A wolf in sheep's clothing: a mixed-methods analysis of the far-right alt-tech social media movement

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Chapter 5

The Gift of Gab: A Netnographic Examination of the Community Building Mechanisms in Far-Right Online Space

Abstract

Major social media platforms have recently taken a more proactive stand against harmful far-right content and pandemic-related disinformation on their sites. However, these actions have catalysed the growth of fringe online social networks for participants seeking right-wing content, safe havens, and unhindered communication channels. To better understand these isolated systems of online activity and their success, the study on the platform Gab Social examines what mechanisms are utilised by the far-right to form an alternative collective on fringe social media. By examining Gab's emphasis on creating its lasting community base, the work offers an experiential examination of the different communication devices and multimedia within the platform via a netnographic and qualitative content analysis lens. The emergent findings and discussion detail the far-right's virtual community-building model, revolving around its sense of in-group superiority and the self-reinforcing mechanisms of collective. Not only does this have implications for understanding Gab's communicative dynamics as an essential socialisation space and promotor of a unique meso-level character, but it also reflects the need for researchers to (re)emphasise identity, community, and collectives in far-right fringe spaces.

Keywords: Far-Right, Netnography, Fringe Media, Community, Online Extremism

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Introduction

[10] Minor changes were made to the published article, which includes fixing some phrasing, grammar, and word choices. None of the data, results, or conclusions were altered.

Despite the influx of users on Gab Social and other Alt-Tech websites, our comprehension of these far-right fringe sites is limited to a handful of studies (See Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022; Jasser et al., 2021; Munn, 2021, 2022; Peucker & Fisher, 2022), which seldom touch on these platforms' senses of community or collective identity. Contemporary research largely neglects these dynamics, instead favouring the examination of hate-filled content and the extremist or radical dangers fringe platforms present. However, how can we examine the platform's content without understanding its userbase and sense of collective first? Filling this gap and providing a starting point for future research, the study asks: what are the mechanisms utilised by the far-right to form an alternative collective on fringe social media?

I analyse this query by showcasing how these online communities are built by perpetuating meso-level[3] identity-building narratives in conjunction with the users' communicative experiences. Offering a novel experiential examination – vis-à-vis a mixed methods netnography and qualitative content analysis (QCA) – of the community's different narrational devices and multimedia, I examine the mechanisms which help create its collective base. Moreover, outlining these community-building processes advances our understanding of far-right fringe media's continued effectiveness and popularity. As a result, I seek to reorientate our comprehension of these types of platforms, moving away from the current conceptualisation of fringe media as simply an escape from online and offline antagonism, an alternative medium for far-right communication, or a collective space for grievances (Jasser et al., 2021; Schulze et al., 2022). These notions only offer some pieces to the complex puzzle. Instead, I argue that these platforms mean more to their users, offering an essential socialisation space whilst promoting a unique sense of meso-identity.

I focus on Gab's online milieu of generalised content creation and community-building mechanisms to establish this shift. Herein, applying Ren et al.'s (2012) theoretical model showcases how certain media types and narratives in virtual platforms improve user attachment to that online space. However, the authors' framework only provides a practical baseline and does not offer nuance to each unique online community's needs. Therefore, the article provides a two-part interconnected approach, building towards a new theoretical model for the community-communication mechanisms on Gab. First, a deductive analysis is formulated with Ren et al.'s outlined instruments – group categorisation, group information, group homogeneity, intergroup competition, and familiarity with group – to provide an empirical springboard (Ren et al., 2012). Then netnographic field notes produce the necessary inductive refinement to deepen our understanding of far-right fringe media collectives. Through this deductive, inductive, and interrelational investigation, three main thematic patterns emerge in understanding the platform's collective: (1) establishing a sense of unity amongst the community, (2) creating a new ontological worldview through conspiracies, and (3) determining in-group belonging through dichotomous framings. Further deconstructing these mechanisms as different forms of the community's in-group superiority, the study models Gab's alternative ontology, conspiracy repertoire, familial connections, and out-group labelling as the discursive baseline for the platform's interactions and content. This new approach (and its subsequent findings) offers a foundational shift in the field, where examining the collective should be as important as its hate-filled by-products. Therefore, the study aims to open the door for future research on these online communities, providing a (new) starting point for understanding far-right fringe media.

A Literature Review on Identity, Online Communications, & Community

The link between the populaces' extensive online usage and their identity forms the cornerstone for investigating virtual community building practices. While some scholars argue that these online networks are non-representative of identity or can lead to false representations (See Gil-Or et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2011), I contend that the lines between the offline and online self are becoming increasingly "blurred" (Hongladarom, 2011, 2014; Huang et al., 2021). Importantly, contemporary research outlines the identity-construction potential in virtual environments, allowing participants to explore their "true selves" without the physical and societal constraints of the offline world (Huang et al., 2021). The internet thus creates a performative space (See Merchant, 2006) for self-reconstruction through which individuals seek validation and belonging by emulating an idealised persona – ignoring the physical, normative, geographic, economic, political, or cultural boundaries constraining offline interactions. Therefore, the study contends that online identity development through the changing virtual community affordances and communications best represents an individual's understanding of self and in-group.

A common denominator in this online identity construction literature is the transition from "I" to "we" or the self to the group, in the formation of a collective belonging (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Davis et al., 2019; Hohman et al., 2017; Nasrin & Fisher, 2021). Brewer and Gardner (1996) define the phenomenon as depersonalisation. Instead of relying on the intrapersonal attributes and experiences defined by SIT and self-categorisation, depersonalisation signifies a shift towards classification vis-à-vis group behaviours and characteristics (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg & Rinella, 2018(Müller et al., 2022). Therefore, individual identity within these online contexts is superseded by the collective, emphasising the group's continued survival. Through this process of

collective identity formation, the in-group qualifiers and subsequent out-group disqualifiers become the most important basis for evaluating ourselves and those around us. With the focus on in-group and out-group dynamics, the core of collective identity is via relational meso-level comparisons. Community members thus constantly redefine identity and establish prototypical behaviours to maintain a collective body.

Simultaneously, meso-identity's competitive and comparative nature leads to out-groups labelled as inferior. This innate contrastive need materialises in different ways within far-right spaces, including through stereotyping, xenophobia, exclusions, conspiracies, and violent intergroup conflict (Bliuc et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Krämer, 2017; Scrivens et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 2019). Consequently, in online extremism research, we often concentrate on intergroup relations and their narrational by-products. Instead of focusing on the 'in', research centres around the 'out', examining the production of hate-filled online content and the community's many targeted toxic narratives. However, in highlighting the numerous threats of this far-right content, we have largely forgotten the importance of the other half – the in-group.

