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

Chapter 6

More Than Meets the Reply: Examining Emotional Belonging in Far-Right Social Media Space

Abstract

This article challenges prevailing assumptions that fringe social media platforms exclusively serve as unmoderated hate-filled spaces for far-right communication by examining the userbase's emotional connection to these environments. Focusing on Gab Social, a popular alternative technology website with affordances akin to Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, and its subgroup, 'Introduce Yourself', the research investigates how participants discuss their attachment and sense of membership within a far-right online community. The resulting findings demonstrate how counter-mainstream media acts as a unifying force by catering to the social needs of participants seeking an in-group of like-minded individuals. Moreover, I argue that fringe social media platforms offer participants far more than mainstream platforms, providing a positive interactive environment and a new virtual home for those feeling rejected and antagonised by other communities, institutions, and organisations, both online and offline. Therefore, the work offers valuable empirical insights into the emotional emphasis participants place on fringe social media and its implications for fostering attachment, community formation, and identity construction within far-right online counterpublics.

Introduction

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[11] 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.

While extremist and hate-filled discourse dominates the Alt-Tech research landscape, this article delves deeper into the intricate emotions driving the sustained popularity of these communities. Herein, a more holistic approach is necessary to illustrate the positive communal instruments for the Alt-Tech movement and its participants, extending beyond a simplistic framing of negativity. Studies of a similar nature are scarce, with Koster and Houtman's (2008) and Collins' (2024) being the only works on these positive mechanisms, representing a 16-year gap in our understanding. What this creates is a conceptual blind spot which fails to capture (or ignores) the different aspects of far-right online space. To address this significant lapse, I examine the platform Gab Social, posing two interconnected questions: (1) how do emotion-based processes of belonging, attraction, and attachment manifest in the far-right online space Gab Social? And (2) how do these mechanisms shape the platform's user engagement and virtual community dynamics? Consequently, the study aims to showcase the emotion-based community mechanisms within far-right Alt-Tech spaces and to unpack the functions of these processes in facilitating and promoting participant engagement and the communication dynamics on Gab.

I employ a critical grounded theory approach within a mixed-methods framework, integrating netnography and sentiment analysis to formulate the community's sentiment-based communication structures and mechanisms. Central to this research design is both immersivity and reflexivity (Bryant and Charmaz, 2019; Mattheis, 2023), wherein qualitative and quantitative data collectively contribute to unravelling the narrative of emotion-based belonging, attraction, and attachment within Gab Social. The inductive approach unfolds in two stages: (1) in close-reading findings extracted from the netnographic fieldnotes and manually collected data, which were thematically coded and organized, and (2) across a dual-lexical sentiment analysis. These mixed-methods allow

for the research question's empirical mapping, shedding light on the emergence of a *new home* on Gab, with offline and online rejection and Alt-Tech reattachment serving as its foundational elements. Furthermore, by adopting this thick data procedure, the study delves empirically deeper, outlining six fundamental discursive processes that shape user engagement and the community dynamics within this newfound virtual home. Through these findings, the article brings attention to the habitually overlooked positive mechanisms that underpin the success of the far-right fringe social media movement.

Literature Review

SMT and its emphasis on collectives, communities, and group dynamics offers an excellent starting point for examining the importance of positivity on Gab Social. Herein, SMT's central rationale towards participants' experiences and motivations for collective identity include the shared systems of meanings (rituals, practices, and cultural artefacts), intra- and inter-group interactions and dynamics, and emotional investments (Melucci, 1996). Consequently, if emotions play a crucial role in collectivity, it is then logical to ask what type of emotions are present and in what capacity they function. For instance, Collins (2001) highlights both the actionable and consequential dimensions of emotions in SMT, ranging from physical manifestations and collective assemblages to feelings of solidarity, groupness, and moral superiority. Micro-level investigations within SMT showcase more specific functions for the individual, like the delineation and connections between self and other or the personal and social (Ahmed, 2004). Others take the argument one step further, framing sentiments at the core of social movements, as they provide the sense of belonging and shared grievances inspiring collective action (Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2009). Regardless of

the specific viewpoint or application, SMT underscores the importance of emotions in constructing communities and driving social movements.

Therefore, the foundation for developing an empirical framework around Gab Social's far-right community is the intertwined relationship between emotions and belonging. While formulating a consensus definition of belonging continues to be contentious (Chin, 2019), the article utilises the concept's focus on the innate human need to establish positive social bonds and interpersonal relations (see Pardede & Kovač, 2023). In this context, belonging becomes a relational and sentimental construction of self and other, reflecting individuals' "emotional investments and desires for attachment" (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Recognising that everyone possesses the need and aspiration to belong, and sentiment is a critical driver of belongingness (Leary, 2021), emotion plays a pivotal role in shaping one's sociality, positionality, and identity. The article intermixes the term *emotional belonging* (see Yuval-Davis, 2006) – the psychosocial relationship between individual sentiments and the sense of community connection – to encapsulate the affective ties and subjective experiences individuals invest in their social groupings. Operationalising this concept helps highlight the intricacies of (online or offline) community dynamics as it delves into the emotional attachments that shape the continuous home-like construction of groupness (Antonsich, 2010). By applying these interconnected concepts, we can shed light on the emotional motivations, affiliations, and interpersonal bonds that maintain and promote Alt-Tech social spaces.

The contemporary research intermixing the themes of emotions and belonging in far-right online spaces is limited to a handful of studies (Askanius, 2021; Jasser et al., 2023; Koster & Houtman, 2008; Marcks & Pawelz, 2022; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023, 2024) which predominantly fixate on

the hate-filled threats these two devices generate. Marcks and Pawelz (2022) and Jasser et al. (2023) offer similar (negative) depictions. The former showcases the relationship between the broadcasted hyper-emotional disparagement and the perceived collapse of Judeo-Christian culture and society. Herein, the German far-right utilises these discourses to formulate a collective self-defence identity and promote extremist violence against labelled perpetrators (Marcks & Pawelz, 2022). The latter details Gab Social's baseline for techno-social belongingness built off the perceived persecution and subsequent fear of 'Big Tech' social media control – mimicking similar 'white victimhood' sentiments (Jasser et al., 2023).

