

Viewing anti-immigrant hate online: An application of routine activity and Social Structure-Social Learning Theory

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Please cite this article as: Costello M., Restifo S.J. & Hawdon J., Viewing anti-immigrant hate online: An application of routine activity and Social Structure-Social Learning Theory, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106927>.

This is the version of the article that was submitted for publication. It is not the definitive version of record and will undergo additional copyediting, typesetting and review before it is published in its final form.

ABSTRACT

The increasingly prominent role of the Internet in the lives of Americans has resulted in more people coming into contact with various types of online content, including online hate material. One of the most common forms of online hate targets immigrants, seeking to position immigrants as threats to personal, national, economic, and cultural security. Given the recent rise in online hate targeting immigrants, this study examines factors that bring individuals into virtual contact with such material. Utilizing recently collected online survey data of American youth and young adults, we draw on insights from Routine Activity Theory and Social Structure-Social Learning Theory to understand exposure to anti-immigrant online hate material. Specifically, we consider how online routines, location in social structure, and social identity are associated with exposure. Results indicate that engaging in behaviors that can increase proximity to motivated offenders increases the likelihood of being exposed to anti-immigrant hate, as does engaging in online behaviors that bolster one's target suitability. Additionally, individuals who view Americanism as fundamental to their social identity are more apt to encounter anti-immigrant hate material on the Internet, as are those who are more dissatisfied with the current direction of the country.

Keywords: Online Hate; Immigration; Routine Activities Theory; Social Structure-Social Learning Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) described 2016 as an “unprecedented year for hate” in the United States (Potok 2017). For the year, there were 6,121 reported hate crimes¹ (FBI 2017) and 917 active hate groups (SPLC 2019). But 2016 was not an anomaly. Reported hate crimes increased 17 percent (to 7,175 offenses) in 2017, and the number of active hate groups in the country reached a record 1,020 in 2018 (FBI 2018; SPLC 2019). Noticeably, immigrants, especially those from Latin America, the Middle East and Asia, are increasingly the targets of hate—both offline as well as online (FBI 2017; Kaleem, 2019; SPLC 2019). Indeed, in 2017, 60 percent of hate crimes targeted individuals because of their race/ethnicity/ancestry (FBI 2018), and between 2015 and 2017 the rate of exposure to online hate material attacking immigrants increased by more than 60 percent (Costello et al. 2019). The rapid growth of hate material targeting immigrants is alarming because aggressive and inflammatory online rhetoric and imagery can lead to intolerance and, in extreme instances, verbal and physical attacks against them (Stacey et al. 2011).

Given the surge in anti-immigrant hate material and the dangers it poses, it is crucial to identify and understand those factors that steer individuals toward such malicious online content. In this article,

¹ Estimates suggest U.S. hate crimes are severely underreported, averaging about 200,000 incidents annually from 2015-2017 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2017).

we examine dynamics associated with exposure to anti-immigrant hate material online using data on youth and young adult internet users. We begin with a brief description of online hate and contextualize its emergence and spread. We then turn to Routine Activity Theory (RAT) and Social Structure-Social Learning Theory (SSSL) and consider how these frameworks can help explain exposure to online hate. The former highlights the association between crime, offender, target and guardianship, while the latter calls attention to social learning processes embedded in group membership, culture, and structural environment. Next, we discuss anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States and how perceived national identity and satisfaction with the trajectory of the country can affect exposure to hate material targeting the foreign-born. This is followed by a description of our data ($N = 726$), measures (attitudinal, demographic, situational), and analytic approach (logistic regression). We conclude with a discussion of our key findings, study limitations, and the broader implications and contributions of our work.

2. Theory

2.1 Online Hate

Online hate, also referred to as online extremism or cyberhate, is a type of cyberviolence that uses computer information technology to voice attitudes and opinions devaluing persons because of their race, ethnicity, immigrant status, religion, gender, sexual identity, and/or political persuasion—among other traits (Blazak 2009; Hawdon et al. 2017a). Online hate differs from other forms of cyberviolence, such as cyberstalking or cyberbullying, in that hate attacks target individuals based on their collective group membership (Costello et al. 2016a). While hate groups have long been attracted to the technological, geographic, and economic advantages the Internet affords (Meddaugh and Kay 2009), social media has accelerated the spread of online hate, offering individuals unassociated—or loosely associated—with hate groups easily accessible, user-friendly, and far-reaching platforms to publicize and communicate hate (Potok 2015).

Cyberhate takes many forms and is spread by those on the political left and right, as well as white supremacists, eco-terrorists, and transnational jihadists (Brown 2009). Online hate, however, is presently monopolized by far-right extremists (Berger 2016; Potok 2015; Ratliff et al. 2015) who champion white supremacy and racial purity and stoke fear of impending white genocide. Immigrants, portrayed as a mounting threat not only to white ascendancy, but also white survival, are thus common targets of right-wing cyberhate. Websites dedicated to anti-immigrant hate regularly malign and marginalize the foreign-born through derogatory and dehumanizing characterizations (Gemignani and Hernandez-Albujar 2015), depicting them as a burden to taxpayers, labor market threat, and colonizing force producing social, moral, and cultural decay (Phadke et al. 2018). It should come as little surprise, then, that as the United States continues to diversify, projecting to reduce whites from a majority to a plurality by mid-century (Lieven 2016), anti-immigrant hate has become increasingly pervasive in cyberspace. In fact, survey data show that exposure to anti-immigrant hate online dramatically increased over the last few years (Costello et al. 2019).²

2.1.2 Explaining Exposure to Anti-Immigrant Hate Online

Recent scholarship has used a modified version of Cohen and Felson's (1979) Routine Activity Theory to examine cybercrime and victimization. Initially conceptualized to shed light on crime in a physical environment, RAT purports that crime is more likely when a motivated offender, suitable target, and inadequate guardianship converge in time and space. This framework, in turn, has been extended to explain various online abuses, including identity theft, harassment, fraud, and targeted hate (Bossler and Holt 2009; Pratt et al. 2010; Reynolds 2013; Reynolds and Henson 2015; Reynolds et al. 2011).