Contrariwise, the limited research on the predominant meso-level themes, stories, and ideologies in far-right online communities stresses the importance of understanding and conceptualising these virtual collectives. For example, Gaudette et al. (2021) examine the formation of echo chambers on the platform *Reddit* (subreddit r/The_Donald), stipulating the community's dichotomous need for in-group and out-group content. Here, users manipulate the platform's affordances to formulate a collective, primarily upvoting posts that promote an "othering." Subject matters include racist, misogynistic, sexist, anti-leftist, and xenophobic worldviews. The authors contest that larger numbers of upvotes indicate topics that particularly resonate with the group's sense of belonging

(Gaudette et al., 2021). Similarly, Bliuc et al. (2019) identify a parallel phenomenon occurring on the forum site Stormfront (subforum Downunder), where collective identity centres around simple separations and identifiers between "us" vs "them." Moreover, the website offers a safe space for discussants to confer and validate their feelings of anger about trending real-world topics, varying the focal points of discussion from racism politics to more local and specific targeted ethnic groups (Asians) and religious out-groups (Muslims) (Bliuc et al., 2019). This non-static nature of a collective is conferred by Bliuc et al. (2020), wherein far-right group maintenance relies on their ideology's adaptation and reflexivity. Herein, transformative existential threats that risk the community's collective ideological core are reshaped into simple dichotomies to better understand the complex phenomena and direct anxieties towards out-groups (Bliuc et al., 2020). While the basis for exploring in-group behaviour still revolves around out-group narratives, the shifting emphasis is promising. Notably, the literature showcases that there is more to far-right communications than intergroup dynamics. However, how does this research on collectives, community, and identity map to far-right fringe spaces? The answer is much less favourable, offering little to the discussion.

Recent studies chart the propagation of fringe media, measurement tools for the phenomenon, and potential future areas of analysis (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022; Jasser et al., 2021; Munn, 2021, 2022; Peucker & Fisher, 2022). The majority of these studies crawl extensive data collections using API coding to accumulate millions of posts. For instance, Jasser et al.'s (2021) study gathers content between 2017 and 2018, outlining the platform's affordances and provides a summary of textual content and sentiments revolving around "Big Tech" escapism and collective victimisation. In another example, Dehghan and Nagappa (2022) generate a dataset containing 68,000 vaccine-

related posts created before COVID-19 until August 2021. Their findings outline the radicalisation process for non-political issues, explaining how vaccine discourses are radicalised in virtual spaces (Gab) away from the hegemonic narratives in mainstream media (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022). Finally, Luke Munn (2021) examines the mechanisms that enabled communicative coordination before the Capitol Hill insurrection, occurring primarily over the platform Parler – a similar social media space. Munn's findings suggest that Alt-Tech websites inspire hatred and violent political action (Munn, 2021). These studies are emblematic of the field, with harmful outputs and dynamics as a central focus.

However, the foundational understanding of identity, collective, and community (the basis of any online and offline group) for these novel virtual spaces is missing. Peucker and Fisher (2022) offers the closest study to these connections. They investigate the utilisation of mainstream media sources to reinforce ideological belonging in alternative social media communities. Herein, the far-right relies on an online content milieu for identity reinforcement, picking and choosing different sources (from mainstream to fringe) to solidify an ontological worldview (Peucker & Fisher, 2022). Nevertheless, these studies fall short in capturing the underlying reasons behind Gab's diverse content milieu, and the community-building structures and mechanisms pertinent to analysing a social media platform (Kozinets & Rosella Gambetti, 2020). How can we examine fringe platforms without understanding their communities? A limited number of studies explore aspects of meso-identity across different far-right spaces (See Bliuc et al., 2020; Bliuc et al., 2019; Gaudette et al., 2021; Zuckerman, 2019), yet none have fully addressed the issue – especially not for Gab or similar platforms. Therefore, in fixating on examining far-right extremist content and its numerous harms on fringe media, researchers have missed the very fabric of these websites – the userbase's identity

and sense of collective. Ultimately, we need a (new) starting point to better understand fringe media. The article offers this fundamental launching pad, unpacking and illustrating the mechanisms utilised by the far-right to form an alternative collective on these platforms.

Online Member Attachment Theory

When studying virtual far-right collectives and communities, scholars commonly utilise Social Movement Theory (SMT) due to its explanatory power in describing in-group versus out-group dynamics (Bliuc et al., 2019; Bliuc et al., 2020; Gaudette et al., 2021; Scrivens et al., 2020). Like SIT, SMT highlights the communicative construction of a group where the online content milieu and intergroup dynamics actively create a sense of belonging. However, these theories differ in their approach to understanding behavioural dynamics and community formation, with the former focused on the psychological processes of groupness and the latter on the mechanisms of organised collective action. Importantly, contemporary research's utilisation of SMT and its subsequent narrational centralisation of "in" vs "out" is problematic as it reinforces the field's fixation on the far-right's discursive dangers. In turn, current understandings of these virtual collectives are primarily confined to dichotomous framings (Bliuc et al., 2019; Gaudette et al., 2021; Perry & Scrivens, 2016) rather than the psychological processes of community and group identity. While SMT remains a robust theoretical framework in explaining in-group and out-group dynamics, current approaches consequently overlook the nuanced nature of far-right virtual collectives. Can radical meso-identities be simplified into dichotomies? Is Gab's content milieu and community construction based solely on framing different out-groups? These collectives are complex constructions of meanings, emotions, and narratives, not defined by any singular discursive mechanism. I propose a new theoretical basis to understand fringe media and other far-right online

communities and shift the focus from this problematic conceptualisation, examining the different effects of its content milieu, with "in" vs "out" as one of the many essential dynamics.

Providing this new starting point is Ren et al.'s (2012) "Building Member Attachment in Online Communities: Applying Theories of Group Identity and Interpersonal Bonds" article. The authors strive to compile years of social psychology literature on community formation and belonging in their seminal work, focusing on which features of content and social mechanisms foster the greatest feelings of collectiveness. Their experimental findings include the ease of forming online identity-based groups, how the establishment of a collective stimulated the website's maintenance, and the use of algorithms to promote belonging and online interactions (Ren et al., 2012). Moreover, taking predominant articles from the SIT camp, the authors construct a descriptive model for the effective methods of forming meso-identity in online spaces. Ren et al.'s (2012) community-building techniques include:

1. **Group Categorisation:** Creating a set definition for the characteristics of the community. Membership within the collective becomes explicit by adopting distinct rules, symbols, and ideologies that are consistent, reinforcing, and easily assumed among members. As Michael Hogg puts it, group categorisation intends to "make the group 'groupy'" (Hogg, 2009). By focusing on entitativity, the in-group collective creates clear boundaries, promotes homogeneity, and establishes common goals for the community.
2. **Group Information:** Providing specific content for establishing the group's identity. This discursive process is a distinct step in the depersonalisation of the self, as users shift from "I" to "we" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). By establishing and constantly reinforcing in-group information, the community promotes the collective over the self

(Davis et al., 2019). The process attempts to shift user understanding and worldview, making belonging to a collective more important than any individualised construct.

3. **Group Homogeneity:** The community attempts to establish and stress that every group member is the same or is undergoing a similar life experience. Herein, the loosely connected users from many different geographic, socioeconomic, and political backgrounds feel uniquely united and validated in a common cause. This homogeneous emphasis is potent in far-right discourse, with scholars highlighting different collective narratives based on feelings of victimhood and the belief in an emerging "cultural war" (Busbridge et al., 2021; Hogg, 2020; Jasser et al., 2021; Marcks & Pawelz, 2020).

4. **Intergroup Competition:** Paramount to maintaining a fringe online community is the relational dynamics between in-group and out-group members. By establishing an "us" vs "them" paradigm, online groups can attack characteristics of outsiders while simultaneously reinforcing their superiority as a collective (Agius et al., 2020; Eddington, 2018; Hogg, 2018). A predominant example used by the far-right is the establishment of minority communities as out-groups. Common narratives include targeted hate speech against the LGBTQ community, Jews, Muslims, Asians, and migrants (Tuters and Hagen, 2020; Baele, Brace and Coan, 2021).

