

From the front page of the internet to the home of free speech online:

The far-right movement's political communication on Reddit and Gab

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Abstract

As recent events, from the riot at the US capitol in January 2021 to an increase in the popularity of far-right ideology in politics around the world, have shown, the far-right movement is growing in strength every day. It spreads not just offline, but online; not just through political spaces, but in any way it can, and has learned to avoid detection and removal. Extremists that are part of movements such as the far-right have been pushed off of many mainstream platforms and, as a result, have created their own 'alt-tech' (alternate technology) platforms where they can express themselves and their ideas without fear of repercussion. As such, this thesis examines the way the far-right communicates on two specific communities, one from Reddit (as a traditional platform) and one from Gab (as an alt-tech platform). The communication of these communities is considered with relation to platform governance and affordances in order to establish if these elements affect such communication and how they do so.

The research is carried out using a thematic analysis of 50 posts from each community, for a total of N=100 posts. The main communication strategies found in these posts are collected and categorised for analysis. They are combined with a functionality analysis carried out on Reddit and Gab as platforms, which details the affordances present on each platform, in order to establish what effect (if any) the affordances and governance of the two platforms have on how their users communicate far-right ideas. The findings of the research indicate that affordances and governance do, indeed, affect the communication of the two groups studied. Where the platforms have similar affordances the groups communicate similarly, and where the platforms have different affordances the groups communicate differently. Platform governance is stricter on Reddit than on Gab, and this research finds that this makes Reddit users less likely to be explicit about far-right ideas than Gab users are. The thesis therefore helps to contribute to the current academic discourse surrounding the far-right and provides suggestions for future research into the issue.

Keywords: Far-right, Alt-tech, Platform Affordances, Platform Governance, Reddit, Gab

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Chapter 1: Introduction

- How did you connect with Nick?
- We used to play Fortnite together.
- You and Nick? For real?
- Yeah. It's the new golf course.

– *Louis Theroux's Forbidden America, Episode 1: Extreme and Online*

The above quote comes from the first episode of *Louis Theroux's Forbidden America* (Theroux & Dewsbury, 2022), a documentary investigating the far-right movement in the United States, and occurs between Theroux and an unnamed member of the far-right, who describes being drawn into the movement through the online video game, *Fortnite*. This is a small example of what many theorists have known for years: that the online far-right movement no longer spreads only through specifically designated forums and political spaces, but in any, and every, way it can (Nagle, 2017). This is more possible now than ever, as the far-right movement has been forced to learn to communicate their ideology more subtly and through non-traditional channels due to platform crackdowns on extremist content and, often, removal of those posting it.

Even platforms which once had the reputation of being safe havens for extremist content, such as Reddit, have become far less friendly towards it in recent years. This is due, in part, to increased knowledge about far-right communication and ideology, as well as to rulings which hold the platform responsible for the content it hosts, and, perhaps most importantly, to the reluctance of advertisers to advertise on a platform with a problematic reputation. The political and economic ramifications of hosting extremist content, therefore, have encouraged the vast majority of mainstream platforms to toughen up their platform governance strategies in an attempt to remove or reduce the amount of far-right (and other extremist) content on their platform.

The common platform governance strategies used to discourage and remove extremist content include the adoption of stricter platform rules (Gorwa, 2019), stricter content moderation (Ganesh & Bright, 2020; Jhaver et al., 2019; Trujillo & Cresci, 2022), and, in extreme cases, the removal and banning of any user or community that posts problematic content (Al-Rawi, 2021; Innes & Innes, 2021; Rogers, 2020). Additionally, the platform can design and organise its affordances (the actions that the user perceives as being

allowed by the platform) to discourage the posting of such content. There are problems associated with attempting to rid a platform of extremist content, the most commonly voiced of which is that removing content and users from mainstream platforms (such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or Reddit) may push them towards more fringe platforms, including so-called ‘alt-tech’ sites.

Alt-tech (or alternate technology) appeared specifically in response to the mass removal of far-right content from most mainstream social media platforms (Zannettou et al., 2018). Popular alt-tech sites have included *Voat*, which shut down in 2017 (Mekacher & Pappasavva, 2022); *BitChute*, a YouTube alternative (Trujillo et al., 2020); image boards like *4chan* and *8kun* (previously *8chan*) (Colley & Moore, 2022); *Gab*, which will be one of the two platforms examined in this thesis; and, most recently, *Gettr*, (Paudel et al., 2021). These alternative platforms have been researched (Al-Rawi, 2021; Jasser et al., 2021), but there has been little investigation into how such platforms differ from mainstream ones, and how this affects the content posted to them. Al-Rawi (2021) called for further research into other alt-tech platforms, including Gab, and into “the convergence of various social media sites, including traditional platforms, in spreading hate in the online ecosystem” (p. 846).

As such, this thesis will examine how the political communication of the far-right differs between an alt-tech platform, Gab, and a mainstream platform, Reddit, in an attempt to understand why these differences occur. Therefore, the research question will be: *how do platform affordances and governance contribute to the ways in which the political communication of the far-right movement differs between Reddit and Gab?* The objective of this research is twofold: it aims to establish how the political communication of the far-right differs between Reddit and Gab, and also to establish what effect (if any) platform governance and platform affordances have on this. This research will not only begin to fill the aforementioned gap in research identified by Al-Rawi (2021), but will also add to the overall academic knowledge regarding the far-right (ideology and communication), alt-tech platforms, and the effects of platform governance and affordances. Additionally, this research found evidence of the ‘Dark MAGA’ movement (discussed in Chapter Five), about which articles have begun to be published (Shoaib, 2022; Squirrell, 2022) but which has not yet been academically researched.

In addition to its academic relevance, this topic also has social relevance in that it will help to further understand the far-right. This is an important issue today, as evidenced by recent events, from the riot at the US capitol in January 2021, to the trucker’s protest in Canada early this year, and to the success of far-right governments and movements in Eastern

Europe. Even the mass shooting of Robb Elementary school in Uvalde, Texas last month comes as one of the latest in a long line of mass shootings, many of which have been tied to the far-right movement. The man behind the Pittsburgh Synagogue mass shooting in October 2018 posted his ideas on Gab, and even a final message announcing the attack before it happened (Roose, 2018). The far-right movement is growing daily, becoming more violent, and is clearly of great societal concern. This thesis attempts to understand the movement and its strategies a little more, in the hope that this can be combatted.

The structure of the thesis, then, will be as follows. Chapter Two will outline the theoretical framework informing this thesis, including the literature relating to the platform – namely platform affordances, platform governance, and a brief overview of Reddit and Gab and their relation to the far-right – and the literature on the far-right movement – namely its ideology and communication. Chapter Three explains the method that will be used to investigate the research question: a thematic analysis of two communities, one from Reddit and one from Gab. Chapter Four contains a functionality analysis of the affordances of Reddit and Gab, exploring how privacy and anonymity, self-expression, interaction, and moderation function on each platform. Chapter Five outlines the results of the thematic analysis in preparation for Chapter Six, which discusses these results and provides a conclusion to the thesis.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical aspects are relevant in attempting to answer the research question, *how do platform affordances and governance contribute to the ways in which the political communication of the far-right movement differs between Reddit and Gab?* To begin, it must be established how, and in what ways, the platform can shape the communication that happens on it. Here, this will come down to the governance of the platform, the affordances of the platform, as well as the context of the platform – in this case, the context of Reddit and Gab. Next, the political communication of the far-right movement will be discussed, specifically regarding the ideology of the far-right (including the specific beliefs and messages it spreads) and the discursive strategies it uses to promote this ideology.

2.1 The role of the platform in shaping communication

It is widely acknowledged, even outside of academic circles, that the platform does, at least partly, shape the message. The majority of internet users realise, for instance, that the way one expresses the same message on different platforms changes – Instagram requires an image, while Twitter limits the number of characters, and so on. Internet users also generally know the kinds of content they will be allowed to post on a site: for example, most sites do not allow explicit sexual content, so users know not to post it. The former realisation is an acknowledgement of *platform affordances*, while the latter is *platform governance*. Both of these aspects, along with the context and reputation of the platform, have a significant impact on the communication of the platform, as will be discussed throughout the following sections.

2.1.1 Platform affordances

The theory of technological affordances emerged as a middle ground between technological determinism (the idea that technology affects social relations and structures) and constructivism (the idea that technologies, and their impact on social structures, are entirely socially constructed) (Hutchby, 2001). Viewing technology through its affordances (“the possibilities that they offer for action”) (Gibson, 1979, cited in Hutchby, 2001, p. 9) allows them to be examined without falling too far into either determinism or constructivism (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017), as well as to examine the users' *perception* of that technology and the opportunities for action it affords them, which determines how they will use the technology (Hutchby, 2001). Platforms can manipulate the affordances of their websites to

encourage or discourage various behaviours in their users (Davis and Chouinard, 2016), with varying levels of success (Copland, 2020). Affordances, therefore, are essentially the things that do or do not allow a user to take a specific action, they can help to explain the behaviour of platform users (Jasser et al., 2021), including the arguments present on a platform and how they are articulated. For instance, users would convey a message very differently on Twitter, which allows only 280 characters per Tweet, than on Facebook, which allows 63,206 characters.

For extremism of any kind, including far-right extremism, one of the most important affordances a platform can give is that of privacy (Al Rawi, 2021) or anonymity (Åkerlund, 2021b). This need not be complete anonymity. In fact, complete anonymity is rare online – what we typically have instead is a pseudonymous identity (or username) that we can choose never to link to our real-world identity. It has been found previously that, like the use of real names, the use of pseudonyms can increase trust and credibility (Bernstein et al., 2011). As such, pseudonyms tend to be the preferred method for sites like Gab and Reddit, where users still want to keep their real name private but want a permanent online identity, which more anonymous sites like 4chan do not afford (Bernstein et al., 2011).

Aside from anonymity, the ability to express oneself and produce user-generated content is also a valuable affordance for the far-right, as it allows hate to spread (Åkerlund, 2021b). In order for this spread to be possible, visibility is also important, which is mainly controlled by the platform's vanity metrics (Åkerlund, 2021b) and algorithm (Tuters & Burton, 2021). *Vanity metrics* refer to the actions users can take to interact with and show support for a post, including liking, commenting, and sharing (Åkerlund, 2021b). Content with more support becomes more visible than others (Åkerlund, 2021b), partly due to the role of algorithms, which prioritise content with a high level of engagement (Tuters & Burton, 2021). It is also important, therefore, that the content does not go against the site's rules or terms of service, or not only will it fail to be spread by the algorithms, but may be removed altogether (Chancellor et al., 2016). How strictly the rules of the site are enforced is also important, and those with lax moderation are preferred (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017), as will be discussed in the following section.

Overall, then, the most important affordances for far-right communities online are those relating to *privacy and anonymity, self-expression, interaction, and moderation*. As such, these categories will be examined during the functionality analysis of Reddit and Gab in Chapter Four to consider how they affect user behaviour.

2.1.2 Platform governance

One of the most important affordances that shapes how a platform is used by its members is its governance. As alluded to previously, platform governance is a term used to describe the policing of a platform – basically, the rules of a platform and how they are enforced. Traditionally, this has been through self-governance, in which the platform has a low degree of transparency, liability, and external oversight (Gorwa, 2019). However, recently external governance (intervention by the government in the regulation of the platform) has begun to become more popular, along with attempts to make platform companies more liable for problematic speech on their sites (Gorwa, 2019).

Platforms governing strategies can generally be categorised either as *strategic communication* or *content moderation* (Ganesh & Bright, 2020, p. 7). Strategic communication involves attempting to combat far-right messages with opposing ones. It typically has one of three aims: to reduce the likelihood of radicalisation, to prevent vulnerable groups from being radicalised, or to try to reverse the ideology of those already radicalised (Ganesh & Bright, 2020). Commonly, the type of strategic communication carried out by social media companies (such as Reddit and Gab) attempts to reduce the likelihood of radicalisation across the platform, rather than de-indoctrinating those already radicalised (Ganesh & Bright, 2020). As this thesis looks at far-right communication, typically posted by those already deeply involved, the concept of content moderation, which refers to a set of practices used by social media platforms to enforce their guidelines on acceptable content, will be more important (Ganesh & Bright, 2020).

The aim of content moderation, in relation to extremism, is to reduce the presence of extremist narratives and viewpoints on a platform, thereby reducing the potential that audiences might be exposed to extremist narratives (Ganesh & Bright, 2020). In attempting content moderation, platforms can make use of mechanisms of regulation, including “content policies, terms of service, algorithms, interfaces, and other socio-technical regimes” (Gorwa, 2019, p. 856). For instance, as the analysis of Reddit and Gab will show, the terms of service can explicitly ban particular types of speech – such as hate speech. While this does not prevent users from creating hate speech, it gives the platform moderators precedent to remove hate speech as soon as they see it. In this way, content moderation is used to support the platform’s community guidelines and involves removing content and users that violate the rules on “hate speech, inappropriate content, support or celebration of terrorism, or spam” (Ganesh & Bright, 2020, p. 11).

Content moderation is carried out in a variety of ways. Some platforms include automated content moderation (Jhaver et al., 2019). Reddit does this in the form of the ‘automoderator’ bot that can be programmed by community admins to carry out simple moderation tasks, such as flagging content that appears to be against the community rules (r/Reddit, n.d.). Other sites use moderation techniques including algorithmic moderation (Gorwa et al., 2020), user moderation (Hine et al., 2017; Massanari, 2017; etc), crowdsourced moderation (Gol et al., 2019), and ‘soft’ moderation like shadow banning (Myers West, 2018). Content moderation is reported to have a variety of effects: from making ‘problematic’ content more difficult to access, to forcing problematic users to move to a platform more accepting of their views, to making the problematic content decrease in frequency but increase in ‘toxicity’ (Trujillo & Cresci, 2022).

Therefore, there is some disagreement as to whether or not content moderation is an effective form of platform governance. On the one hand, not moderating content, or only moderating it to a limited degree, can allow hate speech to infiltrate the site (Jasser et al., 2021). Users on platforms with strict content moderation policies have to be more subtle in their expression of extreme ideas for fear of moderation (Åkerlund, 2021b). On the other, the negative consequences may outweigh the benefits. For one thing, extremists tend to wear their censorship as a badge of honour, so having their content removed can have a community-building effect among extremist groups (Ganesh & Bright, 2020). For another, content moderation is often not enough to stop the most extreme users, who must eventually be *deplatformed* (Al-Rawi, 2021; Innes & Innes, 2021; Rogers, 2020).

Deplatforming occurs when users are permanently removed from a site for breaking the terms of service. This usually occurs only after repeat warnings and suspensions, making it a last resort (Innes & Innes, 2021; Van Dijck et al., 2021). It is a commonly used tactic against far-right extremists (Rogers, 2020). Deplatforming is seen by some as a good solution to the regulation of harmful content, but by others as social media companies censoring their users, which can even add weight to the deplatformed user's words (Innes & Innes, 2021) and draw attention to their message (Rogers, 2020). Although there do remain questions as to whether or not it is effective in all cases (Innes & Innes, 2021; Rogers, 2020), some instances of an effective deplatforming campaign have been found (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017). Even effective deplatforming is not without issue, however. Chandrasekharan et al. (2017), for example, found that those effectively deplatformed on Reddit simply moved to alternative social media where their views were more welcome.