RAT has similarly been used to explain exposure to general forms of online hate (Costello et al. 2016a), as well as online hate that specifically advocates violence (Hawdon et al. 2019). For instance,

² According to recent data, reported exposure to anti-immigrant hate online grew from 20.7 percent in 2015 to 32.6 percent in 2017—a jump of 63.5 percent (Costello et al. 2019).

specific online behaviors, such as spending more time online (Costello et al. 2016; Keipi et al. 2017), avid social media use (Hawdon et al. 2019; Hawdon et al. 2014), and maintaining robust social networks (Hawdon et al. 2014) are found to increase the likelihood of encountering cyberhate. Moreover, engaging in antagonistic online behaviors (Hawdon et al. 2019), producing online hate material (Hawdon et al. 2014), and joining others in online deviance (Hawdon et al. 2019; Costello et al. 2016) can render individuals targets. Sexting, adding strangers to social media networks, and anonymously confiding in others online have also been identified as increasing targeting and cyber-victimization (Reyns et al. 2013; Reyns et al. 2016).

Capable guardianship, however, although shown to reduce criminal activity in a physical environment (Pratt and Cullen 2005), does not reliably reduce cyber-victimization (Bossler and Holt 2009; Leukfeldt and Yar 2016). This may reflect both the difficult task of operationalizing capable online guardianship, as well as challenges associated with policing a fundamentally anonymous, and theoretically limitless, online realm. Importantly, recent work shows that attempts among internet users to confront and self-regulate individuals engaging in hateful behavior can actually have the opposite of the intended effect. That is, attempts to challenge hate can increase an online user's visibility, which can lead to them becoming a target (Costello et al. 2017).

In sum, RAT offers important insights into cyber-victimization, including exposure to hate material. However, its application to this particular form of cyber-victimization faces a specific challenge; namely, RAT does not distinguish theoretically between wanted and unwanted exposure to online hate content. Because hate is in the eye of the beholder, and those advocating or agreeing with hateful ideology do not necessarily consider it nor mean it to be "victimizing" (Costello et al. 2016b), we argue that broader sociocultural conditions and context must be considered to fully capture and explain patterns of exposure to cyberhate. Thus, following others (Hawdon et al. 2019), we incorporate insights from Social Structure-Social Learning Theory (SSSL) into our analyses to complement RAT and offer an important corrective.

SSSL explores how “variations in the social structure, culture, and locations of individuals and groups in the social system” (Akers 2009: xxviii) influence social learning processes that lead to criminal behavior. Specifically, SSSL highlights how *differential social location* (i.e., group membership), *differential location in social structure* (i.e., socio-demographic stratification), and *differential social organization* (i.e., structural environment) influence an individual’s worldview. Like RAT, SSSL is typically used to explain crime that occurs in offline settings. Yet, these factors can influence an individual’s online experiences as well, including their proximity to motivated offenders, visibility as a target of online deviance, and the likelihood of being under capable guardianship (Hawdon et al. 2019; Kaakinen et al. 2018). We therefore argue that the structural factors and social learning processes identified by SSSL influence victimization by molding those processes described by RAT.

In this study, we devote particular attention to the role of differential social location and differential location in social structure, as well as to what Akers (2009) refers to as *theoretically defined variables*—i.e., unspecified social structural factors that can affect learning processes that lead to criminality. Akers intentionally developed and described such variables broadly to allow for future development of SSSL. In this case, we explore belief systems that might affect the likelihood of being exposed to online hate targeting immigrants. Specifically, we consider whether individuals whose self-perception is defined by their status as an American and who are dissatisfied with the direction of the country are more likely to encounter anti-immigrant hate. The section that follows provides a backdrop to immigration, nativism, and American identity, and elaborates upon connections to cyberhate.

2.1.3 *Anti-Immigrant Sentiment in America*

The recent swell of anti-immigrant fervor in the U.S. fits a larger pattern and history marked by frequent moments and, at times, forceful waves of prejudice and hate. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—often looked back upon as exceptional eras in which millions of immigrants and immigrant families were incorporated into the American fabric—point to numerous instances when nativist fears gained public traction and expression through policy endorsing and, when successful, codifying

segregationist and exclusionary practices (Bennett 1988; Lieberman 1980). Indeed, nativist claims that the foreign born—particularly those deemed *nonwhite* (including various European ethnics)—posed a serious cultural, criminal, economic, and political threat prompted such restrictionist federal policies as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the National Origins Act of 1924, and “Operation Wetback” in 1954 (Higham 1988; Ngai 2004).