When positive emotions are mentioned, they are often referenced in their malicious use in formulating belonging (Åkerlund, 2022; Askanius, 2021; Tuters & Hagen, 2020), dog whistling and or cloaking the hate-filled message existing below the surface. These findings are especially prevalent when examining popular far-right virtual communication strategies. For example, the use of ambiguous humour, irony, and dark satire via memetic imagery is a strategy to slowly convert unsuspecting participants on mainstream platforms to the neo-Nazi and Alt-right fringes of the internet while simultaneously normalising extremist messages within the public sphere (Askanius, 2021). The gradual affinity to far-right disguised humour and recognition of intended hate-filled messages creates another facet of belonging, one of in-grouping (Greene, 2019). An insider community is established through these discourses, where understanding the intended meaning generates a technocultural superiority and inferiority between those in the know and those not. Consequently, contemporary research makes clear the ever-presence of hatred – no matter its surface-level presentation – that dominates the far-right online ecosystem.

However, there is a fascinating connection between the study of these hate-filled far-right virtual spaces and how research on emotions and belonging describes the importance of positive social connections. Herein, can the far-right's emotional belonging be solely governed and maintained by negative sentiment? The answer is no. Sociality and affective relations, irrespective to social grouping, also or even mainly rely on positive self-projections and the natural seeking of in-groupness (Pardede & Kovač, 2023; Valcke et al., 2020). These connections have started to emerge within research on the far-right and other extremist online spheres (Amarasingam, 2023; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2024). For instance, Törnberg and Törnberg (2024) emphasise the significance of reciprocal emotions, wherein community members forge positive collective bonds through the social support and protectiveness offered by Stormfront. Similarly, Amarasingam (2023) discusses the roles of sentiment-based online community bonding revolving around social openness, collective investments in the group, and the relative ease of spiritual and emotional connection-making.

Building on these novel perspectives of far-right virtual community and positivity, the study provides a look at the emotional processes of belonging within Gab Social. Herein, the findings centred around *a new home* demonstrate the importance of utilising a different perspective for analysing the far-right's Alt-Tech ecosystem beyond the well-documented surface-level negativity. By examining the sense of emotional belonging within Gab's 'Introduce Yourself' community, I highlight the essential processes that create, maintain, and promote these environments of far-right connectivity. The immersive discoveries also emphasise the importance of recognising the userbase's individual- and meso-experiences (both online and offline), attributing to this alternative collective and its internal dynamics.

Method

I utilise the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach to capture the deeper-seated layers and narrational themes forming the userbase's sense of emotional belonging to Gab. While maintaining the fundamental elements of any grounded theory technique (Kenny & Fourie, 2015), CGT emphasises the researcher's responsibility and role to capture the participant's experiences and emotional expressions (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). Herein, the observer plays an active part in the analytical process by intermixing their recorded experiences with the collected data vis-à-vis a journaling process, where the researcher works iteratively with the two-sided data to code and establish the studied phenomena's recurring themes. Moreover, this epistemological and interpretive storytelling model, where the investigator's thoughts and feelings are valuable, pairs well with netnography's immersive and experiential fieldnotes guiding the thematic findings (Kozinets, 2019). For CGT in general and this study in particular, the narratives can also move beyond the qualitative realm, oftentimes complemented by quantitative depictions highlighting different aspects of the same phenomena (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). What is created then is a mix-and-match methodological pairing technique with CGT as the foundational building block, helping connect interpretation with analytical technique in a coherent story on the Gab community's multilayered attachment. Where many sole quantitative, qualitative, or even mixed-methods investigations in the field struggle to tell a cohesive narrative, CGT provides a potential solution to unite or fill in the missing and necessary pieces to complex social phenomena.

Dual lexicon-based sentiment analysis provides the study's quantitative empirical baseline. A pre-defined word dictionary per the chosen lexis reflects the semantic orientation of the examined words or sentences, computing the collected content's individual polarity or emotional values

(Wijngaards et al., 2019). I employ a two-pronged lexical approach with Sentimentr (Rinker, 2019) and EmoLex (Mohammad & Turney, 2013), which captures both polarity scores and emotional values to encapsulate the sentimental variations perpetuated by Gab's 'Introduce Yourself' (Czarnek & Stillwell, 2022). The former calculates sentence polarity, scoring each word via a 10739-unigram dictionary, with final sentence values falling between -2.0 (negative) and +2.0 (positive). This computer-aided practice allows for the accurate production of visualisable data, closely mimicking human-controlled benchmarks (Wijngaards et al., 2019). EmoLex's 14182-lexicon associates words with a particular sentiment (negative emotions – *disgust, anger, fear, sadness* versus positive emotions – *surprise, joy, anticipation, trust*) adapted from Plutchik's (1982) seminal eight basic emotions work. The dual-lexical approach is suggested by Czarnek and Stillwell (2022) to highlight not only the negative or positive affiliation with the experienced themes but also the emotional spectrum and complexities within the community's attachment and attraction. Therefore, employing this cross-technique better captures the differentiated use of the far-right's sentimental values on Gab Social.

The reflexive qualitative technique, netnography, "seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, and systems" of online communication sites (Kozinets, 2019). The method is best recognised as a reconstituted ethnography – using different disciplinary elements from anthropology, computer science, communication, media, and cultural studies – for investigating virtual collectives, connecting the online traces of social interactions to help tell an experiential and immersive story of the observed community. Moreover, netnography's application in the article centres around its outlined emotional participation strategy with the researcher directly engaging with the "feeling of those whose worlds and words are being

investigated" (Kozinets, 2019). The approach is not to empathise or sympathise with far-right participants but to ground the research within the community's conceptualisation of the world, where understanding the nuances of far-right emotions requires an analytical and normative shift to their values, ideas, and ideologies. Using this technique, I showcase the importance of cultural immersion for examining extremist communities and the qualitative variations these findings bring. Therefore, the method – portraying the overarching technoculture of the examined (sub)community – can help transcend the surface-level depictions in contemporary research of far-right online content. Finally, the cumulative results centre around a thick data approach (Davis et al., 2019), with netnography and sentiment analysis helping to form the overarching narrative and empirical depth to far-right platform attachment.

