

Submission to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage

Re: Study of the history of and current display
of hate symbols and emblems in Canada

Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre's
Online Hate Research and Education Project:

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Dear Members of the Committee,

The Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre of the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto's Online Hate Research and Education Project is a Government of Canada Anti-Racism Action Program-funded initiative researching how memes and other digital practices are being used to spread in hatred in Canada. For the last six months our researchers have been cataloging and analyzing hateful posts found across mainstream and fringe social media platforms in order to generate new knowledge about how contemporary hate groups, movements, and individuals use social media, symbols, and memes in the attempt to indoctrinate Canadians. A key deliverable of our project is a continually updated reference list identifying and contextualizing Canadian hate symbols.

This brief focuses on an example of right wing protest and symbols, due to the nature of the Convoy protest and the symbols that the proposed legislation focuses on. It's important to note that, although producing hate symbols and memes are primarily the domain of the far-right, the described practices are not confined there. Our research, understanding that hate is not confined to any end of the ideological spectrum, collects any material that targets all protected Canadian demographics, regardless of source.

Many were dismayed over the course of the 'Freedom Convoy' protest in Ottawa when they saw unambiguous hate symbols like the Nazi Swastika and the Battle Flag of the Army of Northern Virginia (hereafter referred to as the Confederate flag) carried on Canadian streets.¹ The open display of hate symbols, along with the protestor's conduct, illustrated to Canadians the growing ties between the movement against public health measures and groups that promote hateful beliefs. However, the Nazi Swastika and the Confederate flag were not the only hateful symbols observed by anti-hate experts over the course of the three weeks. Symbols associated with a number of hateful and conspiratorial movements were prominently displayed, but did not arouse the same kind of press attention or public worry.

Hate is not always as easy to identify as a Swastika or a Confederate flag, and groups in Ottawa that displayed obscure and contextual hate symbols were able to do so with few, if any, consequences. This is by design, as the propaganda that many contemporary hate groups and movements deploy relies on a number of strategies to dodge moderation and avoid public censure, including irony, humour, misdirection, mischaracterization, aesthetics, and pseudoscholarship in a range of subjects.² On social media they constantly come up with new symbols and new slogans to shroud their beliefs and keep "normies", as people not engaged with fringe internet culture are known, in the dark. Part of this strategy involves the appropriation of anodyne symbols and assigning them hateful meaning. Many of these

¹ Kimberly Molina, "Police on guard against 'lone world individuals' as protest convoy arrives in Ottawa," CBC, January 28, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/police-weekend-demonstrations-ottawa-1.6331215>; Shira Hanau, "Swastikas displayed at Canadian 'Freedom Convoy' protests against vaccination mandates," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, January 30, 2022, <https://www.jta.org/2022/01/30/politics/swastikas-displayed-at-canadian-freedom-convoy-protests-against-vaccination-mandates>, Accessed April 24, 2022; Emily Pasiuk, "Edmonton-area MP under fire for photo of him near flag bearing Nazi symbol," CBC, 30 January 30, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-area-mp-under-fire-for-photo-of-him-near-flag-bearing-nazi-symbol-1.6333266>. Accessed 23 April 2022.

² Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 62-68; Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall and Simon Murdoch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?*, (Milton Park: Routledge, 2020), 107-119.

symbols, like the ‘okay’ hand gesture or Pepe the Frog, utilize plausible deniability to deflect charges of hate and set the accuser up for ridicule.³

Those on the political fringes have often been on the frontier of communications and technology. In the 1990s neo-Nazis set up telephone lines that spread hate speech and began using the internet as tool to grow a movement through forums and message boards.⁴ In the 2000s and 2010s, hate groups adapted their strategies after recognizing how YouTube’s algorithm creates ‘rabbit holes’ that research has demonstrated have the effect of isolating users, and contributing to the radicalization processes.⁵ More recently, conspiracy theory movements like Qanon, which started on fringe imageboards like 4chan and 8chan grew into mainstream platforms like Facebook and Instagram.⁶ Uneven removal from these platforms did little to slow the movement's growth, and it continued to gather momentum on both Facebook and the growing expanse of alternative social media and video streaming websites.⁷