The demographic character of the U.S. foreign-born population has of course changed dramatically over the past century, and Asian and European ethnics are no longer typical targets of anti-immigrant hostilities (Golash-Boza 2012; Timberlake and Williams 2012). Even so, disparaging stereotypes and prejudice against immigrants have in many respects remained constant. Nativist hyperbole past and present routinely centers on and equates the foreign born with violent crime, job competition, and politico-cultural insurgency (Restifo et al. 2019; Schrag 2010). Since the 1990s, such rhetoric has increasingly fixated upon unauthorized immigration from Latin America and the perceived terrorist threat of Arab and Muslim arrivals (Chavez 2013; Edgell et al. 2016). The presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama in particular featured intensified immigration and national security policy enforcement relative to public and political pressure in these regards—though both administrations generally sought comprehensive immigration reform (Ilias et al. 2008; Obinna 2018).

Strikingly, the first decade and a half of the 2000s, particularly the period spanning the presidential administration of Barack Obama, witnessed a rapid rise in political partisanship on immigration issues as local Republican leadership increasingly aligned with and championed nativist views and action (Schain 2018; Williamson et al. 2011). The salience of this shift is reflected in the surge of local and state anti-immigration laws proposed and passed, including such blatantly hostile legislation as Arizona’s SB 1070, Alabama’s HB 56, and Georgia’s HB 87. Nativist views gained further mainstream political purchase during the 2016 presidential election as Republican candidate and eventual president Donald Trump took advantage of growing public concerns over immigration by depicting the foreign born—especially those from Mexico and Muslim-majority countries—as dangerous criminals and terrorists (Bloch et al. 2020; Bonilla-Silva 2019; Potok 2017; see also Trump 2016). Moreover, once in

office, Trump pursued an immediate and aggressive agenda targeting immigrants, including taking steps to construct a U.S.-Mexico border wall, implement a Muslim travel ban, and eliminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. It should therefore come as little surprise that immigration is now viewed by the broader American public as a top concern confronting the nation (Jones 2019). Indeed, Gallup data from July 2019 shows that 27 percent of Americans view immigration as the most important problem—surpassing all other issues for the polling period and representing a record for immigration in Gallup polls.

The growing concern over immigration in the U.S. coincides with, and is likely linked to, resurgent nationalist attitudes (Brands 2017). Marshalling this revival, President Trump loudly and unabashedly embraced nationalism, exclaiming at a rally in 2018, “You know what I am? I’m a nationalist, O.K. I’m a nationalist. Nationalist! Use that word! Use that word!” A day later in the Oval Office, Trump reiterated his affinity for the title, stating “I am a nationalist. It’s a word that hasn’t been used too much. Some people use it, but I’m very proud. I think it should be brought back” (Baker 2018).

Fundamentally, a nationalist ethos frames patriotism as an emotion, akin to love of one’s family, with citizens of a nation bound by a shared past, common culture, and collective morality (Mead 2013). As such, nationalism is expressly about social identity and a feeling of belonging to something bigger than the individual (Hogg and Abrams 1988). Social identity theory, in turn, emphasizes the salience of group memberships to one’s sense of self and denotes how identity construction involves comparing oneself to others. Those deemed similar are recognized as in-group members, while those deemed distinct—across key status dimensions—are viewed as out-group members (Steets and Burke 2000). In pursuit of a positive sense of self, individuals draw favorable comparisons between their in-group and other out-groups, effectively highlighting the distinctiveness—and often alleged superiority—of one’s social identity (Grant and Brown 1995). This sense of distinction can translate into evaluative bias (Branscombe et al. 1993; Sidanius et al. 1994), devaluing out-groups (Branscombe and Wann 1994), and even discrimination (Cagnon and Bourhis 1996) when in-group identification is particularly robust or finite resources are at stake (Oakes et al. 1994; Tajfel 1978; Hawdon 2014).

The immigration debate in the U.S. is routinely couched in nationalistic terms, emphasizing the role of social identity. Members of the in-group nation, or *us*, are pitted against *them*, the would-be social, cultural, ideological, linguistic, and economic interlopers from abroad (Hollinger 2006) who carry the potential to upend the delicate balance between national unity and diversity (Citrin and Wright 2009). Long-standing concerns over the ability and willingness of immigrants, especially immigrants who are most dissimilar from the native population, to assimilate to American ideals buoy fears of an erosion of national identity (Higham 1988; Schrag 2010). Indeed, multiculturalism is commonly framed as a direct threat to *Americanism* (Citrin and Sides 2008; Citrin and Sears 2009).

Since identification as American—like all identities—is only meaningful vis-à-vis some *other*, and because status is inexhaustible (Hawdon 2014; Milner 2013), promoting one's identity as American can come at the cost of the identities of others, including immigrants. Extant work demonstrates that perceived threat to social identities increase ethnocentrism (Bourhis and Giles 1977; Grant 1993; see also Bloch et al. 2020; Chavez 2013), and we therefore expect individuals who view their status as American as core to their identity to be more apt to seek out and/or notice materials that enhance the status of their identity—specifically, cyberhate targeting immigrants. Similarly, while the U.S. population is increasingly diversifying (Lieven 2016), concerns over immigration are accelerating (Jones 2019). Given the growing belief that immigration is a major problem in need of immediate correction, coupled with the long history of scapegoating the foreign-born for national problems, including crime, unemployment, wage depression, and social and cultural decay (Pollin 2011; Rothschild et al. 2013; Schain 2018), we anticipate that individuals who are dissatisfied with the country's current trajectory will be more likely to encounter and/or view anti-immigrant cyberhate.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analytic sample for this study consists of 726 internet users age 15 to 36 who were exposed to online hate. Consistent with prior research, we focus on youth and young adults because they are particularly active on social media and thus more likely to encounter online hate material (e.g. Costello et

al. 2016a; Räsänen et al. 2016). Data were collected by Survey Sample International (SSI) in December 2017 from demographically balanced panels. SSI recruited participants through random digit dialling and other permission-based techniques. Potential respondents were sent email invitations, and SSI provided several incentives to participants to take the surveys. Importantly, SSI stratified the sample to reflect the U.S. population on key demographic traits. Women were nonetheless disproportionately represented in the sample (66%), so we constructed weights based on the percentage of women in the U.S. age 15 to 36. All results reported herein are based on the weighted data. Notably, demographically balanced online panel data such as these are typical for investigating hate material on the Internet (see, e.g., Costello et al. 2016a,b; Näsi et. al. 2014; Näsi et. al. 2015).

