

When is Violence Okay? Moralistic Violence as a Counter-Hegemonic Strategy

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This is the pre-publication version of the paper. The final paper is published in *The Spectacle of Online Life*, which is edited by Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo, Christopher T. Conner, and Matthew N. Hannah. The citation for the published piece is:

Costello, Matthew and James Hawdon. 2025. "When is Violence Okay? Moralistic Violence as a Counter-Hegemonic Strategy." Pp. 245-260 in *The Spectacle of Online Life*, edited by Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo, Christopher T. Conner, and Matthew N. Hannah. Lexington Press.

Introduction

On January 6, 2021, a mob of supporters of then-President Donald Trump attacked the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., assaulting law enforcement and causing property damage in an attempt to overturn the results of the preceding presidential election. On December 4, 2024, Brian Thompson, CEO of UnitedHealthcare, was shot and killed in Midtown Manhattan. The suspect, 26-year-old Luigi Mangione, left behind writings that said in part "frankly these parasites [the healthcare industry] had it coming and that "it [the murder] had to be done" (Dienst & Winter 2024). While these two incidents are unrelated, what they have in common is that both are high-profile examples of *moralistic violence*, a form of extra-legal social control that utilizes unilateral aggression in response to a supposed injustice or deviant behavior (Black 1983).

This study explores factors associated with the belief that moralistic violence is legitimate or acceptable. We are particularly interested in examining whether exposure to, targeting by, or perpetration of harmful online behaviors, or cyberviolence, relate to the acceptance of moralistic violence. Indeed, there is reason to believe they may be, as cyberviolence often takes the form of moralistic violence. For example, online users who espouse hate speech, a common form of cyberviolence, routinely target individuals or groups they perceive as inferior, deviant, or otherwise harmful to society. By focusing on the potential relationship between cyberviolence and beliefs in moralistic violence, this work contributes to the growing body of research on how online and offline violence are related.

This chapter proceeds by first discussing moralistic violence, detailing what it is and why we interpret it as a counter-hegemonic strategy. Then we turn to cyberviolence, discussing the forms it takes, harms it can cause, and how engagement with cyberviolence may relate to the acceptance of moralistic violence. After that, we provide an overview of the materials and methods of our study, including how we collected and analyzed we utilize. Finally, we conclude with a detailing and interpretation of our study findings.

What is Moralistic Violence?

Moralistic violence is a form of conflict management, or the "handling of a grievance with unilateral vengeance" (Black 1993:74). Also referred to as *self-help*, moralistic violence is social control that defines and responds to a perceived deviant behavior (Black 1983; 2004). As such, it is commonly framed as a pursuit of justice (Legewie 2016), especially when other legal remedies are seen as absent or

inadequate (Motley & Joe 2023). Moralistic violence can take various forms, ranging from a husband harming their spouse's lover or a teenager assaulting someone who insults them, to hate crimes and anti-government violence (Cooney 2014). In each of these instances, the perpetrators of violence are seeking justice, or attempting to right a supposed wrong without the use of the formal legal system.

Moralistic violence can be further divided into discipline or rebellion. Discipline occurs when a superior enacts self-help on a subordinate, such as when a slave owner beats his slave for disobeying a command. In this case, the violence is justified in the eyes of the perpetrator based on the norm that one rightfully has power over the other, and any affront to that power requires discipline. Conversely, rebellion is self-help performed by a subordinate against her superior, such as when a child murders her parents to avenge their perceived mistreatment. In this example, the violence is justified based on a perceived grievance that is not adequately redressed through the legal system. Most work on moralistic violence focuses on explaining the social fields of violent self-help committed by individuals (e.g., assaults, murder, domestic violence) or a collective (e.g., feuds, lynchings, riots, terrorism, genocide); however, we can also understand moralistic violence as a counter-hegemonic strategy, or an attempt to challenge the dominant power structure in society. The subsequent section delves into the notion that moralistic violence represents a counter-hegemonic strategy.