These alternate social media are forms of what has come to be known as *alt-tech* (or alternate technology), which has appeared as a response to the deplatforming and other forms of rejection of far-right content on mainstream media (Zannettou et al., 2018). The rise of alt-tech has led some to worry about the possibility that far-right and alt-tech platforms could build a new platform ecosystem outside the mainstream, which would isolate the far-right from the rest of the ideological spectrum, and thus complicating “the process of governing ideologically diverse polities” (Freelon et al., 2020, cited in Van Dijck et al., 2021, p. 9). There is some evidence of this, as far-right supporters, over the past years, increasingly moved to open-source platforms to evade censorship and create a truly decentralized online space (Van Dijck et al., 2021).

2.1.3 *Reddit and Gab*

Online communication can also be shaped by the way that platforms express the culture and values of their user base around a broad range of issues, including elements important to the far-right, such as gender, race, and religion (Pauwels, 2012). The affordances and governance methods mentioned previously can also add to this. For example, extremist platforms typically offer a high level of anonymity (Åkerlund, 2021b) and privacy (Al-Rawi, 2021), the promise of unregulated free speech (Åkerlund, 2021b), and a lack of interference from mainstream media (Al-Rawi, 2021). In fact, mainstream media can be entirely cut off through the use of links. Foot et al. (2003) argue that linking to a source makes it visible. Therefore, specifically *not* linking to a source can be considered “an act of silencing through non-recognition” (Rogers & Marres, 2000, cited in Foot et al., 2003, p. 22). By not linking to mainstream media, then, extremist platforms can render them invisible.

The above goes for both Reddit and Gab (see Figure 2.1, below), though there are differences between the users of the two sites which, along with their affordances affect how they are used and the prevalence of far-right ideology on the platform. For instance, Reddit users are primarily young, educated, male, and from the United States (Degenhard, 2021; Statista Research Department, 2022a, 2022b, 2022d). Gab users are also predominately men from the United States (Jasser et al., 2021; Zannettou et al., 2018). However, they are primarily conservative and overwhelmingly white (Lima et al., 2018), especially compared to Reddit, which was found to have a relatively equal number of black and white users (Statista Research Department, 2022c). Lima et al. (2018) also found that the far-right has a strong, influential presence on Gab, as does hate speech.

Figure 2.1

The layout of the homepages of Reddit (above) and Gab (below) on 5 May 2022.

The image displays two social media homepages side-by-side. The top half shows the Reddit homepage, and the bottom half shows the Gab homepage.

Reddit Homepage (Top):

- Search bar: "Search Reddit"
- Navigation: "Hot", "Everywhere", "New", "Top", and a menu icon.
- Post: "Cat presents her newborns to her human mom" by r/aww, posted 4 hours ago, with 30.3k upvotes. The post includes a video thumbnail showing a cat in a bed.
- Right sidebar: "Top News Communities" list including r/worldnews, r/nottheonion, r/olympics, and r/savedyouaclick. Below this is a "Reddit Premium" advertisement and a "POPULAR COMMUNITIES" section.

Gab Homepage (Bottom):

- Search bar: "Search Gab"
- Header: "Gab.com" and "Popular posts across Gab"
- Sort: "Sort by Hot Posts"
- Left sidebar: "Menu" (Home, Search, Groups, Feeds, Marketplace, News, About) and "Explore" (Apps, Shop, Trends, Dissenter).
- Post 1: Lauren Witzke (@LaurenWitzkeDE), 6h. Text: "They are hitting Cawthorn relentlessly because he exposed the DC lobby blackmail enterprise. Our politicians are all blackmailed and THIS is why they all vote the way they do. It's not going away unless we purge the entire system and start over." (1530 likes, 132 comments, 610 shares).
- Post 2: Andrew Torba (@a), 3h. Text: "People who have a problem with my methods and strategies don't realize that there is a small window of opportunity to ram open the Overton Window. When I see it I will take it as quickly and as aggressively as possible, because that's the only way. Few understand this." (1315 likes, 278 comments, 243 shares).
- Post 3: P. Jeffrey Black (@PJeffreyBlack), 4h. Text: "Don't Believe the Pro-Choice Propaganda." (Hashtags: #Abortion #ProChoice #Propaganda)

Previously, Reddit has also been criticised for its less-than-tough stance on far-right content (Gaudette et al., 2021) and hands-off approach to moderation (Topinka, 2018). Extremist content spreads easily on Reddit due to its structure and affordances. Reddit is comprised of millions of subcommunities, known as *Subreddits* (or *Subs*), each with its own specific topic. In each subreddit, users vote on posts, with the most popular being the most visible (Carman et al., 2018). This voting system has previously been found to increase the user's perceived social identity, and therefore collective identity, as well as creating an echo chamber of ideas, which is an ideal breeding ground for extremism (Gaudette et al., 2021).

The prevalence of hate speech on the platform led Reddit to begin regulating it in recent years, with some significant success (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017; Gaudette et al., 2021; Van Dijck et al., 2021). Reddit's terms of service regard hateful content as that which aims to "promote hate based on identity or vulnerability" (Reddit, n.d.), so subreddits that did this were the primary targets of moderation. Reddit's first step in regulating these subreddits was to manually 'quarantine' those which produced hateful content (Gaudette et al., 2021). Quarantined subreddits lose access to revenue-generating mechanisms on the platform, cannot be found by searching on Reddit, only with the page URL, and are removed from their subscribers' feeds until the user seeks it out to add it again (Copland, 2020). Users who attempt to access quarantined subreddits are met with a warning regarding the content on the subreddit and requiring them to agree to see such content before proceeding, which was intended to stop users from stumbling across extreme content accidentally (Copland, 2020).

Eventually, Reddit began removing these hateful communities altogether in a mass-deplatforming (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2021). Deplatforming these communities did work for Reddit, in that hate speech on the site decreased 'drastically' as those users who were reprimanded either lessened their use of hate speech or left the site altogether, moving to other platforms (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017). As mentioned previously, this migration to other platforms is a major concern in the discourse around deplatforming, as it can lead to the increased popularity of alt-tech. This is what happened in Reddit's case, with many users migrating to Voat, an alt-tech platform that no longer exists (Al-Rawi, 2021). Typically, alt-tech is created to give a platform to far-right content rejected by mainstream media (Zannettou et al., 2018). For instance, Bitchute is an alternative to YouTube, and Gab was originally an alternative to Twitter (Al-Rawi, 2021), though it has since become one of the alt-tech movement's most successful and durable sites (Jasser et al., 2021).

Gab's biggest competitor, Parler, was removed after the January 6th riot at the US capitol, at which point Gab saw a huge influx of users (Jasser et al., 2021). From its inception, Gab has attracted a variety of (mainly right-wing) extremists, from the alt-right and neo-Nazis to QAnon and conspiracy theorists (Van Dijck et al., 2021). Gab prides itself on its lax moderation policy, allowing nearly all online behaviour except activities which break the law or encourage others to do so, spam, doxing or activity that causes offline harm (Jasser et al., 2021). Many of its high-profile, influential users are 'celebrities' associated with right-wing ideology, such as Milo Yiannopoulos and Alex Jones (Zannettou et al., 2018).

The casual format of Gab makes it unlikely that the site would be used to plan real-world action, so its negative impact is in terms of spreading far-right ideology (Jasser et al., 2021), and it has previously been described as a "haven for white supremacists" (Rogers, 2020, p. 214). Mathew et al. (2019) indeed found that the amount of hate speech on Gab is steadily increasing and that it is spreading to previously non-hateful users. It has also been found that some Gab users actively try to recruit others to the far right (Zannettou et al., 2018). Additionally, those who have committed violent acts have used Gab to express their views and announce their acts, which also leads to an increased level of traffic to the site, and therefore an increased spread of far-right ideology (Rogers, 2020).

We can tell a lot about a platform by the users it attracts. Reddit and Gab have similar user bases, in that they are predominantly males from the United States, but differ in that Gab's user base is far more homogeneous, both politically (conservative) and racially (white). This difference could be explained by the self-presentation of each platform. Gab targets itself to more extreme users through its slogan ('the home of free speech online') and its status as an alt-tech platform, which tends to attract those who have been deplatformed previously. In contrast, Reddit markets itself as being more akin to an apolitical news discussion forum, from its slogan ('the front page of the internet') to its design. However, the most important element affecting far-right discussion is how each platform treats extremist content in general. While Reddit once accepted it, it has since cracked down hard (and, often, successfully), thus making it a far less friendly place for those intending to engage in far-right discussion than Gab is, which highlights its lax moderation policy in an attempt to engage those who Reddit tries to drive away.

2.2. The far-right

When we talk about the far-right, we are not talking about one single, homogenous group. Instead, the far-right movement is a form of right-wing extremism, encompassing a variety of movements and ideologies, including the “‘manosphere,’ the ‘alt-right,’ and racists more broadly” (Gaudette et al., 2021, p. 3494), as well as “right-libertarianism, Trumpism and white supremacy” (Jasser et al., 2021, p. 7). These movements all share similar beliefs and values which fall under the banner of far-right ideology, though all elements need not be present in a single message, and the discursive strategy used to present the message varies.

2.2.1 *The ideology of the far-right*

There are several key issues and beliefs commonly associated with far-right ideology. First is that of *othering*, or the alienation and exclusion of specific groups (Gaudette et al., 2021). This leads to an us-versus-them narrative, and the perception of an ‘in group’ (the far-right) and an ‘out group’ (the group being alienated) (Åkerlund, 2021a). Groups often alienated include non-white people (Al-Rawi, 2021), religious groups, especially Jews and Muslims (Gaudette et al., 2021), feminists (Åkerlund, 2021b) and women in general (Jasser et al., 2021), and immigrants (Åkerlund, 2021a; Marcks & Pawelz, 2020; Tutters & Burton, 2021). This othering is part of a larger process of dehumanising these groups, which makes it easier to encourage hate speech and violence against them (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020).

Hate speech is also a key element of far-right rhetoric. Hate speech targets a minority group or individual due to their “race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability or disease” (ElSherief et al., 2018, cited in Mathew et al., 2019, p. 2). This can encompass everything from simple insults and slurs to *scapegoating*, or blaming a particular group for problems beyond their control (Al-Rawi, 2021; Marcks & Pawelz, 2020), to *dangerous speech* (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017), which suggests that action should be taken against a particular group (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020). Hate speech is deeply connected to the process of othering, as it further dehumanises those it targets and strengthens the perceived boundaries between the in-group and the out-group (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017). Additionally, exposure to hate speech desensitises users to hateful content and lowers their empathy towards those targeted (Mathew et al., 2019).

Another important element of far-right ideology is victimhood. The far-right see themselves as part of an imagined homogenous, victimised people (Åkerlund, 2021a).

Typically, they see themselves as victims of cultural erosion (Al-Rawi, 2021) or censorship – not just by the media but by big tech companies (Jasser et al., 2021). In extreme cases, this perceived victimhood can also encompass fears of white genocide (Gaudette et al., 2021) and *Great Replacement* theory – or the idea that they will be replaced by one of the out-groups (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020). Interestingly, this perceived victimhood is often juxtaposed with their self-representation as superior and powerful (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020). The myth of victimhood is used to stoke fear among far-right followers and mobilise the far-right agenda, including violence, as an existential threat makes violence not just acceptable but necessary – even a heroic act (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020).

The perception of this victimised community goes hand in hand with a sense of nostalgia, for a real or unreal past (Åkerlund, 2021a). This manifests as *traditionalism*, a desire to reinstate traditional values and reject the modern world (Tuters & Burton, 2021). Often, the society that traditionalists want to reinstate is one which excludes non-white people, or at least views white people as superior (Åkerlund, 2021a). Even if these points are not made in an explicitly racist way, they will often circle around racist ideas, such as *multicultural rhetoric* and *differentialist racism*, which substitute the biological focus of traditional racism with a cultural focus, and suggest that some cultures should not mix, with the implication being that some cultures are better than others (Topinka, 2018).

Aside from the beliefs mentioned above, the far-right movement is often anti-establishment (Åkerlund, 2021a). It tends to reject mainstream conservatism as too liberal (Tuters & Burton, 2021), and treat the left as almost as much of an enemy as minority groups are (Gaudette et al., 2021). Additionally, such groups are also anti-censorship – as is to be expected, given how many of them have been deplatformed – and anti-political correctness (Al-Rawi, 2021). These ideas, along with all of those mentioned above, are often portrayed in specific, strategic ways in order to have the desired effect on the audience, as will be discussed now.

2.2.2 *Discursive strategies of the far-right*

The far-right, as any political movement does, aims to spread its ideas to as many people as possible and garner support for its cause. As such, the intention of their communication strategies is to avoid censorship and to make their ideology as palatable as possible, which often involves using far subtler language (Al-Rawi, 2021). This can include the use of coded language and dog-whistle terms, that will be understood by the intended

audience but not by onlookers or community moderators (Åkerlund, 2021a; Al-Rawi, 2021; Tuters & Burton, 2021). The same can be said for the use of jargon, which will be understood by members of the far-right, but not outsiders, and has the additional benefit of giving the user more credibility with their followers (Åkerlund, 2021b). Symbols are often used, such as the (((echo))) symbol that was discovered by the mainstream in 2016, and which consists of triple brackets placed around a name or word used to identify Jewish people who can then be harassed (Williams, 2016).

Humour is also a key tactic here (Åkerlund, 2021a; Al-Rawi, 2021), including the use of memes and satire (Askanius, 2021; Gaudette et al., 2021). The far-right weaponizes these methods in a similar way to those involved in trolling (Tuters & Burton, 2021). Weaponizing humour to serve the far-right is possible because they initially seem very mild or banal compared to more serious far-right content, which allows them to spread more easily, and even be unknowingly shared by those outside the group (Askanius, 2021). Using humour also allows far-right users to claim that they were only joking if they come close to facing repercussions for their behaviour (Åkerlund, 2021a). Above anything else, though, using humour allows far-right ideas to infiltrate the mainstream without being immediately censored, thus entering general political discussion, and furthering the far-right agenda (Åkerlund, 2021a; Askanius, 2021).

Aside from trying to make their politics more mainstream and palatable, then, the far-right also focuses on strengthening the belief of those already involved. One way this occurs is through collective identity formation. This is deeply supported by the us-versus-them ideology previously mentioned (Gaudette et al., 2021; Jasser et al., 2021). For starters, bonding against an ‘enemy’ is a good method for strengthening community ties (Gaudette et al., 2021). Additionally, humour is also useful here, as “those sharing a laugh at the expense of an “out-group” foster greater social affiliation and decreased social distance with their “in-group” while simultaneously increasing social distance from their targets of ridicule and insult in a process of dehumanization” (Askanius, 2021, p. 152).

In terms of serious communication, then, the far-right takes steps to raise their followers' trust in the far-right, and lower their trust in the mainstream. One useful tactic in conspiratorial circles involves discrediting mainstream media and politics by arguing that they are controlled by the enemy and not telling the truth (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020). In a similar vein, they also present sources in a biased way, by cherry-picking the content that serves their argument and rejecting the rest as untrue (Åkerlund, 2021b). This helps them to present their argument in a “(pseudo-)rational” (Åkerlund, 2021b, p. 6) way, even if the

argument itself lacks objective support. This can also be achieved by citing fabricated sources or false statistics to add credibility (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020).

Overall, different facets of the far-right movement have developed different ideologies and strategies of communication, although with significant overlap between groups. For instance, the *manosphere* (men-focused spaces which treat women, and especially feminists, as hostile) typically has a misogynistic, violent ideology, but also often includes elements of racism (Farrell et al., 2019) more traditionally associated with a different far-right subgroup: white supremacists (Daniels, 2009). In turn, white supremacist discourse often includes, aside from the obvious racist ideology, elements of misogyny (Daniels, 2009). This tends to hold true with the vast majority of far-right groups, hence why it is often useful to study them as one entity.