Because of their rapid embrace of new communication technologies and platforms, those peddling hateful beliefs often find themselves in the same online spaces as youth. Many hate movements have adapted to youth-oriented platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Twitch, Discord, and even online video gaming servers have developed problems with propagandizing and hateful conduct. This proximity to youth gives hate movements a unique opportunity to radicalize new demographics, build large networks, and even mobilize activists for fringe political parties.⁸

This is particularly concerning, as recent research shows that individuals between ages 15 and 25 are the most vulnerable to radicalization.⁹ Research by the Canadian Anti-Hate Network revealed that children as young as 14 were active in a Canadian white nationalist forum.¹⁰ This problem has been exacerbated over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, as lockdowns forced young people away from their classmates, friends, and support structures and onto these online spaces during a time of profound anxiety and uncertainty. Many young Canadians are looking for something to attach their feelings of isolation and anger to, and unfortunately hate groups are more than happy to oblige. These messages are presented amidst the ironic and irreverent humour that often appeals to young people. These tactics allow them to

³ Pepe the Frog.” *ADL*, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/pepe-the-frog>. Accessed 24 April 2022.); “Okay Hand Gesture.” *ADL*, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/okay-hand-gesture>. Accessed 24 April 2022.

⁴ Perry and Scrivens, *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada*, 25-26.

⁵ Anna Zaitsev and Mark Ledwich. “Algorithmic Extremism: Examining YouTube's Rabbit Hole of Radicalization,” *arXiv* 1912.11211, (2019), <https://arxiv.org/abs/1912.11211>. Accessed 23 April 2022.

⁶ Mike Rothschild, *The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (New York: Melville House, 2021), 31-48.

⁷ Shannon Bond, “Unwelcome On Facebook And Twitter, QAnon Followers Flock To Fringe Sites.” *NPR*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/31/962104747/unwelcome-on-facebook-twitter-qanon-followers-flock-to-fringe-sites>. Accessed 23 April 2022; Barbara Ortutay, “Extremist groups tied to Qanon thriving on Facebook despite ban: report - National | Globalnews.ca.” *Global News*, March 23, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7713262/report-extremist-groups-thrive-facebook-qanon>. Accessed 23 April 2022.

⁸ Pam Nilan, *Young People and the Far Right* (Springer Nature: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 1-29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ Sébastien Roback, “Canada First Exposed: Months Inside One of Canada's Biggest, Youngest, and Newest White Supremacist Chatrooms,” *Canadian Anti-Hate Network*, June 29, 2021, https://www.antihate.ca/canada_first_exposed_tyler_russell. Accessed 23 April 2022.

avoid accountability all the while directing young people who often have yet to develop strong critical thinking abilities towards ideas they might not fully understand, while maintaining the stance that it's all just a joke if noticed.¹¹

In 2021 the Canadian Race Relations Foundation conducted a survey, finding that young people are far more likely than other demographics to experience hateful content online; nearly three in four respondents aged 18 to 29 reported having experienced or seen hateful comments online, while two in three reported having witnessed or seen comments or contents inciting violence.¹² The membrane between online and offline worlds is increasingly porous, and memes and symbols once confined to extreme online spaces are being normalized and appearing in “real life” more frequently. This is no small worry, as radicalization associated with memes and hate symbols have been credibly linked to incidents of terrorism around the world.¹³

Canada has its own surprisingly productive hate ecosystems that are producing their own propaganda, which sometimes involves symbols like the Nazi Swastika and Confederate flag.¹⁴ Domestic hate organizations and movements, shaped by local concerns and circumstances, are linked to international networks that share and develop common cultures and symbols. Some of the symbols found in Canadian ecosystems are unique to that context, others are well accepted extremist icons used internationally.