Case Selection, Data Collection & Analytical Technique

While existing work emphasises the significance of the Alt-Tech movement within the far-right as an expanding microcosm of techno-sociality (Jasser et al., 2023; Munn, 2021), our current conceptual framework surrounding these individual platforms and their user engagement remains limited. This study focuses on Gab Social and its subgroup, g/introduceyourself, to investigate how this online community fosters a sense of attraction and attachment through the emotional dimensions within their posting. Notably, Gab is considered the most prominent and publicly available alternative social media platform in the Western world, with recent research suggesting approximately twenty million users on the site (Acampa et al., 2023). Herein, Gab Social stands out from other Alt-Tech and fringe platforms in avoiding the trap of techno-elitism (see Gehl, 2016), where the website is purposefully open to all right-wing conservative participants regardless

of one's background. And although not all members purport to extremist ideologies or narratives, many users occupy the virtual space as a far-right enclave (Jasser et al., 2023; Kor-Sins, 2023).

Therefore, with the platform's millions of users and subsequent diverse range of content, the article examines the subgroup g/introduceyourself as a constructed medium for far-right users to connect and demonstrate their emotional connection to Gab. The group serves as a welcoming, where users can post greetings and signify their political, social, and ideological positionality – making their case for in-group status. Using members' self-reflections on why they came to the platform and why they belong, I aim to unpack the emotion-based processes of Alt-Tech belonging, attachment, and attraction cultivating the far-right's presence and success on Gab.

The data collected from g/introduceyourself was taken in two separate but continuous phases. Phase one involved scraping the group for individual posts from November 2022 to April 2023, utilising the open-source Python code /garc (Stevens, 2020). This initial coding phase presented an effective means to systematically gather a large subset of data while ensuring the retrieval of diverse information, such as user-generated content, timestamps, and interactions. The second phase involved a follow-up two-month synchronous period between the manual collection of each post on g/introduceyourself and a reflexive immersion journal (Kozinets, 2019). While the collected content remained consistent, matching the details scraped in phase one, I used May and June 2023 to better understand the virtual subgroup's technocultural traces. During this immersion stage, the netnographic fieldnotes involved documenting participant experiences and writing reflections on the predominant themes and emotional connections dictating user engagement. These reflections are essential to thematically bridge the gap between the scraped and manual data.

Over the eight months, the combinatory collection resulted in 6,225 posts – 5,706 scraped and 519 manual – and the researcher's immersive discoveries.

Coding and analysing the data flows from the open-format CGT technique (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). In this procedure, the prescribed reflexivity and memo writings conducted on MAXQDA pair with netnographic immersion journal fieldnotes. This epistemological coupling works as both a thematic reinforcement and supplement, with the findings from each helping to refocus the codes into a more consolidated narrative (Kenny & Fourie, 2015). After performing the inductive interpretation of the manually collected data and constructing the predominant themes (*Friends and Family*, *Free Speech*, *Like-Minded*, *Identity*, *Religiosity*, and *Out-grouping*), ten keywords based on frequency and thematic relevance were identified from each (see Table 6.1). These keywords were then applied to the scraped data, sorting every post, with the matching keyword, into their respective theme(s). Any duplicate posts sorted into the respective themes were removed. Finally, the fully coded and sorted dataset is analysed with the dual-lexical sentiment methods (Sentimentr and EmoLex) on RStudio. This technique provides a complimentary angle and quantitative baseline to the empirical conceptualisation. Mixing these methodologies helps contribute to the overarching story of belonging, attachment, and attraction on the platform Gab Social, offering a potential explanation of far-right user experiences and emotional connections within and to the Alt-Tech website.

Table 6.1 Outline of the Inductive Themes and Keywords Found on Gab Social's g/introduceyourself

Themes	Keywords
Friends & Family	*Happy, Hear, Community, New, Friend, Join, Family, Hope, Interest, Connect*

|	
Free Speech	*Free, Share, Speech, Discussion, Platform, Truth, Know, Freedom, Learn, Diverse*
Like-Minded	*Group, Mind, People, Social, Engage, Excite, Hear, We, Conversation, Find*
Identity	*Interest, Conservative, White, Child, Belief, Country, Sick, Race, Family, Patriot*
Religiosity	*God, Christian, Jesus, Come, Love, Bless, Good, Christ, Lord, Bible*
Out-Grouping	*Left, Woke, Jews, LGBTQ, Gay, Evil, Destroy, Censor, Antifa, War*

Finally, ethical considerations must be addressed. Netnography provides a blueprint for ethically analysing social media platforms based on ethnographic principles of participative-cultural research (Kozinets, 2019). For this study, the main concerns revolve around protecting the userbase and their data and the public availability of content. The personal data scraped (usernames), timestamps, and links to the content were immediately removed from the dataset after initial collection, with the study focusing solely on the textual media. Moreover, there is no possible reverse search affordance within Gab (or on the subgroup g/introduceyourself), with the selected excerpts in the article protected against discovery. All data is thus anonymised, safeguarding the users and their opinions. It is also essential to note that content on g/introduceyourself is public and does not rely on an account to view the posts.

Analysis

The results are grounded in the construction and maintenance of Gab's key offering to its userbase, *a new home*. Utilising CGT with the thick data technique, sentiment and netnographic analysis, I highlight the emotional and discursive processes that stimulates g/introduceyourself on Gab, with community positivity at the forefront of the group's interaction. However, that does not mean far-right extremist rhetoric is non-existent. Instead, these narratives play an effective part in group

attachment, challenging the way we perceive hate-filled communications and our normative conceptualisation of positive and negative emotions. Through a comprehensive investigation of the collected 6,225 posts, subject to both computerised and immersive close-reading practices, a complex formulation of emotional belonging highlights the deep-seated attachment layers governing the site's continued success. Notably, excerpts from selected content are used as illustrative examples and talking points to supplement the findings. The following mixed-methods analysis starts with a centralised focus on a *new home* and its construction within the Gab community and then branches into the predominant themes which actively maintain, promote, and create this virtual environment.