Moralistic Violence as Counter-Hegemony

Modern states rely on formal mechanisms, such as courts, to manage conflicts. Moralistic violence is therefore typically defined as an illegitimate conflict management strategy. Indeed, Weber ([1918] 1946) argued that a fundamental characteristic of statehood is the claim to a monopoly over the use of force. Yet, a state is unlikely to endure if it primarily relies on violence to impose its will on the citizenry. Rather, modern democratic states derive their authority and claims to a monopoly over violence from law and the belief in the legitimacy of those laws (Weber 1921; 1978). According to Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971), beliefs in the legitimacy of laws are buoyed by elite control over cultural and ideological mechanisms such as the media and the offices of the state. The lower classes typically accept the status quo because they adopt a "philosophy of the popular masses" that is often uncritical and fragmentary (Gramsci 1971: 419). Thus, the elite's definition of reality tends to be widely accepted, and they win support through hegemonic strategies that endorse and legitimize the system. A foundational part of this hegemonic strategy are the laws that define the use of the state's apparatuses of social control as acceptable forms of conflict management and self-help as an unacceptable form of conflict management.

Consequently, anyone who disobeys the will of the state or tries to resolve conflicts in manners not promoted by the hegemonic strategy are formally labeled "deviants," "criminals" or "terrorists" (e.g., Black 1983; Chambliss 1975; Lemon 2014; Spitzer 1975). While the hegemonic strategy of non-violent conflict management is generally accepted by the overwhelming majority of citizens, at times it is challenged from those who feel marginalized or otherwise distrustful of the broader hegemonic system (Beckett & Sasson 2000). To understand why some individuals come to see moralistic violence as a legitimate counter-hegemonic strategy, we explore the potential role of engagement with cyberviolence. As we note previously, cyberviolence is often couched in moralistic terms, and therefore engagement with cyberviolence, especially if it is frequent, may encourage the belief that violent forms of self-help are legitimate. The subsequent section, focusing on cyberviolence, expands upon this idea.

Cyberviolence

Cyberviolence is any harmful activity that is committed with the use of information-communication technologies. A range of online behaviors, including bullying, harassment, stalking, threats and hate, all qualify as cyberviolence (Holt 2017). Cyberviolence is unique relative to traditional offline violence in that it is more prevalent, can occur anytime, and the victim and perpetrator often do not know one another

(Peterson & Densley 2017). The anonymity of social media, in particular, fuels cyberviolence by encouraging online disinhibition, whereby individuals take less responsibility for their actions and feel less remorse for any harm they may cause (Reason et al. 2016).

Cyberviolence is becoming more pervasive (Buil-Gil et al. 2021; INTERPOL 2023; Reichelmann et al. 2021), which is problematic for many reasons. While not all encounters with cyberviolence are victimizing, some are, and can cause harm to those exposed to or targeted by online abuse. For instance, some online users subjected to cyberviolence report feeling angry, depressed, fearful, or lonely, while others report physical anguish or financial harm (Mania 2024; Tynes et al. 2004; Tynes 2005, Näsi et al. 2015). The potential negative effects of cyberviolence are not confined to cyberspace, however. In fact, repeated exposure has been identified as an early step towards radicalization, or the adoption of extremist beliefs. (Costello et al. 2023; Cowan & Melltrick 2002; Foxman & Wolf 2013), and linked to offline violence (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011; for a list of deadly attacks see Freilich et al., 2011; The New America Foundation International Security Program, 2015).

The amenability of certain online spaces to violent rhetoric helps explain how cyberviolence can facilitate extremist beliefs or encourage offline violence (Little et al. 2021; White House 2015). Online communities are often insular, especially on social media platforms, potentially fostering echo chambers, or filter bubbles, wherein likeminded individuals interact, share and reinforce a common set of beliefs (Albadi, Kurdi & Mishra 2022; Costello, Restifo & Hawdon 2021; Hawdon, Bernatzky & Costello 2019). If the beliefs are hateful, degrading, or violent, their repetition and fortification can desensitize individuals to such rhetoric and facilitate the normalization of ostensibly radical or otherwise dangerous belief systems (Schulze et al. 2022). For instance, frequent exposure to online hate material can increase feeling of anxiety and fear which, in turn, can foster both prejudice and violence (Bilewicz & Soarl 2020; Youngblood 2020).

