Anime, Social Media, and the Modern Culture War

Enshittification, Fandom, and a Dominican-American Lens on Fascism Online

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Michael Peña is a Dominican-American cultural critic whose work examines fandom, diasporic identity, digital platforms, and the politics of contemporary media.

Reader's Guide

This report examines how enshittified platforms like Twitter/X reshape political behavior, fandom culture, and discourses around fascism. Though grounded in anime communities, the arguments apply broadly to today's digital political landscape.

Abstract

This report examines how contemporary digital platforms—especially Twitter/X—reshape political behavior, cultural conflict, and fandom. Using a media-ecosystem approach, it analyzes how "enshittification" (the progressive shifting of value from users to advertisers to platform owners) alters the flow of information, amplifies culture-war narratives, and strengthens authoritarian messaging. Drawing on research from sociology, tech policy, and online subcultures, I argue that platforms do not create culture wars; they intensify, weaponize, and algorithmically organize them.

The report also considers anime and fandom communities as modern soft-power arenas, where identity, resistance, and radicalization collide. For readers navigating propaganda, disinformation, or political fatigue, this document offers a clear map of how digital structures shape public sentiment—and where individuals still maintain agency. Although written through the lens of a Dominican-American critic and media worker, the findings are intended for fans, educators, journalists, and organizers seeking to understand the 2020s information landscape.

Key Terms & Definitions

Enshittification

Coined by tech critic Cory Doctorow, enshittification describes the predictable corporate decay cycle of digital platforms: services begin user-friendly, then shift value toward advertisers, and finally toward platform owners at the expense of both users and workers. Doctorow illustrates how this progression undermines trust, increases friction, degrades information quality, and accelerates authoritarian messaging online (Doctorow).

In this report: Enshittification frames Twitter/X as a system that structurally produces polarization, extremism, and information decay.

Echo Chamber / Filter Bubble

Echo chambers occur when platform design and social networks reinforce ideological homogeneity, reducing exposure to opposing views. Research shows these systems increase polarization, weaken cognitive autonomy, and intensify cultural conflict (Cinelli et al.; Ross Arguedas et al.).

In this report: Echo chambers explain how U.S.–Japan culture-war narratives recycle and amplify across fandom spaces and political factions on Twitter/X.

Algorithmic Governance

The automated decision-making systems that rank, filter, suppress, or amplify content. Studies show that algorithmic changes—especially after Musk's takeover—alter political visibility, increase hate speech, destabilize moderation structures, and strengthen extremist discourse (Hickey et al.).

In this report: Algorithmic governance reveals how fascist or fascist-adjacent messaging spreads through attention-maximizing infrastructures.

Soft Power (and "Cool Japan")

Soft power is influence achieved through culture rather than force. Japan's state-backed Cool Japan initiative leverages anime, fashion, and tourism to promote a managed national image.

Scholars argue this soft-power project simultaneously invites global fandom while reinforcing internal xenophobia, purity narratives, and economic precarity for migrants (Matosian).

In this report: Soft power helps explain how anime serves as geopolitical narrative material across the U.S.–Japan digital culture war.

Meme Weaponization

Memes function as rapid, replicable carriers of ideology. Extremist groups exploit anime avatars, ironic humor, and "innocent" aesthetics to distribute radical frames with plausible deniability (Bowes).

In this report: Meme weaponization explains how fandom aesthetics are co-opted to smuggle white-supremacist logic into mainstream discourse.

Youth Attention & Cognitive Vulnerability

Studies show that short-form video, infinite scrolling, and rapid visual stimuli reduce attention span, impair memory consolidation, and increase fatigue (Alruwaili; Yan et al.). Research from Pew and JAMA documents rising depressive symptoms, anxiety, and body-image distortion associated with teen social media use (Faverio et al.; Nagata et al.).

In this report: These findings structure the concern that platform decay threatens youth literacy, cognitive autonomy, and democratic participation.

White Supremacy as Structural Grammar

White supremacy here is not an individual belief but a cultural and political grammar that organizes economic and racial hierarchies. Scholars show how online platforms replicate this logic: anger is monetizable, hierarchy is algorithmically rewarded, and "honorary whiteness" is extended or revoked through digital performance (Ross Arguedas et al.).

In this report: This term grounds the systemic through-line connecting U.S. culture wars, anime nationalism, and transnational extremism.

Fandom as Identity Infrastructure

Fandom communities function as sites where individuals rehearse identity, belonging, and political meaning. They are now geopolitical micro-publics that remix national anxieties, diasporic narratives, and political grievances. This phenomenon is amplified by platform decay and transnational echo chambers (Anderson et al.; Pew Research Center).

In this report: Fandom serves as the cultural substrate through which political messages circulate at scale.

0. Q Index (Reader's Guide)

1. Introduction

Defines the contemporary culture war as a transnational, platform-shaped ideological ecosystem linking the U.S. and Japan. Introduces key claims: platform design, meme culture, anime, soft power, and white supremacy as structural forces, plus the concern that platform decay erodes literacy and cognitive autonomy.

Keywords: definition, scope, thesis, U.S.–Japan, white supremacy, literacy

2. Social Media and the Modern Culture War

Explains how engagement-driven platforms turn cultural conflict into a central organizing logic of politics. Covers echo chambers, identity performance, and how domestic grievances become transnational narratives.

Keywords: echo chambers, identity, disinformation, global frames, "us vs. them"

3. Twitter and Platform Enshittification

Traces Twitter's evolution from microblog to political infrastructure to Musk-era decay. Connects product and moderation changes to increased hate, noise, and culture-war escalation—and shows how Twitter's decline leaks into the wider media system.

Keywords: Twitter, Musk, enshittification, hate speech, infrastructure, free speech rhetoric

4. Meme Weaponization and Online Extremism

Looks at memes as propaganda with plausible deniability, from Pepe to culture-war image macros. Examines how anime and pop aesthetics are used in extremist spaces and how memes help build and perform online identities.

Keywords: memes, Pepe, irony, propaganda, anime avatars, edge culture

5. Anime, Nationalism, and Soft-Power Politics

Situates anime as both soft power and raw material for nationalist narratives. Explores how anime is used to tell stories about cultural superiority, purity, and belonging—alongside more inclusive fan uses.

Keywords: anime, nationalism, soft power, fandom, belonging/exclusion

6. Japan's "Cool Japan" Strategy

Explains "Cool Japan" as a state-backed soft-power project and outlines its contradictions: inviting global fandom and tourism while maintaining restrictive attitudes and policies toward foreigners and migrants.

Keywords: Cool Japan, tourism, xenophobia, labor without belonging, image vs. reality

7. Transnational Echo Chambers — U.S. and Japan

Describes how U.S. and Japanese culture-war frames circulate and remix each other via shared platforms. Focuses on mutual fantasies (Japan as ethno-state model; U.S. as cautionary tale) and how algorithms flatten context.

Keywords: transnational, U.S.–Japan, shared platforms, mutual fantasies, flattened context

8. White Supremacy as a Hegemonic Framework

Frames white supremacy as a structural grammar that organizes economic anger, racial identity, and political mobilization in the U.S., and shows how its logic is adapted onto Japanese and anime-inflected contexts.

Keywords: white supremacy, economic misdirection, racial identity, hierarchy, "honorary" models

9. Implications: Culture War, Platform Decay, and the Future of Literacy

Connects platform design and short-form video to shifts from "reading publics" to "scrolling publics." Surveys research on attention, cognition, and youth literacy, and offers practical tools for rebuilding cognitive autonomy in an enshittified environment.

Keywords: media literacy, algorithmic literacy, attention, short-form video, cognitive autonomy, practical tools

10. Conclusion: Platforms, Power, and Literacy in the Culture War

Synthesizes the argument for peers in cultural journalism: platforms intensify and structure culture-war narratives; Musk-era X (Twitter) illustrates how governance choices amplify white supremacist frames; Cool Japan/anime extend this globally. Argues that cultural journalism must explicitly address infrastructure and cognition as part of its literacy work.

Keywords: synthesis, evidence summary, aestheticized hate, role of cultural journalism, exposing scaffolding

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1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary "culture war" is not just a clash of values inside one country. It is a transnational, always-on conflict organized by digital platforms that reward outrage, identity performance, and rapid emotional reactions. Social media, and especially Twitter, has shifted the terrain from slow, deliberative public debate to an environment where memes, clips, and hot takes carry more weight than arguments. In that environment, cultural symbols such as anime, memes, and national branding are no longer neutral entertainment; they become raw material for political identity and, in some cases, for extremist organizing.

This paper argues that the modern culture war is best understood as a networked ideological ecosystem: one that links the United States and Japan through social media platforms, fan cultures, and soft-power strategies. It focuses on three intertwined dynamics:

1. how platforms like Twitter structure attention and conflict;

2. how right-wing movements exploit meme culture and anime aesthetics; and

3. how white supremacy functions as a hegemonic grammar for culture-war narratives, even when those narratives travel through Japanese pop culture or "Cool Japan" branding.

