Additionally, Carrillo had turned his phone off prior to the attack in a premeditated attempt to conceal his whereabouts from law enforcement.

On the afternoon of June 6th, almost a week after the murder in Oakland, a white Econoline van was discovered abandoned near a wooded creek in Ben Lomond, California. The van showed details consistent with footage captured of the vehicle used during the Oakland shooting, and was found with ammunition, firearms, tactical gear, and bomb-making equipment inside. Following a thorough investigation, the van was determined to belong to Carrillo. As law enforcement approached Carrillo’s property to conduct a warranted search later that day, Carrillo opened fire on the deputies and detonated an improvised explosive device somewhere on the property. Two officers were shot, one later dying of his wounds. Carrillo fled the scene and escaped by carjacking a white Toyota Camry, holding the victim at gunpoint with an AR-15 assault rifle. 30 minutes later, Carrillo abandoned the Camry and attempted another armed carjacking but was apprehended by law enforcement before he could get away. It was later determined that the AR-15 assault rifle he was carrying had been the same one used in the Oakland shooting. On June 25th, 2020, Carrillo was indicted by grand jury for the May 29th shooting, and later pled guilty to both attacks (DOJ 2022). On February 11th, 2022, he was sentenced to 41 years in prison for murder and attempted murder of the law enforcement officers involved in the May 29th shooting (DOJ 2022). For his role as an accomplice, in March 2024, Justus was sentenced to life in prison for aiding and abetting murder and attempted murder of a federal employee (DOJ 2024).

Carrillo demonstrated his Boogaloo fanaticism through multiple means and incriminating connections. On the morning of the first shooting, at 7:57am, Carrillo commented on the “K/alifornia Kommandos” Facebook page, “If it kicks off? Its
kicking off now and if its not kicking off in your hood then start it. Show them the targets.” Minutes later, Carrillo commented again on Facebook, “Go to the riots and support our own cause. Show them the real targets. Use their anger to fuel our fire. Think outside the box. We have mobs of angry people to use to our advantage” (U.S. v Carrillo 2020). This is following the previously mentioned Facebook exchange that occurred May 28th between Carrillo and Justus on the same Facebook group.

Physical evidence from the crime scenes on June 6th included a tactical vest found in the abandoned van with a Boogaloo flag patch, depicting an igloo and a Hawaiian patterned stripe on a black American flag background. These are common symbols of the Boogaloo movement. More disturbingly, Carrillo appears to have scrawled Boogaloo-themed messages in his own blood on the hood of the stolen white Camry. These include the words and phrases: “BOOG”, “I became unreasonable,” and “stop the duopoly” (U.S. v. Carrillo 2020).

Evidence from other criminal cases further ties Carrillo to several violently mobilized members of the Boogaloo movement. According to evidence from the criminal complaint U.S. v. Hunter 2020, Ivan Harrison Hunter was a known associate of Steven Carillo. Hunter was arrested and charged for his violent involvement in the George Floyd riots which occurred in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the early hours of May 28th, 2020. Hunter, a resident of Texas, traveled to Minneapolis on May 27th after arranging a meet-up with other Boogaloo Bois Michael Solomon and Benjamin Ryan Teeter on Facebook. These two were later criminally charged in a separate case. Late that night, Hunter and several accomplices attacked the Minneapolis Police Department’s Third Precinct Building. With people still inside the building, he fired

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4 See Appendix C for Carrillo crime scene evidence.
an AK-47 semiautomatic rifle 13 times through the closed doors. Two others then threw Molotov cocktails through the broken windows and set fire to the building.

Hunter returned to Texas the next day and immediately began posting about his actions on Facebook, including posting pictures of himself wearing a distinctive skull mask and his Hawaiian flowered AK-47. On June 3rd, Hunter and two others were stopped by police in Austin, Texas during a traffic stop after being seen leaving the nearby George Floyd protest wearing tactical gear and carrying assault rifles. Looking inside the vehicle, police saw that the men were heavily armed, having two AR-15 rifles, an AK-47, and two pistols all with multiple rounds of ammunition ready to be utilized. The police seized all weapons, ammunition, and a bag of marijuana from the men and released them. During the stop, Hunter mentioned that he was the leader of the Boogaloo Bois in South Texas. Days later, law enforcement became aware that Hunter had been in contact with Carrillo for months prior to these violent incidents.

The following examples of communication between Carrillo and Hunter are taken from *U.S. v. Hunter* 2020:

1.) On March 14th, Hunter messaged Carrillo, "Start drafting that op. The one we talked about in December. I'ma green light some shit." Carrillo replied, "Sounds good, bro!"

2.) On May 30th, approximately four hours after the murder of the Oakland officer took place, and approximately two hours after the burning of the Third Precinct building in Minneapolis, Hunter contacted Carrillo via a social media application and had the following exchange:

8:37:09AM UTC (1:37:09AM PDT): Hunter to Carrillo: Go go go
8:37:23AM UTC (1:37:23AM PDT): Carrillo to Hunter: ?
3.) In a June 1st Facebook message exchange, Hunter asked Carrillo for money. Carrillo - who said he was going to "be in the woods for a bit" - responded by sending Hunter $200 via a cash application. Hunter thanked Carrillo, telling him "now I stand a better chance Steve." In the exchange, Carrillo told Hunter that he was "doing good shit out there" and to "stay safe." Hunter replied, "You too king!"

4.) In August, Hunter admitted to a confidential human source (CHS) in contact with the FBI that he and Carrillo were founding members of the “Happy Friends Group” which, according to Hunter, is a "fire team" that responds with violence if the police try to take their guns away. He also mentioned that he was a member of the Boogaloo Bois and referred to himself as a "terrorist."

Hunter was eventually arrested on October 21, 2020 in San Antonio, Texas and indicted for one count of riot on November 4th, 2020 (DOJ 2020).