This thesis will also take this approach: focusing on the issues common to many far-right groups, as outlined earlier, including racism (Al-Rawi, 2021; Daniels, 2009), misogyny (Åkerlund, 2021b; Farrell et al., 2019; Jasser et al., 2021), antisemitism and Islamophobia (Gaudette et al., 2021), xenophobia (Åkerlund, 2021a; Marcks & Pawelz, 2020; Tutters & Burton, 2021), scapegoating (Al-Rawi, 2021; Marcks & Pawelz, 2020) and the creation of an us-versus-them narrative (Åkerlund, 2021a). Additionally, this research will also focus on the communication strategies that have been found to be used across many far-right subgroups, including humour (Åkerlund, 2021a; Al-Rawi, 2021), the use of memes (Askanus, 2021), and the manipulation of sources and information to suit the cause (Åkerlund, 2021b; Marcks & Pawelz, 2020).

Chapter 3: Method

3.1. Research approach

To examine the differences in the political rhetoric of the far-right between Reddit and Gab, this paper took a qualitative approach. Such an approach allows a deeper, more detailed analysis than the researcher is afforded by quantitative methods (Schreier, 2013). This was necessary to capture the language used, in order to look for themes that the literature suggested would appear (including hate speech, scapegoating, and a victim ideology, among others), as well as to complete a broader analysis of the topics discussed most frequently on the platform. To answer the research question, the researcher performed a thematic analysis of a sample of N=100 posts from select communities on Reddit and Gab. Additionally, an affordance analysis of the two platforms has also been provided (see Chapter Four) as a background for assessing the relationship between affordances and user behaviour.

3.2. Sampling strategy and data collection

Data was taken from both Reddit and Gab, where the posts average 40 and 80 words, respectively. Although this is relatively short compared to other online forums, the researcher was also conducting a thorough analysis of the audio-visual elements that appeared alongside these posts. According to Colley and Moore (2022), this is necessary to “develop a more accurate and nuanced reading of the platform’s discourse” (p. 12). The number of posts collected, then, had to be smaller than if only textual elements were being analysed, as this would allow the researcher to conduct a detailed analysis of all elements.

As such, 50 posts were collected from each platform to achieve a total of 100 posts. Comments were not to be analysed alongside posts, as this would have been beyond the scope of a master’s thesis. Although this limited the research in that the interaction between users could not be documented, it still allowed the researcher to examine the discursive strategies used on both platforms, and could later be expanded into future research which also includes comments in the analysis.

The collection of posts began with the identification of comparable relevant communities on the two platforms. As already argued, Reddit and Gab were chosen for their history with, and reputation as havens for, right-wing extremist speech. However, nowadays the two platforms provide their users with different affordances (including governance and culture of use), and Reddit’s attempts to moderate extreme ideologies on the platform make it

a good example of how such attempts can change a platform. In comparing it to a far-right platform, as which Gab has been described (Al-Rawi, 2021; Jasser et al., 2021; Rogers, 2020), the researcher could begin to establish how the different moderation strategies, affordances, and cultures on the platforms affect how the far-right community communicates. This is best achieved by comparing two communities which deal with similar topics. The two communities chosen, therefore, were r/AskThe_Donald on Reddit and *Trump2024* on Gab.

r/AskThe_Donald allows users to select a post flair (a method of categorising posts explained in Chapter Four), that categorises posts as being content from “Gab, Truth Social, ETC” (r/AskThe_Donald Moderators, n.d.-a). This indicates that there is a shared userbase between the two platforms and that some users are likely involved in both platforms. This provides an opportunity to examine how far-right users behave and discuss content differently on different platforms, as this thesis does.

r/AskThe_Donald was created in 2016 to replace the then quarantined subreddit, r/The_Donald, which was later banned from Reddit altogether (Allyn, 2020) for harbouring extreme content (Gaudette et al., 2021). Far-right ideology is common on the subreddit, which describes itself as a “PRO Conservative, PRO Patriot, American loving ... Pro Trump, Pro Right-wing partisan subreddit” (r/AskThe_Donald Moderators, n.d.-b). This was important as, unlike Gab, Reddit is not a far-right platform, so the researcher had to be careful to ensure that far-right content was collected and analysed, as was likely to be the case on r/AskThe_Donald.

In order to examine a similar community on Gab to the r/AskThe_Donald subreddit, the *Trump 2024* group was chosen. There are many similarities between these two communities. For one thing, r/AskThe_Donald is a political subreddit that deals with a variety of issues but primarily centres around supporting Donald Trump, as does Gab’s *Trump 2024*. The groups are also relatively similar in size. r/AskThe_Donald is one of the smaller subreddits, with only 118 thousand members. This means it is well-matched with *Trump 2024*, which, as a bigger community on a much smaller platform, has 264.8 thousand members. r/AskThe_Donald is older than *Trump 2024*, having been created in August 2016, while *Trump 2024* was created in July 2018, but this shouldn’t have made a significant difference to the posts’ content.

To begin the sampling of the posts, then, the platform functionality of sorting posts by ‘hot’ on was used both Reddit and Gab. This brought up the posts which had achieved a lot of recent engagement, thus providing a middle ground between simply sorting by ‘popular’, and sorting by ‘new’ (Carman et al., 2018). Furthermore, the ‘hot’ sorting also

meant that the collected posts were seen and engaged with by other users, which strengthened this project's ability to examine the discursive strategies used by posts which had been successful in garnering support from the right-wing audience. Additionally, as much as 22% of Reddit posts are automatically removed shortly after being posted, even though they may be re-approved by a human moderator at a later date (Jhaver et al., 2019). Thus, using the 'hot' functionality ensured that posts that were later removed, and therefore did not contribute to the discussion on the platform, were far less likely to be included in the sample.

The collection process took place on a single day (April 28, 2022) to ensure that the posts from each platform were from the same timeframe. The researcher did not exclude any posts during the collection process, but instead simply collected the first 70 posts from each platform (so that there would be more than enough posts if some from the first 50 had to be discounted). Posts were collected using screenshots so that all of the relevant information was easily captured. Additionally, photos and videos were downloaded in full quality to be analysed. Once all posts had been collected, the researcher made a first pass through them, removing usernames and replacing them with numbers (e.g., Gab User 01, Reddit User 03, etc.) and removing any posts that were considered irrelevant. Typically, irrelevant posts were those which, instead of discussing politics, discussed the platform or community that they were posted to.

3.3. Data analysis

As previously mentioned, the collected posts were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to determine which themes can be found in the data and can be either inductive (examining the entire dataset to see which themes occur) or deductive (looking for specific themes in the data, such as when trying to answer a predetermined research question) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To begin with, this thesis took a deductive approach, meaning the analysis was based on literature. However, it also included inductive elements, in that it incorporated some additional concepts that appeared in the data but not the theoretical background.

Thematic content analysis requires the units of analysis (in this case, posts) to be collected and then organised through a *coding* process, in which the data is fragmented and labelled with codes (Boeije, 2010), then sorted into themes and subthemes, the suitability of which can be assessed using a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When the themes are determined, they are examined in order to establish their relation to one another and the

research question (Boeije, 2010). The codes and themes will therefore include both deductive codes and themes (from the literature) and inductive codes and themes (from the dataset).

In this thesis, codes were clustered into the different discursive strategies used by the far-right, as outlined in the previous chapter: memes and other humour, coded language, symbols, hate speech, scapegoating, victimisation, and so on. The codebook can be found in Appendix A. As discussed in the following section, it can be problematic for researchers to reproduce extremist content, as they risk increasing its reach. As such, the codebook contains only one example of each code, so as to reduce this harm as much as possible. Codes are organised first according to their role in language – as the message, the format, or the performance, and then further broken down into themes found in the literature and outlined in Chapter Two, including the us-versus-them narrative, humour, scapegoating, and so on.

3.4. Research limitations and problems

Several limitations arise from this research design. First, the small sample size represents an issue, as it cannot necessarily be held as representative of a larger trend or phenomenon. As noted by Marshall et al. (2013), it is difficult to define exactly what constitutes too small or too large a sample, particularly in qualitative research, with many instead citing the importance of reaching ‘saturation,’ which must be recognised by each researcher and thus has little consistency. Nevertheless, a sample size of 100 posts is small, even considering the highly detailed analysis performed on them, although any more would have been beyond the scope of a master’s thesis. Additionally, and also mentioned previously, is the problem of whether or not to examine comments. While not examining comments means that a significant portion of the discussion is not recorded, examining them would lead to such loss of detail in the overall analysis that this is deemed a necessary sacrifice, and something left to future research.

As is often the case when researchers conduct a qualitative analysis alone, it is important to make sure that categories are well defined, so that another researcher would code elements in the same way and, thus, arrive at similar results (Schreier, 2013). This is difficult when coding alone, as there is no way to be sure that someone else would code things in exactly the same way. In this case, while there are many instances in which another researcher would likely code the data in the same way, there are some categories and subcategories for which the distinction, while clear to this researcher, may not be clear to

another. For instance, the difference between inflammatory language and emotional language is minor, and many examples contain elements of both.

3.5. Ethical considerations

By far the most significant problems associated with this research, however, are the numerous ethical issues that come with studying the far-right. For one thing, followers of the far-right movement have a tendency to avoid participation in scientific research. Even if they do participate, they may alter their language to avoid social sanctions. Furthermore, identifying oneself as a researcher in far-right forums poses risks for the researcher, as previous cases of online and offline harassment of researchers demonstrate (Vaughan, 2022). These concerns are heightened in the current case, where research is undertaken by a young, female student enrolled in a program that may be perceived as ‘left-wing’ (which far-right political rhetoric demonizes), and Colley and Moore suggest that “women and certain other identity groups are at particular risk” (Colley & Moore, 2022, p. 22) of harassment. Therefore, as online posts provide access to uncensored far-right political communication and can be collected without the researcher exposing herself, the analysis of already existing posts on social media platforms is the least intrusive method of data collection.

However, this brings up the issue of obtaining informed consent without exposing the researcher to those on the platforms, as well as the issue of protecting those whose posts are analysed in the thesis. In this case, we will not obtain informed consent due to the nature of the research topic and the danger posed to the researcher. Instead, this research is justified by public interest, i.e., this research is socially relevant, as it can contribute further knowledge on how to better improve the moderation of extreme speech on these platforms. Regarding the protection of the users involved, posts will be anonymized as much as possible, by removing the username when the screenshot is taken, to be replaced with a numbering system (Gab User 01, Reddit User 01, and so on) as Gaudette et al. (2021) did. Since the posts will be de-identified, and quotes will not be associated with individuals, there is a minimal risk of identifying individuals. It may be possible for quotes from the thesis to be used in Internet searches leading to specific usernames, but identifying the individuals behind the usernames remains difficult, unless individuals choose to disclose their real-life identity on their Gab or Reddit profiles.

To be safe, the researcher will make an effort to minimize the quotes or paraphrase where possible. However, providing quotes from the data is a crucial means of establishing

the validity and reliability of the qualitative process, so it cannot be completely replaced. Importantly, for research to be able to expose the dynamics of far-right political rhetoric, the choice of words, symbols and the construction of arguments remain indispensable. In that sense, there is a strong social and scientific reason for such details to be examined and shared with the research community and the public opinion. Aside from these issues, Colley and Moore (2022) also highlight the danger of giving a platform to the extreme content being researched, especially when directly reproducing content. As such, like Colley and Moore, the researcher will aim not to reproduce any harmful content in this thesis. That said, it can be important to reproduce certain words or terms for the sake of discussion (Colley & Moore, 2022), with the caveat that the researcher will ensure to consider, for each case, whether the repetition is completely necessary.

Chapter 4: Functionality Analysis

As discussed throughout section 2.1, a platform's affordances have a significant effect on the type of communication to be expected on the platform. As such, it is important to consider the platform affordances inherent to Reddit and Gab, in order to better understand their effect on far-right communication on each platform. The functionality analysis outlined in this chapter, therefore, is used alongside the thematic analysis to establish what effect, if any, the platform affordances of Reddit and Gab have on the far-right's communication on each platform. The affordances most important to the far-right movement – privacy and anonymity, self-expression, interaction, and moderation, as mentioned earlier – will be considered with regard to both platforms, and are discussed below.

4.1. Privacy and anonymity

Both Reddit and Gab afford their users relatively high levels of anonymity and privacy. For one thing, both platforms demand only an email and password to sign up, with no requirement that the user connect their Reddit or Gab account to other aspects of their digital presence or verify their identity. However, unlike sites like 4chan, neither allows users total anonymity, as they are still tied to their username as a pseudonym (Bernstein et al., 2011), and other users can therefore view their posting and commenting history.

The sites do treat some issues differently, though. For instance, Reddit allows the site to be browsed without the user being logged in. This includes looking at and searching in specific communities. Gab, on the other hand, only allows users to see the posts that are currently popular and does not allow them to view or search for specific posts or communities. Both sites encourage users to log in (or sign up) and refuse users the ability to post, comment, like or vote without being logged in.

4.2. Self-expression

Once users are logged in to either site, though, they are allowed to post in virtually any community on the platform. Both sites allow posts to include text, polls, videos, photos, or links. However, Gab allows users to post, for example, a video with text alongside it, while Reddit refuses to incorporate any text alongside polls, videos, photos, or links, aside from the max-300-character post title. Reddit demands that users choose a subreddit to post to, and to post to multiple subreddits they must repeat the post in each one, as they are refused the

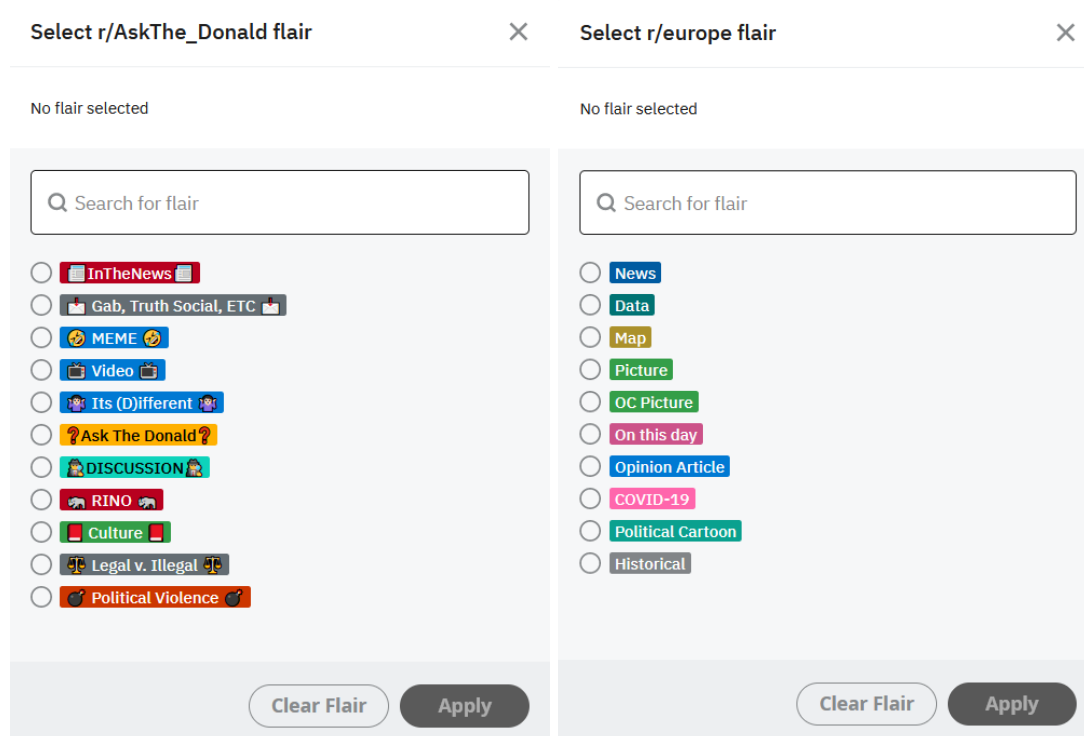
choice to post to more than one at a time. Any user on the subreddit posted to is allowed to see the post. Gab, on the other hand, allows users to post either to a group or to their timeline, the latter meaning that only those who follow them will see it (at least without seeking it out).