This brief uses two examples of symbols that appeared during the Freedom Convoy in Ottawa to illustrate the ambiguity, irony, and plausible deniability that must be grappled with when encountering and deciphering potential hate symbols today. Well-known hate symbols with widely accepted meaning, such as the Nazi Swastika and the Confederate flag should be banned, as their appearance is usually an unambiguous display of hate. However, the two examples from the Convoy demonstrate the limits of criminalizing hate symbols and the need for additional measures to address and counter their presence in Canadian society.

Canadians have poor public awareness about the practices and imagery of contemporary hate promotion. The sparseness of existing educational and outreach infrastructure creates space for hate groups and movements to operate in the open. When compared to nations like Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Canada's anti-hate research and education infrastructure is lacking.

It will not be possible to legislate against the constantly evolving memetic practices of online extremists. In addition to banning the two mentioned symbols, Canada must invest in vital research and education infrastructure through non-profits, educational institutes, universities, and community groups. This

¹¹ Miller-Idris, *Hate in the Homeland*, 65-68.

¹² Canadian Race Relations Foundation, *Online Hate and Racism: Canadian Experiences and Opinions on What to Do About It* (Toronto: Abacus Data, 2022), www.crrf-fcrr.ca/images/CRRF_OnlineHate_Racism_Jan2021_FINAL.pdf. Accessed 23 April 2022.

¹³ EJ Dickson, ‘Why Did the Christchurch Shooter Name-Drop YouTube Phenom PewDiePie?’ *Rolling Stone*, March 15, 2019 <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/pewdie-pie-new-zealand-mosque-shooting-youtube-808633/>. Accessed 25 April, 2022.

¹⁴ Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens, *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), ; Jacob Davey, Cecile Guerin and Mackenzie Hart, *An Online Environmental Scan of Right Wing Extremism in Canada* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), 5.

includes supporting the development of research sharing networks between the aforementioned groups and the encouragement of intercommunal and organizational collaboration.

Tracking Hate Symbols in Canadian Internet Memes

At the Online Hate Research and Education Project, we are researching hate memes and symbols in a Canadian context. We use the Ontario Human Rights Code and human rights lawyer Richard Warman's Canadian Human Rights Tribunal approved Hallmarks of Hate to analyze memes for hateful content. Each meme is analyzed to determine:

- Which group protected by the Ontario Human Rights Code is being targeted
- What specific community within the OHRC defined group is being targeted
- What specific Hallmark of Hate has been identified

These memes are collected from a broad array of social media platforms, from mainstream options like Tik Tok and Facebook, to more fringe communities on Telegram and 4Chan. Memes have been collected from groups and platforms across the ideological spectrum.

From this research we are producing a growing list of hate symbols that appear online in Canadian contexts, which is categorized as:

- Explicit Hate Symbols
- Contextual Hate Symbols
- Meme Characters with Hateful Uses
- Contemporary Canadian Hate Group Symbols
- Historical Canadian Hate Group Symbols

Examples of Contextual Hate Symbols seen at Freedom Convoy

A number of examples from our research into online ecosystems manifested at the Freedom Convoy. Two in particular were both prominent and demonstrate the ambiguous and contextual meaning of contemporary hate symbols, and how irony and plausible deniability makes identifying them particularly difficult.

Honk Honk

On 22 February 2022 Member of Parliament for York Centre Ya'ara Saks spoke on the House of Commons floor about the "Honk Honk" memes going around pro-Convoy social media pages, describing it as a stand-in for "Heil Hitler." The statement resulted in a deluge of mockery and harassment; social media users, fringe media producers, and the most-watched cable broadcast in the United States, Tucker Carlson Tonight, all attacked Saks for making what was characterized as a baseless accusation aimed to tar all Convoy supporters as fascists and Nazi sympathizers.¹⁵

¹⁵ Dan Collen. "'Honk Honk' Was An Antisemitic Meme Long Before The Convoy Started Using It." *Canadian Anti-Hate Network*, March 1, 2022, https://www.antihate.ca/honk_honk_antisemitic_meme_before_convoy. Accessed April 24 2022.