Outside of his connection to Ivan Hunter and their “Happy Friends Group”, Steven Carrillo was also a member of the California-based Boogaloo militia group, the “Grizzly Scouts.” Starting April 2020, members of the Grizzly Scouts connected on Facebook to arrange periodic in-person firearms training and other meetups. The Grizzly Scouts’ Facebook page was named “K/alifornia Kommando”, which is a
reference to the “/k/” pro-weapons 4chan forum where the Boogaloo ideology originated (Sharpe 2022). On the page were several more references to the “Boogaloo” including the group’s description which stated, “they say the west won’t boog” and “were here to gather like-minded Californians who can network and establish local goon squads” (DOJ 2021). Members of the group also communicated through WhatsApp to discuss the “boogaloo”, tactics, and their desire to kill law enforcement. On June 6th, as law enforcement officers were approaching Carrillo’s property in Ben Lomond, California, he messaged the Grizzly Scouts on WhatsApp telling them he was preparing to fire at the police and calling for backup. One member responded by telling him to delete all evidence on his phone, and then instructed another member to delete any Grizzly Scout related files from their shared Dropbox account. Within hours of Carrillo’s final shootout, the Grizzly Scouts had deleted all records of their WhatsApp communications and began messaging on a different application. Four of these men were later charged with conspiracy to obstruct justice by destroying records and destruction of records in official proceedings (DOJ 2021).

Steven Carrillo was an active-duty staff sergeant in the Air Force at the time the incidents described took place. According to the Air Force Times, he was even the Phoenix Raven Team Leader of the 60th Security Forces Squadron, a division of highly skilled Air Mobility Command security forces, at Travis Air Force Base in California (Losey 2020). This position means that he had specialized training in the use of firearms and tactical security operations. After joining the Air Force in 2009, he went on to serve in Kuwait in 2019 and received the Air Force Achievement Medal (Losey 2020). Therefore, he was not only well-trained but also well-acquainted with combat.
Carrillo’s wife had also been an A1C in the Air Force, but sadly committed suicide in May 2018 (Losey 2020). The deposition of Carrillo’s lawyer claims that Carrillo “spiraled” after leaving Kuwait, and that he blamed himself for his wife’s death (Sharpe 2022). At his sentencing hearing in 2022, Carrillo’s lawyer also claimed that “jail staff had quickly diagnosed him with a mental illness” but declined to state the name of the illness, only saying that proper medication had made him clear-headed enough to realize the extent of his remorse (Sharpe 2022).

Analysis of Violent Extremist Case Study #1

Considering the larger political and social context of 2020, many have speculated that connections formed on Facebook were very appealing to those who were socially isolated during the pandemic. This could be especially true for those who experienced complex trauma as combat veterans, and those who struggle mental illness and personal tragedies, like Steven Carrillo. As noted in the literature review, Facebook and social media were also a major breeding ground and source of networking for the growing Boogaloo movement in 2019 and 2020. Carrillo’s use of Facebook as both a means of promoting his Boogaloo values and communicating with other adherents in order to plan and commit violent attacks points to a high level of social media engagement as well as a strong correlation between his social media use and mobilization to violence. Without social media, it is unlikely he would have been able to connect with Justus to commit these murders, nor would he have been able to communicate with other convicted Boogaloo extremists like Ivan Hunter or the Grizzly Scout gang. With all of the behaviors outlined in the above case study, this case presents a compelling argument in support of the research hypothesis.
Violent Extremist Case Study #2 – Joseph Morrison

Joseph Morrison is the “Commander” of the violent militia gang “The Wolverine Watchmen”, a strong adherent of the “Boogaloo” ideology, and a central conspirator in the failed plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020. For his involvement in the kidnapping conspiracy, Morrison was convicted and charged by the State of Michigan with three consecutive sentences totaling 20 years or more for providing material support for terrorist acts, threats of terrorism, gang membership, and possession of a firearm in commitment of a felony (Michigan Department of Attorney General 2022). Morrison and several other Wolverine Watchmen were among those charged under Michigan’s Anti-Terrorism Act of 2002 and are among the select few to have been convicted of state domestic terrorism charges in the United States.

Incidents and Evidence

Joseph Morrison, a Michigan resident aged 26 at the time of these events, started the Wolverine Watchmen in November 2019 (Oosting & House 2020). Going by “Boogaloo Bunyon” online, Morrison created a private Facebook group to recruit new members to the militia (Morrison Affidavit; Macklin 2021). The tagline of the group was “Boojahideen only” – a mix of Boogaloo and mujahideen which references the self-initiated recruitment process of learning about the ideology before attempting to join a Boogaloo group (Macklin 2021; Smith 2022; Stall and Wolfson 2021). Clearly communicating the group’s goals and intentions, Morrison posted the following to the Wolverine Watchmen’s Facebook page: “Wolverine Watchmen is a group of Patriots to network and assemble and recruit like-minded individuals. Develop regional QRFs and squad tactics. Only add people you trust, no statists, no fudds, no bootlickers, and no cops or feds. If you’re serious get a Wire and message
an admin your username. Boojahidden only, No feds, cops, bootlickers or commies or ethnonationalists” (People of Michigan v. Morrison et al. 2021). Under his “Boogaloo Bunyan” handle, Morrison further cemented his Boogaloo ideals by posting “Morte Semper Tyrannis and long live the Republic” on the Watchmen Facebook page in March (People v. Morrison et al. 2021). This loosely translates to “Death Always to Tyrants” in Latin and is a reference to “Sic Semper Tyrannis”, the words said by John Wilkes Booth after assassinating Abraham Lincoln (Sottile 2020). Additionally, Morrison posted threats against Governor Whitmer on social media, writing “one, two, I’m coming for you, three, four, better lock your door” (People v. Morrison et al. 2021).

In March 2020, the FBI was alerted to the group by local law enforcement who had discovered that the Watchmen were seeking to uncover the home addresses of police officers for nefarious purposes (U.S. v. Fox 2021). Around this time, a member of the Watchmen concerned with the group’s plans to target and kill police officers agreed to work with the FBI as a confidential human source (CHS). The CHS had joined the private Wolverine Watchmen Facebook page and had then communicated with Morrison and other members through Facebook and Wire, an encrypted messaging app. The CHS had become alarmed when they detailed violent plans to follow police officers to their homes and share their location data, constructing explosives, and how to illegally convert semi-automatic firearms to machine guns (Oosting 2021; People v. Morrison et al. 2021). This individual provided the bulk of the evidence used to convict Morrison and his co-conspirators as detailed in the criminal complaint U.S. v. Fox 2021 and evidentiary support documents for People v. Morrison et al. 2021.
On April 30th, 2020, Morrison and other Wolverine Watchmen attended an anti-Coronavirus restrictions rally at the Michigan Capitol Building with the intention of recruiting more people to their cause (Macklin 2021; Oosting 2021). After some urging by one of the members who wanted to “storm the Capitol” and “catch that bitch [Whitmer]”, the men, armed and armored, entered the Capitol building looking for Governor Whitmer. After realizing she was not there, they instead took a selfie outside of her office (Macklin 2021). This unsatisfactory gesture did nothing to assuage their ire over the repressive pandemic restrictions, and their growing resentment ultimately led them to become involved in the conspiracy to kidnap Governor Whitmer.

