

# **A case study on political hate mail on a college campus: A content analysis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This case study examines hate mail received by the University of Wisconsin La Crosse Student Association between November – December, 2021 in response to a political statement they sent to the student body regarding the Kyle Rittenhouse case. They offered solidarity to Black and brown individuals on campus, condemned white supremacy, and alleged that Rittenhouse's acquittal was not a just act. Student Association, along with the University as a whole, the Chancellor, the UWL Police, and the UWL Communications team received hundreds of phone calls, emails, social media messages, and letters in response to this statement. This paper seeks to identify, label, and characterize the types of hate mail sent, as well as analyze the overall content and rhetorical decisions made by the hate mail writers. These findings provide an insidious implication about the climate on college campuses.

## **INTRODUCTION**

On August 25, 2020, 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse drove from Illinois to Kenosha, Wisconsin, to counterprotest at a Black Lives Matter protest, during which he fatally shot two men and wounded another. Rittenhouse was charged with two counts of homicide, one count of attempted homicide, two counts of reckless endangerment, one count of unlawful possession of a firearm, and one count of curfew violation. In November 2021, he went to trial after pleading that the killings were in self-defense and was ultimately acquitted of all charges.

That same November, the University of Wisconsin La Crosse Student Association (UWLSA) Executive Cabinet, made up of nine students, wrote a statement to condemn the Kyle Rittenhouse verdict and denounce white supremacy on their campus. This statement was then sent to the full student body. In the following two months, several University entities, such as University Centers, the UWL Police, and the UWL Communications team (UComm), received calls and emails not only from upset students but also from parents and community members. Two of the student leaders who crafted the statement, the President and Vice President, also received hundreds of hate mail calls, emails, direct messages (DMs), and postal mail during those two months. The Republican Party of Wisconsin also helped to circulate the statement to the rest of the state, in part because of the left-leaning political nature of the statement itself, but also to publicly condemn me, the Vice President of Student Association, who is a well-known queer activist and political figure in the La Crosse area.

The UWLSA's email received over two hundred responses between the end of November when the statement was released and the beginning of December, when students took their final exams and then went home over the winter break period. The President and Vice President of the Student Association received fifteen calls to the UWLSA office phone, and the Vice President received several calls to their personal cell phone. The Vice President was sent thirty-one direct messages between FaceBook, Instagram, and Twitter. There was only one piece of physical postal mail sent from an anonymous address in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The key to understanding hate mail is by assessing the type of message used, its emitter, the way in which the message rallies supporters, and how the people interpret the message. In this research, hate mail will be defined as any hostile or threatening text sent, anonymously or otherwise, that uses offensive, abusive, or targeted language toward an individual, group, or entity. Under this definition, emails that were sent that confused the student

government with a different campus body or with the University itself but were either threatening, abusive, targeted, or insulting will qualify.

All the texts received was then coded into four separate content categories and further analyzed for content. The coding of the emails is as follows:

### **Disagreement**

Definition: Code as *disagreement* any letter in which the author is writing without a clear intent to persuade.

*Disagreement* may additionally include instances where the writer:

- a. Wrote letters without the explicit purpose of persuading the Executive Cabinet
- b. Wrote letters that detail why the Executive Cabinet did not understand the case
- c. Wrote letters that express general disagreement

### **Confusion/Misconceptions**

Definition: Code as *confusion/misconceptions* any letter in which the author wrote to the Executive Cabinet that did not understand whom they represented, but still used threatening language.

*Confusion/misconceptions* may additionally include instances where the writer:

- a. Did not understand that the Executive Cabinet did not represent the University
- b. Threatened a professional campus entity, the job of a faculty or staff person, or the University itself
- c. Wrote letters that, while not targeted at the correct group of people, still contained intimidating language

### **Debater**

Definition: Code as *debater* any letter in which the author is specifically trying to debate the Executive Cabinet's findings.

*Debaters* may additionally include instances where the writer:

- a. Wrote letters with the intent to discuss the statement and the case's findings further
- b. Wrote letters under the original guise of "civil discourse"
- c. Used language that escalated after the first point of contact was unsuccessful
- d. Disagreed with the findings of the statement and wanted to talk about it further

### **Identity Attacks**

Definition: Code as *identity attack* any letter in which the author targets and weaponizes a marginalized identity held by a member of the Executive Cabinet.

*Identity attacks* may additionally include instances where the writer:

- a. Deliberately weaponized language against a specific identity
- b. Referred to an author by name and proceeded to insult an identity they held
- c. Wrote about an identity in a disparaging manner
- d. Threatened or wished harm upon someone who was a member of a particular identity.

## **DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS**

I am one of the nine students who helped to craft, sign off on, and circulate this statement. I am a senior at the University of Wisconsin La Crosse, and because of my involvement in progressive national and local issues (e.g., organizing the Kavanaugh protests, conducting a Write-In Campaign for La Crosse City Council, etc.) I am a well-known figure in the La Crosse community and, in some circles, in greater Wisconsin. I am very forthcoming

about my queer identity as a nonbinary person, and I display my pronouns (they/them/theirs) in every online and in-person space. This is not my first time receiving political hate mail for something I have said or done in my political, academic, or professional career, nor is it my first time receiving hate mail for identities I hold. It is likely that this statement went viral because I was a member of the authorship.