While it is difficult to draw a direct causal link between exposure to cyberviolence and either the internalization of violent beliefs or offline violence, evidence is emerging that such relationships may indeed exist, often reciprocally. In fact, extant work suggests that spikes in cyberviolence consistently coincide with hateful offline incidents (Williams et al 2020), and that a sudden rise of hate speech online can incite violence against minority groups (Naher 2023). At the individual level, there are several high-profile examples of hate-motivated violence that demonstrate the dangers of repeated engagement with cyberviolence. Dylann Roof, who murdered nine African Americans in a church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2016, frequently used social media to spew hate and connect with others who held similarly racist beliefs. Likewise, Robert Bowers, who killed eleven people in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2018, routinely posted anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi hate on, Gab, a social media site where he interacted with others who held similarly hateful beliefs (Beckett, 2018). One of the deadliest examples comes from 2019, when Brenton Tarrant murdered forty-nine people in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Prior to doing so, Tarrant uploaded his hate-laden manifesto online, which, in part, discussed the Internet's role in nurturing and molding his radical belief system (Zadrozny & Collins, 2019).

Violence inspired or facilitated online is not isolated to singular events, however. Schulze and coauthors (2022), for instance, argue that societal crises produce instability that extremists can exploit on social media, facilitating the adoption of radical and violent belief systems. The recent COVID-19 outbreak serves as a timely and troubling example. Two parallel trends emerged in the outbreak's immediate wake—cyberviolence targeting Asians, who were frequently scapegoated for both the origin and spread of the virus, skyrocketed (The Federal 2020; Kim & Kesari 2021), as did offline harassment, including violent attacks, targeting Asians (Costello et al. 2021; Costello et al. 2023; Donaghue 2020; Ren & Feagin 2021). Similarly, a recent surge in anti-Muslim cyberviolence coincided with a spat of hate crimes targeting both Arab and Muslim communities (Roberts 2017). In both cases, although a definitive connection between

hateful online rhetoric and offline violence is difficult to determine, existing knowledge on online radicalization suggests they may be connected.

Given what we know about radicalization, and the potential connection between cyberviolence and the adoption of radical beliefs or offline violence, a central theme of this analysis is exploring whether various types of engagement with cyberviolence correlate with a greater acceptance of moralistic violence. Indeed, we suspect that engagement with cyberviolence is both a precursor to the acceptance of moralistic violence, as well as a result of it. That is, whereas in many cases exposure to cyberviolence can normalize the belief that moralistic violence is acceptable, it is also probable that prevailing beliefs about the acceptability of violence lead some individuals to seek out online communities that validate their views. In the next section, we discuss our analytic approach to exploring these potential relationships.

Data and Methodology

Sample

This study utilizes an analytic sample of 632 Internet users in the United States between the ages of 18 – 26. The data were collected by Survey Sample International (now Dynata) between May 8 and May 18 in 2018. Dynata uses a number of permission-based recruiting techniques to find potential participants and build online proportional sampling panels. The use of sampling panels has been found to have similar levels of reliability to probability sampling techniques that assess attitudes (Simmons & Bobo 2015; Weinberg, Freese & McElhattan 2014). Study participants were told they would be taking part in a study exploring the expression of extremist and hateful options online, and that the researchers are particularly interested in investigating their experiences with hateful or extremist content on social networking sites. Proportional sampling was used to gather data that are demographically balanced on important population characteristics. Even so, since our sample disproportionately represents females, sample weights based on the percentage of females in the United States between the ages of 18-26 in 2018 are used. The weighted data are used in all analyses in this study.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for this study assesses respondents' acceptance of moralistic violence. It is a composite measure created from six variables using factor analysis. Each of the six variables have response sets ranging from 1, 'strongly agree', to 5, 'strongly disagree'. However, we reverse-coded the measures so that higher scores denote stronger agreeance. Survey respondents were asked to respond to the following six statements for the construction of our dependent variable: 1) It is okay to use violence against someone if they start a fight with you first, 2) It is okay to use violence if someone makes fun of you or insults you because of your religion, your origin or the color of your skin, 3) It is okay to use violence to solve the problems of the world, 4) It is okay to commit terrorist acts, 5) It is okay to use bombs to fight injustice, and 6) It is okay to use violence because this is how people respect you. These six measures have a Cronbach's alpha of .90, suggesting a high degree of reliability. In Table 1, we show the percentage of survey-takers who agreed or strongly agreed that violence is okay for these six measures, offering a detailed picture of the variables that comprise our measure of moralistic violence. It demonstrates that sizable shares of respondents rationalize moralist violence in retaliation, while smaller, shares believe violence is acceptable to gain respect, fight injustice, solve global problems, or engage in terrorism.