Additionally, while both platforms allow the use of emojis alongside text, Gab supplies its users with custom emojis, which are usually political in nature (see Table 4.1 in Appendix B). It also includes an emoji button, thus encouraging the use of emojis more than Reddit does. Both platforms allow users to add a content warning to their posts. On Reddit, users are allowed to select from pre-set buttons that show that the post is Not Safe For Work (NSFW) – explicit – or that the post contains a spoiler. On Gab, there are no predetermined options, and users are allowed type one themselves.

Gab also encourages the use of hashtags to sort posts, make them searchable, and track what is currently popular. On Reddit, the encouraged method of sorting or categorising posts is through the post flair – a tagging system that varies from subreddit to subreddit and allows users to select one of multiple ‘flairs’ for a post that pertains to the usual content posted on that subreddit. The list of available flairs is chosen by the moderators of the subreddit. For instance, the post flairs in r/AskThe_Donald include ‘in the news’, ‘meme’, ‘video’, and ‘discussion’, among others (see Figure 4.1, below).

Figure 4.1

Post flairs on r/AskThe_Donald (left) compared to those on r/Europe (right).



Reddit also allows community flairs as a method to allow users to express something about themselves. Like with post flairs, the mods of each subreddit can choose the community flairs and make them available to the subreddit's users. Many subreddits allow users to choose their own flair, while some do not. For instance, on the r/HarryPotter subreddit, users can choose their community flairs based on what Hogwarts house they think they would be in. Conversely, on r/AskThe_Donald, users cannot choose a community flair without 'powering up' by paying money. Moderators of r/AskThe_Donald can assign users community flairs, which include 'expert', 'novice', and 'competent' (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3, below).

Figure 4.2

Community flairs on r/AskThe_Donald (left) compared to those on r/Europe (right). The list of moderators on each community is used to display the flairs, but any user can have one.

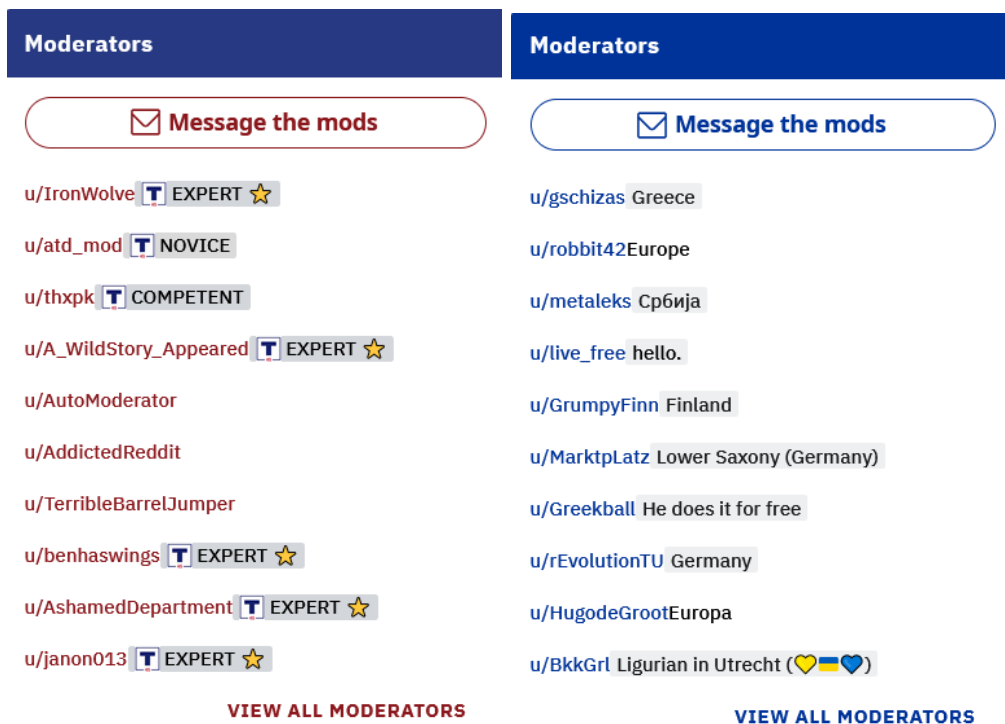
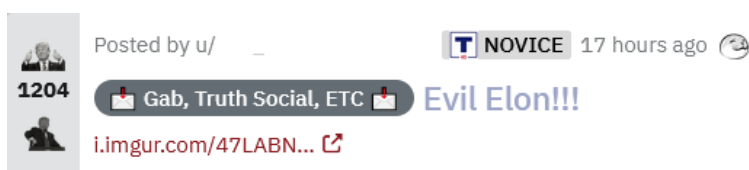


Figure 4.3

An example of how post and community flairs appear on a post. The community flair is 'Novice' in the top row, and the post flair is 'Gab, Truth, Social, ETC' in the second row.

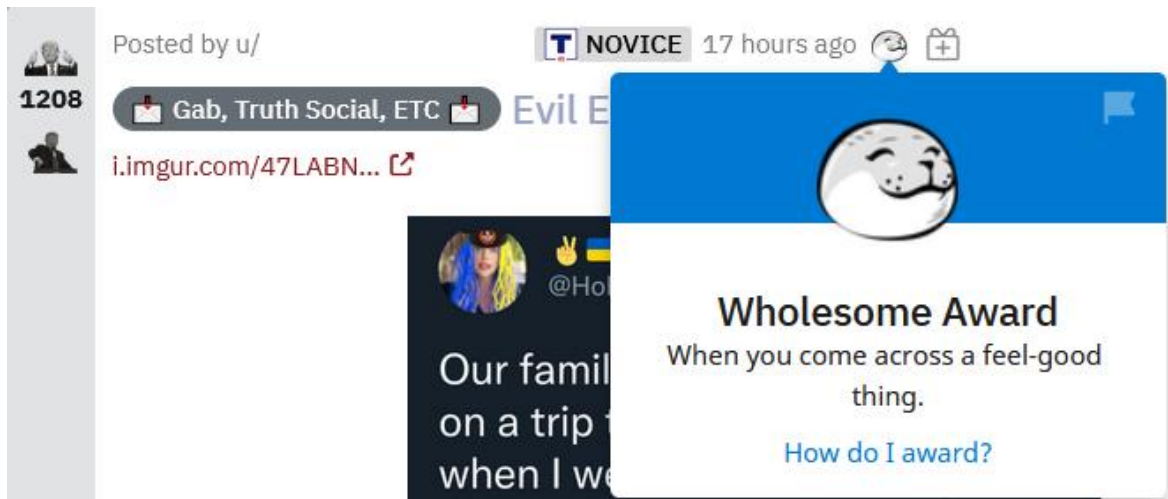


4.3. Interaction

Both Reddit and Gab allow users a variety of ways to interact with others, primarily through the posts the others make. For instance, both sites encourage users to comment on others' posts, share the post with others, and show support for others' posts (by liking on Gab, and by upvoting on Reddit). Both sites also allow users to 'repost' (on Gab) or 'crosspost' (on Reddit) posts from other communities on the platform. Additionally, Reddit encourages users to express their dislike for another user's post, by downvoting, which Gab does not. Reddit also encourages users to award posts, which is an opportunity to display extreme support for a post. Awards can be bought with Reddit coins, which cost real money. Alternatively, Reddit periodically gives users free awards which they can gift to other users to show support for their posts. See Figure 4.4 for an example. Both platforms also encourage users to message one another privately, and neither demands that users follow one another first. The messaging system on Gab affords users far more privacy and security than that of Reddit, as Gab's chats are encrypted, while Reddit's are not.

Figure 4.4

Award given on r/AskThe_Donald. The pop-up appears when the mouse is on the award.



4.4. Moderation

Both sites have content policies which discourage a variety of actions, by stating that they are banned and that those who take them will face repercussions. For instance, illegal behaviour, misrepresenting identity or affiliation, interfering with the website, as well as impersonating others, are banned on both sites. However, Gab also bans all pornography, while Reddit bans only child pornography and non-consensual pornography, thus allowing

other pornography. Reddit also bans doxing, harassment, bullying and identity-based hate, while Gab's content policy specifically states that "offensive speech" is not banned (Gab, n.d.). A specific statement such as this could, in fact, be read as an encouragement of offensive speech, when examined from the affordance mechanism perspective (Davis & Chouinard, 2016).

The sites also take somewhat similar approaches to content moderation, essentially placing its responsibility on the users themselves and encouraging them to regulate their own content and that of their peers. Both sites are made up of groups (or subreddits) with specific topics, that are allowed to be set up and run by anyone. Those who are in charge of these communities are also in charge of moderating them and are encouraged to do so by the variety of tools at their disposal. They are encouraged to set their own rules and take steps to ensure that they are followed. On Reddit, however, several communities have previously been deplatformed because their moderators did not ensure they adhered to the site-wide rules, which is a further encouragement (for those that remain) to ensure that their communities do not break Reddit's terms of service. This has yet to occur on Gab.

Chapter 5: Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the political communication of the far-right movement on Reddit and Gab found that the communication strategies deployed by users all contributed to the us-versus-them narrative. As such, the us-versus them narrative will be used to organise the results of the thematic analysis, to analyse the way that communication strategies on Reddit and Gab contributed to the narrative and how they differed in doing so. The frequency of the different strategies on each platform is also documented, in order to strengthen the comparative dimension of this project by numerically displaying the differences between the two platforms. These results will also be combined with the affordance analysis presented earlier so as to understand the impact of affordances on far-right communication, and how the users of Reddit and Gab used platform affordances to support their communication of the us-versus-them narrative.

As outlined in section 2.2, this us-versus-them narrative is created in two ways: by constructing the ‘us,’ or in-group (in this case, the far-right), and by constructing the ‘them,’ or out-group (in this case, mainly the left, but also minority groups and anyone else the far-right perceive as an enemy). Previous research has found that in-group is portrayed in a positive light to encourage bonding (Åkerlund, 2021a), while the out-group is often mocked (Askanius, 2021, p. 152), alienated, or ‘othered’ (Gaudette et al., 2021). Similarly, this research found that, on Gab and Reddit, the in-group is most often portrayed either as victims (of the out-group) as strong, patriotic truth-seekers, and as credible, while the out-group is scapegoated, mocked, and shown to be losing the political battle that far-right ideology believes is occurring.

5.1. Constructing the ‘us’

The literature suggests that the far-right will present themselves as victims of the erosion of their culture and identity (Al-Rawi, 2021) and of censorship, often by the media (Jasser et al., 2021). The research into Gab and Reddit found this to indeed be the case, as the communities there portrayed themselves as victims based on their religious, racial (white), and political identity, and also as victims of censorship (carried out by the media, but also in the polls). This was indeed, as Marcks and Pawelz (2020) suggested, juxtaposed with the far-right’s projection of their own strength, and the communities researched here were no exception. In this case, the in-group showed how strong they were by portraying themselves

as powerful, smarter than the out-group, victorious in a political battle, or being vindicated. They also highlighted their patriotism, something which the far-right values, thus making them superior to the ‘unpatriotic’ out-group. Finally, they highlighted their credibility, as well as discrediting the out-group, to ensure their arguments were strong.

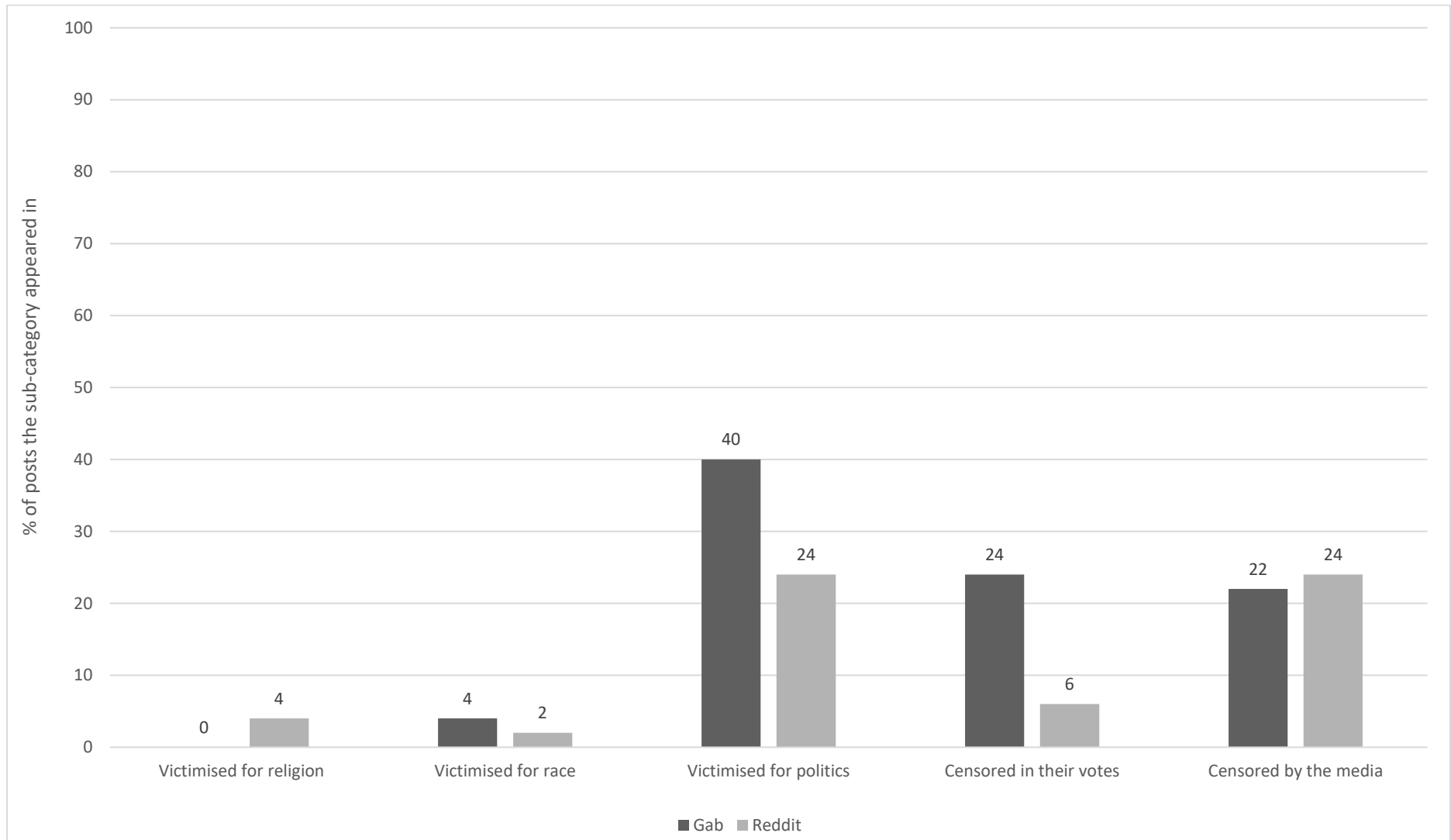
5.1.1. Victims

Regarding the far-right’s perceived victimisation due to their identity, then, this research found that Reddit and Gab users were most concerned with being victimised for their political affiliation. This appeared almost twice as often on Gab as on Reddit, in statements such as “if I go to a Trump rally Covid-19 magically appears” (video, posted by Reddit User 01). As shown in Figure 5.1, the other two elements of victimised identity appeared far less on both platforms. Concerns with racial victimisation tended to revolve around how left-wing politics treated them for being white: “white lives matter too” (image, posted by Gab User 02); “I’m not allowed to have an opinion on racial matters because I’m white, but if I don’t have an opinion on it I’m the reason why people are oppressed” (video, posted by Reddit User 01). Concerns about religion, then, tended to be expressed through exaggerated news stories – “world’s first lesbian bishop calls for church to remove crosses” (Breitbart News article, posted by Reddit user 02) – and through anger about Coronavirus lockdowns preventing them from attending church.