## FINDINGS

This mapping of the UWL Student Association's hate mail input and the defining of four kinds of hate mail that they received has drawn comparisons between the existing hate mail categories, as well as identified patterns that are used across the board. Existing literature on hate mail identifies techniques used in writing it, not on the specific types that exist, nor do they focus their research on Western college campuses. The hate mail analyzed focused on one or more of these four categories: 1) a message written to argue or disagree with the intent of the statement itself, 2) messages that were confused by the content itself or by the identity of the organization making the statement (e.g. individuals who did not understand what the trial had to do with Black lives or white supremacy, or individuals who thought that the students represented the opinions held by the University as a whole, etc.) but were overtly abusive in nature, 3) messages that tried to convince the authors that there had been a misunderstanding that then aimed to correct said misunderstanding, and/or 4) messages that directedly targeting the identities of the authors.

Hate has been shown to be an organizing principle that can be viewed as a collective identity that unifies. (Cifer, 2016) The functional perspective of hate is known to have patterns, and hate is particularly noticeable at the intergroup level, where it turns devalued groups into victims of hate. (Fischer et al., 2018) As the body of social media grows, the amount of online hate mail and hate speech increases as well, and inciting hatred against a group based on misconceptions is an easy feat. "[C]ontemporary, information-overloaded contexts" rely heavily on emotional appeals. The primary function of reasoning is inherently argumentative. (Introduction...) In other words, people persuade to win a discussion, not to seek truth, and people will deliberately overlook facts if their emotional compass is pointed in a different direction. Through this lens, we will examine hate mail received by the Student Association of the University of Wisconsin La Crosse.

The most common category of hate mail was those writing to express general disagreement. The text would be derogatory and light-hearted, often making a joke at the expense of the Executive Cabinet, but never strayed into an attempt at persuasion. Examples of this type of hate mail were messages like "After reading your statement it is obvious that you did not watch any of the trials," or "What does this case have to do with race? You're fucking stupid," and so forth. These messages were typically shorter than those written by debaters and typically did not feature any sort of overt threat. Instead, the values and moral compass of the authors were under fire with people stating that since one of the men killed had a criminal record, "[you] must support pedophiles" or "you are a pedophile [yourself]," using intentionally provocative and inflammatory language to incite an emotional response. These texts held assertions about the authors that had not been proven in any meaningful way and were intended to ridicule. Often, they would be accompanied by statements such as "liberal drool," "this is why liberals shouldn't hold office," or general discontent with the intelligence of left-leaning individuals, using the statement authors as an illustration to enforce this notion. Interestingly, disagreement messaging was the most likely to come with quotes and testimony from the case itself, though they were frequently provided without the proper or correct context, or they were misinterpreted in some way. One concerning example of this was an email that referenced sections of the case that specifically addressed self-defense, followed by a comment about how dangerous the student's anti-Rittenhouse sentiments were by writing "[I]f you are ever in a situation where you need to defend yourself with a weapon, you better pray they don't kill you," implying that should any of them be in a similar circumstance, they would be killed. There were many iterations of this messaging ranging from those that hoped the authors would never be in a self-defense situation to those that actively seemed to wish harm upon them. These were some of the most intimidating responses received, and the ones that required follow-up with the UWL Police just in case the "threats" might be actionable.

Another type of hate mail was from individuals who were confused about the origins of the statement, whether it be that they did not know who Student Association was, saw the school colors in the letter heading, and assumed the students represented the whole of the University, people who thought the statement was issued by the Chancellor or the UWL Communications team (UComm), or those who generally did not understand the conclusions drawn in the statement (e.g., "What does this have to do with race?"). While this may not sound like hate mail in the traditional

sense, these messages were often the most overtly threatening and were accompanied by action items. If the mailer thought the statement was written by the Chancellor, it may threaten to revoke funding that they had previously offered. If the mailer thought it was a University sanctioned statement from UComm, they may request the immediate firing of those staff statement writers, or they would call for an investigation of the University. In the UWL Parent's and Families private FaceBook group, there were cries for the firing of the faculty responsible for drafting the statement, and one mother of a UWL alumnus demanded the immediate dissolution of the University as a whole, and later the dissolution of UW Systems. Over thirty of these messages promised legal or police action in response to "defamation of Kyle Rittenhouse" or because "[colleges] are not supposed to push their political beliefs on others." These messages were repetitive and aggressive, and they were almost always partnered with a threat to someone's academic, professional, social, or emotional wellbeing. As this statement got circulated in off-campus communities, mail of confusion significantly increased, with individuals who did not have children or did not have children who attended the school staking a claim on the issue. While there were those who were generally upset and confused about the findings in the statement, most of these messages were intimidating in nature and came with an ultimatum if their needs were not met. After several weeks of donors threatening to revoke donations and angry parents threatening to un-enroll students from the college, the Chancellor drafted an email that both divorced himself from the statement and affirmed that all students had the right to free speech—both to draft political statements and to send hate mail. This understanding coincides with current definitions of hate mail. Hate mail lives within the realm of political participation. Though it is understood as a type of harassment, it is also a behavioral manifestation of political hate and is seen as a social struggle over "the boundaries and the definition of the collective." (Temkin and Yanay, 1988)