At the same time, this ecosystem has cognitive consequences. As platforms gradually degrade—privileging engagement metrics, ad revenue, and instant answers over thoughtful content—they do not just distort public discourse; they also erode media literacy and basic literacy practices. Emerging research links heavy social media and short-form video use to impaired attention, reduced working memory, and weaker executive control, especially in young people exposed to these formats during key developmental windows. The final section of this paper uses those findings as a set of practical tools for recognizing how these platforms are reshaping our capacity to think, read, and form independent conclusions.

This introduction therefore does four things. First, it defines the culture war as a global, platform-mediated phenomenon. Second, it narrows the focus to Twitter, anime fan cultures, and U.S.–Japan political feedback loops. Third, it frames white supremacy as a structural lens rather than a side topic. Finally, it previews the central claim: that platform design and soft power are not just political technologies, but cognitive ones.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explain how the culture war operates when:

- social media platforms structure visibility and reward conflict,

- far-right movements strategically co-opt cultural symbols like memes and anime, and

- states pursue soft-power projects that can unintentionally align with nationalist or exclusionary politics.

More specifically, the study aims to:

- trace how Twitter's evolution—from early chronological feeds to algorithmic ranking to Musk-era "free speech" policies—has affected the spread of disinformation and extremism;

- analyze how anime and "Cool Japan" are used both by the Japanese state (for tourism and branding) and by foreign and domestic right-wing groups (for identity and propaganda); and

- show how white supremacy and ethno-nationalist thinking provide a shared ideological framework for these developments, even when the cultural surface is "just" entertainment.

Throughout, the emphasis is not only on what happens, but on what these patterns mean for democratic discourse and for people's capacity to interpret media critically.

1.2 Scope and Approach

This paper is comparative and interdisciplinary. It draws on:

- media and communication studies (echo chambers, algorithmic feeds, meme culture);

- cognitive and developmental research on attention, working memory, and short-form content;

- scholarship on extremism, white supremacy, and online radicalization;

- studies of soft power and cultural diplomacy, particularly around "Cool Japan."

Temporally, the analysis is organized around three benchmarks in the platform environment:

1. Pre-Facebook era – early web and pre-algorithmic social media (blogs, forums, chronological feeds);

2. Post-Facebook / Twitter rise – the normalization of algorithmic engagement feeds and real-time commentary;

3. Post-Musk Twitter era – explicit de-prioritization of moderation, policy changes that amplified hate and disinformation, and a visible acceleration of platform decay.

The paper does not offer detailed policy prescriptions or electoral strategy. Instead, it focuses on mechanisms, patterns, and implications for literacy, leaving room for future normative or policy work built on this descriptive foundation.

1.3 Thesis Overview

The central thesis of this paper is that:

1. Social media platforms, especially Twitter, have become core infrastructure for the culture war, and their design evolution has systematically increased polarization, disinformation, and echo-chamber dynamics.

2. Far-right movements in the U.S. and Japan exploit meme culture and anime aesthetics to normalize nationalist and white supremacist narratives, using "cute" or familiar imagery to make extreme ideas feel socially acceptable.

3. Japan's "Cool Japan" strategy operates as a double-edged soft-power tool: it boosts tourism and cultural prestige while co-existing with, and sometimes indirectly reinforcing, domestic xenophobia and foreign ultranationalist fantasies about Japanese homogeneity.

4. White supremacy functions as a hegemonic frame for the American culture war, organizing grievances around race, belonging, and status, and providing a template that resonates with parallel ethno-nationalist projects abroad.

5. Platform degradation contributes to a slow erosion of media literacy and cognitive autonomy, especially as feeds shift from curiosity-driven exploration to passive consumption of short-form, high-dopamine content; this undermines people's

ability to read deeply, evaluate sources, and form their own conclusions.

The conclusion returns to these points and offers readers concrete questions and habits they can use to navigate enshittified platforms without surrendering their capacity for independent thought

2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MODERN CULTURE WAR

Social media platforms are not just neutral stages where the culture war happens; they are active participants in how it is framed, intensified, and remembered. Their business models depend on capturing and holding attention, and the easiest way to do that is by surfacing content that is emotionally charged, identity-affirming, and easy to react to. Over time, this has shifted political life from a primarily institutional and broadcast-driven sphere (parties, TV news, newspapers) to a feed-driven environment where trending topics, memes, and viral clips set the agenda.

In this environment, "culture war" issues—race, gender, sexuality, immigration, religion, national identity—are especially attractive to the algorithm. They come with built-in emotional hooks and clear in-group / out-group lines. The result is not just more arguments about culture, but a reorganization of politics around cultural identity. Rather than asking "What policies work?", feeds increasingly encourage people to ask "Which side am I on?" and "Who is attacking people like me?" Social media doesn't invent these questions, but it amplifies and sorts them in ways that keep conflict alive and constantly visible.

2.1 Echo Chambers and Identity-Based Polarization

An echo chamber is often described as a space where people only encounter views they already agree with. On social media, the reality is more complicated and more dangerous. Many users do see opposing views—but they often see them in simplified, hostile, or mocking form. The feed becomes a place where you are mostly surrounded by your own "side," and where the other side appears mainly as screenshots, quote-tweets, or outrage fuel.

This matters for the culture war because it turns politics into a performance of belonging. Likes, retweets, quote-tweets, stitches, and duets all become ways of signaling that you are on the correct side of a cultural line. When that happens, the content of a claim matters less than what it signals about identity. A post about immigration, policing, or trans rights is not just a statement about policy; it is a badge of team membership. The more a platform surfaces content that pits one identity group against another, the more it encourages users to see their feeds as battlegrounds of "us" versus "them."

Over time, echo chambers and identity performance reinforce each other. You see more of what your side says. You see the worst or most inflammatory examples of what the other side says. Your sense of threat grows. You become less willing to grant good faith to anyone outside your lane. That is the emotional infrastructure of the culture war, and social media is the main place where it is maintained in real time.

2.2 Disinformation, Engagement, and Platform Incentives

Disinformation—false or misleading information spread deliberately or carelessly—thrives on platforms designed for engagement. The key problem is not just that people lie online; it is that the architecture of the feed rewards certain kinds of lies more than others.

Content that provokes fear, anger, or moral disgust tends to spread quickly. So does content that flatters your in-group or offers a simple explanation for complex problems ("everything is rigged," "they're replacing us," "it's all a hoax"). These narratives fit perfectly into an engagement-driven ecosystem: they are easy to understand, easy to share, and easy to build memes around. Corrective information, by contrast, is often slower, more qualified, and less emotionally satisfying. Even when fact-checks exist, they rarely achieve the same reach as the original, emotionally charged falsehood.

From the platform's perspective, anything that keeps people scrolling, clicking, and reacting is labeled "successful." From a democratic or cognitive perspective, that same pattern looks like systematic drift toward the loudest and most polarizing content. In culture-war terms, this means:

- fringe ideas can be made to look mainstream if they trigger enough engagement;

- white supremacist and nationalist narratives can travel under the cover of memes, "jokes," and ironic aesthetics;

- users are rewarded, socially and algorithmically, for sharpening conflict rather than clarifying it.

The disinformation problem is therefore inseparable from the business model. As long as engagement is the primary metric, the culture war is not a bug in the system; it is a feature.

2.3 From Domestic Grievances to Transnational Narratives

One of the most important shifts social media introduced is that culture-war narratives no longer stop at national borders. A slogan, meme, or conspiracy theory that starts in one country can be translated, remixed, and adopted by movements elsewhere within hours. This is how American white supremacist ideas end up inspiring shooters in other countries, and how Japanese nationalism picks up language and framing borrowed from U.S. right-wing discourse.

For the United States, this means that domestic grievances—about race, gender, religion, or "wokeness"—can become export products. Influencers, pundits, and anonymous accounts generate frames that resonate globally: "globalists," "replacement," "SJWs," "woke mind

virus." These terms circulate across Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram, and imageboards, and they are available for adoption by far-right groups in Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

For Japan, something slightly different happens. Japanese politics and online spaces generate their own nationalist narratives—about immigration, ethnic homogeneity, historical memory—but these narratives are made more visible and legible to foreigners through anime, manga, and pop-culture branding. At the same time, parts of the Western far right project their fantasies of an "ideal" ethno-state onto Japan, treating it as a model of cultural and racial purity. Social media feeds become the place where these mutual projections meet.

The result is a global culture-war ecosystem in which:

- U.S. and Japanese actors borrow each other's rhetoric and symbols;

- pop culture (especially anime) serves as a shared visual language;

- and platform incentives ensure that the most inflammatory, simplified versions of these narratives rise to the top.

This section sets up the rest of the paper: the next chapters zoom in on Twitter as a key arena, on meme weaponization and anime aesthetics as political tools, and on the role of white supremacy and nationalism in structuring the entire transnational conversation.