In certain contexts, “Honk Honk” does mean “Heil Hitler,” but from the beginning the symbol was designed to be a trap. In February 2019 users of 4chan began posting a variation of Pepe the Frog wearing a rainbow wig, red nose, and bow-tie that became known as Honk Honk or Honkler. The meme was meant to characterize a sense of nihilism in the face of an absurd society, or “Clown World” in the parlance. That month a user stated that Honk Honk was going to be the next ‘Okay’ hand gesture, which led to others producing offensive and violent Honk Honk memes. Users were also quick to connect the acronym to “Heil Hitler, and openly posted about their hope that the mainstream media and Anti-Defamation League would take their bait and describe it as a hate symbol [1 and 2]. The memes were often incredibly racist and antisemitic, regularly involving Holocaust celebration and denial [3 and 4] The Honk Honk memes continued to grow through 2019, eventually finding additional homes on the popular content aggregation website Reddit, even after the website shut down the pages they appeared on.¹⁶

The Honk Honk memes that emerged from the Freedom Convoy developed independently of the previously mentioned clown memes, referring primarily to the honking of vehicle horns that characterized the protestors’ occupation of Ottawa. However, the Freedom Convoy memes were quickly contaminated by the visual vocabulary and content of the previously created, explicitly antisemitic Honk Honk memes [5 and 6]. The vast majority of participants in the protest are not sympathetic to Nazism or fascist ideology, but there were known hate group leaders and members present who were trying to capitalize on the moment of memetic convergence and shared visual culture [7].

After the events of the Convoy, many supporters and participants are even more alienated and radicalized. The concern is that participants and supporters may now be finding themselves in increasingly extreme spaces online and off, where they may be encountering hateful material like Honk Honk laden imagery that denies or celebrates the Holocaust. The Convoy revitalized the Honk Honk memes on extreme spaces, where it resides alongside content that is less shrouded. Because of the similarity between Convoy memes and the content on a more extreme space, the individual in question may be more receptive to the hateful ideas than if they were presented with unfamiliar visuals.

Pit Vipers

Pit Viper is a private company that produces sunglasses for use in extreme sports that promote a light-hearted and irreverent identity in their marketing and whose products are designed with a 1980s-style aesthetic [8]. Their style and tone caught the attention of extremists looking for new symbols to ironically co-opt and imbue with hateful meaning, and they began being used by White supremacists associated with the America First Groypner movement after their leader gave a speech wearing a pair.¹⁷

¹⁶ Billy Johnson, “After 9 months, Reddit finally bans group spreading thinly veiled anti-Semitism,” *The Times of Israel*, June 24 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-9-months-reddit-finally-bans-group-spreading-thinly-veiled-anti-semitism/>. Accessed 24 April 2022.

¹⁷ Max Ufberg, “Sunglasses Company Pit Viper Fought the Alt-Right to Control Its Brand,” *Men's Health*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.menshealth.com/style/a38517845/pit-viper-sunglasses-alt-right/>. Accessed 24 April 2022; Zach Petrizzo “This Sunglass Company Is at War With Far-Right Extremists,” *The Daily Beast*, 14 July 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/sunglass-company-pit-viper-is-at-war-with-far-right-extremists>. Accessed 24 April 2022.

Pit Vipers are an example of a symbol and meme that crosses between online and offline contexts. Pit Vipers can be photoshopped onto existing hate symbols, like Pepe the Frog, or historical figures like war criminals associated with the Holocaust [9 and 10]. They can also be worn as a declaration of identity in public.