However, they did not come up with the plot alone. Adam Fox, the ringleader of the kidnapping conspiracy, was involved in several anti-government militia groups, namely the Michigan Home Guard and Michigan Patriot Three Percenters, prior to his involvement with the Wolverine Watchmen (Macklin 2021). Despite being removed from the Michigan Home Guard after only three months for “rage issues”, Fox was the self-described leader of the Michigan Three-Percenters and was a zealous believer in the idea that government tyranny should be opposed by force (Macklin 2021). On June 6th, 2020, Fox and 14 other like-minded individuals met in Dublin, Ohio, to discuss the creation of a self-sufficient society based on the Bill of Rights (Macklin 2021; U.S. v. Fox 2021; Witsil 2020). At the meeting, they also discussed their belief that many state governments, including Michigan and Virginia’s, were violating the U.S. Constitution and therefore the leaders, or “tyrants”, of these states should be violently removed (Macklin 2021; U.S. v. Fox 2021; Smith 2022). In an effort to gain more support for this idea, Fox reached out to Morrison online and formed an alliance with the Wolverine Watchmen on June 14th, 2020 (Macklin 2021; U.S. v. Fox 2021;
During their initial phone conversation, Fox stated his desire to put Whitmer on “trial for treason” before the November 2020 presidential elections, thus planting the seed of conspiracy (Macklin 2021; Witsil 2020).

Four days later, on June 18th, 2020, Morrison and Fox met in person for the first time at the “American Patriot Rally” which had gathered outside the Michigan Capitol to support the upholding of a measure allowing firearms to be carried within the Capitol building (Macklin 2021; Smith 2022). While there, both men were featured in footage wearing Hawaiian shirts, a symbol of Boogaloo support. They also discussed plans to gather “200 men” to storm the Michigan Capitol during a Congressional session “to take hostages, execute tyrants and have it televised” in an attack where “no one was coming out alive”, or alternatively “to barricade the building’s exits and then set it on fire so that those inside burned to death” (Macklin 2021). Considering this plan too risky, another leader of the Wolverine Watchmen, Pete Musico, suggested attacking political leaders in their homes instead.

Morrison and his father-in-law and co-defendant, Pete Musico, 42, lived together on a private property in rural Michigan where they hosted a number of field training exercises (FTX) for the Wolverine Watchmen, including firearms practice and tactical drills (U.S. v. Fox et al. 2020). Their property became a central meeting point for the Wolverine Watchmen and other members of the kidnapping conspiracy spearheaded by Adam Fox (U.S. v. Fox et al. 2020). Morrison, a former Marine Corps reservist, and several other members of the conspiracy, namely Paul Bellar and Barry Croft Jr, both former soldiers, all had military training which they applied to tactical instruction as well as the construction of illegal firearm modifications and improvised explosive devices (Macklin 2021; U.S. v. Fox 2020). On June 28th, 2020, following a
FTX training at Morrison’s property, members of the conspiracy gathered to discuss participating in attacks against the government and kidnapping politicians with the intention of sparking civil war with the government (*U.S. v. Fox* 2021; Morrison Affidavit). Although not directly involved in surveillance of the governor’s vacation home, Morrison and other Watchmen are implicated as being part of encrypted chats discussing detailed plans and reconnaissance related to the kidnapping plot, including the group’s need to gather $4,000 for explosives and other weapons as part of a plan to blow up a bridge near the governor’s home as a distraction (*U.S. v. Fox* 2021).

*Analysis of Violent Extremist Case Study #2*

The private Facebook page for the Wolverine Watchmen created by Morrison played a central role in his ability to connect with and ultimately mobilize other Boogaloo adherents to violence as part of the Whitmer kidnapping conspiracy. In addition to the Watchmen’s use of Wire, an encrypted messaging app, in attempts to conceal their planning of specific attack details and coordinating meetups, the private Facebook page was also used in attempts to hide incriminating communications from law enforcement. Thinking that the privacy of this page made him invulnerable to federal scrutiny, Morrison confidently used Facebook to post violent threats against law enforcement, advertise his ideology to followers, and attempt to recruit others to the Watchmen. Combined with the offline evidence of Morrison’s violent mobilizing behaviors like storming the Michigan Capitol building with the intention of harming Governor Whitmer and hosting FTX training and conspiracy meetings at his residence, the evidence of his involved social media for Boogaloo purposes lends support to the research hypothesis that higher social media engagement is correlated with an increase in probability of violent mobilization.
Non-Violent Extremist Case Study #1 - Cameron Emerson Casey Rankin

Cameron Emerson Casey Rankin is a 26-year-old (22 at time of arrest) man from San Antonio, Texas and self-proclaimed member of the Boogaloo Bois. He was charged in October 2020 for illegal possession of a firearm, which he was prohibited from owning due to previous commission to a mental institution. This is a violation of Title 18 U.S.C. 922(g)(4). In May 2008, Rankin had been court ordered by the Bexar County Probate Court to be committed to the Southwest Mental Health Center for 90 days (U.S. v. Rankin 2020).

Incidents and Evidence

According to the criminal complaint U.S. v. Rankin 2020, an anonymous individual reported Rankin to the FBI following his admission that he wanted to “overthrow the three letter agencies”, which refers to such agencies as the ATF, FBI, and IRS. Additionally, the anonymous tipper told FBI that Rankin had made concerning statements online such as: “…I don’t condone firing first either however we’ve already been fired upon” and “…I’m gonna actively and blatantly disobey all the laws that infringe on my upon my freedom ins Hope’s that I can inspire others to do the same Your complacent and play by their rules which is why you’ve gotten nowhere But don’t worry well take it from here.” Rankin made further posts on Facebook connecting him to the Boogaloo movement, including comments referring to himself as a “boog boi” and posting a Facebook profile picture of himself and two others wearing Hawaiian shirts and ballistic plate vests while carrying long guns and a Boogaloo flag. Rankin is also pictured in the photo with a handgun on his right hip and a black Galil AK-type assault rifle slung across his chest.