Figure 6.1 Participant's Discursive Emotions on Gab Social's g/introduceyourself
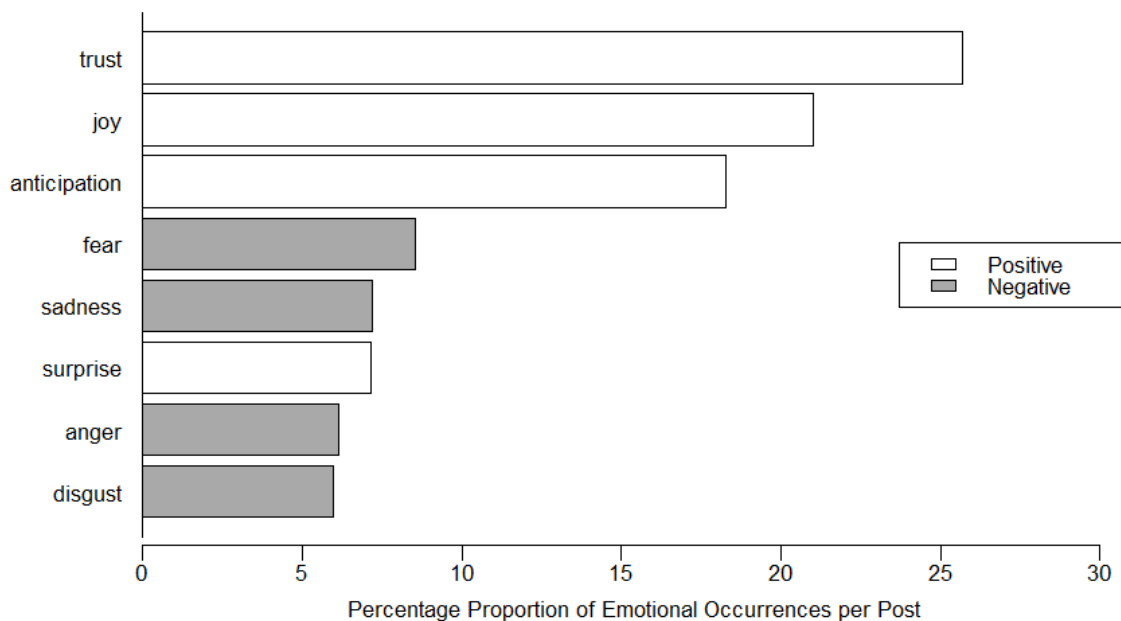
A New Home: The Platform's Emotional Connections

The findings demonstrate a complex emotional package *(disgust – 6.0%, anger – 6.1%, surprise – 7.1%, sadness – 7.2%, fear – 8.5%, anticipation – 18.3%, joy – 21.0%, trust – 25.7%)* of belonging

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on Gab (see Figure 6.1), dominated by positive attribution (*positive* – 78.5% *vs negative* – 21.5%*) to the platform and its community. These emotive reactions assume various forms, ranging from religious texts and inspirational quotes to affiliation with a like-minded community, Gab's self-proclaimed status as a bastion for free speech, a loose-based identity, and a place to escape online and offline prejudices. For instance, the following posts all cement an upbeat yet eclectic community atmosphere:

> *I am interested in Gab.com because it values freedom of speech. It provides a platform where individuals can express their opinions without fear of censorship. I appreciate the opportunity for open discourse and diverse perspectives it offers.*
>
> *Welcome to Gab, a force for good. Why? God is good. Jesus loves you.*
>
> *Hello, sooo excited to finally find a social platform that is bereft of the contents and stipulations of the mainstream media. Common sense rules and we will do our best to preserve it and pass it on to future generations. I'm definitely sharing this app with my family.*

What makes these positive attributes effective processes for the community's emotional belonging are the multifaceted or multilayered attachments users place on the Alt-Tech media space, where Gab is designed as a catch-all platform for the different facets of the far-right (Zannettou et al., 2018). Therefore, where one user emphasises their neo-Nazi beliefs, "globalism will be crushed, support your race and support your country 1488," another poster is "ready to have friends and to learn from daily content." While these participants may not share common ideological perspectives – or instead choose to accentuate a particular aspect of themselves in forming social relationships – they coexist, communicate, and connect via their shared sentimental connection to Gab. The subgroup thus offers a primarily positive interactive space for its community members regardless of the user's nuanced far-right affinities.

I deconstruct the emotional attachment levels shown in Figure 6.1 to illustrate the distinct communicative devices in which these sentiments play into virtual belonging. At the heart of the group and the Gab community's allure reside the foundational tenets of trust, happiness, and hope, which participants count on for their social interactions. Where do these emotive ties come from, which seldom exist on mainstream platforms or, conversely, where social media has been found to create emotional harm (Alsunni & Latif, 2021; Kross et al., 2013)? To achieve these sentiments, the platform depends on an in-group superiority belief system which places Gab's users and content on a self-righteous pedestal:

> *I just want to say having been on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Parlor... Gab has been the best social media community I have ever seen. I see so many loving, encouraging, and positive posts/comments everywhere. I am glad to be a part of a community trying to help each other and lift each other's spirits.*
>
> *To All the New Gabbers "Welcome to Gab", hope you enjoy this Platform, as it is the best in my opinion.*

By creating this superiority-minded environment, the alt-media space supersedes dispositional distrust against social media content while simultaneously creating an echo-chambered milieu where Gab's content and posters are "the best." Subsequently, these conceptualisations directly translate into the numerous posts linked with anticipation, joy, and trust. For example, one user is "happy to be in a place where I can be free to be me!" while others feel open to "sharing real truths" – countering conventional narratives, histories, and facts. Therefore, the group offers an open-space environment for far-right users to freely communicate: (false) information and conspiracies (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022), what makes them happy, their interests and thoughts, and ideological

aspirations, providing an environment for counter-societal socialisation, relationships, and subcommunities to form (Munn, 2023b).