5. **Familiarity with Group:** A priority in promoting collective maintenance of the online community is in establishing a basis of common perception for users. This push for a collective infosphere focuses on content and ideology recurrence within the group, with greater exposure to similar themes being a precursor to user acceptance and interaction on their site. Thus, the platform usually relies on an ecosystem of content scattered among

various websites, fuelled by algorithms and affiliated links on posts (Baele et al., 2020; Munger & Phillips, 2020; Peucker & Fisher, 2022). By forming an interconnected network, similar language, expressions, and themes promote legitimacy and comfort in the user experience (Ren et al., 2012).

But what do these community-building mechanisms mean in context and practice? Importantly, each of Ren et al.'s (2012) explanatory elements represent an essential microcosm for the platform's user interaction, production and reproduction within the content milieu, and flow of information. They are not only structurally relevant but also function to shape the community's discourse, popularising particular messages and framings. Therefore, the research examines Gab through the multi-dimensional aspects of community-building processes as modelled by the authors to better explain the platform's success as a far-right social media site.

However, research on online extremism has been constrained by narrow theoretical frameworks and content-focused analyses, limiting inductive and reflexive approaches. To resolve this shortcoming, Ren et al.'s (2012) model is employed as a deductive starting point, while user experiences and content meaning are explored through netnographic field notes and iterative inductive codes. This complementary methodological approach facilitates the development of a more nuanced understanding of Gab's multifaceted dynamics of identity construction, supplementing Ren et al.'s (2012) theoretical baseline. Subsequently, I provide a complex picture of the platform's users' collective formation, offering valuable insights into the underlying issues of identity and belonging within a counter-societal communicative space. Moreover, by using an adaptive theoretical approach, this work not only circumvents the limitations of previous research

but also enables a more detailed understanding of the content milieu and the appeal of Gab to its participants.

Method

I employ a mixed methods approach between digital netnography – an immersive practice of social media analysis – and QCA to deliver an intricate and interpretative narrative for the platform's collective formation. The study utilises Janice Morse's definition of mixed methods, which details the "full" use of the core methodology (digital netnography) with a complementary tool (QCA) that can be any mix of qualitative or quantitative methods (Morse, 2010). This selection of the deductive (QCA) and inductive (digital netnography) perspectives provides the exploratory framework necessary for an extensive investigation into the content that exists on Gab. With the sizable amounts of qualitative data to unpack, screen captured in different visual and textual forms stemming from the collection techniques in netnography, QCA is an effective partnering method to systematically outline the far-right's social media structural relationships and interactions (Kozinets & Rosella Gambetti, 2020). Conversely, where QCA fails to capture the complex dynamics between social media communications and identity-building, researchers can capture the missing thymos, feelings, and user experiences. This technique places the investigator as the interpretative observer, chronicling the sentiments behind the sharing, posting, and commenting of user content (Kozinets, 2015). Thus, these two methods work together to depict the communicative dynamics on the far-right site. By combining digital netnography's experiential emphasis and systematic data collection methods with QCA's deductive and reflexive coding mechanisms, the study can examine Gab's media practices and the platform's collective user experience.

Robert Kozinets – netnography's founder – describes the research method as "a new approach to conducting ethical and thorough new forms of digital and network data collection, analysis communications work, participation and observation, with ethnographic research that combines archival and online and research representation" (Kozinets, 2015). At the core of this description is the relationship between adapting and evolving technologies and cultural development, otherwise known as *technoculture*. To examine an online community's technoculture, researchers analyse the numerous values, rituals, identities, hierarchies, and other structural sources affected, produced by, or communicated through the everyday consumption of online media (Kozinets and Rosella Gambetti, 2020). Therefore, netnography offers an ever-adapting methodology to the continuous changes in online communication and is best conceptualised as a reconstituted ethnography for examining social media platforms and their users. Importantly, where netnography differs from other immersive online or offline methodologies is not in metaphysical conceptualisations of world or productions of knowledge, but rather in its clear guidelines for conducting "high-quality research" (Kozinets, 2019). These step-by-step guided processes – problem definition, data collection, data integration, and research communication – offer a systematic, transparent, and ethical method to immersive research in complex virtual environments.

Nevertheless, although netnographic studies range in a variety of social media communities and social science disciplines (See Addeo et al., 2016; Bartl et al., 2016; Conti & Lexhagen, 2020; Kulavuz-onal, 2015; Okun & Nimrod, 2017) the approach is largely disregarded in the field. Subsequently, the inspiration to use this methodology came from Maura Conway (2017). Conway describes netnography as being under-utilised for research into online extremism, which can be a

"doubly attractive tool" for deepening our understanding of identity formation at the meso-level (Conway, 2017). Therefore, this study utilises the methodology to focus on the relationship between the platform's curated content and the formulation of group identity in a far-right social media space. Notably, collectives are a construction of affordances, pictures, posts, emotions, and people, which netnography and other immersive research techniques help capture. In the study, this process is done by expanding on Ren et al.'s (2012) baseline deductive codebook, adding the researcher's inductive findings to better our understanding of user experiences and needs. Therefore, coding the data was iterative and reflexive. The field notes also assist in recording the narrational essence of the content and the importance of each discursive theme. Subsequently, these interrelations between inductive codes and experiential data combine to provide novel interpretations of community and collective on Gab, considerations which are sorely missing in the research on online extremist and fringe media platforms.

Specific decisions have been made regarding the parameters of the research, including the number of posts, the type of content to be analysed, and the duration of data collection. Gab generates a considerable volume of content, yet the analysis is confined to specific subgroups (outlined in Table 5.1). These subgroups serve as crucial delimitations for investigating the mechanisms of collective formation and the range of content designed to attract a broad audience, thereby facilitating a better comprehension of the allure of these virtual spaces for far-right participation on a global scale. Therefore, the criteria for the chosen cases should highlight the importance of transnationality, appealing to Anglosphere users regardless of their geographical backgrounds. Consequently, the study pays particular attention to the specific community's descriptions combined with a preliminary examination of its content. Complementing the findings within this

section and capturing the authentic user experience, the netnographic field notes reflexively examine how the curated content helps form feelings of a communal online space. Table 5.1 outlines the subgroups selected, a short description of their intended audience and network, and a brief explanation of why they are essential for the study.

Table 5.1 Outline of Subgroups Selected on Gab for Their Universal Content

Subgroup	Users	About Section	Basis for Selection
News	268.9k	"BREAKING NEWS. Post news-related articles and videos."	A global perspective on news across the world, with a mix of conspiracies, trending topics, and claims promoting the "real" news.
Internet Censorship	102.6k	"Post news and information about Internet Censorship."	Criticism of mainstream social media platforms, and the promotion of different alternative technology sites/communications.
Vaccine Injuries & Deaths	65.8k	"Info related to adverse reactions after being injected with any of the vaccines."	Specific focus on the adverse effects of social distancing, the COVID-19 vaccine, government lockdowns, and the individual's health post-vaccination.
Introduce Yourself	175.5k	"Welcome to Gab. Introduce yourself or welcome others to the platform."	Providing a good-natured environment to welcome new users, while allowing participants to say a bit about themselves and why they joined the platform.
Politics	146.4k	"A group for sharing & discussing politics on Gab."	Active discourse on current world issues with a focus on interaction and entertainment. Everyone's welcome to share their opinion.
Memes, memes, and more memes	185.3k	"Should be loaded with humour, puns, innuendo, and irony."	A variety of content from political and economic critiques to simple memes and videos meant for entertainment.