Table 1. Agreeance with Moralistic Violence

	Strongly or Somewhat Agree
Violence is okay if someone starts a fight with you	19.9%

Violence is okay if someone insults you	17.1%
It is okay to use violence to solve the world's problems	9.3%
It is okay to use violence to gain respect	8.9%
It is okay to use bombs to fight injustice	7.8%
Terrorist acts are okay	6.5%

Independent Variables

We assess respondents' engagement with cyberviolence using three variables. First, respondents were asked how frequently they see material online that expresses negative views toward a group. Possible responses range from 1, "I never see this type of material, to 4, 'I see this type of material frequently. Second, we measure how frequently study participants have been the targets of cyberviolence. Respondents were able to indicate on a five-item scale ranging from 1, 'never' to 5, '11 or more times', how often they were targeted in the past three months for various aspects of their identity. They were able to check all the apply from a list that includes: 1) ethnicity or race, 2) nationality, 3) sexual orientation, 4) religious conviction/belief, 5) political views, 6) disability, 7) sex or gender, 8) gender identity, and 9) appearance. We took the average of these nine items for each respondent to create a global measure of how often they are targeted by cyberviolence. Third, respondents were asked if they ever produced online material that other people would likely interpret as hateful or degrading. Survey-takers could respond 'yes' or 'no' to this question. As we discuss previously, frequently engaging with cyberviolence has the potential to desensitize individuals to its harms, or even foster radical ideas or actions (Benatov et al. 2020; Costello & Hawdon 2018). Hence, online users who frequently engage with cyberviolence may be more likely to find moralistic violence acceptable. However, this is not the only possibility. Routine engagement could heighten online users to its dangers of cyberviolence, potentially leading them to be less accepting of violence in any form (Costello et al. 2019).

We include two additional measures that assess Internet habits. First, we ask respondents how many hours per day they spend online on average. This is measured using an ordinal scale, ranging from 1, 'less than one hour per day', to 6, 'ten or more hours per day'. Second, we approximate social media usage habits by asking respondents to indicate if they have used any of twenty-two possible social media platforms in the past three months. Survey-takers are able to check as many sites as applicable. We dichotomized this variable to create an indicator of high social network usage. High social network usage is defined as using 11 or more services in the past three months; around ten percent of respondents indicated a high usage of social media, according to this definition. These two measures are included as control variables since basic online habits may affect the likelihood of encounters with cyberviolence. For instance, time online relates to cyberhate exposure (Costello et al. 2016) and increases the likelihood of both being the victim of online abuse and victimizing others online (Leukfeldt 2014; Livingston & Helsper 2010).

We control for several sociodemographic traits that may be relevant to the acceptance of moralistic violence. We control for sex, asking respondents if they identify as male or female. This is important because men commit violent acts at much higher rates than women, and studies demonstrate a relationship between attitudes towards violence and violent behavior (Nunes, Pedneault & Hermann 2022). Additionally, there is evidence that men are more apt to hold positive attitudes towards the violation of social norms, including criminality (Romero-Abrio et al. 2019). We also control for the age of respondents. This is important because young people are more likely to commit crimes than their older counterparts (Farrington 1986), and thus may be more accepting of violence. Further, as Spitzer's (1975) contends, youth is an attribute of *social dynamite*, and therefore young people may be especially likely to question the status quo, or hegemonic system. We also include measures regarding the highest level of educational achievement and perceived economic standing of respondents. For the former measure, responses range from 1, 'less than a high school diploma, to 5, 'a master's degree, professional degree, or

higher'. For the latter, respondents were asked to assess, using a 10-point scale, their placement on a scale of economic well-being. Higher scores indicate higher perceived economic standing. These two measures are relevant because various theories link education and economic standing to the acceptance of violence. For instance, Cohen (1955) argues that status frustration, stemming from socioeconomic and educational disadvantage, can lead young people to reject middle-class values of conformity, opting for an oppositional subculture that elevates violence. Similarly, Willis (1977) contends that working-class youths reject modern teaching paradigms, choosing instead oppositional peer groups that prioritize toughness and violence. Both theories suggest a point of view that rejects the hegemonic strategy of non-violence on the part of non-state actors.