When it came to censorship, there were two main areas where Gab and Reddit users felt victimised. First, in their treatment by the media, which appeared relatively equally between the two platforms. This was mainly regarding social media, especially Twitter – “free speech coming back to Twitter” (Tweet, posted by Gab User 01) – but also included traditional media: “when 48% of French people don’t want [Macron] anymore and 100% of the newspapers support him, we are no longer in a democracy” (Reddit post, posted by Gab User 01). Aside from this, users on both platforms also felt that they had been censored in that their votes had not counted, though this appeared mainly on Gab: occurring in 24% of posts compared to only 6% of Reddit posts. In every case, this was in reference to the conspiracy theory that suggests that the 2020 US presidential election was fraudulent: “the evidence [of election fraud] is massive and irrefutable” (Donald Trump, image posted by Reddit User 03).

Figure 5.1

Frequency of the sub-categories of the self-victimisation category.



5.1.2. *Strong, patriotic truth-seekers*

When it came to the projection of strength, then, the power of the out-group was primarily highlighted through the emphasis on having a high number of supporters and through the bravery and toughness of those supporters, for instance: “don’t be fooled, there’s a lot more of us than you think. Trump’s troops – millions strong, America tough” (image, posted by Gab User 01). As shown in Figure 5.2, content like this appeared more often on Reddit than on Gab, and, of the posts dealing with the in-group, received the most positive interaction (awards and upvotes) from other Reddit users. Leading images were often used to highlight this. Figure 5.3 displays an example: a post whose text implies that Donald Trump is braver than Joe Biden. The creator has chosen a photograph of Biden in which he appears worried, and one in which Trump appears confident to support the message. Images like these appeared slightly more on Gab than on Reddit. On Reddit, they typically took the form of ‘Dark MAGA’ imagery, as shown in Figure 5.4. Dark MAGA is a new far-right movement appearing online which is characterised by red-tinted, God-like imagery of Donald Trump taking revenge on his opponents (Shoib, 2022). The movement suggests that Trump was not harsh enough in his previous presidency and often suggests violence as an appropriate course of action when he (inevitably, in their perspective) returns for his second term as president (Squirrell, 2022).

When it comes to how the in-group portray themselves as smarter than the out-group, this typically occurs through the mockery of the out-group (discussed further in section 5.2.2), calling them ‘idiots’ or ‘morons’, and highlighting how easy it is to see through the conspiracy theories that the out-group is supposedly behind: “it usually takes about 10 minutes to debunk their BS” (Truth Social post, posted by Gab User 01). Mockery occurred more often on Reddit than on Gab, as did the in-group’s emphasis on their moments of political victory. This included topics such as Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter, which was considered (at least by the far-right) as a political victory for a variety of reasons, from Musk’s promise to restore Donald Trump’s Twitter account (Meierhans, 2022), to the expectation of those previously banned from Twitter that Musk would also reinstate their accounts (Bergengruen, 2022).

Finally, the in-group also emphasised moments in which they felt vindicated, again more often on Reddit than on Gab. Typically, such posts followed a ‘we-told-you-so’ narrative, for instance: “I hope it’s sinking in for those who didn’t believe us” (Truth Social post, posted by Gab User 01). This was also portrayed through users’ responses to events

Figure 5.2

Frequency of the sub-categories of the projecting strength category.

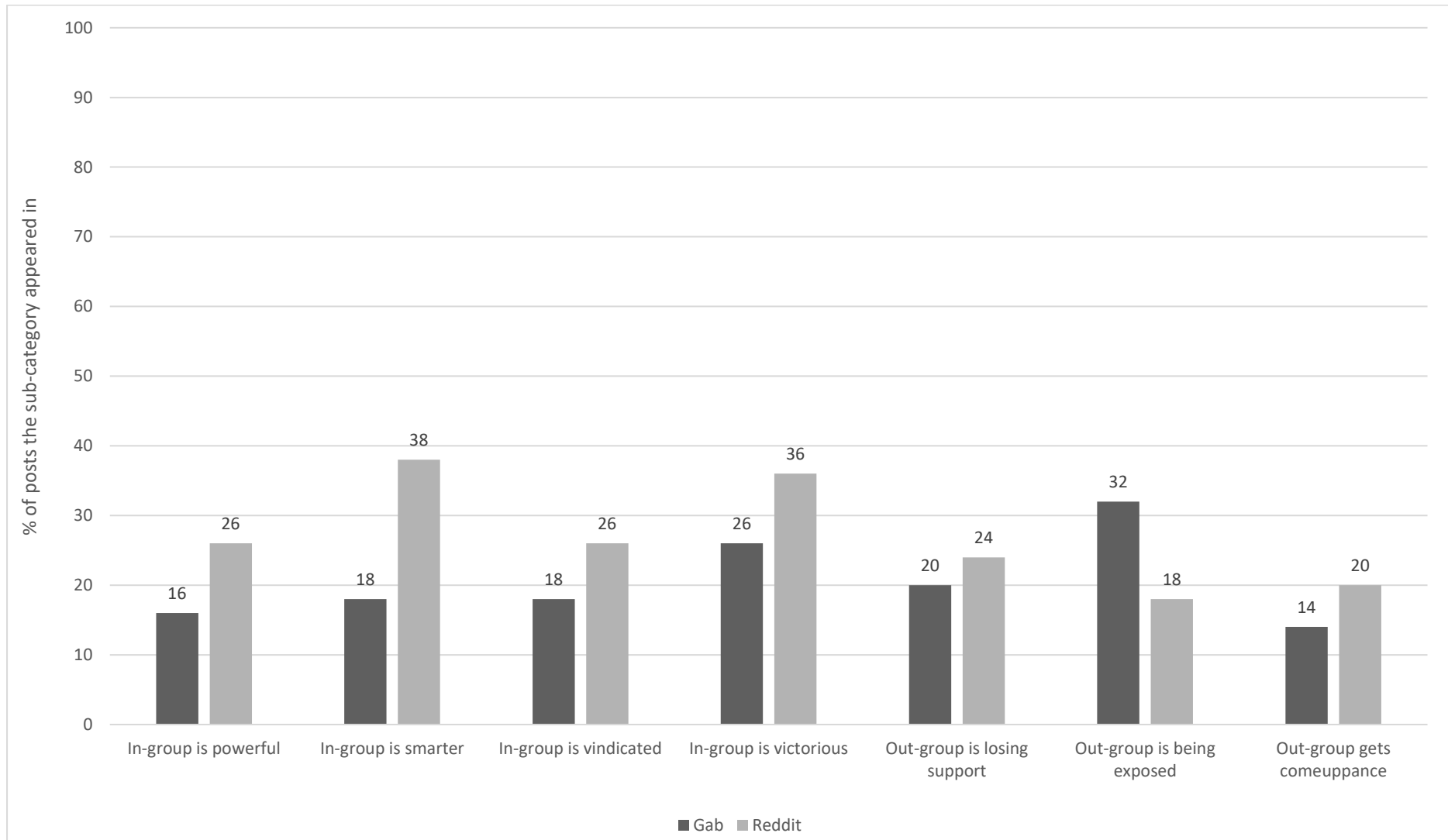


Figure 5.3

An example of leading imagery posted by Gab User 02.



Figure 5.4

Dark MAGA imagery posted on Reddit by Reddit User 02.



that represented an end to policies they disagreed with: for example, Reddit User 03, in response to the airline company Delta announcing that they would restore privileges to those who had been banned for mask violations, stated that they were going to “just pretend it never happened”, implying that those against mask mandates were right all along, and now vindicated. This aligned with their self-perception of themselves as truth-seekers, in that they were able to see the truth when it was obscured to others:

Remember these big tech companies for 5 years called us conspiracy theorists for speaking about censorship and told us it didn't exist. Now it's front & center and the Gov is talking openly about what we can and can't say and how to pass laws to enforce it (Truth Social post, posted by Gab User 01).

Persuasive language was used often here, the two main types being emotional writing, in which the author writes about a topic from a particular emotional perspective that the reader is encouraged to take, and conspiratorial writing, in which the author presents the content as if letting the reader in on a secret. Both were used on Gab more often than on Reddit, with conspiratorial language being more common than emotional language. Emotional language was primarily angry – “100,000 kids are sex trafficked each day in the United States ... our government is evil!!” (image posted by Gab User 01) – thus encouraging the reader to take the same position. Conspiratorial language was used to add to the self-righteous feeling of the in-group in seeing the truth when others cannot, for example:

Did you know:

The 28 Pages show that two 9/11 hijackers tied to Saudi intelligence rented a room from an FBI informant in California before the 2001 attacks

The Director of the FBI kept this covered up for years

His name?

Robert Mueller (Tweet, posted by Gab User 01).

The text format in this example is clearly structured to make the reveal of the conspiracy as dramatic as possible. Another example is simply the use of specific words that attract conspiracy theorists, for instance “notice how...” (Reddit User 03) and “this is an odd coincidence...” (Tweet, posted by Reddit User 03), which highlight the intelligence of the conspiracy theorist who has caught onto the truth.

Finally, the in-group portrayed themselves as patriotic. As patriotism is an important far-right value, this allowed them to highlight how superior to the out-group, which was not only unpatriotic but ultimately anti-American. Patriotic posts primarily took the form either of imagery (most often of flags, Make America Great Again (MAGA) slogans, or red, white,

and blue) or pro-United States dogma: “young Americans should be taught to love our country, honor our anthem, and proudly recite the Pledge of Allegiance” (Donald Trump, 2017, quoted by Gab User 09). Additionally, users on both sites used their respective platform’s affordances to express their patriotism (and other values, primarily religion) through their pseudonyms. Gab encourages users to choose a profile picture, a username, and a display name. Of the users behind the Gab posts collected in this dataset, 18% of users used all three of these to display their values, 18% used two, 36% used one, and 27% did not take advantage of this affordance. Reddit does not allow users a visible profile image or display name, only a username. Of the users behind the Reddit posts collected in this dataset, 40% used their username to display their values, while 60% did not.

5.1.3. Credible

An important aspect of far-right ideology and discursive strategy is the maintenance of credibility. As noted in the theoretical background of this thesis, this is created through the careful sourcing of content and through the use of misleading information to suit the cause (Åkerlund, 2021b). This research found that, on Reddit and Gab, the content sources often included right-wing partisan news sources, public figures and internet users, platforms, and organisations. Misleading information included that which is true but has been cherry-picked to suit the poster’s cause, as well as that which is entirely fabricated, as the research by Marcks & Pawelz (2020) suggested would be the case. A full breakdown of these sub-categories is shown in Figure 5.5.

To begin by discussing content sourcing, and news sourcing, in particular, this research found that right-wing partisan news sources appeared equally on Reddit and on Gab (in 14% of the posts on each platform). However, as Figures 5.6 and 5.7 show, the level of bias and reliability differed considerably between the two platforms. The news sources which appeared on Gab were extremely partisan and unreliable, according to the *Ad Fontes* Media Bias rating system (Ad Fontes, n.d.-b). Gab also included content from several other news sources which have not yet been rated by Ad Fontes, but which are considered extreme, including the *Conservative Brief*, an influential far-right website (Legum, 2022) and *The Daily Telegraph*, an unreliable, right-wing Australian tabloid (Media Bias Fact Check, 2022). In comparison, the news sources found on Reddit were generally rated by Ad Fontes as much less extremist, and somewhat more reliable. As will be discussed in a moment, users on both platforms sometimes chose to screenshot content rather than link to it. When it came to news

Figure 5.5

Frequency of the sub-categories of the displaying credibility category.

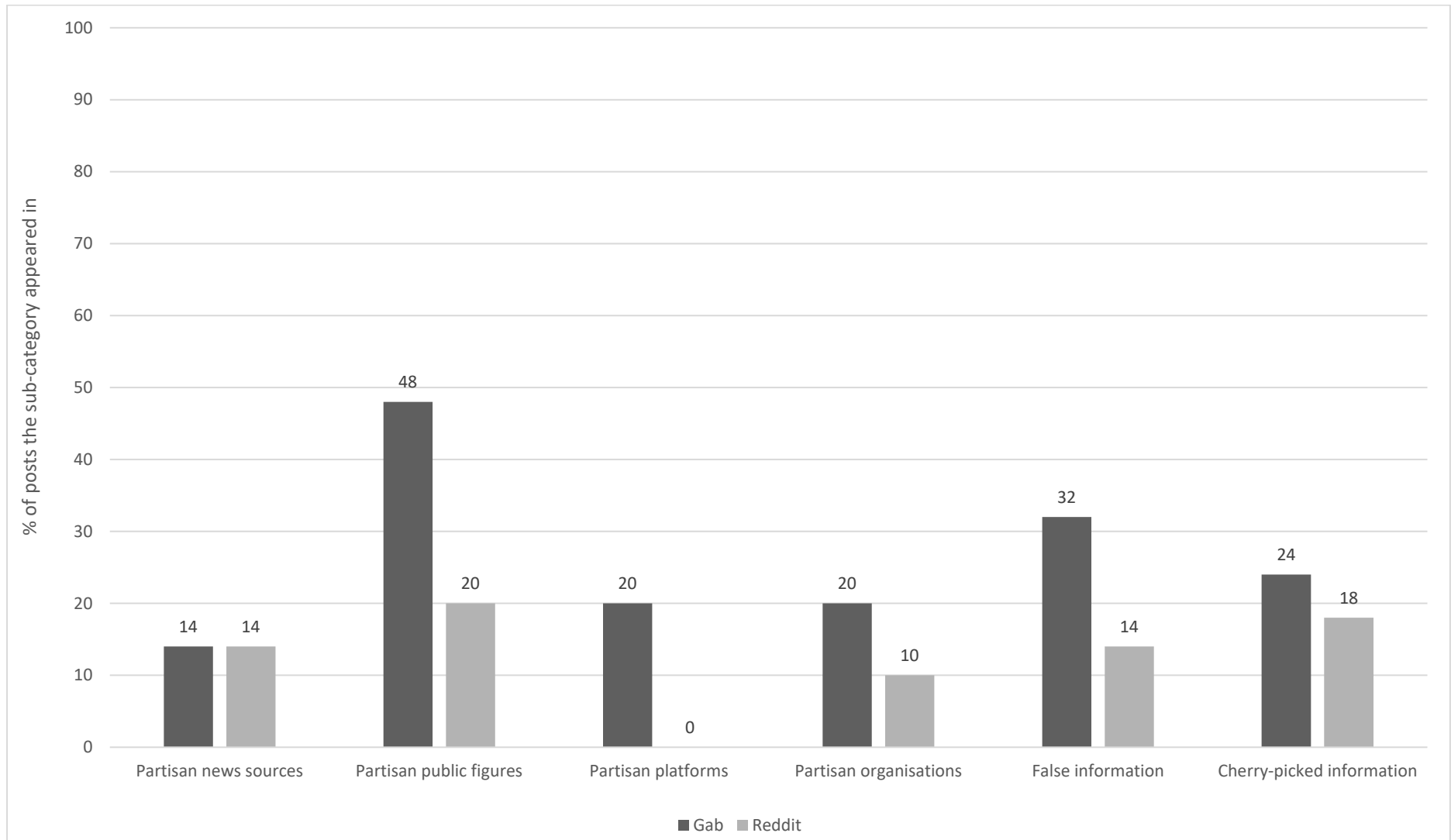


Figure 5.6

Media bias and reliability chart of news sources represented on Gab (Ad Fontes, n.d.-a). NPR News has been included as a reliable, unbiased source, and PalmerReport as a reliable, left-biased source, but neither source was present on Gab.