These findings contribute to the overarching discourse surrounding the sense of emotional belonging prevalent among the subgroup's userbase. While existing research portrays Gab as a technocultural refuge from experiences of social exclusion, mockery, and content moderation (Jasser et al., 2023; Nouri et al., 2021), this analysis reveals that the emotional bonds forged on g/introduceyourself hold a strong importance for its users. Consequently, the userbase's conceptualisation of the space may transcend the status of a mere social media platform, placing the virtual community as a *new home*:

> *Gab has more people looking for community. Gab has people who were isolated from society for daring to use their brains to recognize patterns. It feels a more like a "home" on the internet.*
>
> *I was pondering tonight about how the world could or should change. I was considering the idea of parallel societies that run side by side with people being able to choose which society they fit into. I want to have a voice in the public square and decided to make Gab my new home having rejected Facebook, Instagram and Twitter a few moons ago.*

From these posts, users emanate a euphoric sense of discovery in which Gab serves as an emotional sanctuary to lost internet souls. Not only does this content portray hope, but also a struggle to belong (Munn, 2023b), in which online and offline ostracisation have made the community desperate for any type of positive social relations.

The *home* characterisation reveals two interrelated facets: (1) *rejection* and (2) *reattachment*. The former depicts common grievances among the site's participants, one of "political homelessness,"

"censored by leftists," attacked by the "woke mob," and the other of the destruction of the "middle class," "whites," and Western civilisation:

> *Thank you @a for building this platform. I realized after the last few elections that I am politically homeless.*
>
> *Reply (1) Politically homeless and politically abandoned. I feel you too.*
> *Reply (2) I FEEL that statement -politically homeless.*
> *Reply (3) I think we all feel a little lost right now, trying to figure out who we can trust.*
> *Reply (4) So many of us are politically homeless. You will find camaraderie here. Join some groups. I have found many people kind and helpful.*

The final reply encapsulates the transformative power of far-right media, transitioning from feelings of rejection to reattachment within the Gab community – a parallel online society or ecosystem of disenfranchised users (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022). What is crucial to this transmutational drive is that the userbase actively turns negative sentiment into positive. Thus, the latter, reattachment, offers users a novel chance at socialising post-societal rejection, with participants referring to their joining of the network as "starting over," a "second chance," a "new beginning," and a "new life starting." Herein, the group fills its community's social needs and desires by existing as a positive and welcoming like-minded environment for aggrieved far-right individuals. Andrew Torba, Gab's CEO, further cements these ideals in his battle-like conceptualisations, contrasting the platform's positive and foundational aspects of free speech, open dialogue, and lack of censorship with the numerous outsiders attempting to destroy the community. Within this fight, Gab Social and its userbase are a "bastion" (*new home*) for those who feel rejected or attacked and seek an alternative belonging (Torba, 2023).

Figure 6.2 Sentimentr Scores for Emotional Belonging Themes in Creating a New Home on Gab Social
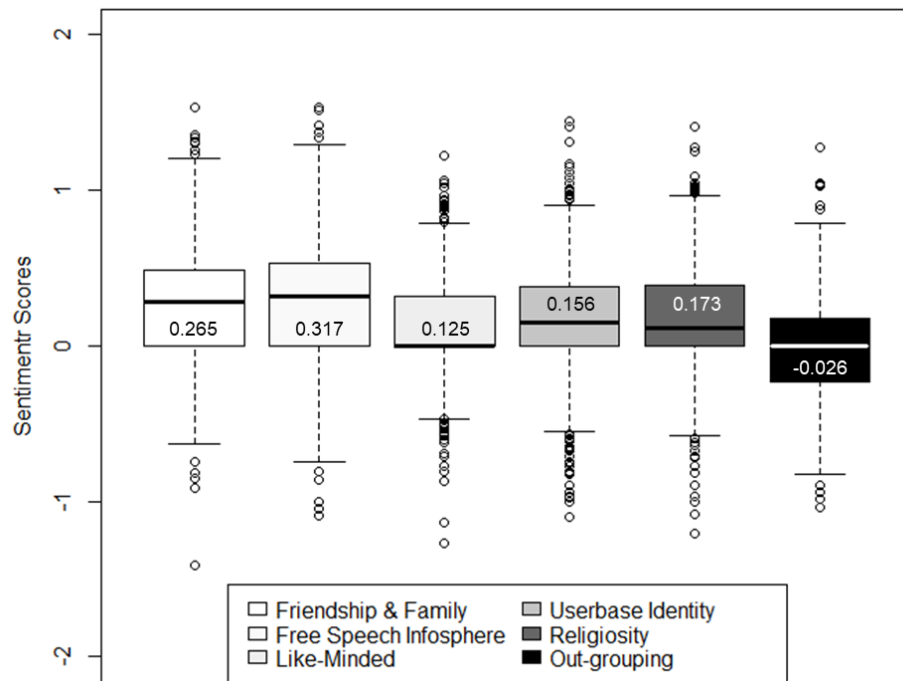
Constructing a virtual home centred around these two principles offers interesting insights into Gab's success as an alternative social media platform. However, the question remains what processes make it a homelike space for its users. Figure 6.2 provides the quantitative baseline *Sentimentr Scores* for each inductive theme, further expanded upon below. These segments are constructed in combination with the observed *new home* group function and include how the community sees the benefits of Gab Social, how the userbase connects, how extremist ideologies, conspiracies, and hatred fit into this welcoming space, and the use of out-groups to promote commonality, comradery, and communal challenges. Understanding these themes in relation to *home* as the Gab group's primary ingredient to their sense of emotional belonging can help transform how we think about far-right communicative landscapes.

Friends and family, free speech, and like-minded: the benefits of Gab Social

First, it is essential to delineate the themes which attract users to the platform and subgroup. Given the abundance of far-right alternative social media sites, such as Parler, Truth Social, Gettr, and MeWe, what makes the userbase specifically interested in Gab? The article outlines three separate principles of narrational attachment between friends and family, (far-right) free speech, and a like-minded community, all helping to strengthen a positive sense of emotional belonging. Importantly, participants are captivated by the technological affordances and lax moderation policies the platform offers and by the community itself. These elements are mutually reinforcing, helping to solidify the platform's attractive technoculture (Kozinets & Rosella Gambetti, 2020).