3. TWITTER AND PLATFORM ENSHITTIFICATION

Twitter sits at the center of this paper because it operates both as a symbol and as infrastructure for the culture war. It is where journalists, politicians, activists, fandoms, bots, advertisers, and anonymous trolls share the same stage. When Twitter works one way, it nudges the broader information ecosystem in that direction; when it decays, that decay ripples outward through newsrooms, TV segments, and everyday conversations that take their cues from what is "trending."

"Enshittification" is a blunt but useful term for describing what has happened to many platforms, Twitter included. It describes a pattern: a service initially optimizes for user value; then gradually shifts to extracting more value for advertisers, owners, and investors; and eventually degrades the experience so severely that it becomes hostile or useless to many of the people who made it valuable in the first place. On Twitter, this pattern shows up in product decisions, moderation choices, and algorithmic tweaks that collectively tilt the field toward rage, noise, and elite self-promotion.

This section looks at three phases in that process: Twitter before Musk, Twitter after Musk's takeover, and what those shifts mean for the culture war.

3.1 Before Musk: From Microblog to Attention Engine

In its early years, Twitter was described as a "microblogging" platform. The feed was mostly chronological, the user base was much smaller, and the stakes felt lower. Even then, it amplified breaking news, protest movements, and celebrity drama—but the architecture was closer to a fast-moving forum than to a fully optimized attention engine.

As Twitter grew, the company introduced features and changes that nudged it toward a more intensive engagement model:

- the shift from purely chronological timelines to algorithmically ranked "Home" feeds;

- retweets and quote-tweets, which made it easier to spread content beyond one's immediate followers;

- trending topics and "What's happening," which turned the platform into a temperature gauge for newsrooms and politicians;

- integration of video, images, and later Spaces and livestreams.

These changes increased Twitter's influence. Journalists began to treat it as both a sourcing tool and a stage. Politicians used it to bypass traditional media and speak directly to supporters. Activists used it to mobilize and document. But the same design elements that made Twitter powerful also made it fertile ground for piling on, harassment, and polarization. Quote-tweets and replies, for example, are excellent tools for context and conversation; they are also excellent tools for public shaming.

By the time of the 2016 U.S. election and the subsequent Trump presidency, Twitter had fully become infrastructure for the culture war. Memes, insults, and clips ricocheted through polarized clusters, and the platform's trending lists became a daily script for cable news. In other words, long before Musk, Twitter was already moving along the enshittification curve: more central to public life, more optimized for engagement, and more saturated with content that rewarded speed, snark, and outrage.

3.2 Musk-Era Changes: Free Speech, Fewer Guardrails, More Noise

Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter accelerated these trends and stripped away many of the remaining guardrails. In the name of "free speech," Musk laid off large portions of the trust-and-safety staff, loosened enforcement on hate speech and misinformation, restored a number of previously banned accounts, and introduced paid verification as a revenue tool. He also reshaped the algorithm, boosting visibility for paid subscribers and for his own posts, and experimented with policy changes in public, often through late-night tweets.

Empirical studies of the post-takeover period show that:

- Tweets containing slurs and hate speech increased significantly after moderation was relaxed, both in volume and in engagement.

- Far-right, conspiratorial, and previously banned accounts saw noticeable boosts in visibility and interaction.

- Bots and spam did not meaningfully decrease, despite promises to "defeat the bots."

For everyday users, these shifts changed the texture of the platform. Timelines became more chaotic, more hostile, and more saturated with low-quality content: spam, engagement-bait, crypto scams, rage farming, and accounts optimized to game the new algorithm. Many journalists, researchers, and marginalized users either cut back their presence or left entirely, weakening some of the counterweights that had previously challenged misinformation or abuse.

From a culture-war standpoint, the result is a platform that:

- gives more oxygen to overtly racist, sexist, and conspiratorial content;

- treats outrage as a growth strategy;

- and empowers a relatively small set of highly active, highly ideological accounts to shape what looks "normal" in the feed.

The formal rules may frame these changes as a neutral commitment to "free speech," but the practical effect is a louder, more fragmented, and more extreme conversation space—one that encourages users to respond quickly and angrily rather than carefully and critically.

3.3 Enshittification as a Culture-War Accelerator

When we zoom out, enshittification on Twitter is not just a story about bad product decisions or an eccentric owner; it is a story about how platform incentives and culture-war dynamics feed each other.

As Twitter becomes more hostile and chaotic, several things happen at once:

- Polarization is reinforced. Users who remain tend to be the most committed, combative, or professionally obligated. People who dislike constant conflict drift away, leaving behind a higher concentration of culture-war fighters.

- Discourse flattens. Nuanced, context-heavy analysis becomes harder to sustain in an environment that rewards speed and emotional punch. Short, provocative statements outperform longer, careful ones.

- Extremes gain visibility. Accounts that traffic in outrage, harassment, or conspiracies often see higher engagement than those offering sober reporting or deliberation. The platform's reputation, in turn, becomes shaped by its loudest, most toxic corners.

At the same time, Twitter still functions as a signal generator for the rest of the media system. Journalists continue to monitor it, even if more skeptically. TV segments are still built around "viral tweets." Political campaigns still watch it for cues about what their base cares about. That means that enshittification on Twitter does not stay on Twitter; it spills over into headlines, talking points, and public perceptions of what "everyone" is saying.

For this paper's purposes, the key point is that Twitter's decline is not just an internal tech story. It is a culture-war story and a literacy story. A decayed Twitter:

- makes it easier for far-right narratives and white supremacist frames to circulate;

- makes it harder for ordinary users to practice slow, critical engagement;

- and continues to influence what other media and political institutions treat as urgent or normal.

The next section turns to meme weaponization and anime aesthetics as specific tools that flourish in this environment and help carry culture-war narratives across borders.

4. MEME WEAPONIZATION AND ONLINE EXTREMISM

Memes began as jokes, in-jokes, and playful references passed between friends and fan communities. On social media, they evolved into a shared visual language, capable of compressing complex ideas into a single image, phrase, or remix. That compression is part of their power: a meme can carry emotion, identity, and argument all at once, in a form that feels light and effortless to pass along.

Because of that, memes have also become tools for political communication and extremist recruitment. Far-right movements in particular have been quick to recognize that memes can serve as both propaganda and camouflage. A meme that looks like a joke can still normalize a slur, a conspiracy theory, or a dehumanizing stereotype. If challenged, the creator can fall back on "it's just irony" or "it's just humor," while the underlying message continues to spread.

This section looks at how memes function as propaganda, how pop-cultural aesthetics (including anime) are woven into extremist messaging, and how these practices help build and reinforce online identities.

4.1 Memes as Propaganda in Disguise

In traditional propaganda, messages are often explicit: posters, speeches, slogans. Online, much of the ideological work is done through "low-stakes" content that doesn't look serious at all. A few recurring patterns stand out:

- Repetition without responsibility. A meme can be shared thousands of times without any individual having to explicitly endorse its content in words. The act of reposting is framed as "just sharing," even when the image carries racist, sexist, or antisemitic messages.

- Plausible deniability. When pushed, creators and sharers can insist that the content is "just a joke," "just edgy," or "just playing with taboo." This makes it harder to call out harmful narratives without being labeled humorless or overly sensitive.

- Emotional priming. Memes often lean on humor, disgust, or outrage. They train audiences to respond to a symbol or group with a particular feeling—mockery, contempt, fear—long before any explicit argument appears.

The classic example is Pepe the Frog, a cartoon character that started as an apolitical, stoner-ish comic figure and was gradually remixed into a symbol of the alt-right and white nationalism. That transformation didn't happen through essays or manifestos; it happened

through thousands of images, captions, and contexts that linked Pepe to racist jokes, Nazi aesthetics, and extremist slogans. The character became a kind of container for those associations, so that even supposedly "neutral" Pepes carried the weight of that history.

Memes function similarly around culture-war issues. A single image might imply that feminists are hysterical, that trans people are predators, that immigrants are invaders, or that critics of racism are fragile and overdramatic. None of this has to be stated outright; the joke does the work. Over time, these repeated patterns help build a mental shorthand: a set of reflexive reactions and assumptions that shape how people see more "serious" news, policies, and debates.

4.2 Anime and Pop Aesthetics in Radicalization

Anime, manga, and related pop aesthetics occupy a special place in meme culture. They provide a huge library of expressive faces, dramatic poses, iconic scenes, and emotionally charged moments that can be detached from their original context and repurposed as signifiers in online discourse. For many fans, this is harmless fun: using a reaction face, a favorite character, or a reference to signal taste and community.

Extremist and far-right communities, however, have learned to weaponize these same visuals. Some common uses include:

- Cute or "kawaii" characters paired with hateful or eliminationist text. The contrast between the soft aesthetic and the harsh message helps normalize the latter, and can make outsiders feel like they are missing an in-joke if they are disturbed by it.