Next, we control for respondents' social bonds using four measures. Each asks survey-takers to rate how close they feel to a particular group, using a scale ranging from 1, 'not at all close' to 5, 'very close'. The first measure takes the average of respondents' scores on how they rate their closeness to their family and friends. We consider this a measure of their primary bonds. The other three measures gauge closeness to an online community to which respondents belong, a religious community, and a political group or party. These measures are included because prior work demonstrates a relationship between poor social integration and a lack of social bonds and engagement with risky and deviant behaviors (Colvin, Cullen & Vander Ven 2002). It is similarly likely that a lack of appropriate social ties may relate to belief systems commonly deemed deviant, such as the acceptance of moralistic violence. It is important to note, however, that the literature is mixed on how online social bonds affect deviant behavior and beliefs. Some work finds that online communities serve as valuable support systems, especially for those who feel isolated. Thus, they may be a protective mechanism against deviant behavior and beliefs. Other work, though, suggest certain online communities can teach deviant, violent, or discriminatory beliefs and actions (Costello et al. 2016; Costello, Hawdon & Ratliff 2017; Costello & Hawdon 2018; Oksanen et al. 2014), and thus inclusion in such communities could make it more likely that individuals accept moralistic violence.

Lastly, we utilize two measures to gauge general attitudes and worldviews of respondents that might be pertinent to attitudes towards moralistic violence. One taps into feelings about laws and rules. It is constructed by taking the average responses to two questions, each using a five-point scale from 1, 'strongly agree', to 5, 'strongly disagree. Respondents are asked to rate their views on the following two statements: 1) laws are made to be broken, and 2) It is okay to do anything you want as long as you don't hurt anyone. We control for this variable with the expectation that those who endorse violating laws or acting as they please will be more apt to accept violence as a means of self-help, even though it is commonly viewed as illegitimate. Indeed, there is evidence linking a disregard for rules and norms with the perpetration of violence (Asriani et al. 2021). The second variable approximates respondents' views on equality: it is a composite measure created from four measures using factor analysis. All four measures asked respondents to rate statements on a seven-point scale ranging from 1, 'extremely negative' to 7, 'extremely positive'. The statements are: 1) Some groups of people are simply not the equal to others, 2) Some people are just more worthy than others, 3) Some people are just more deserving than others, and 4) Some people are just inferior to others. The Cronbach's alpha for these four measures is .88, indicating a high degree of reliability. Those who score lower on this measure of equality are expected to be more accepting of moralistic violence, which often presupposes that the target is inferior in some manner, and thus deserving of harm.

Table 2 reports the means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values for all independent variables in the analysis. A correlation matrix was used to initially assess possible sources of multicollinearity. We use a correlation above .6 as a source of concern; all correlations are below this threshold. We additionally conducted a variance inflation factor (VIF) test, which confirmed a lack of multicollinearity (mean VIF score = 1.39, with all individual VIF scores below 1.8).

Analytic Approach

We analyze factors related to the acceptance of moralistic violence using an ordinary least squares regression technique. This is appropriate since our dependent variable is continuous. Beta coefficients, which show expected change in an outcome when an independent variable's value is increased by one unit, holding all other effects constant, are used for interpretation. All analyses for this study were conducted using STATA 15.1.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of all Independent Variables

Variable	Mean/%	Std. Dev.	Min. Value	Max. Value
Hours/Day Online	3.94	1.45	1	6
High SNS Usage = 1	11.18%	0.32	0	1
Exposure to Cyberviolence	2.80	0.91	1	4
Targeted by Cyberviolence	1.64	0.85	1	4.78
Produced Cyberviolence	0.15	0.36	0	1
Male = 1	46%	0.50	0	1
Age	21.86	2.21	18	26
Education	2.83	1.02	1	5
Economic Status	5.20	2.10	1	10
Closeness to Primary Bonds	4.16	0.85	1	5
Closeness to Online Community	2.81	1.25	1	5
Closeness to Religious Community	2.59	1.45	1	5
Closeness to Political Group	2.25	1.35	1	5
Law Abiding Attitude	3.50	1.06	1	5
Belief in Equality	-0.09	1.03	-1.11	2.63

Results

Table 3 shows the results of regressing the dependent variable, a belief that moralistic violence is okay, on the independent variables. We use a two-model sequence for the analysis. The first model contains variables that capture engagement with cyberviolence, our key independent variables of interest, as well as basic Internet viewing habits. The second model adds the remaining variables, including sociodemographic traits, social bonds, and attitudes.