In 2021, two days after a participant in the January 6th insurrection in Washington DC recorded himself wearing Pit Vipers inside the Capitol Building, the company issued a statement on social media condemning racism, facscism, and terrorism. Despite the statement by Pit Vipers, the sunglasses have continued to be used by known hate groups and appear on fringe web platforms. During the Freedom Convoy in Ottawa, a member of Canada First, an offshoot of the America First Groyper movement, was photographed wearing Pit Vipers [11]. In this context, it is safe to assume that the choice of sunglasses is intentional and that the wearer is identifying himself to those in the know.

As with the Honk Honk memes, seeing an individual wearing a pair of Pit Viper sunglasses doesn't mean that it's a declaration of hate. The sunglasses are popular with a number of audiences and are in-line with currently in vogue aesthetic trends. However, the fact that a private company would explicitly denounce part of its customer base should attest to the hateful nature of some appearances.

Recommendations to the Committee

Hate symbols today are fluid, ambiguous, and referential. Deciphering specific examples with nuance requires ingroup knowledge of politics, history, popular culture, and internet culture. Because of the constantly evolving nature of online and offline hate, criminalizing contextual hate symbols like Honk Honk and Pit Vipers would involve a massive restriction on free speech. Attempts at regulating examples like Honk Honk and Pit Vipers would likely have the opposite of the intended effect, resulting in even more memes production and the further pollution of online ecosystems.

Like the appearance of a Confederate or Nazi flag in a museological context, not all appearances of the aspects of a memetic hate symbol are necessarily bigoted. Many memes that have hateful uses also have entirely non-hateful uses, or are appropriated by vulnerable communities seeking to reduce its power. Nuanced contextualization is necessary when evaluating an appearance.

To equip Canadians with the requisite knowledge, Canada should:

- Financially support the creation and upkeep of critical anti-hate research and education infrastructure, including organizations, projects, and a national anti-hate research sharing network to facilitate cooperation between academic institutions, non profits, community groups, private organizations, and individuals.
- Conduct a study into the intersection between Holocaust denial the role that social media plays in mainstreaming hateful pseudohistory.

Appendix A: Images

HH.gif, 105KiB, 511x512



Anonymous ID:yC3aHEzA Sun 10 Feb 2019 22:55:11

No.202784085

[View](#)

>>202783958

For the retards out there:

In white nationalism

Neo-Nazis use the number 88 as an abbreviation for the Nazi salute Heil Hitler. The letter H is eighth in the alphabet, whereby 88 becomes HH.

honk honk

[1] Example of post on 4chan explaining the meaning behind Honk Honk. Source: www.4plebs.com

honk-honk-42034755.png, 102KiB, 500x522



Honk Honk



OPERATION SPREAD HONKLER **Anonymous** ID:T8d3hsGF

Tue 09 Apr 2019 23:15:22 No.209458449 Replies: 10

[View](#)

Our weaponized autism is LIMITLESS

The gameplan to make honkler an ADL hate symbol;

Step 1 - Change your profile pic on all social media platforms to honkler (uploaded pic related)

Step 2 - Reply to everything with redpills such as:

"Despite being only 13% of the population blacks commit 52% of crimes. HONK HONK"

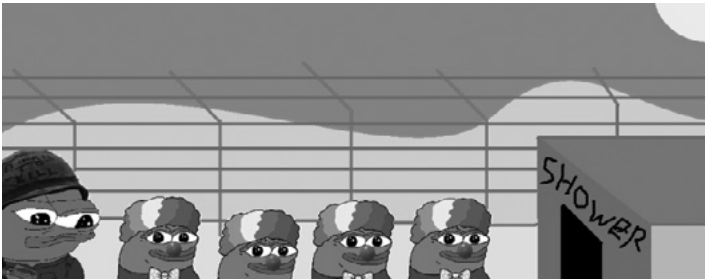
Step 3 - Watch the (((MSM))) lose their shit and the (((ADL))) put Honkler in their hate symbol database.