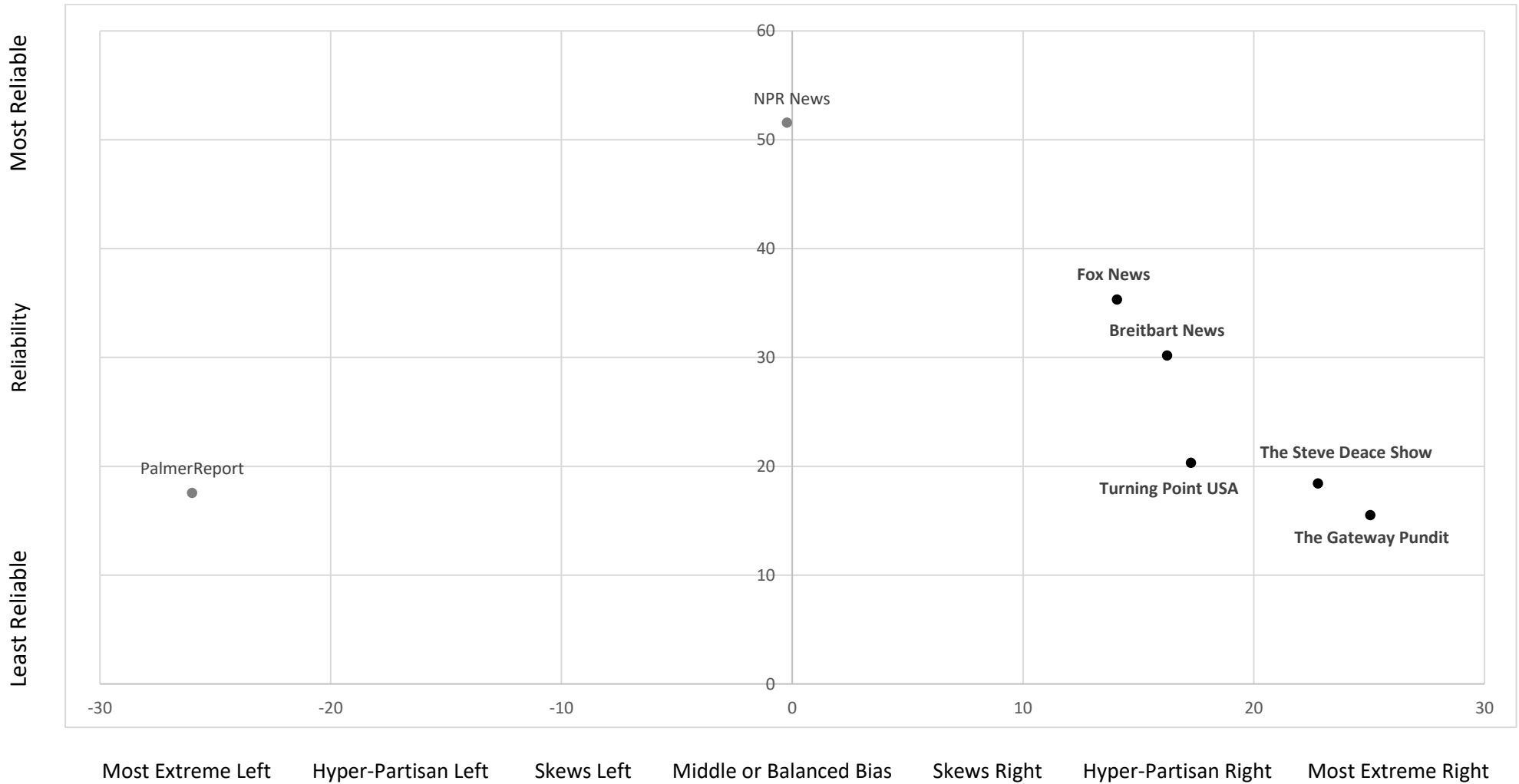
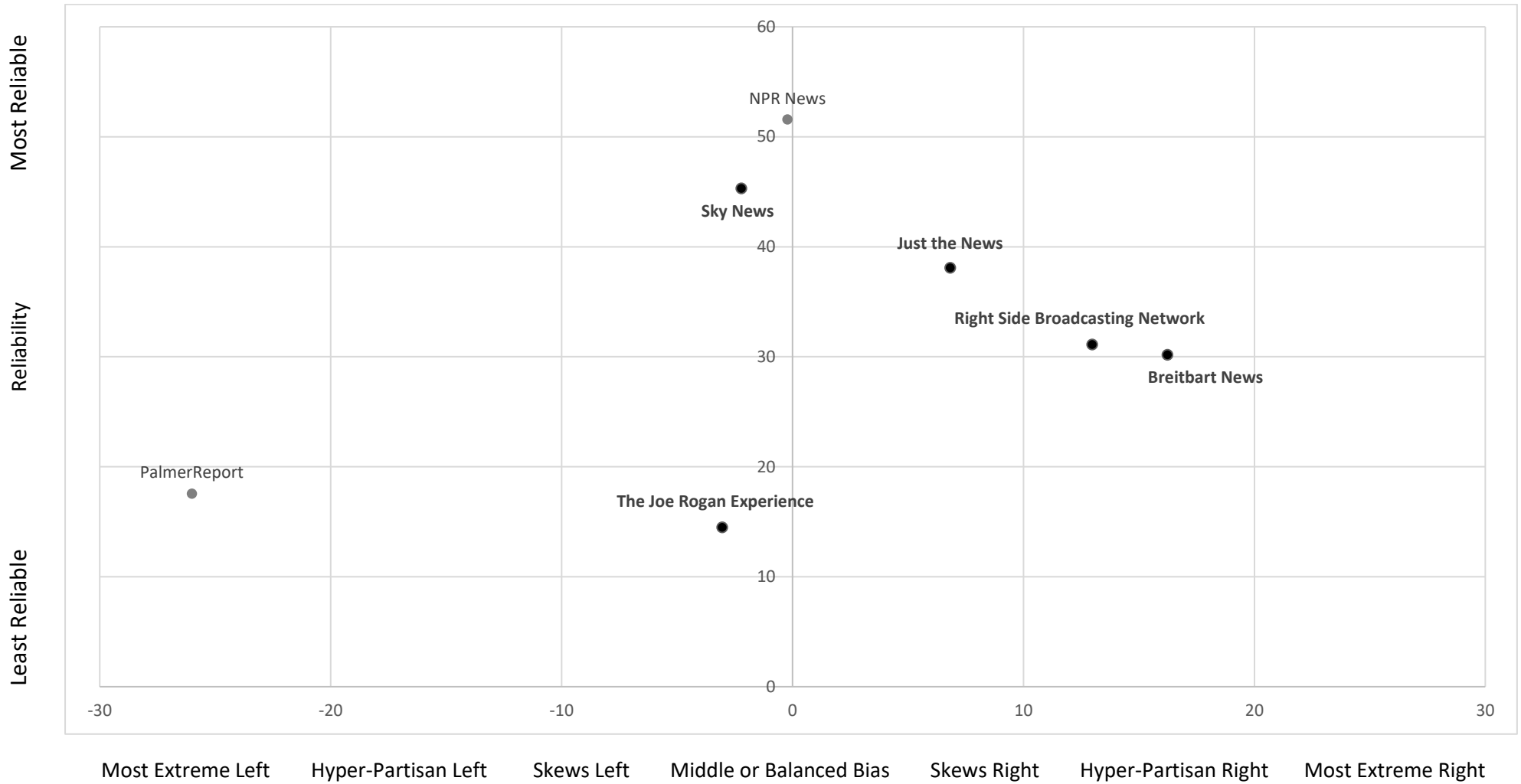


Figure 5.7

Media bias and reliability chart of news sources represented on Reddit (Ad Fontes, n.d.-a). NPR News has been included as a reliable, unbiased source, and PalmerReport as a reliable, left-biased source, but neither source was present on Reddit.



sources, those that were linked to tended to be the more right-wing partisan sources, while those that were screenshotted were the more neutral ones. This is important because, as Foot et al. (2003) argue, the content linked to by a community makes it visible in that community, and content not linked to is effectively rendered silent.

The same can be said for the non-news sources behind posts. As shown in Figure 5.5, by far the most common of these were partisan public figures and social media users, who were behind more than twice as many Gab posts as Reddit posts. These included right-wing politicians like Monica Crowley and Mike Pompeo, far-right influencers and conspiracy theorists like Jack Posobiec and Dinesh D'Souza, and anonymous social media users who have become influential in the far-right movement despite their not revealing the true identity behind their username. The content for some posts was sourced from right-wing partisan organisations such as Act for America, an anti-Muslim organisation, listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC, n.d.).

Finally, right-wing partisan platforms also appeared reasonably often on Gab, but never on Reddit. The content of Gab posts was taken from Truth Social, the far-right alt-tech network started by Donald Trump (Wong, 2022), from Telegram, a platform known to harbour far-right extremists (Al-Rawi, 2021; Rogers, 2022), and even from other communities on Gab. Interestingly, those who reposted content from other Gab posts chose to ignore the affordances of the platform and bypass the 'repost' button by screenshooting and posting the content. This did not occur on Reddit: users of r/AskThe_Donald used the crossposting affordance to share posts from other communities on the platform. However, when it came to content from outside the community's platform, both Reddit and Gab users chose to screenshot content rather than link to it, despite both platforms encouraging users to link to other content in their posts. As Hutchby (2001) noted, affordances are not just what the platform allows the user to do, but what the user *perceives* the platform as allowing them to do. In other words, if the user does not know they can repost content, then they will not do so. This may be the case here, or it may be a conscious decision to avoid using the repost button. Unfortunately, without further research which examines this specifically and asks users why they do it, it is impossible to know which is the case.

When it came to the information in posts, then, a significant amount of it was misleading on each platform. The first type of misleading information, that which is entirely inaccurate, appeared in 32% of Gab posts and 24% of Reddit posts. These posts often included numbers for which there is no proof. For instance, an image posted by Gab User 01 claims that 100,000 children are victims of sex trafficking every *day* in the United States, an

incorrect statistic which seems to have been based on the number of children sold into the sex trafficking business every *year* (Goldberg, 2014). The other type of misleading information, that which is cherry-picked to suit the poster's goals, appeared in 32% of Gab posts and 18% of Reddit posts. Unlike the previous subcategory, the information listed here was not outright false, but often had other information or context removed which changed its meaning. For instance, a Just the News article posted by Reddit User 01 claims that Stacy Abrams wanted non-citizens to vote in United States elections. This mischaracterises what Abrams actually said, which was simply that non-citizens are part of the diversity of those who are against Donald Trump (Sherman, 2019). Her statement has been deliberately cherry-picked and mischaracterised to achieve the writer's goal of infuriating the audience.

5.2. Constructing the 'them'

The out-group constituting the 'them' was most often the Left, but also included the media, the government, and various minority groups. They were scapegoated, thus constructing them as criminals or villains and blaming them for the problems faced by the in-group. Additionally, they were mocked for supposedly being less intelligent than the in-group, for their beliefs and for their political losses.

5.2.1. Scapegoated

Scapegoating is frequently discussed in the literature that covers the far-right, especially regarding how it is used to target immigrants. Generally, the scapegoating of immigrants suggests that "violence is a direct consequence of migration and refugees, who are portrayed as brutal and immoral" (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020, p. 12). In general, scapegoating is used to blame a set of problems on a specific group, thus giving those problems a recognisable face that the in-group can target (Marcks & Pawelz, 2020). It can, therefore, be recognised in the treatment of groups other than immigrants, too. For instance, this research found that several different groups are scapegoated by the far-right on Gab and Reddit. Most often, these are the left, the government, the media, and only rarely minority groups (including immigrants, racial minorities, and the LGBT+ community).

The scapegoating of all of these groups often made use of the suggestion that the out-group was being exposed, often of criminal activity or participation in a conspiracy. This occurred more often on Gab than on Reddit, and was expressed both in vague terms – "they're freaking out about what Elon will find behind the curtain" (Tweet, posted by Gab

User 01) – or specific ones – “Facebook can be held liable for sex trafficking on the platform” (image, posted by Gab User 01). Also common were statements that portrayed the out-group as losing support for their cause, which occurred relatively equally on Reddit and Gab. This included the suggestion that left-wing politicians were losing support, an example of which is an article reporting that other Democrats were turning against Joe Biden and that activists were receiving push-back on their ideas: “people are fed up with woke politics; especially in the workplace. The tides are turning” (Reddit User 02). Finally, there were also posts which showed the out-group receiving comeuppance for their perceived transgressions. This included statements such as “Disney should have spent less time smearing parents and praising the Chinese Communist Party” (image, posted by Gab User 03).

Additionally, the left, the government, and the media were often portrayed as villains who aim to oppress ‘regular’ Americans – “the Biden Administration and Democrats in Congress are hellbent on eroding our Constitutional right to keep and bear arms” (Donald Trump Jr., quoted in Conservative Brief article, posted by Gab User 01) – to harm children – “they used to warn us about adults who discuss sexuality with children and ask them to keep secrets from their parents. Now they hire them as public school teachers” (image posted by Reddit User 03) – and to undermine democracy – “[Stacey Abrams] wanted [non-citizens] to be able to vote in our elections” (Brad Raffensperger, quoted in Just the News article, posted by Reddit User 01).

When it came to minorities, then, the ways that they were scapegoated did not differ significantly between the platforms, or between groups, although the language used on Gab tended to be more dehumanising than that used on Reddit. For example, Gab posts referred to immigrants simply as “illegals”, while Reddit posts referred to them as “migrants” or “immigrants”. In general, scapegoated groups were often seen as violent – “riot in the streets with the BLM” (video posted by Reddit User 01) – and as taking advantage of the system: “did you know illegals can file a tax return with a temp ITIN and, also claim relatives that still live in Mexico and other countries?” (Gab post, posted by Gab User 01). However, in contrast to what the literature surrounding the far-right suggests, this research found that minority groups were scapegoated far less than any of the others mentioned. As shown in Figure 5.8, the most common group scapegoated was the LGBT+ community (and primarily transgender people), followed by racial minorities and then, finally, immigrants. Interestingly, the group that was scapegoated the most often was the Left. They were accused of being criminals – “[Hillary Clinton] didn’t lose because [she’s] a woman, [she] lost because [she’s] a criminal” (image posted by Gab User 01) – hypocrites – “the left

impeached a president for trying to expose a crime, and then replace him with the person who committed the crime” (image posted by Gab User 01) – and hyper-sensitive, in that they are offended by everything. In line with the findings relating to the us-versus-them narrative, Gab also treated the left far more harshly than Reddit here, in that the Left were accused of being criminals in 40% of Gab posts, but only 6% of Reddit posts. The other two subcategories were more even and appeared only slightly more on Reddit than on Gab.