Results from the first model indicate that basic Internet habits, including the amount of time spent online and number of social media sites used, do not correlate with the acceptance of moralistic violence. However, specific online behaviors - engaging with cyberviolence - do. In fact, we find that frequently seeing cyberviolence is negatively correlated with the belief that moralistic violence is acceptable ($B=-.23$, $p<.001$), whereas being frequently targeted by cyberviolence ($B=.43$, $p<.001$) and producing cyberviolence ($B=1.01$, $p<.001$) both correlate positively with the belief that moralistic violence is okay.

Results from the previous model remain constant in the second model, with only slight changes to the size of effects. Additionally, we find that being male is positively associated with the belief that moralistic violence is okay ($B=.14$, $p<.05$). However, age, education level and economic status are not significant correlates of beliefs regarding moralistic violence. Several social bonds are significantly related to the

acceptance of moralistic violence. Having strong primary bonds correlates negatively with the belief that moralistic violence is okay ($B=-.09$, $p<.05$). Conversely, close ties to a religious community ($B=.05$, $p<.05$) and a political group or party ($B=.13$, $p<.001$) correlate positively with the belief that moralistic violence is okay. Closeness to an online community is not significantly related to the dependent variable, however. Lastly, both attitudinal indicators are significantly correlated with the belief that moralistic violence is acceptable. Those who state that laws and rules should be abided are less likely to accept moralistic violence ($B=-.31$, $p<.001$), whereas those who score low on the measure of equality are more apt to do so ($B=.25$, $p<.001$).

Table 3. OLS Regression Analysis of Acceptance of Moralistic Violence

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	Std. Error	Coef.	Std. Error
Violence is Okay				
Hours/Day Online	-0.04	0.03	-0.01	0.02
High SNS Usage = 1	0.08	0.14	-0.01	0.11
Exposure to Cyberviolence	-0.23***	0.05	-0.13***	0.04
Targeted by Cyberviolence	0.43***	0.07	0.11*	0.05
Produced Cyberviolence	1.01***	0.18	0.50***	0.14
Male = 1	-----	-----	0.14*	0.07
Age	-----	-----	0.01	0.02
Education	-----	-----	0.03	0.04
Economic Status	-----	-----	-0.01	0.02
Closeness to Primary Bonds	-----	-----	-0.09*	0.04
Closeness to Online Community	-----	-----	0.02	0.03
Closeness to Religious Community	-----	-----	0.05*	0.02
Closeness to Political Group	-----	-----	0.13***	0.03
Law Abiding Attitude	-----	-----	-0.31***	0.04
Belief in Equality	-----	-----	0.25***	0.04
R ²	0.39		0.6	
N	632		632	

* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Discussion

Modern states rely on formal legal systems to adjudicate disputes, and therefore most acts of moralistic violence on the part of the citizenry are regarded as deviant or criminal. Nevertheless, our survey results show that a segment of young Americans embrace different forms of moralistic violence to varying degrees. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents are more likely to accept the use of moralistic violence in retaliation, and less likely to do so in more extreme forms such as terrorism, or via the use of bombs. To understand why some individuals embrace moralistic violence, our analysis emphasized the role of the Internet in affecting beliefs.