- Anime avatars as masks. Anonymous accounts using anime profile pictures can participate in harassment campaigns, spread conspiracies, or push racist narratives while blending into a broader fandom landscape. This makes it harder to distinguish between ordinary fan behavior and coordinated political activity.

- Nationalist fantasy through anime imagery. Some far-right users, especially in Western countries, use anime imagery to project fantasies of homogenous, militaristic, or "pure" societies, projecting their own ethno-nationalist desires onto stylized versions of Japan.

Within certain online spaces, this has produced a specific hybrid identity sometimes dubbed the "extremist weeb": a user who is deeply embedded in anime and otaku culture while also endorsing or flirting with fascist, white nationalist, or ultranationalist ideas. For these users, anime is not just entertainment; it is a symbolic toolkit for expressing hierarchy, domination, and exclusion in an aesthetically appealing way.

From the outside, this can be difficult to see clearly. Anime art styles and references have become so widespread that many people treat them as generic internet visual language. That ubiquity is precisely what makes them useful to extremists: the imagery looks harmless and familiar even when the message is not.

4.3 Identity-Building Through Visual Culture

Memes, anime, and other pop-cultural visuals do more than transmit individual ideas; they help people build and inhabit identities. In the context of online extremism and the culture war, this identity-building has several layers:

- In-group belonging. Sharing certain memes, using certain reaction images, or adopting certain avatars signals membership in a community. On the far right, this can include specific image macros, slogans, or "joke" references that function as shibboleths—if you know, you know.

- Edge as status. Being more ironic, more offensive, or more "redpilled" than others can become a status game. Users compete to produce content that pushes boundaries, which can pull the group further into extreme positions under the cover of humor and "free thinking."

- Narrative about self and world. Over time, the visuals someone consumes and shares help construct a story: "I'm part of the group that sees through the lies," "We're the ones with real courage," "Everyone else is brainwashed." This narrative is emotionally satisfying and makes it harder to entertain contradictory information.

In culture-war terms, this means that online extremism is not just about people believing certain propositions; it is about people performing a certain identity day after day, through images, jokes, and aesthetic choices. That performance is sustained and rewarded by platforms that boost content which gets reactions and keeps people scrolling.

For this paper's broader argument, meme weaponization and anime aesthetics show how the culture war operates on symbolic and affective terrain as much as on factual or policy terrain. To understand why certain narratives spread and stick—from white supremacist fantasies to anti-immigrant panic to nationalist pride—we have to look at the images, styles, and in-jokes that carry them. The next section turns to Japan's "Cool Japan" strategy and the way state-backed soft power intersects with, and sometimes collides with, these grassroots and extremist uses of pop culture.

5. ANIME, NATIONALISM, AND SOFT-POWER POLITICS

Anime is more than a genre; it is one of Japan's most visible exports and a major part of how the country is imagined abroad. For millions of people, their first emotional connection to Japan is not through history or policy but through a series, a character, or a fantasy world. That emotional bond has clear soft-power value. It makes Japan feel familiar, exciting, and attractive long before anyone books a flight or reads a policy brief.

At the same time, anime is not a single, unified message. It is an industry with many creators, politics, and contradictions. Some works endorse authority and national pride; others critique militarism, capitalism, or patriarchy; many are simply escapist or apolitical on the surface. But once anime travels through global social media and the culture war, its meanings are no longer controlled by studios or creators. States, corporations, and extremist communities all try to appropriate anime's symbolic capital for their own goals.

This section looks at anime as a soft-power instrument, as raw material for nationalist stories, and as a site of tension between global fandom and exclusionary politics.

5.1 Anime as Cultural Soft Power

From the perspective of Japanese state and industry actors, anime is a strategic asset. It introduces foreign audiences to Japanese language, landscapes, festivals, food, and everyday life in stylized form. It also supports a global ecosystem of conventions, cosplay, fan art, tourism, and merchandise that channels attention and money back toward Japan.

Several features make anime particularly effective as soft power:

- Emotional depth and long-form storytelling. Many series follow characters over dozens or hundreds of episodes, building deep attachments that translate into curiosity about Japan itself.

- Recognizable aesthetics. Even people who do not watch anime can recognize the style; that instant recognizability is useful for branding, marketing, and tourism campaigns.

- Translatability. Anime is dubbed, subtitled, and circulated globally. Fans often do unpaid promotion through fan subs, memes, and discussion, extending the reach of each work.

Government initiatives and tourism campaigns have leaned into this, promoting anime pilgrimages to real-world locations, funding events, and framing anime as a symbol of a

"cool," creative Japan. In this frame, anime functions as a friendly interface: a way to soften Japan's image, attract visitors, and position the country as a cultural superpower rather than a military one.

This is the surface-level story. Beneath it, however, lie questions about who this soft power is for and how it interacts with domestic debates about identity, race, and belonging.

5.2 Nationalist Uses of Anime and Pop Culture

While the state promotes anime as a symbol of openness and creativity, nationalist and far-right actors—both in Japan and abroad—often use the same imagery for very different purposes.

In Japan, some right-leaning circles present anime and other "Cool Japan" products as proof of cultural superiority and uniqueness. The global popularity of anime becomes evidence that Japan should preserve its distinctiveness and resist immigration or multiculturalism. The message is: the world loves us for what we already are, so we should not change. This can slide into rhetoric that treats foreign residents as temporary guests or necessary labor, but not as full members of the national community.

Outside Japan, parts of the Western extreme right project their own fantasies onto anime and Japanese society. They imagine Japan as an ethno-state: racially homogeneous, socially orderly, insulated from "degeneracy" and demographic change. Anime imagery becomes a kind of aesthetic gateway into this fantasy. Nationalist accounts might share anime scenes of traditional festivals, idealized towns, or disciplined youth, pairing them with captions about "real culture," "civilization," or "what the West has lost."

In both cases, anime is being used to tell a story about who belongs and who doesn't, even when the original work has nothing to do with immigration or race. The same show that inspires one viewer to learn Japanese or visit Tokyo can inspire another to advocate for closed borders or racial segregation at home. The difference lies in the interpretive frame brought in by the viewer, not in the pixels themselves.

5.3 Global Fandom, Exclusion, and the Soft-Power Paradox

The global anime fandom is diverse. It includes people of many races, genders, and nationalities who bond over shared interests, creativity, and community. Fans form friendships, organize conventions, raise money for charity, and create spaces that are explicitly inclusive and anti-racist. This is also part of anime's soft power: it builds horizontal connections among ordinary people that do not run through governments at all.

At the same time, this global fandom coexists with spaces where anime is intertwined with gatekeeping, harassment, and outright bigotry. Some communities police who is a "real fan" based on race, nationality, or politics. Others treat anime as a refuge from "political correctness" and frame any attempt to discuss representation or racism as an attack on "freedom" or "authenticity." Extremist groups exploit these tensions, recruiting through shared tastes while smuggling in ideology.

The paradox is that anime's success as soft power depends on being widely accessible and emotionally resonant, but nationalist uses of anime depend on drawing sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders. States want foreigners to love their culture; nationalists want to control who counts as part of that culture. Social media makes it easy for these projects to overlap and conflict in real time.

For this paper's larger argument, anime and its surrounding ecosystems show how soft power and the culture war intersect. Anime is not inherently liberatory or reactionary. But in a media environment shaped by algorithmic feeds, engagement incentives, and transnational culture-war narratives, it becomes a flexible resource: something states use to brand themselves, extremists use to dress up their projects, and ordinary people use to find connection and meaning. The next section turns directly to Japan's "Cool Japan" strategy and how official soft-power policy collides with domestic xenophobia and global culture-war currents.

6. JAPAN'S "COOL JAPAN" STRATEGY

"Cool Japan" is the umbrella term for a set of policies, campaigns, and narratives through which the Japanese state and its partners promote the country's contemporary culture abroad. Anime, manga, J-pop, fashion, food, and games are positioned as national assets that can attract tourists, boost exports, and improve Japan's image globally. On the surface, this looks like a straightforward soft-power strategy: use beloved cultural products to build goodwill and economic opportunity.

But "Cool Japan" is not just about marketing. It sits at the intersection of domestic politics, nationalism, and globalization. The same state that proudly showcases anime to the world has struggled with xenophobia, restrictive immigration policies, and repeated scandals around the treatment of foreign workers and residents. This creates a tension between the image and the infrastructure: an inviting, playful Japan for visitors versus a guarded, often exclusionary Japan for those who try to stay.

This section explores how "Cool Japan" functions as soft power, how it collides with domestic attitudes toward foreigners, and what that means in the context of the global culture war.

6.1 Soft Power and Global Branding

From a soft-power perspective, "Cool Japan" is a success story. Over the last two decades:

- international tourism to Japan surged (before the pandemic),

- anime and manga became mainstream around the world,

- Japanese food, fashion, and design gained visibility,

- and "Japan" became shorthand for a blend of tradition and cutting-edge pop culture.