3.1 *Dependent Variable*

Our analyses center on exposure to anti-immigrant hate online. This outcome is measured dichotomously, with 1 indicating respondents encountered anti-immigrant hate material online within three months just prior to taking the survey and 0 indicating they did not. Respondents were first asked if they had seen or heard any material online that expressed negative views about any group because of their race, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, political views, immigrant status, or religion in the past three months. Those who responded affirmatively were then asked what the hate they saw targeted, and respondents were provided a list of choices including race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, political views, religious conviction or beliefs, gender or gender identity, etc. Over one-third of study participants reported encountering hate online that targeted “nationality or immigrant status” during the preceding three months, making it one of the most common forms of cyberhate seen. Table 1 offers a breakdown of the type of online hate to which respondents were recently exposed.

Saw Online Hate in the Past 3 Months	Percent
Yes	68.5
No	31.5
Online Hate Pertained to:	Percent of those Exposed¹
Race	51.6
Sexual Orientation	36.4

Immigrant Status/Nationality	35.4
Politics	33.2
Religion	25.5
Gender Identity	22.4
Gender	20
Appearance	13.8
Disability	6.5
Other	0.3

¹ Respondents could select multiple categories, so percentages do not add to 100%

Table 1. Exposure to Online Hate Material by Type of Hate

3.1.2 *Independent Variables*

We begin with Routine Activity Theory and consider its key dimensions (i.e., *proximity to motivated offenders*, *target suitability*, and *guardianship*) relative to online experiences. Recent work demonstrates that certain online behaviors can bring online users into virtual proximity to hateful materials, as well as render them suitable targets for cyberviolence (Costello et al. 2016a,b; Hawdon et al. 2017b). First, we take into account several activities that tap into *proximity to motivated offenders*, or, more specifically, “dangerous” virtual spaces that might contain anti-immigrant hate. These activities include the amount of time respondents spend online and the number of social networking sites (SNS) they use. Time online is measured by asking respondents approximately how many hours per day they spend using the Internet. Possible responses range from 1 (“less than one hour per day”) to 6 (“ten or more hours per day”). SNS usage is gauged by asking respondents to identify any popular social networking mediums (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) they used during the preceding three months. These measures are dichotomous, coded 1 for use of a given site and 0 otherwise. We anticipate that spending more time online and greater SNS usage will increase online users’ virtual proximity to motivated offenders, and thus make exposure to anti-immigrant hate more likely.

Next, we assess *target suitability*. Here, we control for expressing political views online, being directly targeted by online hate, and immigrant status. Although we are examining exposure to hate, not targeting, it is likely that many of the same factors that make respondents targets will also place them in virtual proximity with it. Respondents were asked if they voiced political views online within the past

year. Responses were coded 1 for such activity and 0 otherwise. Political views can be contentious, and their expression can be seen as antagonistic, heightening a person's target suitability (Hawdon et al. 2019). We thus expect the expression of political views online to correlate with exposure to anti-immigrant hate. Respondents were also asked if they have ever been the direct target of online hate. Responses were coded 1 if so and 0 otherwise. Being targeted can indicate an individual occupies hostile online spaces where hate exists (Costello et al. 2016b). Indeed, repeat victimization is common (Fagan and Mazerolle, 2011; Finkelhor et al. 2007), and individuals who experience one type of cyber-victimization are more likely to be confronted by other types (Reyns et al. 2013). As such, we expect that persons that have previously been the target of hate will be more likely to be exposed to anti-immigrant hate. Immigrant status is coded 1 if persons were born outside the U.S. and 0 otherwise. Since immigrants are often direct targets of anti-immigrant hate online, we anticipate that they will be at greater risk to encounter such material.

Finally, we assess *guardianship*. We use respondents' living arrangement as a proxy, in this instance, to capture online guardianship. This is consistent with prior work on guardianship in online contexts (e.g., Räsänen et al. 2016; Reyns et al. 2016). This measure is dichotomous, coded 1 if respondents live alone and 0 if not. Living alone represents a low level of guardianship (Reyns et al. 2016), and potentially an increased likelihood for engaging in online deviance. We therefore expect living alone to correlate with exposure to anti-immigrant cyberhate.

Building on Routine Activity Theory, we blend insights from Social Structure-Social Learning Theory to further develop and extend our understanding of cyber-victimization. As suggested by SSSL, individuals' online behaviors are shaped by, if not largely a result of, social learning processes. As such, we introduce several measures approximating core tenets of SSSL. These include *differential location in social structure*, *differential social location*, and two *theoretically defined variables*.