Interestingly, we find that spending more time online and utilizing numerous social media sites do not correlate with views on moralistic violence. However, engagement with cyberviolence does. Hence, while simply being an avid Internet or social media user may not affect attitudes towards violence, engaging in particular behaviors while online does. Indeed, we find positive relationships between both producing and being targeting by cyberviolence and acceptance of moralistic violence. The former finding suggests that

those who hold positive views of violence are likely to share those views online, while the latter finding could indicate that frequent victims of cyberviolence are more apt to feel aggrieved, and in turn be more accepting of violence. Further, it could indicate that online users who are repeatedly targeted by cyberviolence occupy online spaces where abuse is common, perhaps even normative (Costello et al. 2017). In fact, prior work finds a relationship between being victimized and victimizing others, both online and offline (Hawdon et al. 2014; Hinduja & Patchin 2008; Jennings et al. 2012). Conversely, we find a negative correlation between exposure to cyberviolence and agreeance with moralistic violence. We suspect that regular exposure to distasteful material allows individuals to recognize its corrosiveness, yet not feel personally aggrieved since they are not the direct targets. Thus, they may be less likely to endorse moralistic violence, relative to those who are targeted by it.

Another key focus of this study is how social bonds affect attitudes towards moralistic violence. We find that having close ties to primary bonds - friends and family - correlates with lower acceptance of moralistic violence, while closeness to political groups or religious communities has the opposite effect, and attachment to online communities is not significantly correlated with attitudes towards moralistic violence. The finding regarding primary bonds aligns with expectations, as these fundamental attachments can serve as both support systems and protective mechanisms for myriad undesirable actions and beliefs. To understand why closeness to political parties and religious organizations correlate positively with the acceptance of moralistic violence, we draw on Black's (1993) assertion that vengeance is most extreme in contexts wherein similar elements exist separately, yet nevertheless are bonded in physical and social space. Black refers to this as *stable agglomeration*. Being close to religious and political groups decrease social distance among group members, but increases it between groups, as it reflects polarization, or social distance. However, these groups are "equal" and "functionally independent". The political environment in the United States, for instance, is a two-party, winner-take-all system with parties that are functionally independent. Likewise, religious faiths and denominations are functionally independent, yet often hold competing and incompatible views on various existential matters. In both cases, political parties and religious groups are immobile organizations. Hence, we suggest that individuals who endorse the current "frozen" environment of polarized but equal and functionally independent organizations locked in a winner-take-all fight are more likely to say that moralistic violence is okay.

We find minimal evidence that sociodemographic traits are important for understanding views on moralistic violence. In fact, age, education, and economic status are not significant correlates. Gender, on the other hand, is, with men more likely than women to state that moralistic violence is acceptable. This result is expected, as men tend to hold more positive views of rule violations, relative to women (Romero-Abrio et al. 2019) Further, men commit significantly more violent acts than women. To wit, in 2019 men accounted for 72.5% of all violent crime in the U.S., including 88% of murders and non-negligent homicides, 96.6% of rapes, and 84.2% of robberies (FBI 2019). We should therefore expect men to hold more positive views towards moralistic violence, since views about violence and violent acts are related (Nunes, Pedneault & Hermann 2022).

Lastly, the two attitudinal measures we include in this study correlate with beliefs about moralistic violence, both in the expected direction. First, respondents who report a general disregard for rules and laws are more apt to accept moralistic violence. Since moralistic violence can serve as a counter-hegemonic strategy, we should anticipate that those who show less reverence for rules will be more accepting of actions that are normatively deviant and operate outside the formal legal system. Conversely, individuals who report stronger beliefs in equality are less accepting of moralistic violence. This is likely because moralistic violence commonly targets marginalized individuals and groups, treating them as unequal.

Concluding Remarks

This study found that some people support the use of violence as a form of self-help for a variety of reasons. Indeed, factors ranging from experiences with cyberviolence, gender, social bonds and worldviews correlate with acceptance of moralistic violence. More broadly, we argue that the acceptance of moralistic violence can be understood through the prism of Gramsci's (1971) theorizing on cultural hegemony. Specifically, moralistic violence represents a revolt against the hegemonic belief that the use of violence is, with few exceptions, the domain of the state. We should therefore expect moralistic violence to become increasingly accepted as widening income and wealth inequality fuel disenfranchisement (Qureshi 2023) and institutional trust continues to wane (Pew Research Center 2024a,b). Moreover, the fragmentation of traditional forms of media (Schatz 2023) and subsequent growth in news consumption from social media platforms (Pew Research Center 2024c) is likely to undermine the ability of elites to effectively transmit their hegemonic beliefs. This may be especially true if cyberviolence – often taking the form of moralistic violence – continues to metastasize online.

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