The profile photo was taken on May 30th, 2020, in downtown San Antonio as the men were attending a George Floyd protest. Rankin posted the photo to Facebook
the following day on May 31st, 2020. The photo received many comments, which prompted Rankin to reply with statements such as: “yeah, no fuck police hope they burn the precinct down” and “I’m BOOGALOO we hate police” (U.S. v. Rankin 2020). One of the commenters on this picture was Ivan Hunter, another criminally charged Boogaloo member, to whom Rankin wrote, “hey man I talked with [E.F.] thanks for being in minianapolis” (this is likely referring to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where Hunter and several others participated in the burning of police precinct and violent riots at George Floyd protests on May 28th, 2020).

Evidence from the criminal complaint U.S. v. Rankin 2020 shows that Rankin was in contact with other Boogaloo members under watch by the FBI and had indicated desire to travel and assist them. The following examples of mobilizing behavior are taken from U.S. v. Rankin 2020:

1.) On March 23rd, 2018, Rankin was denied purchase of two firearms at a sports store in San Antonio on the basis of his mental health history.
2.) On May 1st, 2020, one FBI predicated subject in Denver posted on Facebook calling for support as police allegedly were “swarming his house”, to which Rankin asked if the subject was “ok” and if he needed “backup.”
3.) On June 1st, 2020, Rankin sent audio messages on Facebook to one account, saying, “we’re not just going to protest. We’re going to boog. So uhm if you’re not down for that uhm I would advise you not to come…Honestly, if we take control of the White House…for liberty I think we can get somewhere.”
4.) Rankin was identified by a Confidential Human Source (CHS) as being a member of a Snapchat group called “Ice Bois/CO/WY.” On July 3rd, 2020, messages alluded to plans for more demonstrations like the George Floyd protests. On July 4th, 2020, messages indicated that Rankin had travelled to
Oregon to transfer Bitcoin and planned to stop in Colorado to visit two FBI predicated subjects. This trip was also recorded on his Instagram account.

5.) On August 4th, 2020, Rankin posted a photo to his Facebook timeline of himself holding a Galil semiautomatic rifle to his shoulder with finger on the trigger.

6.) On August 10th, 2020, FBI officers in San Antonio watched Rankin enter the San Antonio International Airport wearing a Hawaiian shirt and “Boogaloo” flag ballcap. He checked a semiautomatic handgun in his luggage, for which he did not have a license or concealed carry permit. At the airport, he suspiciously changed shirts several times both before and after landing. Upon landing in Manchester, New Hampshire on August 11th, 2020, ATF officers met Rankin and served him with a written notice of his prohibition from owning firearms and copies of his mental health records. They asked him to voluntarily submit his handgun to which he refused and became belligerent, prompting the ATF agents to forcibly seize his weapon and ammunition. Rankin angrily disposed of the documents given to him by the ATF as he was leaving the airport.

7.) On September 21st, 2020, Rankin was sent copies of these documents to his residence in San Antonio, along with a letter regarding the administrative seizure of his weapons. However, he was no longer staying there. Instead, Rankin was found to be staying at his foster brother’s apartment in Manchester, New Hampshire,

8.) On October 20, 2020, the FBI was granted a search warrant for the apartment in Manchester, which was executed on October 28th, 2020. Law enforcement
found the black Galil assault rifle and camouflage body armor worn by Rankin in his Facebook photos. Rankin was then taken into custody.

*Analysis of Nonviolent Extremist Case Study #1*

Based on available evidence, Rankin was found to have used social media to post original extremist content including pictures and text posts, comment on other extremists’ posts and pictures, and to communicate directly with other extremists on multiple platforms. Although his messages on Facebook and in chat groups like the “IceBois” on Snapchat indicate a desire to become involved in more protests and potentially violent activities, no concrete attack planning was made through these communications. Additionally, while his threatening posts against law enforcement on Facebook demonstrate a clear alignment with Boogaloo ideals, threats are not considered to be evidence of attack planning and are technically perceived as exercise of free speech. Similarly, although he did participate in the George Floyd protests with other Boogaloo members while armed and posted pictures of this event on Facebook, there is no explicit evidence that these meetups were coordinated through social media nor that the purpose of these meetups was to engage in violent extremist activities or attack planning. Even if these behaviors are incriminating, they are not illegal nor do they indicate full violent mobilization.

Based on the mobilizing behaviors exhibited by Rankin in the criminal complaint *U.S. v. Rankin* 2020, while he did travel and his plans indicated that he contacted other Boogaloo members during these travels, he did not travel to participate in violent extremist activity. That being said, his travel activity was considered suspicious, and his possession of firearms was deemed to be illegal on the basis of his prior mental health history. For these reasons, Rankin is classified as nonviolent, but motivated to violent extremism. Considering his use of social media
centered more around projecting his Boogaloo ideals and connecting with other Boogaloo members than in specific attack planning, this case is a bit more ambiguous in its support for the hypothesis that higher engagement with extremist groups online increases the likelihood of violent mobilization. It does however, lend support to the theme presented in the literature review that social media is a common source of radicalization and group socialization for potential extremists (Smith et al. 2019).

**Nonviolent Extremist Case Study #2 – Michael Paul Dahlager**

In November 2021, Michael Paul Dahlager was sentenced to two years in prison for Unlawful Possession of a Machine Gun, exactly a year after he was first brought to the attention of the FBI by a concerned individual for threats made against law enforcement. These violent statements were made in his capacity as an avowed member of the “Boogaloo Bois.” The conviction comes about as a result of Dahlager’s use of illegal “drop in auto sears”, which are small devices that can be inserted into semi-automatic firearms to convert them to fully automatic machine guns (Dahlager Sentencing Memorandum 2021).

**Incidents and Evidence**

After visiting Dahlager’s home on November 21st, 2020, hearing his threats against law enforcement, and seeing his small personal arsenal, the concerned individual agreed to become a confidential human source (CHS) for the FBI. On that day, the CHS noticed that Dahlager possessed an AR-15 assault rifle, body armor, a solvent trap suppressor and two auto sears (Dahlager Sentencing Memorandum 2021). Possession of both suppressor and auto sears violates Title 18 U.S.C. 922(o), which prohibits ownership of automatic weapons (Dahlager Criminal Complaint 2021). Several weeks later on December 12th, 2020, Dahlager, the CHS, and other Boogaloo
Boi associates attended the “Stop the Steal” rally at the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Cloud, Minnesota (Dahlager Criminal Complaint 2021). During this trip, Dahlager claimed to be conducting “recon” for a future protest planned at the Capitol in January 2021. As part of his alleged reconnaissance, Dahlager took videos of the area surrounding the Capitol building, identifying where police snipers were positioned on nearby rooftops.