A *new home* necessitates a deeper connection between far-right users on Gab, one of friendship, familial bonds, and community (Jasser et al., 2023). These friends and family (*Sentimentr Score =* 0.265) facets regularly materialise in posts on g/introduceyourself and provide a positive interaction starting point. Utilising the close-reading keywords (*Happy, Hear, Community, New, Friend, Join, Family, Hope, Interest, Connect*) associated with the coded theme, the related contents highlight the introductory relationships and emotions between virtual strangers:

> *Gabbers are like a family, we don't always agree but we will have your back if you show respect.*
>
> *It feels good to be here. I am now a Gab family.*
>
> *I can honestly say that I've connected with real people on Gab. Some of which I've come to build relationships with. Gab will forever be the place for new friendships, and rediscovering old faces Big Tech has tried to erase.*

There is an immediacy behind joining the platform, in which boundaries for initial membership are non-existent and being part of the "Gab family" is automatic. Importantly, little effort is required

to "feel at home" or to "fit in." Simply registering and posting a welcoming message generates positive replies from the community with participants actively looking to connect.

Why are these users so quick to form or look for friendly and familial bonds? Because the userbase feels they have each experienced similar scenarios of online and offline societal rejection (Renström et al., 2020) and are now like-minded (*Sentimentr Score* = 0.125) in their social needs, wants, and interactions (Jasser et al., 2023). Consequently, the community often cites their platform experiences in reference to the Gab family as "us," "we," "together," or "our" as a method to denote homeliness and in-group (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). This reformulation in placing group over self is an effective means for building a collective voice while countering past and present communal transgressions:

> *Thank you for creating a media site for like-minded individuals who have been ostracized and erased from the leftist, corrupt, and evil sites that are visible to everyone on Earth.*
>
> *Gab is where we should've been all along. Today, I correct that, and hope to share with you the continuing struggle against the assault on free speech.*

These varying tribulations – an explanatory factor for the relatively lower *Sentimentr Score* – offer themselves as a bonding exercise for the group's participants, inherently linking their struggles towards a common cause. It also showcases that experiences of rejection do not have to be individualised, but rather users believe "we," as a far-right community, are all suffering the same virtual fate, although experiences of ostracisation and moderation may differ.

At the same time, Gab's marketing and terms of service stratagem as a (far-right) free speech (*Sentimentr Score* = 0.317) haven provides the façade that individuals can "finally" post whatever

is on their mind "without censorship" or "Big Tech control." The associated free speech keywords (*Free, Share, Speech, Discussion, Platform, Truth, Know, Freedom, Learn, Diverse*) reiterate these findings. What is essential to this emotional belonging is the (newly found) freedom to communicate anything the user wants:

> *Greetings everyone! I hear this is the place to freely express facts and opinions. Awesome!*
>
> *Let me test your "free speech", gab. A lot of Jews can be slimy scumbags with massive victim mentalities.*

Moreover, the community's infosphere as "truth seekers" who research and highlight "hidden realities" (Munn, 2022) provides an empowering environment where the group's far-right ontologies are continuously reaffirmed:

> *I'm interested in finding the TRUTH behind the current events unfolding in this world.*
>
> *I'm here for Freedom of Speech, to have a truthful meaningful conversations about things that matter in this fight for our White Race, White Family and White Nation.*
>
> *Interested in learning more truth and information to make sense of everything going on in the world.*

Gab is thus an information space of comfort where participants can feel at home in a virtual place which appeals to an alternative (far-right) perspective of the world and appreciates those willing to speak their minds on taboo or counter-mainstream topics.

Identity and religiosity: how the community connects

Understanding and identifying the community which calls Gab home is vital to comprehending their intimate relationship with the platform and subgroup. However, no overarching identity unifies the group. Instead, loose guidelines are established by the content and replies, which regularly repeat in the data. In their search for emotional belonging, users attempt to fall within the spectrum of acceptable content captured in the close-reading findings. Moreover, while the previous attributes related to home evoke positive sentiments amongst participants, identity amongst the community is oftentimes contentious, volatile, and under existential threat. These values create an atmosphere of insecurity and subsequent venting on how the group should best overcome it.

Finding a coherent identity amongst far-right individuals is difficult, demonstrated in the umbrella conceptualisation of the movement (Pirro, 2023). Outlining one on Gab – an international online space with content variety from puppies to neo-Nazis – is even more challenging. However, that does not mean specific communal identities and cultures do not exist on 'Introduce Yourself.' Instead, what is clear from the identified terms (*Interest, Conservative, White, Child, Belief, Country, Sick, Race, Family, Patriot*) is that the community's identity (*Sentimentr Score* = 0.156) presents an ongoing struggle for the userbase's survival versus their collective strength. The relationship is best understood in pairings with the destruction of these outlined essential self-facets:

> *I would appreciate it if you could spread this information to the patriots around you.*
> *I want patriots to be aware that Antifa has declared war on white people.*

> *Absolutely fed up of Twitter, their hidden totalitarian censors who are RACISTS against whites, occidentals, Christians, heterosexuals. Fed up of those accounts of gays, showing their dirty ass all day long, in front of kids.*
>
> *Proud white man against my replacement!*

The userbase is thus quick to double down on their attachment to Gab, where these identifying features offer hypermasculine nationalism (Hogg, 2020) or a sense of control (Webber et al., 2018) against existential threats. These sentiments place the community as true patriots "fighting for our freedom." In this context, one's whiteness, country, family values, and patriotism are traditional symbols of a far-right ultra-conservative nostalgia (Reyna et al., 2022) – an attempt to recapture the community's past prestige. Therefore, fitting into this power "struggle" offers users an easy in to develop connections and feel welcome into the group while maintaining the Gab community as a powerful communal force fighting to protect one another.

Religiosity (*Sentimentr Score* = 0.173) offers itself as another central instrument and answer to this identity insecurity, and as a predominant catch-all belonging for the subgroup's users. In this context, the group's collective faith can challenge the "evils of the world." Religious doctrine intermixes with the abovementioned protectionism to showcase the strength the community holds both in spiritual affinity and collectivity (Armaly et al., 2022):

> *I understand how important it is for everyone who is Christian to stick together and how we should dominate institutions of power so we don't get dominated.*
>
> *Standing up for Jesus Christ. Taking an honest and truthful stand against the many things that are going wrong in our society.*

Christianity, likewise, presents a positive "guiding light" for the userbase's sense of rejection, often taking this form in inspirational biblical quotes and support networks on the platform:

> *In welcoming newcomers to Gab, my hope is that you find not only free speech but also the reality of God's power. Is there something today that is heavy upon your heart or life that I can pray with you about?*
>
> *Jesus is king, he defeated the enemy and he is coming back. Because of him I will never get tired of winning.*

This discourse becomes a powerful tool to foster connections among the diverse userbase and a higher power. The findings showcase that believing in Jesus relieves and comforts the community's growing ontological insecurities (Kinnvall, 2004). Moreover, in cases where the group's hypermasculine strength or racial nostalgia fails to establish a strong sense of control or to challenge the "great evil in the world," Christianity becomes a fallback mechanism to uphold the community's perception of "winning." As a result, user identity on the group is multi-layered, utilising the far-right's transnational diversity to fluctuate in their conceptualisation of home on the platform. What then becomes essential is that specific identity-based characteristics on 'Introduce Yourself' intentionally remain loosely defined. Instead, a sense of emotional belonging within the userbase revolves around power, as participants ebb and flow across different identities or in-group features that project their collective strength and maintain the subcommunity as a positive environment for far-right socialisation.