Government agencies, local governments, and industry groups have invested in this image:

- funding cultural festivals, exhibitions, and screenings abroad;

- supporting anime tourism routes and "pilgrimage" sites based on popular series;

- branding creative industries as pillars of national identity and future growth.

The underlying message is that Japan is creative, safe, charming, and unique. Instead of emphasizing military or economic power, "Cool Japan" emphasizes cultural presence: a country you may never have visited, but feel like you already know through media. For many foreign fans, that sense of familiarity creates a strong emotional tie—and sometimes a desire to travel, study, or work in Japan.

In this frame, anime and related media successfully function as soft-power infrastructure. They shape how people imagine Japan before they encounter any official diplomacy. But soft power is not neutral. It raises questions about whose image of Japan is being promoted, and whose experiences are omitted.

6.2 Contradictions: Xenophobia vs. Tourism

The story gets more complicated when we look at how Japan treats foreigners who are not just visitors or consumers but residents, workers, or neighbors. While "Cool Japan" encourages affection for Japanese culture, domestic policies and social attitudes have often signaled caution—or outright hostility—toward long-term immigration and multiculturalism.

Key tensions include:

- Labor without belonging. Programs that bring in foreign workers, especially in sectors like manufacturing, agriculture, and elder care, have been criticized for low pay, poor conditions, and limited paths to permanent status. Foreign workers can be welcomed as economic resources while remaining socially marginalized.

- Legal and political exclusion. Long-term foreign residents, including those born and raised in Japan, have historically had limited political rights and representation. Proposals to expand local voting rights to non-citizens have sparked backlash from nationalist groups that frame such moves as threats to national sovereignty.

- Everyday discrimination. Reports of housing discrimination, workplace harassment, and social exclusion are common among some non-Japanese residents and ethnically minoritized groups. Cases of abuse in detention centers and high-profile deaths of foreign detainees have revealed systemic problems in how the state treats those who fall outside idealized notions of "Japanese-ness."

This creates a split-screen effect:

- On one screen, Japan is "cool": an open, fun, creative hub that wants the world's attention and affection.

- On the other screen, Japan is "closed": wary of demographic change, slow to grant rights to foreigners, and influenced by voices that present immigration as a threat.

For tourists and short-term visitors, only the first screen may be visible. For migrants, foreign workers, and ethnically marginalized communities, the second screen is impossible to ignore. This is the "Cool Japan" paradox: a country that actively markets itself to the world while often struggling to accept the world on equal terms.

6.3 Implications for Global Culture Wars

In a global culture-war context, "Cool Japan" and its contradictions are not just domestic issues; they become part of how Japan is used symbolically by others.

For some Japanese nationalists, the success of "Cool Japan" is proof that Japan's current social model—relatively homogeneous, tightly controlled immigration, strong emphasis on cultural continuity—should be defended against change. The logic is: the world loves Japan as it is; therefore, efforts to increase diversity or expand rights for foreigners are framed as risks, not opportunities.

For segments of the Western far right, Japan becomes a fantasy template: proof that a wealthy, technologically advanced country can remain ethnically and culturally "pure." They selectively highlight stories of low crime, social order, and restrictive immigration, while ignoring or romanticizing the struggles of migrants and minorities within Japan. Anime and "Cool Japan" content feed into this: they supply the aesthetic backdrop for this fantasy, even if the original works do not endorse those politics.

Meanwhile, for progressive or marginalized communities around the world, "Cool Japan" can be read very differently: as an example of how a state can benefit from global cultural exchange while still reproducing exclusion and inequality at home. This reading resonates with critiques of other soft-power projects—Hollywood, K-pop, European art cinema—that simultaneously open doors and reinforce hierarchies.

In all of these cases, "Cool Japan" acts as a symbolic resource that different actors use to tell different stories about identity, borders, and belonging. Social media amplifies those stories, connecting Japanese debates about immigration and national identity to global narratives about multiculturalism, white supremacy, and cultural purity.

For this paper, the key point is that "Cool Japan" is not a neutral backdrop to the culture war; it is one of the stages on which it plays out. The next section turns directly to the feedback loop between U.S. and Japanese culture-war narratives and how they circulate through platforms, memes, and soft-power imagery.

7. TRANSNATIONAL ECHO CHAMBERS — U.S. AND JAPAN

The culture war is often framed as if it were purely domestic: "America's culture war," "Japan's culture war." In practice, social media has created transnational echo chambers where ideas, symbols, and grievances move back and forth between countries at high speed. U.S. right-wing narratives about race, gender, and "wokeness" circulate in Japanese online spaces; Japanese nationalist narratives about homogeneity, immigration, or "traditional values" are picked up and romanticized by Western audiences. Anime and other "Cool Japan" exports function as shared reference points in these exchanges.

This does not mean that U.S. and Japanese politics are identical. Each has its own history, institutions, and specific flashpoints. But the platforms that host these conversations—Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, forums—encourage convergence at the level of imagery and framing. Users borrow each other's language and aesthetics, even when they only half understand the local context. The result is a global culture-war vocabulary that can be plugged into different national stories with minimal translation.

7.1 Globalization of Culture-War Frames

Certain frames that originated or were popularized in the United States now circulate widely online:

- "woke" and "anti-woke" as catch-all labels,

- "cancel culture,"

- "replacement" and demographic anxiety,

- "free speech" as a shield for bigotry or harassment,

- "SJWs" (social justice warriors) and "snowflakes" as caricatures of progressive politics.

These phrases and memes have shown up in Japanese online spaces, sometimes directly translated, sometimes adapted, sometimes used ironically. They coexist with Japan-specific narratives about political correctness, feminism, LGBT rights, or historical memory. In many cases, they provide a ready-made vocabulary for expressing discomfort with social change.

The flow also goes the other way. Western users import Japanese terms and aesthetics—like "weeb," "otaku," "moe," or specific anime archetypes—and use them as shorthand in their own culture-war conversations. Characters and series are drafted into debates over gender roles, masculinity, nationalism, or censorship, regardless of the creator's intent.

What ties these movements together is the way platforms flatten context. A meme or term can detach from its original setting and circulate as a kind of free-floating signifier, available to anyone who finds it useful in their own fights.

7.2 Right-Wing Affinities and Mutual Fantasies

Within this transnational flow, the far right in the U.S. and Japan sometimes find points of affinity, even when their material conditions differ.

On the U.S. side:

- Some white supremacists and nationalist influencers present Japan as a model of ethno-national cohesion: "look at Japan; they don't have mass immigration or 'woke' politics, and they're doing fine."

- Anime and "Cool Japan" imagery become aesthetic proof that a highly developed country can remain "pure" and orderly.

- Japan's struggles with immigration are reframed as virtues: a country that "protects its own."

On the Japanese side:

- Some nationalist commentators borrow or echo U.S. right-wing talking points about "globalists," "liberal elites," or "political correctness."

- U.S. culture-war battles over trans rights, Black Lives Matter, or critical race theory are held up as cautionary tales about what happens when "identity politics" goes too far.

- American chaos—mass shootings, polarized elections, campus protests—is used to argue for preserving Japan's existing social order.

These mutual fantasies are selective. They highlight whatever supports the desired story and ignore inconvenient facts: U.S. right-wing accounts downplay Japan's economic problems, aging crisis, or internal inequalities; Japanese nationalists downplay the realities

of racism, xenophobia, and historical revisionism at home. Social media makes this easier by serving up curated slices of each country's reality—clips, memes, threads—that confirm what people want to believe.

7.3 Shared Platforms, Divergent Histories

At the level of platforms, U.S. and Japanese users often occupy the same spaces: the same Twitter timelines, YouTube channels, Discord servers, and algorithmic feeds. They can see each other's posts, translate them, remix them, and react to them in real time. At the level of history, however, they are working with different legacies:

- The U.S. culture war is rooted in slavery, segregation, indigenous dispossession, immigration waves, and a constitutional framework that turned race, religion, and rights into recurring flashpoints.

- The Japanese culture war is rooted in imperial expansion, war memory, postwar reconstruction, ethnic hierarchies, and debates over homogeneity, minority recognition, and the U.S.–Japan security relationship.

When U.S. and Japanese actors meet online, these histories do not disappear, but they are often compressed into stereotypes and simplified narratives. A U.S. user may treat Japan as a monolith of politeness and order; a Japanese user may treat the U.S. as pure chaos or pure opportunity. Algorithms further encourage this by rewarding content that leans into caricature rather than nuance.

For the purposes of this paper, the important point is that transnational echo chambers help stabilize certain culture-war patterns:

- Racial hierarchy and white supremacy find new ways to express themselves through "East vs. West" comparisons and fantasies about "civilization" and "decay."

- Anime and pop culture serve as shared symbols that can be attached to very different, even opposing, political projects.

- Online spaces make it easy to borrow each other's anger while leaving most of the underlying complexity behind.