On seeing the video a few days later, a Boogaloo Boi comrade suggested that they “blow that building first”, which Dahlager affirmed (Dahlager Sentencing Memorandum 2021). He made additional concerning statements to the CHS at this time, saying “if it comes down to having a better world for my kids, I’m 100% prepared to die for my country…the army is here. The state’s standing army that we were warned about is at the Capitol” (Dahlager Criminal Complaint 2021). He also mentioned that he didn’t think his wife realized that she had “married someone with a propensity for violence” (Dahlager Sentencing Memorandum 2021). However, after meeting with several members of the Boogaloo Bois and the CHS on January 12th, 2021, Dahlager backed out of attending the January 17th rally upon learning that the FBI had been investigating the Boogaloo Bois and had potentially infiltrated their organization. Instead, he recommended focusing on tactical training and recruiting new members (Dahlager Criminal Complaint 2021).

On February 3, 2021, the CHS received two auto sears from Dahlager at his residence. He demonstrated how to install the devices into a firearm and also showed the CHS 10 more 3-D printed auto-sears he had purchased from someone on Facebook in May 2020. The CHS later gave the two auto sears to the FBI, who confirmed that the devices fit the federal description of a “machine gun” under Title 26 U.S.C. 5845(b) (Dahlager Criminal Complaint 2021). During this meeting,
Dahlager disclosed worrisome personal information to the CHS, confessing that his in-laws did not trust him to be around his children and that there were growing issues in his marriage (Dahlager Sentencing Memorandum 2021). A month later, in a conversation between the CHS and Dahlager on March 31st, 2021, Dahlager made more troubling remarks. He mentioned that his wife wanted him to get rid of his weapons and referenced his desire to get in a violent confrontation with police. He said that if he wanted to commit “suicide by cop, I’m not going to wear a bulletproof vest….or carry 30 magazines for a gun I don’t have…I’d go out fighting…go hunt some pig” (Dahlager Sentencing Memorandum 2021). These startling admissions caused the FBI to determine that Dahlager could potentially harm himself or others, leading to his arrest on April 7th, 2021.

Following his arrest, the FBI discovered a significant amount of evidence supporting his Boogaloo affiliation and potential for violence in both his car and residence. The evidence included: “a tactical vest with ballistic plates, eight loaded .556 rifle magazines, three loaded .40 magazines, a silencer case, four smoke grenades, flex cuffs, zip ties, a radio headset, a copy of the Declaration of Independence, Boogaloo Bois paraphernalia, a tactical belt with knife, six more auto-sears, a .40 pistol, a .556 Ruger AR rifle, and a bolt-action rifle” (Dahlager Sentencing Memorandum 2021). During the FBI’s search of Dahlager’s home, his wife told agents that he had been a member of the Boogaloo Bois for two years and had made her uncomfortable by flying a Boogaloo flag outside their home. She further admitted his threatening statements against law enforcement had troubled her and that he had been irresponsibly spending their mortgage money on firearms and tactical gear (Dahlager Sentencing Memorandum 2021).
Analysis of Nonviolent Extremist Case Study #2

Evidence of Dahlager’s social media activities are extremely limited, with the only mention of social media engagement being his use of Facebook to purchase illegal auto sears from someone he allegedly met there. From this behavior, we can conclude only that he was on Facebook and had joined or followed Facebook pages connected to the Boogaloo Bois and that he had used these connections to communicate directly with another extremist in order to make the aforementioned illegal purchase. While it is likely he participated in other social media engagement behaviors such as liking or commenting on Boogaloo content on Facebook, these behaviors are not explicitly mentioned in the available evidence and as such cannot be counted towards his social media engagement score.

In regard to Dahlager’s demonstrated mobilizing behaviors, a majority fall into the motivation category and relate to his progressive radicalization to the Boogaloo ideology. This is illustrated through the incriminating statements made to his peers and family, such as those expressing his willingness to die for the cause or that he considered himself a violent individual. While he also exhibited some preparation indicators, like purchasing firearms, auto sears, and tactical gear, his attempts at surveillance were amateurish and unfruitful, with no concrete attack planning made during his “recon” of the Minnesota Capitol or in subsequent meetings with other Boogaloo members. For these reasons, he is considered to be motivated but nonviolent and his minimal engagement with social media lends support to the research hypothesis in that low engagement correlates to weak level of mobilization.
Findings and Results

Based on the evidence presented in the data gathered from secondary sources, each individual was categorized as either violent or nonviolent. Their additive social media engagement score was also determined from this data, as presented in the case studies. The actions and behaviors of each individual were compared to the 2021 NCTC Mobilizing Indicators booklet to determine their level of violent mobilization. Those cases which demonstrated a majority of mobilization and preparation indicators were classified as violent, and those with a majority of motivation indicators were classified as nonviolent. The operationalization of each case is shown below in Table 2, where numbers listed correspond to the specifically numbered indicators represented in the U.S. Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators Reference Card (Appendix 1). To better illustrate the outcome of these findings, Table 3 presents a visualization of the total number of each indicator type per case, represented by the color associated with each indicator grouping:

Table 2: Operationalization of Violent Mobilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Name</th>
<th>Mobilizing Indicators</th>
<th>Preparation Indicators</th>
<th>Motivation Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carrillo – Violent #1</td>
<td>1, 2, 5</td>
<td>23, 12, 8, 14, 18, 24, 9, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 26, 11</td>
<td>32, 36, 41, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrison – Violent #2</td>
<td>1, 5</td>
<td>12, 8, 14, 18, 24, 9, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 11</td>
<td>32, 41, 28, 30, 31, 34, 35, 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rankin – Nonviolent #1</td>
<td>18, 24, 8, 20, 22, 23</td>
<td>32, 33, 40, 41, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahlander – Nonviolent #2</td>
<td>8, 18, 24, 13, 15, 20, 11</td>
<td>41, 28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 42, 35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To reiterate, in the *Mobilizing Indicators* booklet, indicator numbers 1-7 are coded red for mobilization to violence, numbers 8-27 are coded orange for engaging in preparation, and numbers 28-42 are coded yellow for developing motivation. As we can see from the data table, the violent cases have more than twice as many preparation indicators as the nonviolent cases. This demonstrates that mobilized individuals took much more serious measures to prepare and plan for acts of extremist violence than motivated individuals. While motivated individuals may have undertaken some preparations, they are generally limited to less attack specific behaviors, such as communicating directly or seeking a relationship with violent extremists or making incriminating and threatening social media posts.