A look at total Sentimentr Score and far-right extremism's place on g/introduceyourself

Where does far-right extremist rhetoric fit within a Gab Social group whose emotional belonging is built on predominantly positive sentiments (*Sentimentr Score* = 0.153) and perceptions of home? The answer is that conventional understandings of right and wrong or good and bad do not match

the ways the far-right constructs positive processes of attraction and attachment on g/introduceyourself. Consequently, positive perceptions of home come in all shapes and sizes marked by intermixing extremist and conspiratorial principles featuring in concealed replies, post-commandeering, and dog whistling or via outright xenophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic content. The content and discursive intergroup struggle of moral ambiguity paints a complex picture of what the virtual home looks like according to its participants. This complexity is exemplified by instances where emotions such as anger, fear, and disgust are constructed and experienced as positive in-group themes.

In the context of the *new home* on Gab, characterised by its emphasis on rejection and reattachment, the userbase's perception of the world has undergone a transformative shift, aligning them with the distinctive yet disjointed ontology of the far-right (see Busbridge et al., 2020; Luger, 2022). At the core of this transformation sits the regular use of conspiracy theories. These narratives are diverse – with no one defining storyline – and encapsulate the believed topsy-turvy nature of society, "the world has turned upside down. Wrong is now right and right is now wrong." Herein, negative emotion (Gerts et al., 2021) plays a fundamental role in conspiratorial manipulations, with users drawing on different conceptualisations of loss, suffering, and destruction in constructing their repurposed world:

> *Your family might think you are crazy for declining poisoned swabs and injections, and defending yourself from a genocide by prepping. There is a real pain to holding this conflict between perception and reality, and the social harm it causes. However, holding that pain is a high form of love: we care about ourselves, them, and humanity so much that we will endure enormous psychological hardship. This war really is one of love overcoming fear.*

> *Neo Nat Soc who loves traditional european values and our ppl and want us all to be free from the jewish-globalist elite banking & media engineered satanic tyranny we live in. won't be taking any vaccines ever. #HoloHoax #TheGreatReplacement #TheGreatReset #UNagenda30 #CovidHoax diversity is a codeword for white genocide. Access to whites is not a human right.*

While the content selected appears unattached, for the Gab subcommunity, perceptions of "truth" are oftentimes interchangeable with anger and fear (Marcks & Pawelz, 2022). These processes are self-fulfilling and mutually reinforcing, with the creation of alternative worldviews a precursor to hate-filled language, and conversely, the propagation of hate reinforces these alternate perspectives. Combining this relationship with the group's emphasis on home on the fringe media site as the ultimate "free-speaking online space" generates a recipe for users to post anything they desire as various forms of pseudo-truths. Toxic communications and conspiracies thus serve a larger purpose. Shifting ontologies around world crises provide a starting point for extremist opinions to flourish (Fitzgerald, 2022; Kaunert et al., 2022), even if the users present these narratives through a positive depiction of "love".

What is essential for the userbase is that conspiracies, how they are discussed, and the hatred the messages evoke are not one-dimensional. Rather, extremist ideologies and opinions are reinforced and manipulated via different content types and dissemination strategies. For instance, dog whistling and radically suggestive media appeals to specific participants who understand the intended message of the original poster (Åkerlund, 2022):

> *I want the real truth all of it .....*

> *Reply (1): Watch 'Europa: the Last Battle' and 'the greatest story never told' for starters.*
> *Reply (2): How A Jew Became a Nazi (Video Documentary)*
> *Reply (3): The History of Jews in Russia (Video Documentary)*
> *Reply (4): Truth is racist, sexist, antisemitic and not too fag friendly.*
>
> *I don't like long nosed people.*
>
> *Reply (1): Jew-hatred is inherent in the European DNA*
> *Reply (2): KEEP THAT JEW HATRED PUMPING IN YOUR VEINS EVERYONE!!!*
> *Reply (3): Every true Aryan knows the Jew is our racial enemy.*

For discussions on "real truth," the dominating replies fixate on Jewish conspiracies and ethnic discrimination, where users are quick to swarm the comment section with hate-filled messages towards the out-group. Other virtual members, often self-described neo-Nazis, feel more comfortable sharing their far-right opinions – anti-Semitism the most common – without the need to conceal their feelings or narrative in the replies:

> *I will be making and posting educational material regarding the Jewish question, White Replacement etc; I am a National Socialist, Hoping to find like-minded individuals here*
>
> *I came here to name the jews because of 14 words. I am fed up with demonic pedophiles controlling the government and care about a future for White Europeans.*

Why do some users then post ambiguous far-right extremist messages if this content is regularly posted without a filter? It is not about hiding the narratives from potential censorship – the community's moderators do not remove (far-right) radical rhetoric. Nor is it about maintaining a front-page façade of positivity. Rather, these narratives are an activity or entertainment for participants (Zuckerman, 2019). Extremist users bond over the shared explicit and implicit messages against out-groups (Hardy, 2023), where ambiguity allows for toxic reinterpretations of

commonly cited enemies and functions as a vessel to attract more eyes amongst unsuspecting viewers. In this instance, hate-filled media and conspiracies act as a mechanism for comradery construction and reattachment, reinforcing the like-minded emotional belonging and sense of shared groupness previously highlighted. Toxicity is "fun" for the platform's community, presented as an ongoing game to figure out the missing (conspiratorial or extremist) connections to their *new home's* far-right ontologies.