[2] Example of post on 4chan referring to Honk Honk meme's purpose. Source: www.4plebs.com

Appendix A: Images



[3] Example of an antisemitic Honkler meme celebrating the Holocaust. Source: [www.reddit/frenworld](http://www.reddit.com/frenworld) (now defunct)



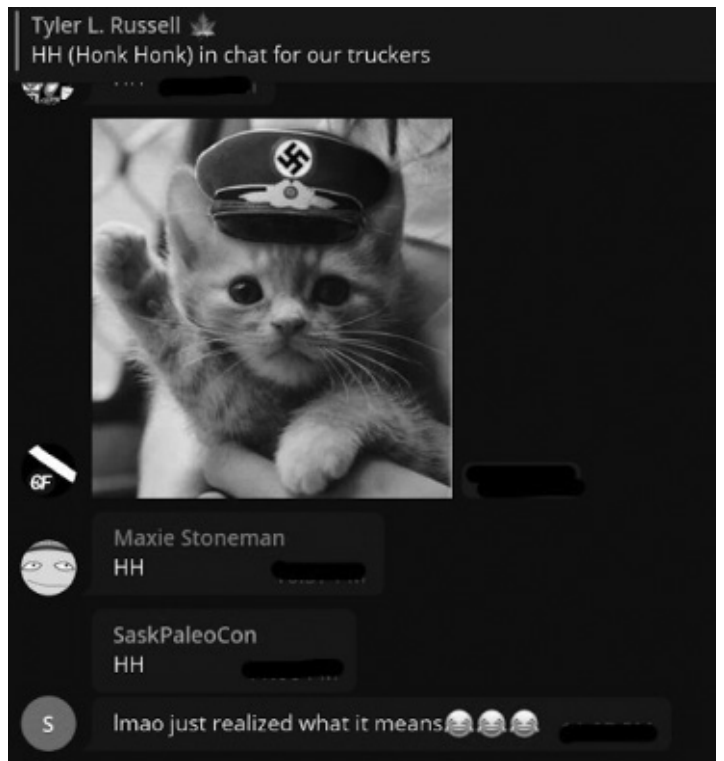
[4] Example of an antisemitic Honkler meme celebrating the Holocaust. Source: [www.reddit/frenworld](http://www.reddit.com/frenworld) (now defunct)



[5] Example of a Honk Honk meme from the Freedom Convoy. Source: www.4plebs.com



[6] Example of a Freedom Convoy meme with Honkler meme character. Source: www.4plebs.com

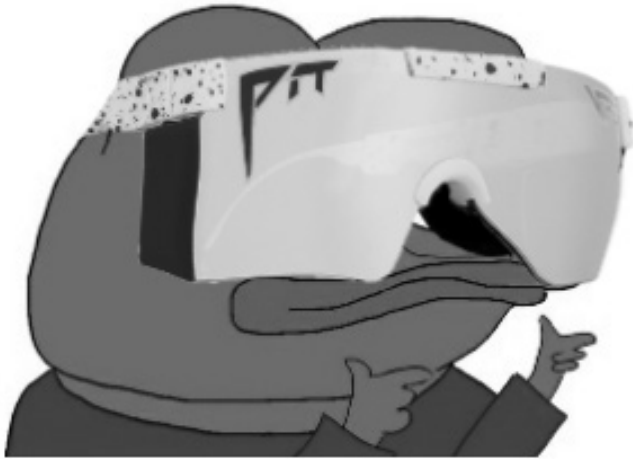


[7] Example of use of Honk Honk to mean Heil Hitler by figure in the Canada First branch of the Groyper movement. Source: Canada First Telegram channel

Appendix A: Images



[8] Example of a pair of Pit Vipers. Source: www.pitviper.com



[9] Example of a meme found on 4chan featuring Pepe the Frog wearing crudely photoshopped Pit Viper Sunglasses. Source: www.4plebs.com



[10] Example of a meme found on featuring war criminal Oskar Dirlewanger wearing crudely photoshopped Pit Viper sunglasses. Source: www.4plebs.com



[11] Example of an individual at the Freedom Convoy wearing Pit Vipers and a Canada First hat. Source: Twitter