This sets up the final analytical step. The next section turns directly to white supremacy as a hegemonic framework—not just in the U.S. context, but as a set of ideas about hierarchy, purity, and belonging that travel through these transnational culture-war circuits.

8. WHITE SUPREMACY AS A HEGEMONIC FRAMEWORK

Up to this point, the paper has described platforms, memes, anime, and "Cool Japan" as pieces of a global culture-war ecosystem. To understand why certain narratives recur so consistently—about borders, purity, crime, "civilization," and "decay"—we have to look at white supremacy as a structuring framework, especially in the American context.

White supremacy here does not just mean explicit neo-Nazis or hooded Klansmen, although those exist. It refers to a broader system of ideas and practices that:

- place whiteness at the top of a racial hierarchy,

- treat non-white groups as threats, problems, or expendable,

- and normalize unequal access to safety, resources, and political power.

In the U.S., this framework was built into the foundations of the country: slavery, indigenous dispossession, segregation, immigration law, and policing. That history continues to shape how people interpret crime, poverty, protest, and national belonging. On social media and in the culture war, white supremacy supplies a ready-made grammar—a set of assumptions about who is "us" and who is "them," who is entitled to the benefit of the doubt and who is perpetually suspect.

When U.S. narratives travel abroad, or when foreign narratives are filtered through U.S.-dominated platforms, they often pass through this grammar. That is why white supremacist fantasies can latch onto stories about Japan, anime, or "Cool Japan," even when those stories emerge from a very different historical context.

8.1 Economic Disenfranchisement and Misrecognized Enemies

One reason white supremacist narratives remain powerful is that they offer a simple explanation for real economic pain. In many communities, especially working-class and rural ones, people have experienced stagnant wages, deindustrialization, debt, precarious work, and collapsing public services. These are rooted in policy choices, corporate power, financialization, and austerity—but culture-war narratives often redirect anger away from those systems and toward racialized "others."

On U.S. social media, it is common to see:

- immigrants blamed for job losses caused by automation and corporate offshoring;

- Black and Brown communities framed as drains on resources, rather than as groups harmed by disinvestment;

- "woke elites" blamed for social fragmentation, even as corporate consolidation and economic inequality deepen.

White supremacy helps stitch these misdirections together. It offers a story in which the real victims are white citizens "replaced," "ignored," or "oppressed" by minorities and foreigners, rather than by the rich or by institutions that systematically extract wealth. Memes and short-form content make this story easy to share: a chart, a joke, an out-of-context video, a headline that confirms the feeling that "our" group is under attack.

In this sense, the culture war functions as a pressure valve. It lets people vent legitimate frustration but channels it toward targets that pose less threat to existing power structures. Platforms profit from the resulting outrage and engagement; political actors exploit it to win elections or pass regressive legislation. The underlying economic architecture remains intact.

8.2 Racial Identity and Political Mobilization

White supremacy also shapes how political identities are constructed and mobilized. In the U.S., whiteness has historically been defined not just by skin color but by distance from Blackness and other marginalized groups. That distance is constantly renegotiated: different European ethnicities were gradually folded into "white," while other groups are kept at the margins or conditionally included.

On social media, this history surfaces in several ways:

- Narratives that frame anti-racist movements as extremist or un-American, while treating racial hierarchy as normal or invisible.

- Portrayals of Black activism, migrant organizing, or Indigenous land defense as "chaos" or "lawlessness," contrasted with white protests or vigilantism framed as "patriotism."

- Persistent tropes about "real Americans" that implicitly or explicitly center whiteness.

These patterns make white identity available as a political resource. Politicians and influencers can activate feelings of racial solidarity—sometimes overtly, sometimes through dog whistles—by framing demographic change, immigration, or civil rights as threats. In

this framing, defending whiteness becomes synonymous with defending the nation, even when non-white citizens are just as much part of that nation.

The culture war becomes the theater where this identity is constantly rehearsed. Fights over school curricula, monuments, comics, anime, casting choices, or corporate branding all get pulled into a story about whether white people are still allowed to exist as "normal," "unapologetic," or "in charge." Online, these fights are hyper-visible and hyper-simplified; each viral controversy is another opportunity to reinforce the sense that white identity is embattled and must be defended.

8.3 Transnational Adaptations of White Supremacy

Although white supremacy is rooted in specific histories—especially in Europe and the United States—its underlying patterns can be adapted and translated into other contexts.

In the U.S.–Japan circuit described in this paper, a few dynamics stand out:

- Japan as "honorary" model. Some Western white supremacists treat Japan as an example of what they want for themselves: a wealthy, technologically advanced country that appears ethnically and culturally homogenous. They place Japan in a hierarchy of "civilized" nations, implying a shared status at the top of a global racial order. In this fantasy, Japanese people function as "honorary whites," even as real Japanese history and racial politics are flattened into stereotype.

- Local hierarchies plugged into global frames. In Japan, ideas about ethnic homogeneity and suspicion of immigrants can be expressed using or echoing global right-wing language about "invasion," "replacement," or "cultural Marxism." These terms were popularized in Western contexts but are repurposed to support local hierarchies in East Asia.

- Anime as a shared canvas. Anime aesthetics provide a common visual language that both U.S. and Japanese far-right communities can use. Western extremists attach anime imagery to white nationalist slogans; Japanese extremists attach similar imagery to anti-Korean, anti-Chinese, or anti-immigrant rhetoric. In each case, the art style softens and stylizes the underlying message.

What ties these examples together is not that every Japanese nationalist is a white supremacist, or that every anime fan is implicated in extremism. Rather, it is that white supremacy offers a portable framework—a way of ranking people, assigning blame, and imagining "order"—that can be mapped onto different cultural contexts with relatively little friction.

On U.S.-dominated platforms, this framework often sets the terms of debate even when the surface conversation is about Japan, anime, or "culture" rather than race. Who is imagined as "civilized," who is imagined as "dangerous," whose suffering is treated as background noise—these judgments are shaped by hierarchies that long predate social media, but are constantly reproduced by it.

For this paper's purposes, naming white supremacy as a hegemonic framework helps explain why certain culture-war narratives resonate so strongly across borders and platforms, while others struggle to gain traction. It also clarifies what is at stake in discussions about media literacy and platform design. The next section turns directly to those stakes, focusing on how enshittified platforms affect our ability to read, think, and resist these inherited hierarchies—and what practical tools readers can use to push back.

9. IMPLICATIONS: CULTURE WAR, PLATFORM DECAY, AND THE FUTURE OF LITERACY

Taken together, the previous sections show how platforms, memes, anime, nationalism, and white supremacy interact to shape the contemporary culture war. This final section asks a different but closely related question: what does all of this do to our ability to read, think, and form judgments?

The answer is not just that people are misinformed. It is that the environments in which they encounter information are steadily training them to want different things from media: speed instead of depth, certainty instead of ambiguity, punchlines instead of arguments, and emotional payoff instead of slow understanding. As platforms decay—prioritizing engagement, ad revenue, and owner interests over user wellbeing—they gradually undermine the cognitive habits that traditional literacy and media literacy depend on.

To see this more clearly, it helps to think in eras: a pre-Facebook era, a post-Facebook/Twitter era, and a post-Musk / short-form video era.

9.1 From Reading Publics to Scrolling Publics

In the pre-Facebook era, much of online life resembled an extension of older reading practices. People navigated through blogs, forums, email lists, and static websites. Content was often longer, and the user usually decided where to go next by clicking links, following blogrolls, or browsing archives. The experience was far from utopian—there was plenty of misinformation and hostility—but it was generally user-paced. You had to make more deliberate choices about what to read, and you were more likely to encounter arguments in extended form.

With the rise of Facebook and Twitter, this shifted toward the feed model. Instead of seeking out content, users increasingly received it, sorted by an algorithm that optimized for engagement. Posts were shorter, more fragmented, and more heavily shaped by social context: what friends liked, what went viral, what was trending. Reading became less a matter of following a thought from beginning to end and more a matter of sampling many small fragments—posts, threads, screenshots—while the feed kept moving.

The post-Musk era of Twitter and the dominance of short-form video (TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts) push this further. Now the default experience on many platforms is an infinite, auto-playing stream chosen by an algorithm that has learned what is most likely to hold your attention for a few more seconds. Long-form text is still available, but it competes with formats designed to be consumed in bursts of 15–60 seconds.

Across these eras, the shift is from:

- search to push,

- user-paced navigation to platform-paced feeding,

- extended reading to fragmented scanning,

- open-ended exploration to answer-seeking and instant gratification.

That shift has direct consequences for literacy. A "reading public" builds norms and skills around staying with a text, tolerating complexity, and wrestling with ideas. A "scrolling public" is increasingly trained to skim, react, and move on.

9.2 How Enshittified Platforms Erode Media Literacy

Traditional media literacy revolves around questions like: Who made this? For what purpose? What evidence is provided? What's left out? These questions assume a certain pace and context. You have to stay with the material long enough to ask them, and ideally you have multiple sources to compare.