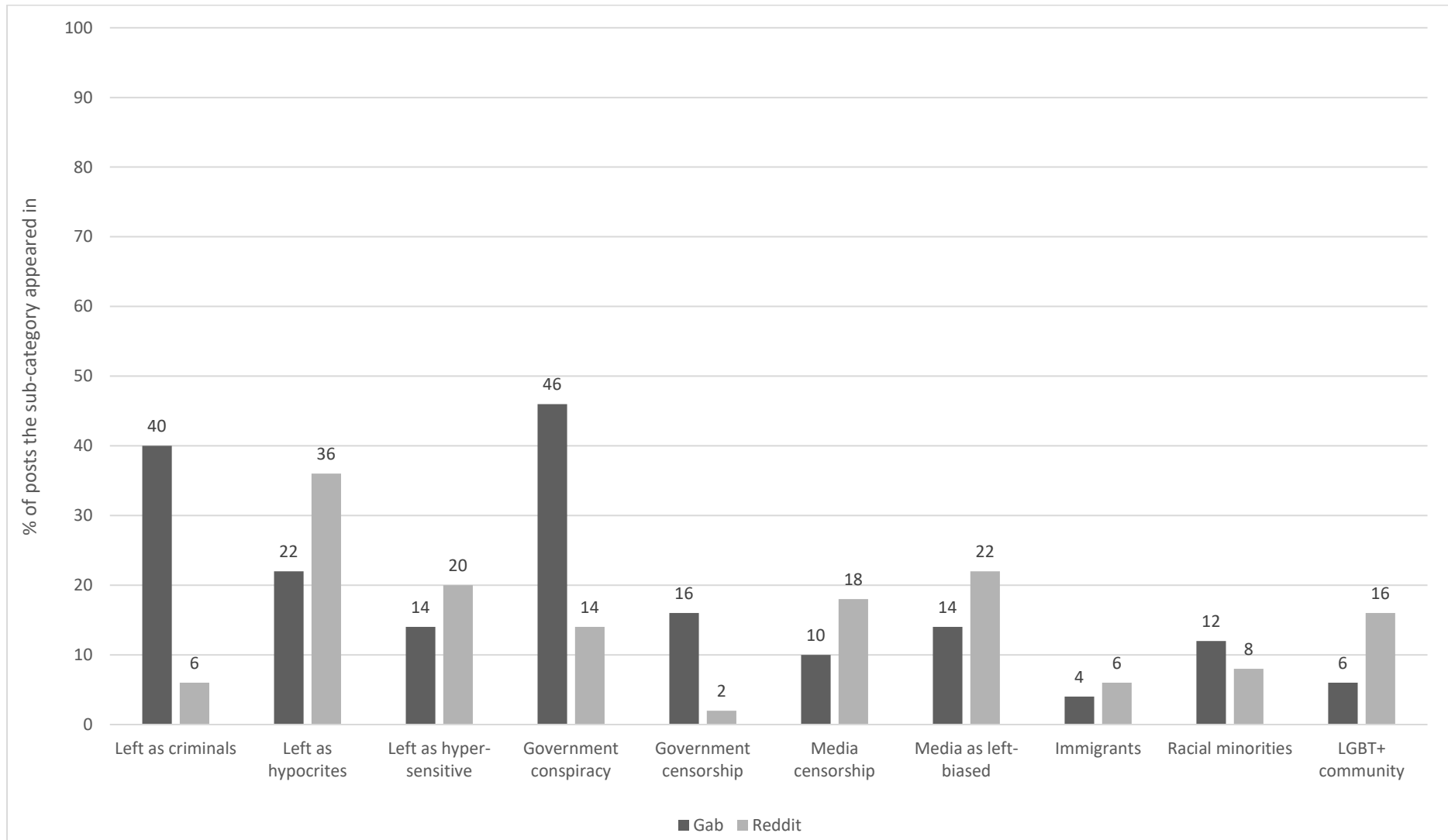
The government, then, was accused of being behind various conspiracy theories though far more often on Gab than on Reddit, as well as censoring citizens. Posts which accused the out-group of being involved in a conspiracy were by far the most popular posts on Gab, receiving vastly more likes than any other kind of post. The most common conspiracy theories on Gab were related to election fraud (specifically the 2020 election), child trafficking, unnamed crimes committed by left-wing politicians, the Coronavirus, and the current food shortages in the United States: “if the United States has food shortages it’s 100% government controlled” (image posted by Gab User 01). Reddit, on the other hand, was primarily concerned with the food shortages with one or two references to election fraud. When it came to censorship, Gab users believed that the government was censoring anyone who saw through their lies and was aware of the conspiracy, while Reddit users were more concerned with the government censoring right-wing voters specifically.

This brings us to the last group scapegoated: the media. Overall, Reddit was more concerned with the media than Gab was. This included both traditional and new media, but especially social media platforms, which were of great concern to both user bases. Posts on both platforms suggested that the media were guilty of censorship – “Let’s invite back [to Twitter] all the doctors who were censored and had their integrity insulted!” (Tweet, posted by Gab User 01) – and also that the media were left-biased and therefore censoring right-wing users more: “Twitter’s interpretation of the context is affected by their left-wing bias” (image posted by Reddit User 01).

Writing style was a common strategy when it came to scapegoating the out-group, particularly the use of leading language, like inflammatory language and suggestive language, both of which were used more often on Gab than on Reddit. Inflammatory language intends to anger the reader, in this case, a member of the far-right. For instance, “an open border policy that is literally killing hundreds of thousands of Americans and facilitating human trafficking” (image posted by Gab User 04) scapegoats the left by insinuating that their policy is getting people killed, and uses inflammatory buzzwords and exaggeration to anger the reader. In contrast, suggestive language is more subtle in telling the

Figure 5.8

Frequency of the sub-categories of the scapegoating narrative.



user how to interpret the text. For example, in reference to auditing the 2020 election for fraud, the phrase “nothing to hide, then nothing to fear. Just do it” (Gab User 02) suggests that there *is*, in fact, something to hide and that this is the reason that the audit is not taking place, thus scapegoating the left and suggesting that they rigged the 2020 election.

5.2.2. *Mocked*

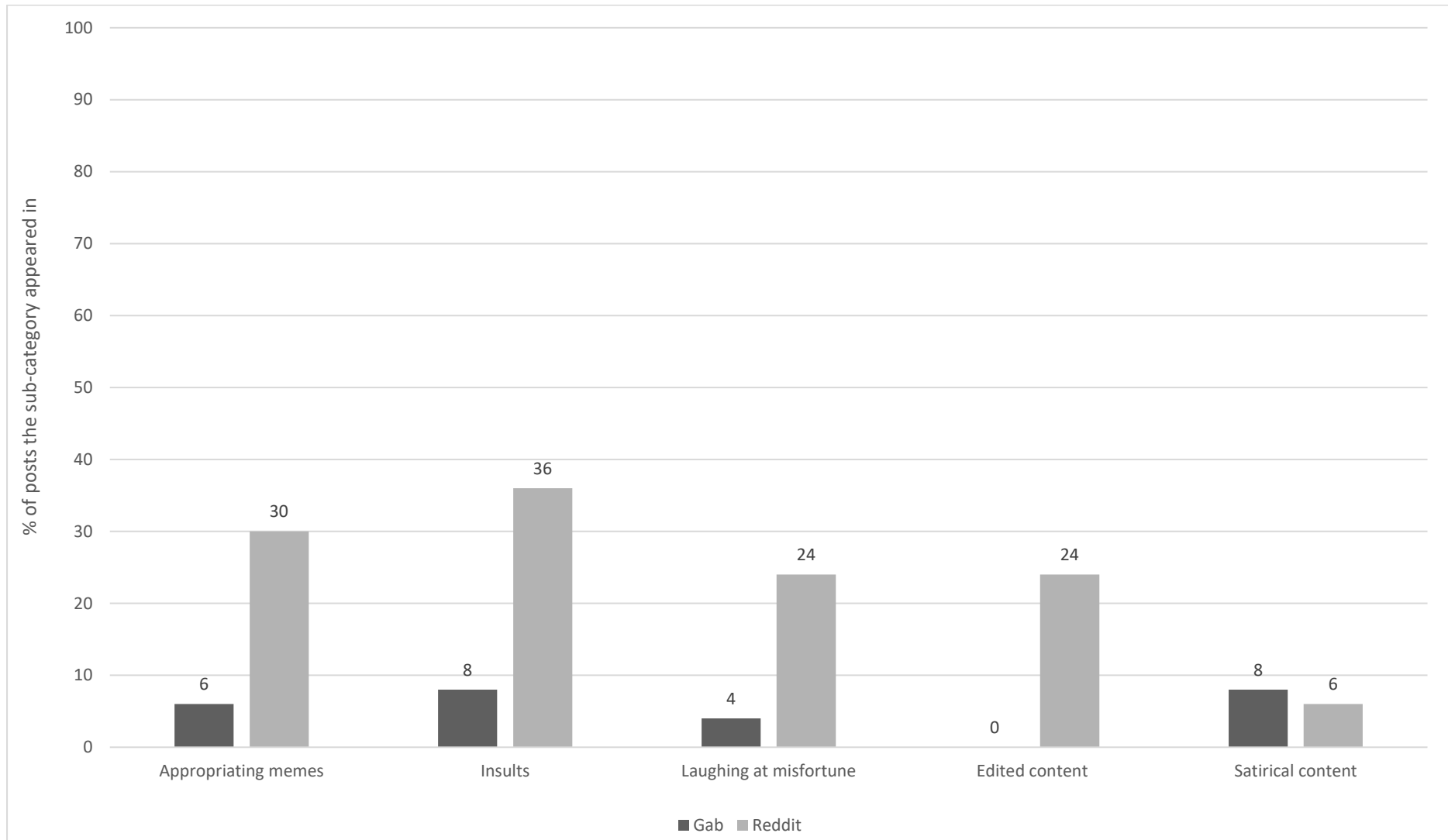
As the literature suggests, mocking can serve to strengthen the us-versus-them narrative, as “those sharing a laugh at the expense of an “out-group” foster greater social affiliation and decreased social distance with their “in-group” while simultaneously increasing social distance from their targets of ridicule and insult in a process of dehumanization” (Askanius, 2021, p. 152). This holds true here, although it was used far more often on Reddit than on Gab. Additionally, this research found that two main strategies of humour were used: mocking the out-group and creating fake content.

A full breakdown of the frequencies of the subcategories outlined below can be found in Figure 5.9 and shows that humour and mocking posts occurred significantly more often on Reddit than on Gab. Additionally, posts mocking the out-group received more positive interactions on Reddit (in terms of upvotes and awards) from other users than any other type of post. The reason for this may be due to the platform governance on the platform. As noted in section 4.4, hate speech and identity-based hate are banned on Reddit, but not on Gab. As such, users on Reddit may be using humour to spread these ideas without being reprimanded for the use of hate speech. This has a basis in the literature, as Åkerlund (2021a) and Askanius (2021) found that the far-right uses humour to make their extreme ideas seem more banal and, therefore, more spreadable, as well as allowing them to claim that they are ‘only joking’ if they are reprimanded for their behaviour. Thus, mocking the out-group allows the far-right to other them and strengthens the in-group’s bond against them.

The out-group was mocked through the appropriation of popular meme formats (to suit the far-right rhetoric), insults, and being laughed at for their misfortunes. The most frequent of these was the use of insults. An example of insults used is the nicknaming of Black Lives Matter activist Shaun King as “Talcum X” (Reddit User 02). This is a play on Malcolm X, as King reports black parentage but is suspected (primarily by the far-right) of lying about this, thus the ‘Talcum X’ nickname suggests that he is a white Malcolm X. Another insult that exemplifies this sub-category comes from a satire piece about Florida Governor Ron DeSantis attacking Disney characters – “when a reporter asked what he plans

Figure 5.9

Frequency of the sub-categories of the humour category.



to do with Dumbo, DeSantis said he wouldn't harm Vice President Harris" (article from The Glorious Conservative, posted by Reddit User 04) – which makes fun of both Harris' intelligence and weight.

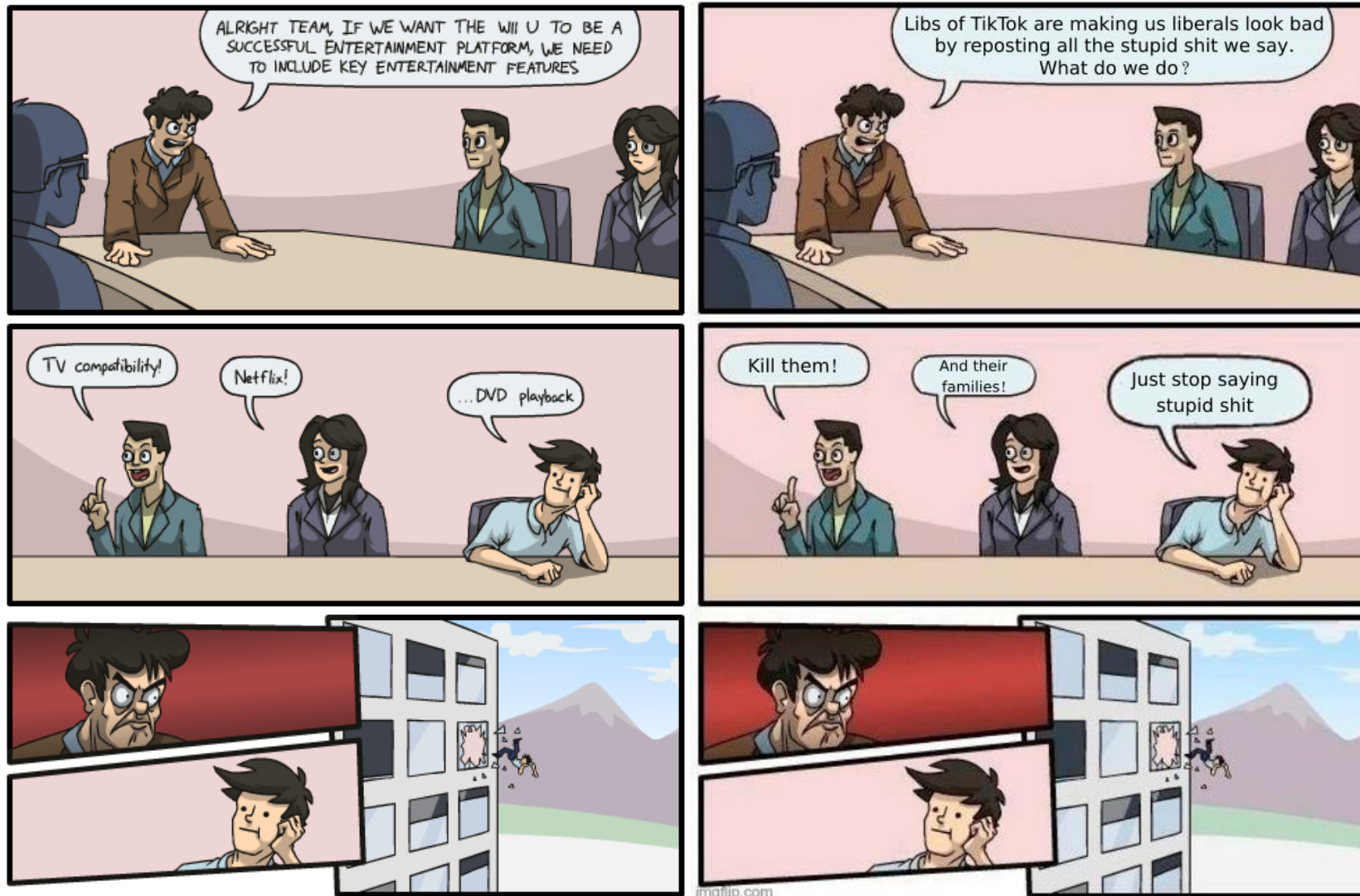
The appropriation of memes was also frequently used; again, far more often on Reddit than on Gab. Figure 5.10 is an example of this. The meme shown is the Boardroom Suggestion meme, in which an employee is thrown out of a window for suggesting a good idea (Know Your Meme, n.d.-c). This is a widely used and recognised meme, such that most viewers would know that the man being thrown out of the window is the one to suggest a good idea. The adapted version, also shown in Figure 5.10, references the Twitter account Libs of TikTok, which reposts left-wing TikTok videos designed to aggravate its right-wing audience (Lorenz, 2022). The meme encourages the viewer to laugh at the left, who are shown to be annoyed that the Libs of TikTok account makes them look bad but still throw the man who suggests they 'stop saying stupid shit' out of the window.