We take into account *differential location in social structure* using a series of socio-demographic indicators. SSSL argues that location in social structure impacts social learning processes that may lead to

criminal behavior (Akers 2009). Taken a step further, prior research suggests that those most attracted to the current brand of rightwing hate, including anti-immigrant hate, are white, relatively uneducated men who are economically marginalized and politically conservative (see, e.g., Baysinger 2006; Berlet and Lyons 2018; Global Post 2015). We therefore introduce measures for race/ethnicity, gender, education, economic engagement, and political ideology. Race/ethnicity is dichotomous, coded 1 if respondents identified as white and 0 nonwhite. Gender is coded 1 if respondents identified as male and 0 female. Education is measured as the highest degree earned, ranging from 1 (“less than a high school diploma”) to 5 (“a master’s degree or professional degree”). Economic engagement is dichotomous, coded 1 if individuals are in school or working full-time and 0 if unemployed or working part-time. Political ideology is based on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (“extremely liberal”) to 7 (“extremely conservative”). As a precaution, we also control for age in years.

Next, we measure *differential social location* (or membership in various social groups). This is done by gauging respondents’ closeness to primary groups and any online communities to which they belong. Closeness to primary groups takes the average of two measures, closeness to family and closeness to friends. Both are based on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (“not at all close”) to 5 (“very close”). Closeness to online communities uses this same 5-point scale. We expect that embeddedness in such social networks will reduce the likelihood of encountering anti-immigrant hate material online because poor social integration and a lack of social bonds has been linked to risky behavior (Colvin et al. 2002), which could include viewing cyberhate.

Finally, we introduce two theoretically-defined variables—as described by SSSL (Akers 2009). The first is a three-factor composite measure that approximates respondents’ self-perceived *Americanism*. This is based on responses to the questions: 1) “How much is being American an important part of how you see yourself?” 2) “How proud are you to be an American?” and 3) “How much do you think your friends see you as American?” Each question is scored on an identical scale, ranging from 0 (“Not at all”) to 10 (“Completely”). Responses to the questions are highly correlated and have a Cronbach’s Alpha of

.851 (indicating a high degree of shared variance). We expect persons that define themselves by a strong sense of Americanism will be more likely to encounter anti-immigrant hate online. Our second measure is based on responses to the question: “How satisfied are you with the way things are going in the United States right now?” We reverse-coded the original scale so 1 represents “completely satisfied” and 7 represents “completely dissatisfied.” We anticipate that those who are dissatisfied with the current direction of the country will be more likely to come across anti-immigrant hate content.

Table 2 reports means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values for all variables. Bivariate correlations (available upon request) suggest multicollinearity is not an issue. Moreover, the mean variance inflation factor for the complete set of covariates (1.26) indicates multicollinearity is not a statistical problem.

Variable	Mean/%	Std. Dev.	Min. Value	Max. Value
Anti-Immigrant Hate	0.35	0.48	0	1
<i>Proximity to Offenders</i>				
Time Online	3.59	1.31	1	6
Use Facebook	0.90	0.30	0	1
Use Twitter	0.41	0.49	0	1
Use YouTube	0.87	0.34	0	1
Use Instagram	0.60	0.49	0	1
Use Snapchat	0.52	0.50	0	1
Use 4chan/8chan	0.02	0.14	0	1
Use Reddit	0.19	0.39	0	1
<i>Target Suitability & Guardianship</i>				
Voice Political Views Online	0.43	0.50	0	1
Previously Targeted by Hate	0.27	0.44	0	1
Immigrant	0.05	0.21	0	1
Live Alone	0.11	0.31	0	1
<i>Structural & Social Location</i>				
White	0.80	0.40	0	1
Male	0.51	0.50	0	1
Education	2.68	1.28	1	5
Political Ideology	4.00	1.60	1	7
Economic Engagement	0.70	0.46	0	1
Age	24.49	6.47	15	36
Closeness to Primary Group	4.15	0.88	1	5

Closeness to Online Community	2.84	1.23	1	5
<i>Theoretically Defined Variables</i>				
American Identity	0.02	0.98	-2.53	1.42
Dissatisfied with Direction of US	4.81	1.63	1	7

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables

3.1.3 Analytic Strategy

We utilize logistic regression to examine exposure to anti-immigrant online hate because our dependent variable is dichotomous in nature (i.e., respondents reported seeing online hate targeting immigrants *or* they did not). The effects of independent variables are reported as odds ratios, which are more intuitively interpretable than coefficients. Odds ratios show relative changes in the odds of an outcome when an independent variable's value is increased by one unit, holding all other effects constant. We use a three-model sequence for our analyses. Model 1 controls for core aspects of RAT (i.e., proximity to motivated offenders, target suitability, and guardianship). Models 2 and 3, in turn, assess key dimensions of SSSL. Model 2 incorporates measures approximating differential location in social structure and differential social location, while Model 3 introduces our two theoretically-defined variables.

4. RESULTS

Table 3 reports odds ratios from logistic regression models predicting exposure to anti-immigrant online hate. Model 1 centers on RAT and offers mixed support. First, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, and Snapchat use are associated with greater odds of exposure to anti-immigrant cyberhate (Odds Ratios = 2.08; $p < .05$, 1.59; $p < .05$, and 1.63; $p < .05$, respectively). This suggests participation in these specific social networking mediums brings online users into virtual proximity with motivated offenders. Time spent online and other social networking sites, however, are not significant. Next, we find that those voicing political views online are more than twice as likely to encounter anti-immigrant online hate (Odds Ratio = 2.20; $p < .001$). This dovetails with notions of target suitability and suggests political expression may place online users at greater risk of being targeted. We also find evidence that points to the salience

of immigrant status, but in this instance, our estimates run counter to expectations. That is, immigrants, the assumed target of anti-immigrant hate, are less likely to encounter such content online than their U.S.-born counterparts (Odds Ratio = 0.51; $p < .05$)—perhaps signaling that U.S.-born *Americans* are not necessarily targeted as victims, but rather as a potentially captive audience for anti-immigrant online hate. Finally, neither previously being targeted by cyberhate nor living alone—which tap into target suitability and guardianship, respectively—are significant predictors of viewing anti-immigrant hate.