The third type of hate mail, and the third most common of them all, were individuals who reached out with the specific intent to debate. They would pen messages that were structured like letters: "Hello [Student Association representatives], my name is [XYZ]..." followed by paraphrasing of the statement's assertions. These kinds of hate mail would start politely and highlight key points that they would like to make to convince the Executive Cabinet, but this was always under the guise of civil discourse. They were well-meaning, hoping to provide some much-needed clarity on the topic because "it seems you have not understood the facts of the case, so this is how I understood it..." After a lack of response from the Cabinet, these messages would escalate, becoming abusive and belligerent in nature, such as one student who reached out over e-mail, Instagram direct messaging, and the Vice President's personal phone number to try to speak to representation from the student government. His requests for a response started courteously, but by the sixth time (and onward) he would insult the authors; "if you knew what you were talking about, you would have responded to me" intensified to "you are a bitch and unfit to serve in this position," followed by a dozen more attempts to reach the students. Another situation like this was a local conservative organization called Good Citizen which reached out to discuss the Kyle Rittenhouse case and the validity of supporting "a man like Jacob Blake," but by the third email with no response from college students, sent a final "You cowards! E-mail me back!!" from their professional communications email address. All the phone calls sent directly to the Student Association office fell into this category of hate mail.

The final, and least frequent, form of hate mail was the ones that directly targeted undervalued identities held by Cabinet members. Although there were individuals of other marginalized groups, it is important to note that all the messaging within this fourth archetype was attacking the Vice President, and therefore singularly the queer community. Hate mail within this category was written by students, alumni, community members, parents, the Republican Party of La Crosse, and various conservative action groups across all text mediums (e.g., postal mail, email, direct messages, FaceBook posts, phone calls, etc.). Mail sent like this would always reference the Vice President's use of neopronouns (they/them/theirs), and would sometimes target the LGBTQ+ community as a collective. These messages contained a wide array of anti-queer sentiment and slurs. One message sent to the Vice President by a UWL student through Instagram criticized the Kyle Rittenhouse statement before writing out "he/she/it/refrigerator/r\*\*\*\*d," while one email stated that the President and Vice President were communists, that they "hope[d] to God in heaven that [their] souls get transferred to the lake of fire to be destroyed," followed by typical anti-transgender and anti-queer rhetoric (e.g. "the alien grey lesbian"), and signed off with "Latinos for Trump." The only piece of postal mail they received fell into this category, with a printed photo of the UWL Student Association page that had the photos and biographies of the Executive Cabinet marked and annotated, though the Vice President's section held the brunt of this attack. These messages were typically the most pointed toward any of the original creators, and the most overtly threatening, as they were the only ones that actively wished harm explicitly on anyone in the Cabinet. They were also the only ones that made specific references to death or Christian imagery, as noted in other scenarios of political hate mail (Temkin and Yanay, 1988), such as "I hope you die" or "if

somebody comes at you with a gun, you better pray for forgiveness.” Though these messages fall outside of the scope of hate speech or a direct threat under the law, they were still harmful and written with language that would evoke fear in the reader. Similar to other types of hate mail that targeted identities, the hate mailers would use the student’s queer identity as a “foil” from which they would reaffirm their own masculinity or patriotism. (Cloud, 2009) It is unclear if the messaging was intended to make the Vice President reconsider their gender identity or sexual orientation in any meaningful way.

## IMPLICATIONS

This case study implies a lack of political awareness and cognitive empathy among students. There were uses of overt intimidation tactics, a normalization of hate mail as appropriate political discourse, and a general comfort in the student’s ability to get away without any repercussions. Despite them using their public UWL email addresses, complete with their professional names and contact information to search them by, they felt emboldened to send abusive messages to other students in the name of a political statement.

Looking at hate mail through the lens of a student-written political statement offers insight into the political landscape of college campuses today. Hate mail has become a commonplace practice of civil participation (Temkin and Yanay, 1988) that includes abusive language intentionally designed to make the recipient feel unsafe and isolated. Peer-on-peer incidents of hate mail include another facet worth looking into: if there is such a blatant pitfall in the understanding of rhetoric and how it can harm others, then there will be a notable empathy gap among this generation and future generations. If students, parents, and the community are sending hate mail to college students and do not see any problem with that, then that is an issue the campus, and the community, need to make strides to address. If alumni, political organizations, and political parties are sending hate mail to college students, that is a problem the campus and community need to address. There is no moving forward unless there is educational programming and an effort to refocus political discourse away from political aggression and toward civil citizen participation.

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