The study utilises a netnographic data collection technique, creating two complementary datasets – field notes and Gab content. The field notes are handwritten in an immersion journal, recording the predominant themes within the multimedia content and the group's experiences in their daily interactions. What is essential is that the researcher's understandings within the open coding

process are inseparable from the data, where personal reflections offer crucial information to help better illustrate the complex virtual story. Notably, I reflected on the previous day's notes before each collection activity, ensuring a cohesive community mapping throughout the two-month process. For the content on Gab, I manually gathered – by using Capture2Text to screen capture the text – each of the daily (weekday) top-five posts of the chosen subgroups to record the discursive foci, storing it in a secured online database. Herein, I specifically sought the content which most resonated with the platform's users, arguing that the more interaction – likes, shares, and comments – the content receives, the more that post appeals to user engagement and their sense of collective (See Hagemann & Abramova, 2023). These social media rankings are already defined by Gab, prioritising the content with the most user interactions. This technique ensures a systematic collection method, allowing future researchers to replicate and compare the findings. Finally, the data sample is from a two-month fixed period, from May to June 2022. The extended duration provides the necessary time to integrate and understand – a prerequisite for conducting a netnography – the far-right online community's cultural, symbolic, and ideological nuances. Moreover, it creates the mandatory boundaries for the study, with the netnographer only stopping after exhausting their reflexive field notes and inductive findings for the selected case (Kozinets, 2015). With the data collection parameters and period, the study collected a sample of 1,320 trending posts for examination.

Finally, ethical considerations for both the studied community and researcher are fundamental to online immersive methodologies. Netnography offers a set of principles reliant upon the investigator's role in the study, the platform and participants observed, and the nature of the data and its collection (Kozinets, 2019). This study's ethical considerations include, (1) the data

collected is anonymised, and the highlighted posts are obscured to prevent reverse searching on the platform, (2) Gab Social is a public social media site where content is free to view without creating an account, and (3) the benefit for the field in understanding far-right collectives outweighs potential negative consequences for the non-vulnerable community. At the same time, the health and well-being of the researcher is paramount. Virtual immersive methods provide an unobtrusive fly-on-the-wall approach to examining extremist communities, helping protect the observer. For instance, the study's observations were conducted without creating an account and included employing a VPN to obscure the researcher's location. No virtual interactions occurred in posting, commenting, messaging, or reacting to the platform's content. Nor did I seek informed consent from the community, which could expose the observer to hate-filled reactions or change the dynamics of group interactions. However, not interacting with the userbase does not mean a non-participatory approach. Instead, netnographers and online ethnographers' deep immersion into these communities is another form of participation that attempts to mitigate the risks for the researcher (Kozinets, 2019).

Analysis

Deductive, Inductive, and Interconnected Findings

The article presents an elaborate illustration of Gab's community-building mechanisms, stemming from the manual sorting, reflexive coding, and field notes – a mixed inductive and deductive approach – of the 1,320 collected posts. Forming the base to these findings vis-à-vis QCA are the mechanisms presented by Ren et al. (2012), which are further developed by the netnographic data. Through the complementary data of these two approaches, the analysis highlights the predominant mechanisms curated across the far-right platform and the interconnectivity between community-building processes. In addition, separating these findings into three distinct and overlapping

categories underlines the formation of a meso-level belonging and identity on Gab. Thus, the following analysis flows from deductive and inductive findings to the interrelationship connecting the two.

Table 5.2 Netnographic Findings Within the Community-Building Framework

Community-Building Mechanisms	Frequency *f*	Frequency %
Group Categorisation		
Anti-Vaccine	191	24%
Truth Seekers	176	22%
Like-Minded Family	167	21%
Anti-Left	158	20%
Freedom Fighters	101	13%
Group Information		
Health & Selective Science	267	37%
Information Controllers	159	22%
Globalist Order	130	18%
Great Replacement & Anti-White	61	9%
LGBTQ, Sexuality, & Schooling	49	7%
Global Warming Hoax	32	4%
Other Conspiracies	19	3%
Intergroup Competition		
The Government & Elites	260	38%
The Left & MSM	259	38%
Social Media Platforms	109	16%
Jews	36	5%
Immigrants	18	3%
Homogeneity		
Hidden Truths & Togetherness	121	40%
Oppression & Censorship	92	30%
Outcasts & Replaced	90	30%
Familiarity		
External Websites	111	43%
Alternative News and Media Websites	90	35%
Video Hosting Websites	57	22%

For the deductive examination of the different far-right subgroups (See Table 5.2), a diverse set of constructs within group categorisation, group information, and intergroup competition make up most user content. Wherein homogeneity and familiarity with group occur relatively infrequently. These findings indicate that the construction of Gab's online community revolves around self-reinforcing and moderated in-group boundaries with a distinct set of rules, symbols and ideologies for user interactions, a homogenous worldview or ontology which the userbase utilises to create commonality and like-mindedness across the platform, and a wide-ranging and amalgamative threat corpus which breeds out-group rivalry. Notably, these deductive frameworks work in tandem, demonstrating the interconnections linking community-building mechanisms (See Table 5.2 below). For example, frequent pairings between processes include familiarity with group information (67%), group information with intergroup competition (54%), and intergroup competition with homogeneity (62%). Identity constructs thus depend on a narrational variety of content, bouncing between the various facets of Ren et al.'s (2012) framework to form a complex discourse of belonging. Nonetheless, comprehending these virtual community-building processes necessitates capturing the discursive utilisation of these mechanisms in situ, revealing the intricate dynamics of meso-identity communications.

Table 5.3 Ren et al.'s Community-Building Mechanisms' Frequencies & Co-Occurrences

	Familiarity *f* = 258	Group Categor. *f* = 793	Group Infor. *f* = 717	Homogeneity *f* = 293	Intergroup Comp. *f* = 682
Familiarity		115	174	45	134
Group Categor.	115		325	136	311

Group Infor.	174	325		148	386
Homogeneity	45	136	148		181
Intergroup Comp.	134	311	386	181	