Enshittified platforms make that harder in several ways:

- Attention fragmentation. The feed is built to interrupt you. Notifications, autoplay, algorithmic jumps, and endless scroll pull your focus from one item to the next before you can fully process any of them.

- Social proof over evidence. Metrics like likes, shares, and views become heuristics for truth or importance. If "everyone is talking about it," it feels real and urgent, regardless of its accuracy.

- Context collapse. News, ads, jokes, personal updates, propaganda, and shitposts all appear in the same visual format. It takes extra work to distinguish them, and the platform has no incentive to help.

- Answer culture. Search, feeds, and now AI-driven tools all nudge users toward fast answers rather than exploration. The goal quietly becomes "resolve this feeling now" instead of "understand this issue over time."

Over time, these pressures don't just misinform; they change what feels normal. It becomes normal to:

- read only headlines, captions, or the first few sentences;

- rely on other people's reactions instead of your own interpretation;

- expect instant clarity and feel impatient or anxious when confronted with ambiguity;

- treat disagreement as an attack rather than an opportunity to refine your views.

In that environment, the classic media literacy advice—"check sources," "do your own research"—can become hollow or even performative. People may repeat the language of critical thinking while still operating within platforms that reward speed, certainty, and team loyalty over genuine inquiry.

9.3 Algorithmic Video and Cognitive Habits

Short-form video platforms add another layer. Their design is optimized for rapid, frictionless engagement:

- short clips,

- immediate sensory payoff (music, motion, expressions),

- seamless transitions,

- and algorithmic curation tuned to your past behavior.

The result is a powerful training regime for certain cognitive habits:

- Shortening time horizons. When most content resolves in under a minute, longer stretches of uncertainty or effort feel uncomfortable. Dense texts, complex arguments, or unedited primary sources start to feel "too much" even for people who are capable of engaging with them.

- Rewarding passive consumption. The easiest thing to do is let the next video play. Unlike clicking a link or opening an article, you don't have to actively decide what to consume; the platform decides for you.

- Blending information and entertainment. Political content, news commentary, and conspiracy theories are packaged in the same format as dance trends and comedy

skits. This can make serious claims feel light and unserious, or it can make entertainment feel like a reliable source of truth.

For culture-war topics, this means that many people's first and most frequent exposure comes in the form of short, emotionally loaded vignettes: a clip of a school board fight, a "gotcha" edit of a protest, a rant about "woke anime," a hyper-edited explainer about why one group is to blame for everything. Each clip is too short to show structural causes or historical context, but the cumulative effect is strong. Viewers absorb attitudes and storylines—who is a victim, who is a villain, who is ridiculous—long before they ever read a full article or policy proposal.

This doesn't mean that short-form video is inherently bad. It can be used for education and organizing as well. But when combined with platform incentives and preexisting racial and national hierarchies, it tends to tilt toward drama, simplification, and polarization. It quietly teaches people to expect that the world can be understood in 30 seconds and that anything more demanding is asking too much.

9.4 Practical Tools: Rebuilding Cognitive Autonomy in an Enshittified World

If platforms are not going to protect our capacity to think, then any hope of resisting the worst parts of the culture war has to include practices that rebuild cognitive autonomy. None of these are magic solutions, and they don't fix structural problems by themselves. But they can give individual readers more room to maneuver.

Some practical tools:

1. Deliberate "slow lanes."

    Build small, non-negotiable habits that require sustained attention:

    ○   reading a chapter of a book each day,

    ○   finishing one long-form article without checking your phone,

    ○   journaling for 10–15 minutes.

        Treat these as workouts for the same mental muscles that platforms are trying to atrophy.

2. Feed translation.

   Any time you open Twitter or a short-form feed, ask yourself:

   "What is this trying to make me feel, and what does it want me to do next?"

   Naming the nudge doesn't make it disappear, but it turns a passive scroll into an active act of interpretation.

3. Friction by design.

   Add small bits of friction back into your media life:

   - disable some notifications,

   - remove apps from your home screen,

   - use browser extensions or phone settings that limit autoplay and infinite scroll.

     The goal is not to go offline forever, but to create micro-moments where you can choose instead of being carried.

4. Question formats, not just facts.

   When you encounter political or culture-war content, don't only ask "Is this true?" Ask:

   - Why is this framed in 30–60 seconds?

   - What gets left out to make it this short or this entertaining?

   - Who benefits if this becomes the dominant way the issue is understood?

     These questions push you beyond fact-checking toward understanding the logic of the format.

5. Use fandom as a gateway, not a cage.

   If anime, games, or other pop culture are your entry points, you can turn them into bridges to deeper literacy instead of replacements for it. That might mean:

- ○ reading interviews, essays, or criticism about the works you love;

- ○ learning more about the real histories or politics they touch;

- ○ using your own participation in fandom to notice where inclusion and exclusion show up.

6. Collective literacy.

   Whenever possible, make reading and media analysis social: book clubs, Discord study channels, group chats that share and discuss longer pieces, not just screenshots. Collective interpretation can counterbalance the isolating, hyper-personalized nature of algorithmic feeds.

None of these practices, by themselves, dismantle the structural forces driving platform decay or white supremacist culture-war narratives. But they give people tools to see those forces more clearly and resist being fully shaped by them. If the culture war is fought through images, memes, feeds, and stories about who belongs, then the ability to slow down, read deeply, and ask better questions is not just a private virtue. It is a form of everyday resistance.

10. CONCLUSION: PLATFORMS, POWER, AND LITERACY IN THE CULTURE WAR

10.1 What the Evidence Shows

Across this paper, we have treated the contemporary culture war not as a purely domestic shouting match, but as a struggle over who gets to define reality inside a media environment that is increasingly fragmented, global, and structurally degraded. Social platforms have become a primary gateway to news and political information; in the United States, large shares of the public now report that they "often" or "sometimes" get news from sites like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X (Pew Research Center, Social Media and News Fact Sheet). When feeds become the front door to politics, design and ownership choices on those feeds become political choices.

The research on echo chambers and polarization complicates simple narratives that blame everything on "bubbles." Large-scale studies suggest that fully sealed-off echo chambers are less common than the popular metaphor implies, but they also show consistent patterns of partisan clustering, selective exposure, and the amplification of hostile attitudes around contentious issues (Arguedas et al.; Cinelli et al.). In other words, platforms do not invent the culture war; they intensify and organize it, making it easier for white nationalist, anti-democratic, and exclusionary ideologies to find one another, normalize their frames, and present themselves as mainstream.

X/Twitter under Elon Musk offers a concrete case study. Hickey and colleagues find that hate speech on the platform rose substantially after the takeover and remained elevated, with no clear reduction in inauthentic or automated activity despite public claims about "defeating the bots" (Hickey et al.). Those empirical findings align with policy and product decisions that relaxed moderation, restored previously banned extremist accounts, and visibly boosted incendiary content in the name of "free speech." Within the framework we have developed—that white supremacy operates as a hegemonic grammar in the American culture war—these are not neutral shifts. They redistribute amplification and risk, making it easier for explicitly racist and conspiratorial narratives to circulate while rendering targeted communities more vulnerable.

Cory Doctorow's concept of "enshittification" helps to situate this in a broader platform arc. Platforms, he argues, typically begin by being good to users, then pivot to serving business customers and advertisers, and eventually extract value from all parties in ways that degrade the basic experience (Doctorow). For cultural journalists and media workers, this trajectory is visible across Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and now X: feeds optimized not for truth, depth, or civic value but for engagement spikes—outrage, fear, and tribal validation. In such environments, white supremacist and authoritarian narratives enjoy structural advantages. They are emotionally charged, simple, and easily packaged into the short, viral formats that platforms reward.

The implications are cognitive as well as political. Studies of social media and short-form video use are beginning to document associations between heavy use and difficulties with attention, working memory, and self-regulation, particularly among young people. Yan et al. show, via EEG, that high "short video addiction" scores are associated with impaired attentional control networks; short-form consumption appears to bias users toward fast, emotionally driven processing (Yan et al.). Alruwaili's work on "scroll immersion" links intensive scrolling to self-reported attention problems, memory issues, and cognitive fatigue among adults (Alruwaili). In early adolescence, Nagata and colleagues find that greater social media use correlates with slightly but consistently lower scores in reading, vocabulary, and memory, alongside differences in brain development trajectories (Nagata et al.). Together with survey data indicating that many teens are "almost constantly" online and that YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram dominate their media diets (Anderson et al.; Pew Research Center, Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023), these findings suggest that the same infrastructures hosting culture-war content are also reshaping the habits and capacities required for deep reading and critical evaluation.