The indicators common to all cases are: 8, 18, 20, 24, 28, 30, 31, 34, 41. Of these, three indicators are preparation indicators and six are motivation indicators with no mobilization indicators being shared among all cases. The main noted commonality between these indicators is that indicators 24, 18, and 41 demonstrate shared desire for belonging and a social identity based in extremist group

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**Table 3: Total Mobilizing Indicators by Type per Case**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Mobilization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DAHLAGER – NONVIOLENT #2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RANKIN – NONVIOLENT #1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MORRISON – VIOLENT #2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARRILLO – VIOLENT #1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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membership. This supports information presented in the literature review which finds that group socialization is a significant factor in radicalization and violent mobilization (Smith et al. 2019). Other commonalities are that indicators 28 and 20 point to shared Boogaloo ideology among all cases. This is shown in that indicator 20, acquisition of weapons or ammunition for suspected criminal purposes, relates to the fact that the Boogaloo movement is centered around fanatical support for firearm rights, while indicator 28, professing intent to harm law enforcement, reinforces that the Boogaloo movement expresses strong animosity towards the government and law enforcement. Common indicators 8, 30, and 31 concern threatening statements made against or in response to government, political figures, law enforcement, legislative issues, and other specific targets, which is strongly aligned with the Boogaloo movement’s antipathy towards authority and regulation. Lastly, indicator 34 expresses acceptance of violence as a justifiable means to achieve ideological goals. Regardless of whether these individuals were able to actually commit violent acts, their expressed willingness to commit violence indicates that they were all on the path towards violent mobilization, if not already fully mobilized. This determination further supports this study’s aim in seeking to identify which behaviors separate the motivated from the mobilized.

Looking more closely at the differentiating factors between those who are motivated but nonviolent versus those who are fully mobilized to violence, the ten indicators shared by violent cases that do not appear in nonviolent cases are: 1, 5, 9, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, 26. 1 and 5 are mobilization indicators, while the rest are preparation indicators. This implies that the mobilization indicators 1, traveling within the United States or abroad to carry out or participate in violent extremist activity, and 5, identifying specific details of an intended violent activity, are the most critical
overall in determining imminence of violent mobilization because they are only present in violent cases. However, taken together, these ten indicators could be considered the most influential in differentiating between those who are motivated from those who are fully mobilized, as well as predicting the overall likelihood of violent mobilization. These top indicators are listed below in Table 4:

### Table 4: Top Ten Mobilizing Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator Number</th>
<th>Indicator Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Traveling, within the United States or abroad, to carry out or participate in violent extremist activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Identifying—in person or online—specific details of an intended violent activity, including target(s), time frames, and participant roles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Unusual building or testing of explosives, especially if tailored to a specific target.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Seeking or claiming religious, political, or ideological justification or validation for a planned violent act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Breaking away from a larger group or creating a more exclusive or operationally secure group to discuss or plan specific violent activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Increased use of physical concealment tactics (for example, countersurveillance techniques, disposable phone) in support of planning a specific act of violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Increased use of online concealment tactics (for example, deleting, hiding, or manipulating social media or other online accounts to misrepresent location or hide group membership, contacts, or activities) in support of planning a specific act of violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Unusual efforts to obtain explosive precursors, especially illegally or surreptitiously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Change in or initiation of physical or weapons training for suspected criminal purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Pursuing or exploiting jobs or personnel who provide sensitive access to enable violent acts (for example, critical infrastructure, the Intelligence Community, law enforcement, military).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Considering this list of behaviors, there are a few which stand out as being particularly indicative of violent mobilization. The first is indicator 5, identifying specific details of an intended violent activity. This indicator is significant as a top mobilizing behavior because making concrete and specific plans with dates, times, and roles is a key factor in separating the “walkers” from the “talkers.” For this reason, it is also extremely important to consider the implications of indicators 12, 14, and 21. 12 indicates ideological justification for attacks, while 14 and 21 indicate concrete attack planning and preparation. As mentioned in regard to indicator 5, engaging in specific attack planning is one of the most critical differentiators between those who are violently mobilized and those who are nonviolent but motivated. When a radicalized individual breaks away from the larger group to form an operationally smaller group, as in indicator 14, or initiates weapons training for suspected criminal purposes, as in indicator 21, these are clear signs that the individual has progressed to taking observable actions that put them firmly overly the boundary of violent mobilization.

When differentiating between “walkers” and “talkers”, actions clearly speak louder than words. As mentioned earlier in these findings, indicator 8, communicating intent to engage in violence or a direct threat with justification for action, is one shared among all cases, demonstrating that making threats or implying intent to harm is not a sufficient indicator of actual mobilization to violence. This is especially true as many radicalized individuals feel comfortable making empty threats online because they are protected by the First Amendment and the perceived anonymity of the Internet. That is why demonstrated and observable actions taken in furtherance of violent objectives are a stronger indicator of mobilization than making violent threats.
The second indicator which stands out is number 26, exploiting jobs or personnel who provide sensitive access to enable violent acts. Both Carrillo and Morrison exploited their military training and position as violent specialists to plan and/or execute violent attacks. The fact that both individuals in the violent cases had military backgrounds points back to the pattern presented in the literature review that many in the Boogaloo movement have ties to the military or combat training. This could be because the ideology may be more appealing to those who are violent specialists on the basis that it promotes the idea of an imminent civil war in which they can exercise their strengths, or conversely, that the Boogaloo movement’s recruiters seek out those with combat experience in order to exploit their skills, knowledge, and training. For example, Morrison and the Wolverine Watchmen exploited the military expertise of several of their members to construct IEDs, train in combat medicine, and engage in tactical exercises. On IEDs, the next indicators which stand out are numbers 9 and 19, which deal with either attempting to obtain explosive precursors or construct explosive devices. The presence of these indicators demonstrates violent intent in a much more impactful way than verbal or written threats, as extremists generally do not try to build bombs unless they intend to use them.