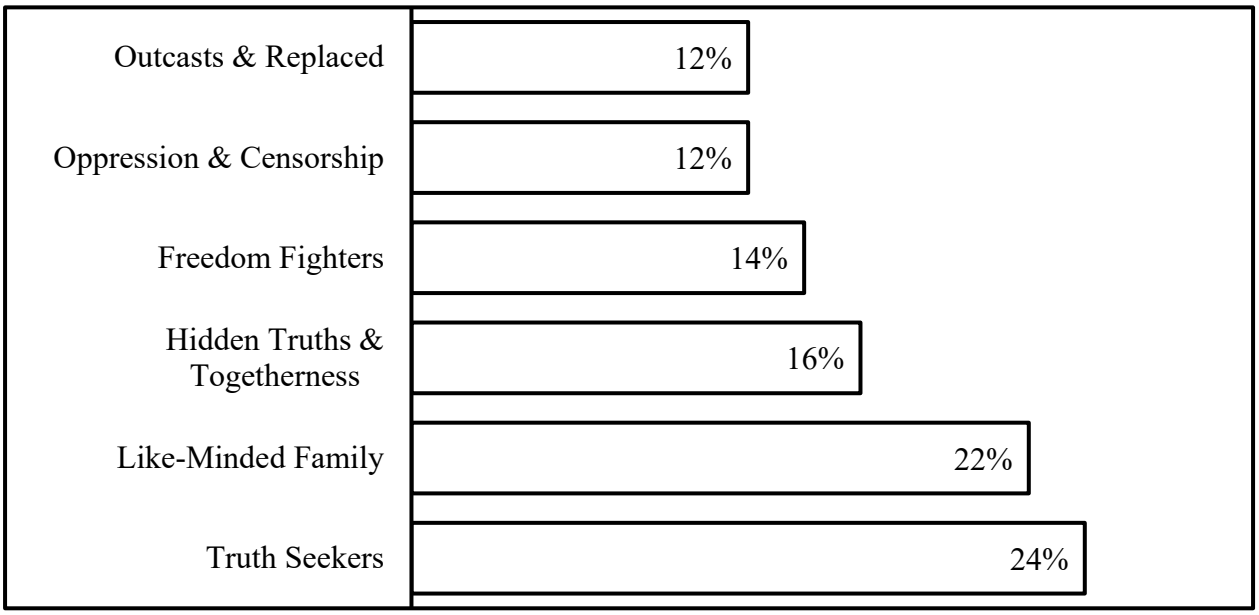
Through the amalgamative mixed methods approach, Table 5.2 provides an elaborate understanding of how the far-right on Gab builds an identity-defining and formulating narrative. However, instead of outlining each inductive code, the story of identity in this virtual space is defined by sets of unified coding. As illustrated in Table 5.3, Gab's members employ community-building mechanisms conjunctively. For instance, posts that include vaccine narratives transcend a singular coding matrix, reinforcing several different processes of belonging (group categorisation, information, and homogeneity). Herein, rejecting the vaccine – using a catalogue of health-related conspiracies – distances the far-right group from "work, friends, and family" while simultaneously creating a sense of togetherness with the platform and its "like-minded" users. In another example, anti-left rhetoric both generates out-group scapegoats and in-group identity as the Gab community comes together to ridicule "brainwashed, indoctrinated loons" who promote the vaccine, the globalist order, the LGBTQ community, and "anti-white" policies. Therefore, mapping the group's interconnected narratives necessitates a combination of community-building mechanisms, with each of these pairings or permutations presenting a separate but essential subset that collaborate to develop the platform's technoculture. Establishing these combinations forms the crux of the analysis and offers important yet complex insights into how community belonging in a far-right social media space develops.

Unifying Factors of Belonging

Understanding the formation of Gab's far-right community begins by determining the unifying factors connecting its users. Consequently, what discursive mechanisms (See Figure 5.1) bring

together these diverse virtual participants – from different geographical, political, cultural, and economic backgrounds – into one cohesive sense of belonging? The study outlines three predominant themes to far-right in-group cohesion between (1) collective grievances, (2) like-mindedness, and (3) an alternative reality-ontology.

Figure 5.1 The Unifying Factors to User Belonging on Gab



How can users find connectivity across the online social sphere? By producing and proliferating common grievances amongst its community members. These narratives, a mixed message connecting societal oppression and alienation, work together to establish a communal discursive baseline. For example, users depict society and culture as "on the edge, about to fall off," with "our freedoms being erased" and "our cities like third world countries." Frequently these narratives are used in conjunction with different conspiracy theories on replacement and genocide, with elites actively working towards "promoting multiculturalism and diversity," "creating a white depopulation agenda," and destroying "individual sovereignty" through the vaccination program.

However, the community's grievances are dynamic and decentralised, including individuals seeking validation for personal problems. Herein, anecdotes on replacement and loss garner extensive support. Participants struggling with "vaccine side effects," being banned from other social media platforms, job loss and other socioeconomic problems, and losing familial connections are often "overwhelmed" by communal feedback and messaging. Thus, Gab offers a safe space for users to confer common grievances and receive reassurance from the greater far-right community.

Tied to these collective grievances and the support network offered by the platform is the like-minded appeal and attitude of its participants. If the community suffers across different aspects of society and increasingly feels ostracised, then Gab offers the communicative space to re-establish a novel sense of self and worth. Thus, users refer to the social media platform as their "go-to for truth," with feelings of "homeliness" or "home," a place "to make friends and meet new people," and a more general excitement and enthusiasm for joining the virtual network. Importantly, words like friends, family, community, and like-minded are repeated within this framing and offer a valuable glimpse into the platform's ability to breed familial connections. Moreover, as a by-product of the above grievances, participants demarcate their community as "locked in a battle for freedom." Herein, the users are united as freedom fighters, recreating a meso-level sense of worth and belonging via like-minded principles of "sovereignty." Portrayals of communal power to fight are paired with calls to "change the things we cannot accept," "join the front lines" against "medical tyranny," to "never be coerced or manipulated," and to "be a real rebel." This like-minded familial connection combined with their freedom fighter attitude helps unite the scattered users under a common guise of family and struggle.

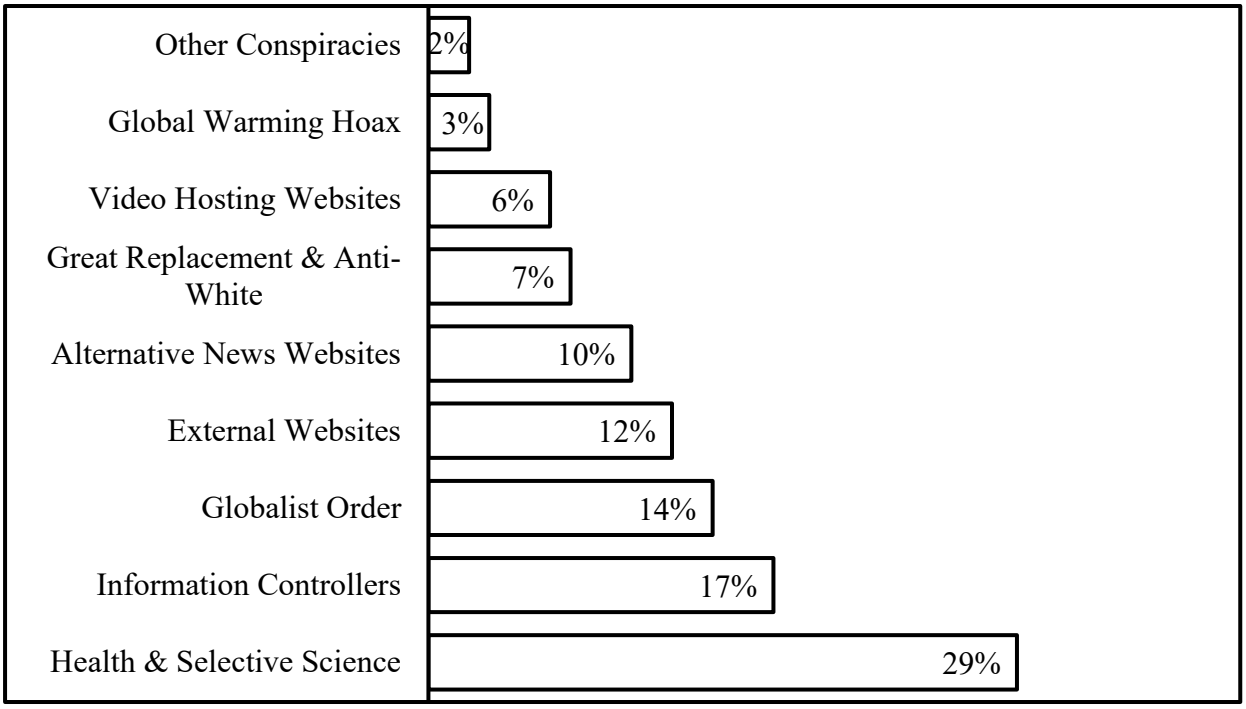
Paramount to the mechanisms of collective grievances and the seeking of a like-minded family is the alternative reality-ontology – a pseudo-construction and understanding of how the world works – that connects these ideas to the far-right community's worldview. At the forefront of Gab's extensive conspiratorial network is the communal belief that the platform's users are in a privileged position as truth seekers. Herein, users "are not conspiracy theorists"; instead, they "look for new angles on the official narrative." This characterisation is frequently paired with being "awake" or "waking up" to "what the hell is going on in this world," citing the words truth, real, and facts as precursors to their alternative explanations. Inherently connected to this group characteristic is their ability to unite as a community and unpack the hidden truths scattered throughout the online and offline world. For example, community members regularly reference *we*: "we are no longer accepting," "we are awake," "we are a different breed from the rest," and "we are so aware of everything happening" to reinforce the legitimacy of their claims. These "uncovered" pseudo-realities, explored below, vary and are an essential component of the platform's community-building. Subsequently, framing the community as truth seekers who collectively unpack the hidden truths of the world helps set the baseline for Gab's alternative ontologies and acts as an in-group unifier for the platform's homogeneity and categorisation.