10.2 Transnational Dimensions and Aestheticized Hate

When we connect this to the transnational dimension, the picture becomes more complex. Matosian's account of "Cool Japan" underscores how anime, manga, and related cultural exports have been mobilized as instruments of state soft power and national image management (Matosian). Bowes's research for GNET shows how anime aesthetics and otaku culture have simultaneously been incorporated into extremist digital propaganda, with anime avatars and memes serving as recruitment tools and coded signals within far-right ecosystems (Bowes). In our analysis, Western white supremacists' romanticization of Japan as a "homogeneous, orderly" ethno-state, and the appropriation of anime imagery as a visual language for hierarchy and purity, are not isolated oddities. They exemplify a transnational circulation of aestheticized hate, mediated by the same attention-maximizing platforms that shape domestic U.S. disputes over race, gender, and belonging.

Seen from this angle, the U.S. and Japanese culture wars are linked not because they share identical histories, but because they share infrastructure and symbols. Platforms flatten context and reward engagement; soft-power campaigns provide globally recognizable aesthetics; white supremacy offers a portable framework for ranking peoples and cultures. The result is an environment where anime, memes, and "Cool Japan" branding can be mobilized to support directly opposing projects—queer liberation and far-right nationalism, diasporic belonging and xenophobic exclusion—depending on who is doing the framing.

10.3 What This Means for Cultural Journalism

For those of us working in cultural journalism and criticism, these findings collectively sharpen several claims.

First, platform architectures shape what kinds of narratives flourish. Engagement-driven feeds systematically favor content that is emotionally intense, identity-charged, and easily framed as "us vs. them," which maps cleanly onto white supremacist, nativist, and exclusionary storylines (Arguedas et al.; Cinelli et al.; Pew Research Center, Social Media and News Fact Sheet). Second, under particular ownership and governance regimes—of which Musk-era X is a prominent example—hate speech and organized harassment can increase even as public rhetoric invokes "free speech" and "open debate" (Hickey et al.). Third, the infrastructures that amplify these narratives are linked to measurable strains on the cognitive and literacy skills required to resist them, especially among younger users moving through critical developmental windows (Yan et al.; Alruwaili; Nagata et al.; Anderson et al.). Fourth, global soft-power projects and fan cultures, including anime and "Cool Japan," are not inherently reactionary, but they supply highly legible symbols and aesthetics that can be repurposed by nationalist and white supremacist actors, particularly within meme-driven, irony-saturated spaces (Matosian; Bowes).

This picture is bleak, but not hopeless. The same studies that identify polarization also note that many users still encounter cross-cutting information and that exposure effects are contingent, not automatic. The same anime and meme cultures exploited by extremists are also used by queer, diasporic, and anti-fascist communities to build solidarity, tell counter-histories, and contest dominant narratives. The same platforms that degrade attention can be repurposed—at least partially—to cultivate "slow lanes": serialized explainers, community reading projects, and hybrid formats that blend fandom, reporting, and analysis.

For our field, one practical implication is that "media literacy" can no longer be treated as a narrow, individual skill set, nor as a purely downstream concern for educators. Cultural journalism is already engaged in literacy work: explaining how platforms function, contextualizing viral controversies, tracing money and influence, and naming the racial and geopolitical hierarchies that shape what we see. The research surveyed here suggests that this work must increasingly be explicit about infrastructure and cognition. It is not enough to fact-check a meme or debunk a rumor; we also need to explain why that meme felt true, why it spread, and how the formats we work within are quietly changing what our audiences are able—and willing—to do with information.

If the culture war is, in part, a battle over whose stories feel natural, whose fears feel urgent, and whose humanity feels negotiable, then our job is not just to add more stories to the pile. It is to expose the scaffolding: the platform incentives, the inherited white supremacist frameworks, the soft-power campaigns, and the evolving literacy landscape that make some stories "click" and others vanish. Doing so will not, by itself, reverse enshittification or dismantle white supremacy. But it can help our readers, listeners, and viewers reclaim some

measure of cognitive autonomy in a system designed to erode it—and that is a precondition for any more ambitious change.

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Appendix A: Mini-Glossary of Key Terms (Youth-Friendly Edition)

(All definitions are original to this report; hyperlinks point to foundational sources and accessible public references.)

Algorithmic Amplification

The process by which platform algorithms push certain posts, videos, or narratives to the top of people's feeds—not because they are true or healthy, but because they cause strong reactions.

This often boosts content tied to anger, misinformation, or political extremism.

Learn more: https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/blog/algorithms-explained/

Algorithmic Governance

Rules and decisions made by algorithms that determine what users see, who gets visibility, and how information flows online.

Even though no human is directly making each decision, the system still shapes politics, identity, and public sentiment.

Learn more: https://datasociety.net/library/governing-with-algorithms/

Attention Economy

A digital environment where platforms compete to capture and hold your attention.

The more time you spend scrolling, the more money they make—often at the cost of your focus, mental health, or autonomy.

Learn more:
https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/02/24/the-attention-economy/

Cognitive Autonomy

Your ability to think clearly, question information, and make decisions without being manipulated by algorithms or misinformation.

A key concept in this report: enshittified platforms reduce cognitive autonomy by overwhelming users with noise.

Learn more: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-022-01097-8

Cool Japan (政策 / Cultural Strategy)

A Japanese government initiative using anime, manga, fashion, tourism, and pop culture to promote national branding abroad.

This report examines how the strategy can unintentionally reinforce nationalistic or exclusionary narratives.

Learn more: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357823.2016.1229332

Culture War

Ongoing conflict over identity, values, and social norms—fought primarily through media, memes, and political narratives.

Platforms don't create culture wars, but they make them louder, faster, and more confusing.

Learn more:
https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/echo-chambers-filter-bubbles-and-polarisation-literature-review

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Echo Chamber

A digital space where people only see opinions similar to their own, reinforcing existing beliefs and shutting out alternative viewpoints.

Algorithms often deepen echo chambers by showing users content they already agree with.

Learn more: https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2023301118

Enshittification

(coined by Cory Doctorow)

A cycle where platforms become worse over time:

1. They treat users well to grow.

2. They treat advertisers better than users.

3. They prioritize owner profit over everyone else—destroying the user experience and social value of the platform.

Learn more: https://pluralistic.net/2023/01/21/potemkin-ai/#enshittification

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Extremism (Digital)

Ideologies that promote hatred, exclusion, or violence—spread through memes, coded language, influencers, and algorithmic networks.

Anime aesthetics are sometimes weaponized to make extremist ideas feel harmless or relatable.

Learn more: https://gnet-research.org/2024/12/19/anime-and-the-extreme-right-otaku-culture-and-aesthetics-in-extremist-digital-propaganda/

Fandom (as Soft-Power Arena)

Communities built around shared love of media—anime, games, comics, K-pop, etc.

Fandom can foster belonging and creativity, but can also be exploited for political messaging, identity battles, and nationalist narratives.

Learn more: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/

Hegemonic Framework

A dominant system of ideas that shapes how society understands power, identity, and "common sense."

In this report, white supremacy is discussed as a hegemonic framework reproduced through memes, algorithms, and culture-war rhetoric.

Learn more: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/01634437211020869

Meme Weaponization

Using memes not just for humor, but to spread political messaging, manipulate emotions, or normalize extremist views.

Meme culture's speed and ambiguity make it ideal for both soft propaganda and disinformation.

Learn more: https://gnet-research.org/2024/12/19/anime-and-the-extreme-right-otaku-culture/

Plausible Deniability (in memes)

When harmful or extremist content is disguised as a joke, making it easy to dismiss criticism with:

"It's just a meme,"

"You're reading too much into it,"

or "It's irony."

This tactic creates cover for radicalization.

Learn more: https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/

Platform Decay

The gradual collapse of a platform's functionality, safety, and social value due to profit-driven decisions, mass layoffs, owner intervention, or failure to maintain infrastructure.

X/Twitter is the central case study in this report.

Learn more: https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0313293

Soft Power

The ability of a country to influence others through culture, values, and storytelling instead of force.

Anime is one of Japan's most successful soft-power tools—but also a political battlefield.

Learn more: https://aurora-journals.com/library_read_article.php?id=73325#

Transnational Echo Chamber

A feedback loop where cultural or political ideas bounce between countries, getting more extreme each time.

Example: U.S. white-supremacist memes → Japanese far-right Twitter → U.S. anime fandom → global misinformation.

Learn more: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10357823.2016.1229332

White Supremacy (Structural / Digital)

Not individual hatred, but a global system that prioritizes white identity, hierarchy, and power.

Online platforms unintentionally amplify its narratives through algorithmic design, meme aesthetics, and political engagement mechanisms.

Learn more: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/echo-chambers-filter-bubbles-and-polarisation-literature-review

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Youth Literacy (Digital)

A skill set involving critical thinking, media interpretation, and resistance to algorithmic manipulation.

This report argues that youth literacy is collapsing under the weight of short-form video, dopamine-loop platforms, and enshittification.

Learn more: https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2025/04/22/teens-social-media-and-mental-health/