Model 2 incorporates measures approximating key aspects of SSSL. Socio-demographic characteristics account for differential location in social structure, while closeness to primary groups and online communities capture differential social location. Noticeably, YouTube, Reddit, and Snapchat use are no longer significant. Moreover, we find little, if any, evidence in support of these aspects of SSSL. Regarding location in social structure, most socio-demographic measures in this model are not significantly associated with exposure to anti-immigrant online hate. The one exception is political ideology. But in this instance our estimates are inconsistent with prior research and expectations. Specifically, more politically conservative individuals are less likely to encounter anti-immigrant online hate than more politically liberal individuals (Odds Ratio = 0.82; $p < .001$). With regards to social location, we similarly find conflicting evidence. Here, closeness to primary groups is associated with greater odds of exposure to anti-immigrant cyberhate (Odds Ratio = 1.24; $p < .05$). This suggests close ties to family and friends may in fact point persons toward anti-immigrant online hate material—given shared attitudes and values—rather than shield them from it as initially anticipated. Closeness to online communities, however, although in the expected direction, is not statistically significant.

Model 3 introduces our theoretically-defined variables and offers support for predictions. Results denote that persons that define themselves by a strong American identity are more likely to view anti-immigrant online hate (Odds Ratio = 1.19; $p < .05$). By the same token, the more dissatisfied individuals are with the current direction of the country, the more likely they are to encounter anti-immigrant content (Odds Ratio = 1.32; $p < .001$). These findings call important attention to the link between nationalist leanings and hate found in online spaces. Relatedly, the effect of immigrant status is diminished and no

longer statistically significant. This suggests American identity and concerns play a more direct role which relegates nativity to secondary relevance.

Model 3 also points to a potentially unique dynamic between location in the social structure and nationalist leanings in that economic engagement is now significant (but only once we include these latter measures) such that those who are economically engaged are substantially less likely to view anti-immigrant hate (Odds Ratio = 0.68; $p < .05$), as expected. The significance of economic engagement suggests the existence of a suppression effect. A suppressor variable increases the predictive validity of another variable by its inclusion in a regression equation (Tzelgov & Henik 1991). Put differently, suppression is present when the size of a relationship between an independent variable and the dependent variable increases when a third variable is introduced (MacKinnon, Krull & Lockwood 2000). To explore this further, we entered the two theoretically-defined variables in Model 3 into the regression equation separately, finding that economic engagement was suppressed by dissatisfaction with the direction of the U.S. since its inclusion resulted in the significant effect of economic engagement.³ The magnitude of the difference in the odds ratio between persons that are economically engaged and those that are not increases by .06 once dissatisfaction with the direction of the country is included, such that persons that are economically engaged now have significantly lower odds of encountering anti-immigrant online hate than those that are not.⁴

³ To confirm the existence of a suppression effect, we explored correlations between the main effect, likely suppressor variable, and dependent variable (McClendon 2002). The absolute value of the correlations between one of the independent variables, economic engagement, and the dependent variable, exposure to anti-immigrant online hate, is less than the absolute value of the product of the other two correlations – between dissatisfaction with the direction of the country and exposure to anti-immigrant online hate and between dissatisfaction and economic engagement – indicating the existence of a suppression effect.

⁴ As a precaution, we estimated the magnitude of the difference in the odds ratio for economic engagement taking into account dissatisfaction with the direction of the country both with and without American identity. Our estimates for economic engagement were essentially identical in both models, further bolstering confidence that dissatisfaction with the direction of the country is the factor driving the suppression effect.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	O.R.	Std. Error	O.R.	Std. Error	O.R.	Std. Error
<i>Proximity to Offenders</i>						
Time Online	1.08	0.07	1.08	0.07	1.06	0.07
Use Facebook	2.08*	0.75	1.20*	0.74	1.98*	0.73
Use Twitter	0.95	0.18	0.90	0.18	0.91	0.18
Use YouTube	1.63*	0.46	1.58	0.46	1.60	0.47
Use Instagram	0.93	0.20	0.90	0.19	0.94	0.20
Use Snapchat	1.39*	0.27	1.39	0.29	1.37	0.29
Use 4chan/8chan	2.00	1.45	2.96	2.61	3.31	3.02
Use Reddit	1.59*	0.36	1.47	0.36	1.41	0.36
<i>Target Suitability & Guardianship</i>						
Voice Political Views Online	2.20***	0.39	2.14***	0.39	2.07***	0.38
Previously Targeted by Hate	1.17	0.22	1.22	0.25	1.24	0.26
Immigrant	0.51*	0.19	0.51*	0.19	0.60	0.22
Live Alone	1.14	0.31	1.22	0.36	1.35	0.42
<i>Structural & Social Location</i>						
White	-----	-----	1.07	0.24	1.03	0.24
Male	-----	-----	0.96	0.18	1.04	0.20
Education	-----	-----	1.10	0.10	1.12	0.11
Political Ideology	-----	-----	0.82***	0.05	0.87*	0.05
Economic Engagement	-----	-----	0.74	0.15	0.68*	0.14
Age	-----	-----	0.98	0.02	0.98	0.02
Closeness to Primary Group	-----	-----	1.24*	0.13	1.23*	0.14
Closeness to Online Community	-----	-----	0.91	0.07	0.95	0.07
<i>Theoretically Defined Variables</i>						
American Identity	-----	-----	-----	-----	1.19*	0.12
Dissatisfied with Direction of US	-----	-----	-----	-----	1.32***	0.09
N	726		726		726	
Wald X2	52.41		66.78		81.39	
Log Pseudolikelihood	-441.97		-429.87		-418.73	