Establishing the Worldview

What exactly are these alternative reality ontologies which make up the online platform's collective worldview? And how do these narratives contribute to the formation of their community? Unsurprisingly, the conspiracies on Gab come in all shapes and sizes (See Figure 5.2), ranging from anecdotes on vaccine side effects to mainstream informational control and censorship, globalist plots for world domination, and great replacement theories. For instance, one member

states, “Jews are openly telling you that everything that has been said about them ritualistically killing babies is true.” Another user exclaims, “my boys aren’t getting the vaccine, more people should know that there are metal techno flakes in the shot.” Notably, discourse on vaccination and COVID-19 dominates the platform, appearing in 253 and 103 unique incidents, respectively. While the findings present a seemingly disconnected and mixed bag of conspiracies, these narratives are neither random nor subject to only small pockets of the platform. Instead, they form an essential ingredient in the building of a collective.

Figure 5.2 The Platform’s Narrational Ontology & Worldview



A primary objective for users on the platform is to shift Gab’s infosphere into a novel paradigm of pseudo-ontological collective understanding, with contemporary phenomena offering a simple starting point for rearranging the narrative. Herein, conspiracies become a tactic to challenge the mainstream viewpoint and core fabric of societal institutions while simultaneously reinforcing

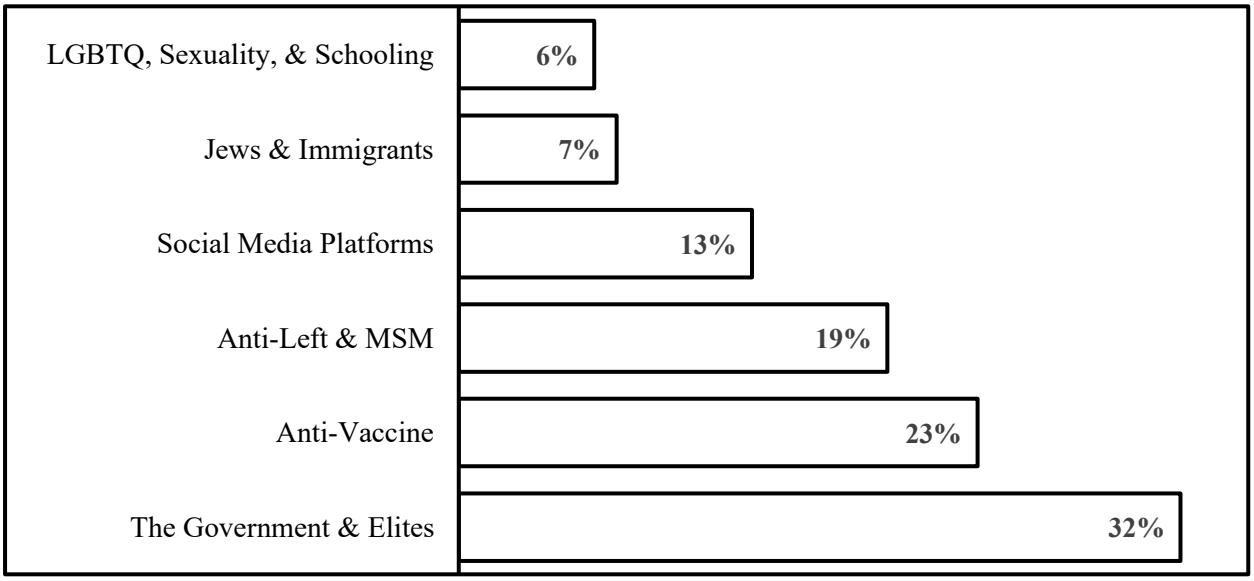
group information. One user sites, “we now live in a nation where doctors destroy health. Lawyers destroy justice. Universities destroy knowledge. Governments destroy freedom. The press destroys information, and our banks destroy the economy.” Another community member states, “dumb people are too distracted by Russia/Ukraine now. Never, ever forget the last two years! Politicians, the media, doctors, and teachers have to pay for what they did.” Notably, these narratives are especially prevalent when users discuss health and science. A common strategy is to present information as health professionals, “the cancer we are seeing is unprecedented, “scientifically it makes zero sense to get the vaccine,” “Doctors are begging parents not to give their children deadly COVID-19 vaccines,” “I will share irrefutable evidence how and why the COVID vaccines are harming and killing people.” Community-building is thus centred around a distrust for mainstream sources, with greater confidence and emphasis placed on the infosphere within Gab and its similar-thinking users – an effective practice for ensuring groupthink. Subsequently, participants attempt to legitimise and reinforce these pseudo-ontologies by linking to content on other online platforms, including Twitter (66), lifesitenews (42), Bitchute (31), Youtube (22), the DailyMail, Odysee, and an assortment of other sites. Therefore, anecdotal proofs and other conspiratorial beliefs are frequently paired with external, alternative news, and video-hosting websites, wherein group information mixes with familiarity to form a like-minded ecosystem of communal narratives.

Who We Are and Are Not?

The final permutation established through the netnographic findings is the community’s dichotomous sense of belonging between an “us” vs “them” framing. Herein, Gab’s user reinforcement of *who we are* relies on comparative qualifiers to its in-group value system. For instance, rhetoric involving rejecting the COVID-19 vaccine stipulates the in-group as a “different

breed," one which "will never be manipulated, or controlled," with other posts noting the "unjabbed's" physical superiority. Other content directly references the Gab community, where users are "blessed" to find a platform and "high-IQ" group "who care about them." Simultaneously, the disqualifiers of out-group characteristics help reinforce this sense of belonging. The article showcases this diverse establishment of far-right out-groups, which ranges from a controlling government to the left, Jews, Immigrants, and the LGBTQ community. Common examples include anti-Semitic conspiracies on white genocide, the left working with LGBTQ teachers to "brainwash children," and government vaccination programs attempting to "neuter the human race." Moreover, users on other social media platforms, both mainstream and fringe, face criticism. These comments comprise Twitter users as "low IQ," a "rampant degeneracy on other platforms," men as "weaker" on Facebook, and Truth Social interactions described as "so dirty."