Finally, indicators 16 and 17 deal with increased use of online or physical concealment tactics. While all case study individuals exhibited some awareness that they were participating in illegal activities, the violent cases took more serious steps to hide their actions. For example, Carrillo removed the license plate from his van, threw away the clothes he had been wearing during the first attack, turned off his cell phone during the first attack, utilized encrypted messaging apps, and ultimately tried to ditch his van along with other critical evidence, demonstrating that he knew what he was doing was illegal and wanted to hide those things which incriminated him.
Similarly, Morrison and his cohort utilized encrypted messaging apps and a private Facebook page to communicate, hid their cell phones during meetings, spoke in code, and attempted to confirm that conspirators weren’t law enforcement by checking their IDs and looking for concealed wires (People v. Morrison et al. 2021). Ironically, these measures failed to detect the FBI informant in their midst, but they did make the attempt. On the whole, these behaviors collectively illustrate violent mobilization more strongly than other mobilizing indicators.

### Table 5: Social Media Engagement Scores by Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Media Engagement Behaviors</th>
<th>Violent 1 Carrillo</th>
<th>Violent 2 Morrison</th>
<th>Nonviolent 3 Rankin</th>
<th>Nonviolent 4 Dahlager</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Joining/following extremist pages and liking extremist content</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Commenting on extremist content</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Using social media or messaging apps to communicate directly with extremists</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Disseminating/sharing extremist content on one or more platforms</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Posting/uploading original extremist content</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Using social media or messaging apps to organize or plan attacks, including planning to take communication offline</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total engagement score</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next step in the case study analysis is examining the social media behaviors exhibited by each case. Six social media behaviors were analyzed according to their support for violent extremist activities and engagement with violent extremist
groups. These behaviors are presented in Table 1, Social Media Engagement Behaviors. To be clear, only behaviors explicitly mentioned in the collected data were counted as part of each individual’s social media engagement score. Individuals could have participated in more online behaviors than are mentioned here, but to infer certain behaviors would be unsupported by the given evidence. The social media engagement data and scores for each case are displayed in Table 5 above.

As shown in Table 5, the violent extremist cases had higher social media engagement scores than the nonviolent cases. Interestingly, the most violent offender also scored the highest on engagement by demonstrating all six social media indicators. However, as mentioned in the limitations, this could be partially due to the fact that there was much more evidence gathered against the violent cases than there was against the nonviolent cases. That being said, the case analysis data suggests support for the hypothesis that higher social media engagement with extremist groups predicts probability of violent mobilization among radicalized persons.

Certain social media behaviors are strongly correlated with the top ten violent mobilizing indicators. In particular, using social media or messaging apps to organize or plan attacks is clearly connected with the top mobilizing indicator, 5, identifying—in person or online—specific details of an intended violent activity, including target(s), time frames, and participant roles. In today’s day and age, most communication takes place online, and the multitude of encrypted and secretive messaging services available online convinces extremists that they can freely discuss violence without discovery. Additionally, this behavior is directly related to the mobilizing indicator 17, increased use of online concealment tactics, as both violent cases utilized encrypted messaging apps and private Facebook accounts and messages in attempts to make their communications less visible to law enforcement.
Finally, the behavior of using social media or messaging apps to communicate directly with extremists was the only social media behavior demonstrated across all four cases. This supports the main point that social media increases connectivity and engagement with violent extremism and lends further strength to the hypothesis that high engagement is correlated with violent mobilization.

**Conclusion**

This research probe, while certainly not conclusive, offers a promising foundation for future research into the relationship between social media engagement and violent extremist mobilization. The literature review shed light on the complexities underlying the radicalization to violent extremism process, and emphasized the critical influence of social bonds and group identities in enabling radicalized individuals’ acceptance of violence. Additionally, this examination confirmed that social learning of extremist behavior could be supported by communities formed on social media. Linking these theoretical underpinnings to the empirical findings of the case study, the results offer a clear answer to the research question which posited how online behaviors could be identified that predict probability of violent mobilization.

By examining various indicators of engagement, ranging from following extremist pages to planning attacks using online platforms, it was possible to create a scale of engagement that adequately measured the proposed concept. The structured approach outlined in this study, where behaviors are categorized and assigned values to calculate a total engagement score, provides a systematic and repeatable way to
evaluate and compare individuals' levels of involvement with extremist ideologies. Taken together, these aspects of the methodology lend validity to the overall research proposal.

Through the case study analysis of two violent and two nonviolent individuals within the Boogaloo movement, it was determined that higher levels of social media engagement, such as direct communication with extremists and planning attacks via social media platforms, correlated with increased indicators of violent mobilization. The analysis substantiated the proposed hypothesis, indicating that social media engagement behaviors can serve as early warning signs of potential violent actions among radicalized individuals.

This study underscores the critical role of social media engagement in facilitating connections with extremist ideologies and fostering online behaviors that may lead to violent mobilization. It emphasizes the intricate dynamics between online behaviors and real-world actions among radicalized individuals, highlighting the continued need for content moderation across various social media platforms and for monitoring extremist groups on social media for signs of violent mobilization.

While the research has provided valuable insights into the relationship between social media engagement and violent mobilization, there are several limitations that warrant consideration. The reliance on secondary sources and the focus on individuals involved in criminal proceedings may have introduced biases and limited the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, data constraints and privacy concerns restricted a comprehensive analysis of social media activities, especially for nonviolent cases. To address these limitations and build upon the findings of this study, future research could focus on expanding the sample size to include a diverse
range of radicalized individuals from different ideological movements. Utilizing more direct data from social media sources, where possible and ethically permissible, could offer deeper insights into online engagement patterns and their implications for violent mobilization. This could include self-reported surveys of social media engagement distributed among noted extremist social media communities, which would be more in line with the current research standards regarding social media engagement scales that seek to measure multiple dimensions of engagement, like emotional connection to content or motivations underlying certain social media behaviors (Sigerson and Cheng 2018). Future efforts exploring the role of offline factors in conjunction with online behaviors could provide a more holistic understanding of the radicalization process. Furthermore, longitudinal studies tracking individuals' social media activities over time could offer a nuanced perspective on the evolution of extremist engagement and mobilization.