Out-grouping: intergroup dynamics, competition, and community (self-)moderation

The final foundation to far-right online narratives and discussions is the intergroup competition (Bliuc et al., 2019; Reyna et al., 2022) promoted and highlighted on Gab. In this context, framing rejection and reattachment vis-à-vis in-group vs out-group (*Sentimentr Score* = -0.026) dynamics connects all members to a common experience (Hogg, 2018). The discursive process of accentuating an "us" and "them" serves two purposes: (1) creating a virtual boundary for membership with clear self-moderation guidelines and (2) presenting an overarching communal threat, where one's home needs to be protected.

In the choose-your-own-community style of Gab's *new home* formulation, the boundaries of who belongs and does not depend on the adapting hate-filled discourse towards established far-right out-groups, with the predominant keywords Left, Woke, Jews, LGBTQ, Gay, Evil, Destroy, Censor, Antifa, War. For an alternative fringe media space built on countering 'Big Tech' censorship (Jasser et al., 2023), animosity towards mainstream media, the left, and Jews as epicentres of "control" and "evilness" dominate intergroup discussions:

> *I came to Gab to connect with groups of people who were originally being censored on other social media networks. The LEFT tries to silence you and take your 'FREEDOM of speech' away. So I come here to stay connected with the RIGHT side.*
>
> *In quest of fellow whiteous righteous people to take on. The fight we so desperately need to not stop waging until we have taken full care of our enemies and oppressors*

The in-group vs out-group competition presents itself as a battle between right and wrong, where the Gab community sits as the moral good, upholding free speech rights online. This dichotomised demarcation towards wrongness and rightness opens the floodgates to the numerous outlined far-right narratives with the ability to produce and circulate radical content seen as righteous and an essential positive facet of their emotional belonging. At the same time, deep-seated anxiety that this newly established home and virtual freedom could be destroyed are frequently portrayed. These existential threats and fears translate into aggressive behaviour against any "outsider" content:

> *It seems like a lot of non—Whites and anti—White toony tunes are joining the site. Must be that magic soil we are so famous for. Why else would people who aren't welcome try to come and wreck the neighborhood?*
>
> *A lefty on Gab looking to meet interesting people*
>
> *Reply (1) if your a lefty get the fuck out. Gab is not for you nigger*
> *Reply (2) welcome to gab. now leave and go back to twitter.*
> *Reply (3) You aren't welcome here. This is OUR space, not yours. Get AIDS and die.*

Out-grouping thus offers the userbase a paramount tool for radical unity (Hogg & Adelman, 2013), promoting togetherness in a fragmented social environment where the community's identity, ideology, and narratives are often conflictual and diverse. Protecting their *new home* against

existential threats surpasses any faceted far-right affiliation, value system, or preference for specific media. The focus instead concentrates on "our" space, our home. This practice connects the diverse userbase, now united in the shared sense of home on Gab and against any out-groups which threaten the core of this virtual belonging. By communally harassing defined outsiders, users showcase and reaffirm their deep-seated emotional attachments to the platform and collective desire to maintain this exclusive far-right online space.

Conclusion

Through the interconnected themes of online and offline rejection and the reattachment to the far-right's Alt-Tech ecosystem, participants on Gab Social's g/introduceyourself highlight the positive emotion-based communicative processes leading to their sense of belonging, attraction, and attachment on the platform – a *new home*. These themes include (1) the immediate formulation of friendship and familial bonds; (2) a like-minded (radical) positionality and worldview; (3) an 'anti-Big Tech' motivation and the common quest for free speech; (4) a powerful in-group construction of collective identity through whiteness, masculinity, and patriotism; (5) Christianity as a common unifier and a method for a 'winning' in-groupness; and (6) out-grouping as a tool to promote togetherness and solidarity. These thick data immersive and computerised findings underscore that contemporary research often paints a one-sided and consequently flawed picture of far-right fringe social media, focusing on their hyper-negative and hate-filled environments. However, this study emphasises the importance of considering the *positive* drivers contributing to these platforms' success, maintenance, and growth. Moreover, it argues that the conventional dichotomy of positive and negative sentiments may not accurately reflect how the far-right perceives their emotion-based communications. By assessing the scale and manifestation of participant emotions, the article offers

a novel approach seldom applied in the field. Consequently, academics should reevaluate Alt-Tech spaces through a different, multi-dimensional conceptual lens that captures the nuanced dynamics and emotion-based elements that establish and sustain these online communities. Recognising this necessity will open the field to new directions and better understandings for these platform's successes.

Furthermore, the study's framework and findings serve as an initial exploration and empirical testing of the intricate emotional dynamics within the far-right Alt-Tech ecosystem. From these results, I suggest the far-right is carving out alluring online spaces for social interaction, fostering environments rife with pseudo-realities, conspiracies, hatred, and extremist ideologies that fuel a positive sense of in-groupness. Still, much more work on these topics is needed. While there is little doubt that Alt-Tech social media platforms, exploiting societal fragmentation and ostracisation, are pivotal in radicalising, recruiting, and mobilising individuals to their cause (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022), user motivations for joining these platforms go beyond the stereotypical focus on those seeking toxic communications, free hate speech, or subscribing to far-right ideologies. Instead, many individuals are inspired by the positive sentiments and strong sense of emotional belonging within these spaces. We must recognise these positive psychosocial processes as an effective online strategy and as promoters of alternative (radical) "homes". Therefore, future research should investigate – across different disciplinary techniques and datasets – the intricate dimensions of techno-sociality, positionality, and culture entrenched within these virtual spaces. For instance, methodologies such as interviewing, as exemplified by Koster and Houtman's work on Stormfront (2008), could offer a more profound understanding of the motivations and experiences of these online participants. While the existing literature appropriately

emphasises the discursive dangers of these platforms, such studies merely scratch the surface. Immersive research is essential to reveal how the far-right strategically leverages these spaces for recruitment, mobilisation, and advocacy. By adopting a nuanced and multifaceted perspective, future investigations can significantly contribute to our comprehension of far-right online dynamics and inform effective strategies for addressing the challenges posed by these digital spaces.

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