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed tests)

Table 3. Logistic Regression Analysis of Exposure to Anti-Immigrant Hate Material Online

5. DISCUSSION

At various points in U.S. history, anti-immigrant hate and fear has captured the American imagination and gained broad public and political support. The twenty-first century, particularly since the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, has witnessed a surge in such views as well as their rapid spread via the Internet. Given this troubling reality, we draw on a sample of internet users to assess how online behaviors, guardianship, differential location in social structure, differential social location, national identity, and views on the state of the nation relate to exposure to anti-immigrant hate material. Blending insights from Routine Activity Theory and Social Structure-Social Learning Theory—two perspectives generally applied to crime and victimization in offline environments—we expand on prior research and offer several important takeaways.

First, we consider core aspects of RAT (i.e., proximity to motivated offenders, target suitability, and guardianship) to shed light on dynamics associated with seeing anti-immigrant hate online. In general, we find only modest support. Time spent online and social networking site usage, which tap into proximity to motivated offenders, show mixed results. Specifically, time spent online does not have a significant effect, while use of certain popular networking sites increases contact with anti-immigrant content. But only Facebook use consistently correlates with seeing anti-immigrant cyberhate. This could be the result of Facebook's expansive network. Boasting over two billion monthly active users, Facebook remains the most-used social networking site (Hutchinson 2019). Alternatively, this could suggest that other major sites are more effectively policing their platforms for cyberhate. Taken together, these findings suggest it is not simply a matter of being online, but rather, virtual contact and engagement with others on specific online platforms factor in.

We similarly find mixed support with respect to target suitability and related online behaviors, including discussing politics and being targeted by cyberhate, as well as immigrant status. In this instance, previously being the target of hate is not associated with seeing anti-immigrant material online. In contrast, voicing political views online increases exposure to anti-immigrant material. This makes sense given the partisanship and contentiousness surrounding immigration and related debates. Indeed,

persons that are politically active online may search for such content to engage others and “battle it out.” We also do not find evidence to suggest immigrants, the assumed target of anti-immigrant online hate, are at greater risk of exposure to it than the U.S.-born. Instead, results show the U.S.-born are more likely to encounter such content. This likely speaks to the importance of immigration to Americans, the extent to which the topic dominates mainstream U.S. media and politics, and the fact that those seeking more information may eventually find anti-immigrant hate material by accident or by choice.

Our analyses thus offer some support for the application of RAT—relative to proximity to motivated offenders and target suitability—to online environments and signal its potential value for explaining contact with anti-immigrant hate. Noticeably though, living alone, which we use to assess guardianship, is not significant in our models. This is consistent with several prior works in this vein that find guardianship—both offline and online—to be generally ineffective at curtailing various online activities (see, e.g., Costello et al. 2016a; Bossler and Holt 2009; Leukfeldt and Yar 2016). Still, our consideration of online habits, routines, and experiences is only one part of a nuanced and complex set of dynamics.

To complement and extend upon the insights offered by RAT, we incorporate and explore elements of SSSL (i.e., location in social structure, social location, and theoretically defined variables). We turn first to socio-demographic characteristics, teasing out linkages between location in social structure and exposure to anti-immigrant hate. Although we find limited evidence of the centrality of such factors within online spaces, political ideology and economic engagement stand out. Political ideology estimates, in this instance, show that more conservative persons are less likely to encounter anti-immigrant hate material than more liberal persons. This contrasts with initial expectations and may otherwise point to a more general targeting of liberals for hate in online spaces. Economic engagement, in turn, does not have a significant effect on viewing anti-immigrant hate unless we control for dissatisfaction with the direction of the country, indicating a suppression effect. That is, the effect of work/school status on exposure is enhanced and simultaneously clarified by taking into account views on the current trajectory of the U.S. Specifically, the correlation between economic engagement and

exposure to anti-immigrant hate among those who express dissatisfaction with the nation is approximately twice that of the correlation among those who are satisfied. As such, unless satisfaction with the direction of the country is controlled for, the relationship between economic engagement and exposure to hate is suppressed. This might suggest that much of the dissatisfaction with the current direction of the country expressed by some study participants is tied to perceived labor market threats, especially from immigrants (see Restifo et al. 2019; Wallace and Figueroa 2012).

Our analyses go further still and we explore how differential social location might shape exposure to anti-immigrant online hate. We focus here on closeness to primary groups and online communities. Although it is often assumed—and we expected—that persons with strong ties to family, friends, and even online groups, will be more receptive to and share mainstream attitudes and values, and thus be less likely to encounter anti-immigrant online hate, our analyses suggest otherwise. Namely, we find that persons that are closer to primary groups are more likely to be exposed to anti-immigrant cyberhate. This suggests it is not necessarily socially isolated individuals or *loners* that feel rejected and seek out such content, but instead persons with family and friends that may be sympathetic to and even advance anti-immigrant views. We do not find evidence to suggest those that are particularly isolated from or connected to online communities are at greater risk.