Figure 5.3 The Far-Right Community's Sense of Belonging Between an "Us Versus Them"



Therefore, the virtual community's interpretation of *who we are* and *are not*, showcased in Figure 5.3, are inherently connected. Subsequently, users frequently utilise this relational dichotomy to establish comparative superiority. For instance, one user boasts about their ability to say "nigger, chink, honkey, kike, or faggot" as the social media community is "accepting" of this language. Other members mention distancing themselves from their everyday social lives – "jobs, friends, and family" – "searching" for themselves within the Gab community, who are "my people." However, as shown, in-group supremacy transcends user characteristics and includes discussions on Gab versus other social media platforms. Interesting to note are the positive emotive evocations the platform receives directly contrasted against the negative sentiments for mainstream media, with participants denoting how "great it is to be here as a free speech alternative to Facebook and Twitter," "the air is clear and more honest" compared to Facebook's "jailing policy," and with many citing a "fresh start" to social media from other platform banning. Thus, constructing a sense of belonging within Gab's virtual community requires comparative narratives. Not only do these framings function to produce clear boundaries for the in-group, but they also serve as a legitimising tool for participants seeking alternative means of communication. This dichotomised mechanism is effective, with the platform's affordances and free-speech policies providing for the community's longing for a judgement-free environment.

Discussion & In-Group Superiority Model

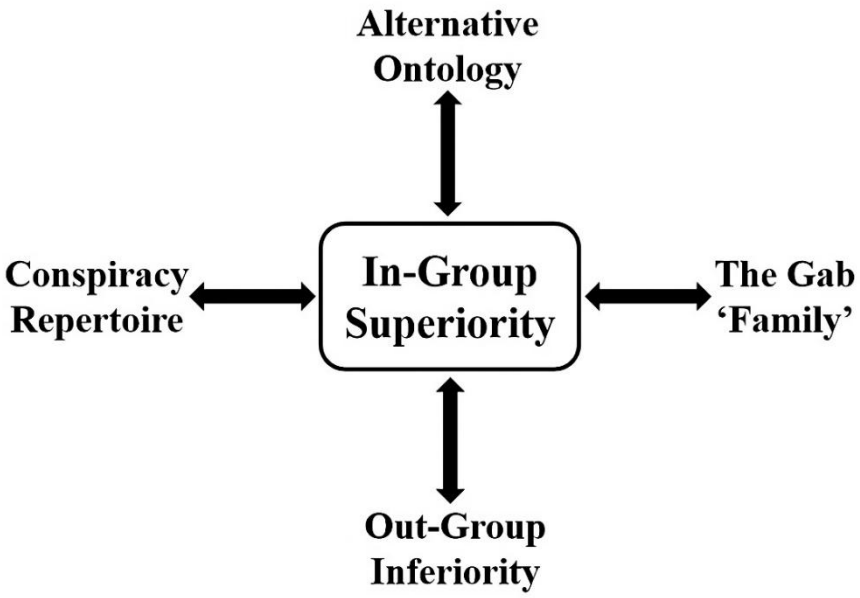
The study illustrates the formation of collective identity on Gab. Combining Ren et al.'s (2012) deductive mechanisms of community-building as an empirical baseline with netnography's inductive interpretations, I outline three main narrational mechanisms for far-right meso-identity – unifiers, worldview, and out-grouping. The following section builds on these findings by providing

a narrational model, showcasing how we can recontextualise far-right fringe content to understand better the importance of *community* for these platforms. Herein, co-utilising the findings in parallel with predominant articles on the subject (Federico et al., 2013; Gaudette et al., 2021; Hogg & Rinella, 2018; Matherly, 2018; Swann et al., 2012), I argue that the platform's interactions, content, and sense of collective identity revolves around an in-group superiority framework. In this process of identity fusion (See Swann et al., 2012), group categorisation, information, homogeneity, familiarity with group, and intergroup competition form the basis of the individual's meso-level identity on Gab – the transition where *we* becomes more important than *I* (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg & Rinella, 2018; Hohman et al., 2017 Müller et al., 2022). Why does this phenomenon occur amongst the far-right? Accentuating meso-collectivity resolves individual feelings of ostracisation, suffering, and loss (Engler & Weisstanner, 2020; Hochschild, 2018; Hogg & Wagoner, 2017). Herein, the political and cultural imaginaries for the relative deprivation of white status (See Hochschild, 2018; Kinnvall & Kisić Merino, 2023) are overcome by recentring belonging to power-evoking or superiority-based group identifiers (Hochschild, 2018; Müller, Harrendorf and Mischler, 2022), where the Gab community presents itself as the best unified virtual and social collective to combat the far-right's common and transnational grievances.

The study proposes a model of this phenomenon with in-group superiority as the foundation of the platform's success, showcasing the community-focused mechanisms and transitional reconceptualisation of self (See Figure 5.4). Moreover, the diagram offers four essential self-reinforcing mechanisms – alternative ontology, conspiracy repertoire, out-group inferiority, and the gab' family' – discovered through the netnographic analysis, which act as the narrational binds solidifying this powerful collective. The following discussion illustrates these discursive

instruments and their connections to contemporary scholarly literature, highlighting the importance of understanding this community's superiority-based technoculture and its subsequent potential for (online) violence.

Figure 5.4 Gab's Community-Building Model Revolving Around In-Group Superiority



The first mechanism to showcase Gab's effective model for building a community of users is the group's receptivity and participation in creating an alternative reality ontology (Fitzgerald, 2022). Herein, distinguishing between fact and fiction for the platform's participants becomes a game or challenge for the community to unpack. Consequently, with 54% of the study's posts featuring content related to group information, a majority basis for the illustrated in-group superiority model is that the community's alternative ontology is active rather than passive (See Zeng & Schäfer, 2021), where member involvement – through liking, commenting, sharing, discussing, or reformulating conspiracies – helps reinforce feelings of collective rightness. Combining these inductive findings linking the truth-seeking and the hidden truth mentality is the far-right's

proclivity to conspiratorial beliefs, presenting a malignant concoction of groupthink, alternative realities, and participatory media (Hogg, 2020; van der Linden *et al.*, 2021; Winter *et al.*, 2022). These studies demonstrate how pseudo-scientific and counter-mainstream claims are readily accepted within the far-right, offering better or more easily comprehensible narratives which match their preconceived views (Hogg, 2020). This anecdotal and or quasi-evidence worldbuilding is often emphasised as the real, "real world" in which the platform's users are of the privileged few to know. Thus, conspiratory ontologies and their active maintenance on Gab form a dangerous duo for precipitating the community's superiority-based technoculture and alternative worldviews.

Moreover, Gab's conspiratorial content offers an interesting look at the purposeful and exploitative framing in formulating in-group supremacy. I delineate this mixed-bag repertoire of narratives with two dichotomous principles: (1) to fortify anti-science, alternative truths, and counter-cultural attitudes, and (2) to emphasise the group's relative deprivation and loss of sociopolitical status. Some may ask how these discourses relate to in-group superiority. The former builds on the anti-vaccine and other COVID-19-related foci discussed previously, for example, when intergroup comparisons pin the Gab community as "a different breed." These findings pair well with Hotez's (2020) study on the far-right's globalised anti-science rhetoric, where the community sees themselves as the preponderant fighters for "medical freedom" – a subset of this study's freedom fighter inductive code. The latter concentrates on the conspiracies involving information control, global order, and great replacement theories (350 unique occurrences), with users yearning for a romanticised past of a white hegemony, non-globalised or non-multicultured societies, and Eurocultural dominance. Herein, the Gab community uses white privilege nostalgia (See Merrill, 2020; Reyna et al., 2022) to evoke group categorisation and homogeneity, forming a collective

"white grievance" to reclaim their perceived rightful place in society. Therefore, even in portrayals of loss, the baseline for these communal narratives centres around a meso-level superiority-based mentality.