By identifying key social media behaviors associated with increased likelihood of violent actions, this study attempts to draw connections between themes that have only minimally been explored within the current body of literature. The use of the NCTC U.S. Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators Booklet (2021) as a form of operationalizing individuals’ level of violent mobilization is something that has not been previously attempted in prior studies, presenting a novel addition to the body of work in the field of counterterrorism studies. Similarly, the scale of social media engagement proposed in this study is an original creation that has not been tested in other research, making it a unique measurement tool for future research. Overall, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and intervention programs striving to counter violent extremism in the digital age.
Bibliography


Appendices
Appendix 1: Mobilizing Indicators Reference Card

US VIOLENT EXTREMIST
MOBILIZATION INDICATORS 2021

1. Travelling, within the United States or abroad, to carry out or participate in violent extremist activity
2. Engaging in a threatening interaction or violently refusing to comply with law enforcement based on violent extremist ideology
3. Disseminating one’s own martyrdom or last will video or statement (for example, a pre-attack manifesto or final statement)
4. Conducting a dry run of an attack or assault or attempting to gain proximity or access to targets
5. Identifying—in person or online—specific details of an intended violent activity, including target(s), time frames, and participant roles
6. Disposing of meaningful personal assets or belongings in an unusual manner, particularly with a sense of urgency or without regard for personal financial gain
7. Unusual goodbyes or post-death instructions
8. Communicating intent to engage in violence or a direct threat with justification for action, particularly if presented as necessary or inevitable, in person or online
9. Unusual building or testing of explosives, especially if tailored to a specific target
10. Planning or preparing to travel abroad to join violent extremist organizations, seek training, or engage in a conflict zone
11. Planning or preparing to travel within the United States to participate in violent extremist activity
12. Seeking or claiming religious, political, or ideological justification or validation for a planned violent act
13. Unusual purchase of military-style tactical equipment (for example, body armor or personal protective equipment) in a manner that raises suspicion of planning violence
14. Breaking away from a larger group or creating a more exclusive or operationally secure group to discuss or plan specific violent activity
15. Surveilling potential attack targets
16. Increased use of physical concealment tactics (for example, countersurveillance techniques, disposable phone) in support of planning a specific act of violence
17. Increased use of online concealment tactics (for example, deleting, hiding, or manipulating social media or other online accounts to misrepresent location or hide group membership, contacts, or activities) in support of planning a specific act of violence
18. Communicating directly with or seeking to develop a relationship with violent extremists, or being contacted directly by them, for suspected criminal purposes
19. Unusual efforts to obtain explosive precursors, especially illegally or surreptitiously
20. Acquisition of weapons or ammunition for suspected criminal purposes
21. Change in or initiation of physical or weapons training for suspected criminal purposes

The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are committed to safeguarding the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and applicable law. It is therefore important to emphasize that many of the mobilization indicators included in this booklet may also relate to constitutionally protected activities. It is most important to look critically and contextually at the specific actions of the individual and their intent. Law enforcement action should never be taken solely based on constitutionally protected activities; on the apparent or actual race, age, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity of the subject; or on any combination of these factors. Individuals are encouraged to contact law enforcement if—based on these indicators and the situational context—they suspect an individual is mobilizing to violence or engaging in violent extremist activities.
Appendix A, cont.

US VIOLENT EXTREMIST
MOBILIZATION INDICATORS 2021

22. Planning or pursuing suspicious travel activity (for example, unusual purchase of one-way tickets, false excuses for international travel, fraudulent passport application) in a manner that raises suspicion of potential violence

23. Sending or receiving unexplained financial resources or equipment to/from violent extremists

24. Creating, joining, or implying membership/association—in person or online—with violent extremists for the purpose of furthering violent activity

25. Conducting research for target or tactic selection for violent acts (for example, acquiring blueprints, maps, schematics, or technical specifications)

26. Pursuing or exploiting jobs or personnel who provide sensitive access to enable violent acts (for example, critical infrastructure, the Intelligence Community, law enforcement, military)

27. Attempting to seek technical expertise (for example, in aviation, biology, chemistry, electronics) to enable planned violence

28. Professing intent to harm law enforcement if law enforcement takes action or statement of intent to harm others (typically ideological opponents) if confronted

29. Expressing desire or willingness to die for a violent extremist ideology

30. Threatening specific violence against a particular physical target, especially in response to current news reporting on political and legislative issues or other flashpoint events that speak to one’s ideological concerns

31. Threatening violence toward specific individuals, including civilian, government, law enforcement, or military personnel

32. Producing, promoting, or extensively consuming violent extremist content online or in person, including violent extremist videos, narratives, media, and messaging for suspected criminal purposes

33. Posing with weapons and imagery associated with violent extremism in photos or videos, especially if paired with threats or expressed interest in carrying out violence against an ideological target for suspected criminal purposes

34. Expressing acceptance of violence as a necessary means to achieve ideological goals (for example, communicating a desire for revenge against ideological opponents) and saying that nonviolent means are ineffective or unavailable

35. Attempting to radicalize others—especially family members and peers—to violence

36. Praising, or researching to emulate, past successful or attempted attacks or attackers

37. Increasing or extreme adherence to conspiracy theories as a justification of violence against ideological targets

38. Engaging in outbursts or fights with or condemning behavior of family, peers, community, or authority figures while advocating violent extremist ideology

39. Adopting more than one violent extremist ideology

40. Rejecting nonviolent voices in favor of violent extremist ideologies

41. Changing vocabulary, style of speech, or behavior to reflect a hardened point of view or new sense of purpose associated with violent extremist causes, particularly after a catalyzing event

42. Isolating oneself from family and peers, particularly if citing violent extremist doctrine or ideology
Appendix B: Examples of the Boogaloo Flag.


Steven Carrillo’s ballistic plate vest with Boogaloo flag patch.

Appendix C: Carrillo Crime Scene Evidence.

Stolen white Camry with Boogaloo references scrawled in Carrillo’s blood.

Appendix C, cont.

Carrillo and Justus parked in front of the federal guardhouse in Oakland, CA.


Carrillo firing at the guardhouse from the open sliding door of the white van.

Appendix C, cont.

Carrillo’s white van discovered in the woods in Ben Lomond, CA.

Image of AK-15 recovered during Carrillo’s apprehension in Ben Lomond, CA.