Importantly, within the framework of SSSL (Ackers 2009), we develop and introduce two *theoretically defined variables* into our analyses to capture and evaluate a belief system that might affect exposure to anti-immigrant hate online—a belief system embedded within and reflective of the broader U.S. socio-cultural and structural context. Focusing on the importance of American identity and beliefs about the trajectory of the country, our results denote the impact of a nationalist ideology and call attention to the potency of resurgent nationalist rhetoric in mainstream politics. Indeed, the current U.S. politico-cultural climate has bolstered and spread an unmistakable *us versus them* mindset, pitting “real” Americans against a supposed unfamiliar *other*. Taken together, the theoretical synthesis and analyses we offer highlight the convergence of certain online activities (i.e., SNS usage and voicing political views),

socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., nativity, political ideology, and economic engagement), and a nationalist worldview for coming into contact with anti-immigrant hate online.

6. STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study offers important insights into factors associated with encountering anti-immigrant cyberhate. Nevertheless, there are several data limitations worth mentioning. For instance, because we use panel data, we cannot be certain that the online survey respondents included in our analyses do not differ in potentially meaningful ways from those who declined to participate. Even so, such data are valuable for advancing our understanding of online behavior and experiences, as well as prejudice and inequality (see, e.g., Costello et al. 2019; Hawdon et al. 2019). Another possible limitation stems from our decision to restrict our sample to individuals age 15 to 36. We did so because not only are youth and young adults avid internet users, they are also more likely than other age demographics to encounter hate material online. This limits the generalizability of our findings, however, and it is also possible individuals outside this age group might be more or less likely to specifically encounter anti-immigrant online hate. Relatedly, we rely on survey participants to determine what constitutes hate and hateful online content. While we offered respondents a broad definition of online hate before they began the survey, it is probable that some individuals interpreted similar terms, issues, and images differently. Thus, what one person designates as hate, another might not.

A final caveat to our study is our limited operationalization of capable guardianship—a central feature of RAT. We used a measure of offline guardianship, whether an individual lives alone or not, because living alone could serve as a general measure of behavioral guardianship. As noted earlier, although capable guardianship is the most widely tested and supported dimension of RAT in offline settings (see Pratt & Cullen, 2005), its adaptation to online contexts has produced inconsistent findings (e.g., Bossler & Holt, 2009; Choi, 2008; Costello et al. 2016a, b 2016; Leukfeldt & Yar, 2016; Reyns,

2015). This is in part due to the difficulty in conceptualizing online guardianship (Vakhitova, Reynald, & Townsley, 2016). For instance, some researchers have operationalized online guardianship as target hardening or physical guardianship, using measures such as the use of firewalls, antivirus programs, filtering, and blocking software (Bossler and Holt 2009; Fleming et al. 2006). Others have used peer deviance as a measure of lack of guardianship because deviant peers should be less likely to act in line with online guardianship (Bossler et al. 2012; Bossler and Holt 2009; Reyns, Henson, and Fisher 2016). Still others have taken an approach akin to ours, measuring guardianship based on respondents' living arrangements (e.g., Costello et al. 2016a,b; Räsänen et al. 2016; Reyns et al. 2016). These approaches, however, have failed to capture or suggest a consistent effect of guardianship on online victimization, and this may well be due to a lack of quality measures. As such, we encourage future research to explore improved measures and new dimensions of potential online guardianship.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The discourse on immigration in America has become particularly acrimonious over the past several years. The racial/ethnic diversification of the U.S population has roiled nationalist fervor and reignited debate over what it means to be an American and who has the right to claim American identity. The 2016 election of President Trump, and the nationalist insurgency that swept Trump into office, portends to reverse decades of U.S. foreign policy, foregoing global integration and a global leadership role for isolationism. Today, renowned scholar Francis Fukuyama's proclamation that the end of the Cold War signaled the triumph of Western-style liberal democracy in the battle of ideologies, and thus the *end of history*, seems premature (Fukuyama 1992). Indeed, the United States and parts of Western Europe, long-standing bastions of liberal democracy, have recently witnessed neo-nationalist insurgencies seeking a tiered system (Mammone 2019) incongruent with a fundamental precept of liberal democracy – *equal citizenship*.

The rise in anti-immigrant (and pro-nationalistic) sentiment in America carries alarming risks. As anti-immigrant hate material is spreading online (Costello et al. 2019), so too is violence targeting immigrants (SPLC 2019; FBI 2017). Given what we know about the effect of exposure to online content on offline behavior, these concurrent trends are intertwined (FBI 2011; Leets 2002; see also Freilich et al. 2011; The New America Foundation International Security Program 2015). It is thus not only necessary, but critical to develop a deeper understanding of those factors that bring online users into virtual contact with cyberhate targeting immigrants. Importantly, we find that certain attitudes concerning social identity affect the likelihood of doing so, and by blending Routine Activity Theory and Social Structure-Social Learning Theory, we suspect that these same belief systems partially pattern online behaviors that also increase the prospect of exposure to anti-immigrant online hate. We encourage researchers to explore this topic further, potentially uncovering ways to help online users avoid various forms of cyberhate, or at least recognize it and understand the danger it can pose to themselves and others.

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