The thick emotional network (Davis et al., 2019), with users often referring to the platform's collective as "family," offers another paradigm to consider when examining Gab's community-building dynamics. This like-minded categorical portrayal not only underlines the similarity between participants but also accentuates a distinct betterness. Therefore when describing Gab and its consocial community, users frequently paired the website with positive emotive reactions in contrast to out-group and other mainstream platforms' negative labelling. Various studies (See Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Davis et al., 2019; Hogg & Rinella, 2018; Koster & Houtman, 2008) suggest that creating these deep familial bonds and emotional attachments is an essential process in establishing a community in either online or offline spaces. For instance, Koster and Houtman (2008) outline a similar perception from Stormfront users. Interview respondents' experiences include support in case of unpleasant events in their offline lives, emotional connections of "extreme happiness" and belonging, a warm, welcoming approach to in-group inclusivity, and mutual understanding or communal solidarity (Koster and Houtman, 2008). These virtual social mechanisms were also predominant when highlighting Gab's unifying factors of belonging, with users frequently citing parallel draws to the platform as the best "free speech community" of "like-minded individuals on the internet".

Consequently, a simultaneous product in formulating in-group qualifiers of superiority is the generated comparative out-group disqualifiers of inferiority. Given the expansive range of

scholarly literature outlining far-right out-groups and intergroup conflict (See Bliuc et al., 2019; Harteveld et al., 2022; Holt et al., 2020; Tuters & Hagen, 2020), it is perhaps unsurprising to discover an extensive existential threat corpus on Gab. These include hate-filled narratives against a broadly-defined left, mainstream media, the LGBTQ community, Jews, Muslims, refugees, immigrants, the government, societal elites, and other social media platforms. However, as outlined in the findings, these comparative framings are purposeful (Bai, 2020; Harteveld et al., 2022). Not only do they assist in establishing clear boundaries between an "us" vs "them," but out-grouping helps reinforce their meso-level superiority. Thus, when users share toxic opinions, for example, on "the woke population," "snowflakes," "baby murderers," "the vaxxed," and "anti-white Jews", the community is dichotomising their sense of worth over these self-defined groups.

What does this in-group superiority model and the depersonalisation of '*I*' to '*we*' mean for the potential perpetuation of (online) extremism or violence? Studies highlight that the transformative and normative value shift from self to group radicalises individuals into adopting their extremist community's norms, where being part of 'we' dictates conformity to this superiority-minded and hate-filled belief system (Hogg & Rinella, 2018; Kavanagh et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2022). Herein, in-group community-building reinforces aggressive behaviour against outsiders or existential threats. Combining this relationship with the Gab userbase's extensive out-grouping exemplifies the potential for far-right violence, with real-world illustrations highlighting the dangers of fringe social media collectives. The 2018 Pittsburgh Synagogue shooter bonded with the Gab community over shared vitriol antisemitism postings (McIlroy-Young & Anderson, 2019); the Christchurch perpetrator of the following year discussed their deeply personal and familial connections made on 8chan; the El Paso terrorist did the same, referring to the 8chan forum as

"brothers"; finally, the interactions on Parler helped unify different far-right camps into a collective with a pseudo-moral and group-fabricated responsibility to violently mobilise against the US Capitol (Munn, 2021). These incidents showcase a technoculture of virtual community belonging, support, and validation for far-right extremism, with meso-identity and connections to these fringe social spaces as a centralising theme.

Conclusion

The study's findings showcase the multidimensional aspect of Gab's community-building processes through the platform's narrational mechanisms. Specifically, the netnographic and QCA analysis of 1,320 top-rated popular subgroup posts offers essential insights into how Ren et al.'s (2012) baseline devices – group categorisation, group information, group homogeneity, intergroup competition, and familiarity with group – are deconstructed and interact with one another in a far-right social media space. Through this deductive, inductive, and interrelational investigation, three main thematic patterns emerge in understanding Gab's success as a virtual platform: (1) establishing a sense of unity amongst the community, (2) creating a new ontological worldview through conspiracies, and (3) determining in-group belonging through dichotomous framings. In the discussion further unpacking these findings, I underline the effectiveness of the community's in-group superiority mindset. In deconstructing this meso-level collective identity, the study models the group's alternative ontology, conspiracy repertoire, familial connections, and out-group labelling as the discursive baseline for the platform's interactions and content. Therefore, this novel conceptualisation of Gab as a far-right collective goes beyond conventional research. Rather than examining the platform as a simple vessel for unmoderated posting and the content therein, I underscore the importance of studying the movement's alternative virtual spaces as a (potentially

dangerous) form of meso-identity. Ultimately, this foundational shift in approach opens the door for future research on these online communities, providing a (new) starting point for understanding far-right fringe media.

What should come next for research on identity and collectivity in far-right virtual spaces? I offer a new beginning for a different approach to studying and understanding these essential components by focusing on the community and its participants rather than their many hate-filled by-products. Herein, utilising an experiential methodological technique that emphasises a deep-dive approach – as opposed to the primarily descriptive articles of the past (Baines et al., 2021; Jasser et al., 2021; Munn, 2022; Nouri et al., 2021) – the study provides a novel look into the mechanisms of attachment and formation of counter-technocultures (Conway, 2017; Kozinets & Rosella Gambetti, 2020). The resulting investigative power and communal themes from these findings suggest a necessary shift in the broadly defined field's perception of Gab, reorientating our epistemological perspective for studying far-right virtual communities to better grasp user experience and the emotions behind the content. Nevertheless, the findings could not cover all narrational mechanisms in understanding collectives. For instance, future studies must consider the implications of gender in community construction, with Gab a male-dominated (Lima, 2018) and hypermasculine virtual space for formulating groupness. A paramount question to investigate is how gender (and the roles of men and women in these environments) affects the construction of meso-collectives in these fringe far-right networks. Further research is also required on the relationship between collectives, identity fusion, and (online) violence. Ultimately, netnographies, online ethnographies, and other immersive virtual methodologies utilised in researching these themes will help facilitate a new era

of investigating fringe platforms and their participants, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their continuing success and importance.

Footnotes

[1] This study utilises the umbrella term of far-right (See Pirro, 2022), which showcases the growing links between illiberal-democratic principles (radical right) and anti-democratic principles (extreme right). The far-right label captures the ideological spectrum of participants, relying on authoritarianist, anti-democratic, and exclusionary nationalistic principles.

[2] Social media platforms designed for extremist communications used by the far-right and other extremist communities, trading undisturbed discourse and lack of moderation policies for limited mainstream reach (See Schulze et al., 2022).

[3] Examining the group's behavioural dynamics rather than the individual's experience (micro) or the entire far-right online base and ecosystem (macro). Namely, the study focuses on the depersonalisation of identity, recentering oneself around established in-group behaviours, properties, ideologies, and narratives (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg & Rinella, 2018). This phenomenon often occurs in online communities where the group (meso-level) supersedes any individual characteristics of self, promoting a powerful, sometimes violent, homogenous identity across its userbase (Davis, 2019; Müller et al., 2022).

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