Finally, the out-group is also mocked by the in-group laughing at their misfortunes and losses. This includes examples such as, in a post about Netflix's stock dropping, "get woke, go broke!" (image posted by Gab User 03), and the mocking of CNN+ for shutting down early by comparing it to Quibi, a famously short-lived streaming service. As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of these posts, especially on Reddit, referenced the anger of left-wing Twitter users about Elon Musk's purchase of the platform: "the tears keep flowing one day after [the purchase]" (Reddit User 01); "leftists on Twitter are SEETHING right now 😂" (Reddit User 02). The latter example also shows how emojis were used to support the humour and to encourage the audience to laugh at the out-group. This was the only element of humour or mocking that occurred more on Gab than on Reddit, though only marginally. This may be explained by the fact that there is somewhat of a stigma against the use of emojis on Reddit (u/dsamanthas, 2018; u/Jrlopez1027, 2020). Alternatively, when creating a post on Gab, the second button at the bottom of the post is labelled 'Insert emoji,' thus encouraging Gab users to include them, which is not the case on Reddit, so platform affordances could also be the answer here.

This brings us to the second type of humour used on Reddit and Gab: creating fake content. This occurred in two main ways: editing pre-existing content and creating completely fake satirical content from scratch. Content which had been edited for humour was only seen on Reddit and did not appear at all on Gab. The edited posts were usually videos, including one in which Tucker Carlson insults a left-wing activist and is then shown wearing sunglasses and

Figure 5.10

Original Boardroom Suggestion meme (Know Your Meme, n.d.-c) (left) and adapted version posted by Reddit User 03 (right).



smoking marijuana, with a song by Snoop Dogg song playing in the background. However, they also included edited images. One example is the image shown in Figure 5.11, which is an edited Calvin and Hobbes comic strip. The original dialogue has been changed to poke fun at left-wing policies.

The other type of fake content, that which has been created from scratch and was, in every case found here, satirical, occurred somewhat equally on the two platforms, but we not as common as edited content. An example of this has already been mentioned: that of the satirical *The Glorious American* article about DeSantis attacking Disney. The article states that, among other things, DeSantis plans to “put down all 101 Dalmatians, issue DUIs to Mr. Toad, and fillet Nemo” (*The Glorious American* article, posted by Reddit User 04). Other posts in the same vein include a satirical article from *EnVolve* which reports that Joe Biden admitted that he doesn’t know what’s going on and a video, made from a variety of clips from different sources, which shows Alex Jones’ Twitter account being reinstated while Elon Musk smokes marijuana.

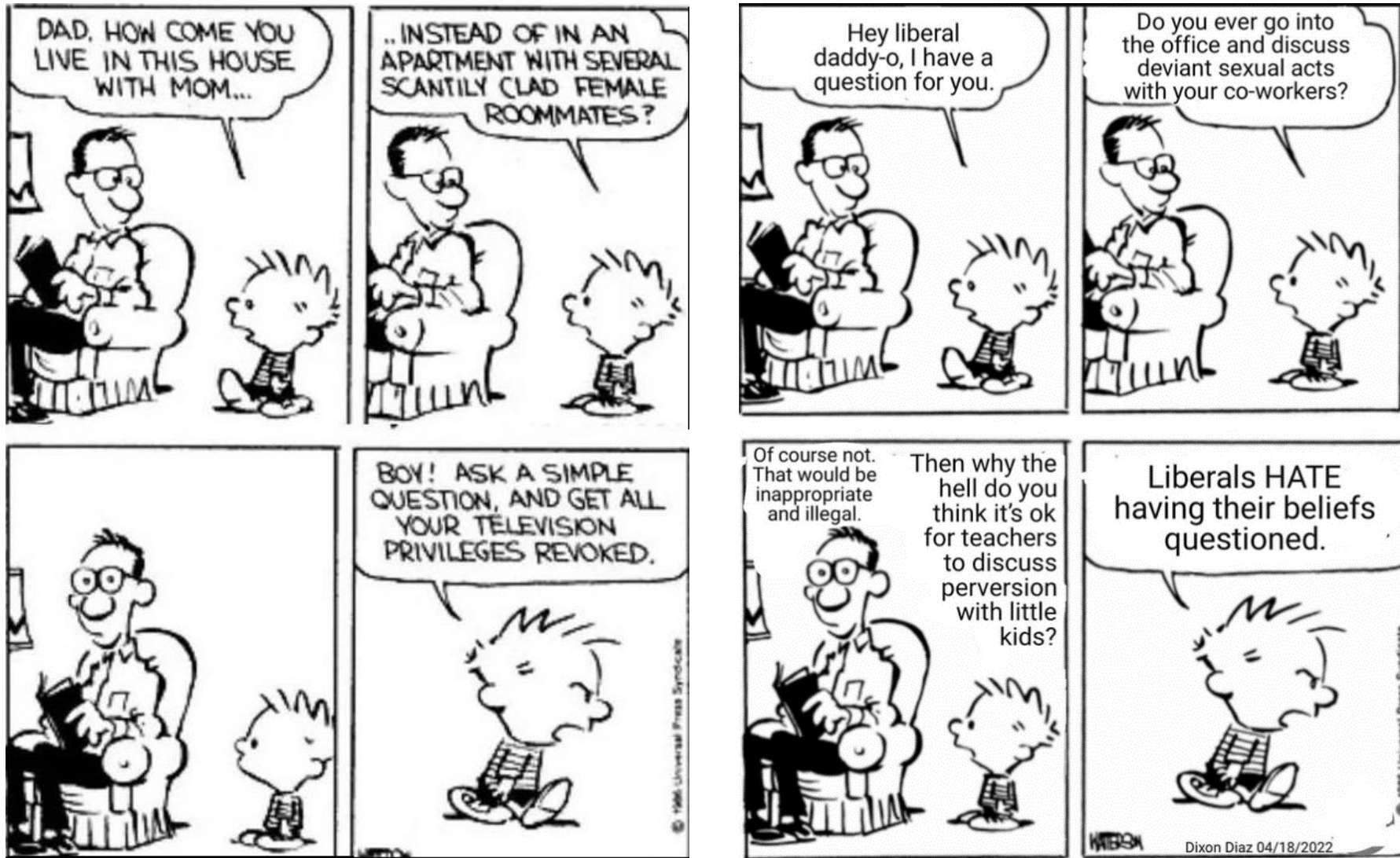
5.4. In conclusion

This research set out to answer the question: *how do platform affordances and governance contribute to the ways in which the political communication of the far-right movement differs between Reddit and Gab?* As these results have shown, platform affordances and governance do, indeed have an impact on the political communication of the chosen communities on Reddit and Gab: *r/AskThe_Donald* and *Trump 2024*. The communication of the members of these groups can be tracked through the presentation of the us-versus-them narrative tying the various elements of the far-right ideology together. Platform governance and affordances contributed to the differences and similarities in how this narrative was presented on Reddit and on Gab.

One difference between the communication of the two groups was in their use of humour to mock the out-group. This is a key part of the creation of the us-versus-them narrative, as the literature suggests (Åkerlund, 2021a; Askanus, 2021), but it occurred significantly more often on Reddit than on Gab and was also received more positively there by other users of the platform. It seems likely that platform governance is behind this. As outlined in section 2.1.3, Reddit has previously used platform governance to crack down on extreme speech, and has removed subreddits for violating its terms of service. As a result, Reddit users may be more hesitant than Gab users to post explicitly hateful content (which is

Figure 5.11

Original Calvin and Hobbes comic (left) and edited version (right) posted by Reddit User 03.



banned on the platform, but not on Gab) for fear of backlash from Reddit, and so use humour to disguise such content and make it seem less harmful, as Åkerlund (2021a) found to sometimes be the case.

Similarly, Reddit has also recently begun to take action against misinformation on the platform (Chow, 2022), which may account for another difference between the two platforms: the emphasis on conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories are common in the far-right, but they appeared far more on Gab than they did on Reddit. In fact, Reddit users rarely mentioned conspiracies at all, which may also be out of fear that their subreddit would be reprimanded or even deplatformed for spreading misinformation, as some others have been. Fears around platform governance such as this apply only to Reddit in this situation, as Gab does not explicitly ban any speech, and is moderated less intensely than Reddit it. This could also explain why this research found that Gab users spoke about out-groups more harshly, and with more dehumanising language than Reddit users did. Aside from large differences like these, affordances may also account for small differences in language between the two communities, such as the lack of emojis on Reddit.

However, there were also similarities between the two communities, which can be explained by the affordances common to both platforms. For example, both communities used writing style and images to back up their points in very similar ways, as both Reddit and Gab allow users to attach images in similar ways. Both Reddit and Gab also allow users to link to content, which the users of these two communities used to link to right-wing partisan news articles, but not neutral articles. The articles (and other sources) seen on Gab were more extremist and less reliable than on Reddit – likely due, again, to the difference in how the two platforms govern misinformation – but they were introduced and dealt with in the same way across both communities. The same can be said for many minor aspects of the data: that small differences in platform affordances produced small differences in communication, but generally, these differences were not that significant.

The next and final chapter will evaluate the thesis as a whole and provide some concluding thoughts to the project.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the impact that platform affordances and governance have on the communication of two select far-right communities on Reddit and Gab. It has found that an us-versus-them narrative underpins the far-right's communication in these communities. This narrative is constructed by portraying the in-group (the far-right) both as victims and, at the same time, as strong, patriotic truth seekers. This is supplemented by the scapegoating and mockery of the out-group. The in-group is also portrayed as credible, and this is supported by the favouring of right-wing partisan sources above more neutral ones. This research also confirmed that platform affordances and governance do have an impact on this communication. Users took advantage of the ability to link to content from outside the platform and used this to make partisan news sources more accessible than neutral ones. Additionally, they used the pseudonyms provided to them by the platform to express their beliefs and values. Platform governance, then, seemed to affect the method by which users disseminated content. For instance, Reddit does not allow hate speech, so users disguised their hateful content by presenting it in a humorous format.

Various theories were used to supplement and inform this research. First, this thesis made use of Hutchby (2001), Copland (2020) and Davis and Chouinard's (2016) ideas about platform affordances. Affordances were therefore seen as not only the actions afforded by the platform but, crucially, how the user perceives the actions available to them. Previous research was also used to understand the various methods of platform governance – including the work of Gorwa (2019), Ganesh and Bright (2020), and Rogers (2020), among others – and the reputation and history of Reddit and Gab, especially in relation to the far-right – including that of Jasser et al. (2021), Zannettou et al. (2018), Gaudette et al. (2021), and Chandrasekharan et al. (2017). When it came to the far-right then, a number of previous works were useful in detailing both the typical ideology and communication strategies of the far-right, especially those of Åkerlund (2021a; 2021b), Al-Rawi (2021), Askanius (2021), and Marcks and Pawelz (2020). All of these previous publications were extremely useful in providing a background to the thesis and preparing the topic for analysis.

When it came to the analysis, then, the chosen method was thematic analysis. This was deemed suitable as it allows a deep analysis of a small number of texts, and the consolidation of the findings into 'themes' or categories. This was a useful strategy given the nature of the research question, which asked how platform affordances and governance

affected communication: a question well suited to qualitative research methods. This method worked well for the purpose of this research, in that it allowed a detailed analysis of the data, which could then be easily categorised, and did this without requiring the researcher to contact the users of the communities researched, which was important given the ethical issues that come with the study of extremist groups like the far-right. In this research, these ethical issues were dealt with following the advice of the Erasmus University Rotterdam ethics board, in that the researcher did not obtain informed consent to ensure her own safety, and the identities of those involved in these communities were protected to ensure their safety.

As discussed in section 3.4, research which uses a small sample size such as this will always be limited in that it cannot be held as representative of a larger phenomenon. In this case, also, the level of detailed analysis meant that comments could not be analysed alongside posts, and therefore that aspect of the discussion is not recorded or examined. The ethical issues that come with examining content of an extreme nature also limit the research somewhat, as it is unwise to spread too much of that content and give it a voice. Not only that, but the researcher can put both themselves and those who post such content at risk, so caution was taken in this case to avoid that as much as possible. Additionally, some phenomena could not be explained by this thesis. For instance, it is impossible to know the intention of a user without asking them, so establishing why users screenshotted and posted content again rather than using the ‘repost’ button was beyond the scope of this thesis. Findings like this would therefore require future research to explain.

Aside from this, future research should also be conducted on Dark MAGA. As mentioned previously, the Dark MAGA movement is a new phenomenon appearing in far-right circles, which, as of the submission of this thesis, has not yet been researched academically. Although it has occasionally been treated as a joke or a meme in publications (Carbonaro, 2022), Dark MAGA has been referenced by Republican politicians such as Madison Cawthorn (Reimann, 2022), showing that it is being taken seriously by those who believe in it. Proponents of the movement believe that Donald Trump was too ‘soft’ during his presidency, and should take a harsher stance against both Democrats and more ‘liberal’ Republicans and “embrace the villain role” (Dark MAGA supporter, quoted in Stall & Grober, 2022) in which he has been cast. This is therefore a more extreme right-wing facet of the far-right movement and one that deserves further research.

The emergence of the Dark MAGA movement also goes to show the progression of the far-right movement towards more violent tendencies. As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, far-right violence is already an issue in many places, with hate crimes and politically-

motivated mass shootings on the rise in the United States, and the erosion of belief in democratic processes which lead to the riot at the US capitol in January 2021. Around the world, the same is happening, from the mainstreaming of far-right policies in Eastern European countries like Poland and Hungary to an increase in far-right violence in Germany (Anadolu Agency, 2022). Overall, it is clear to see that the far-right movement is getting more powerful and more extreme, both online and in everyday life. This is why it is such an important topic, not only for those involved in media and cultural studies but for all of us. It is impossible to solve a problem without understanding it first. This thesis aims to increase our collective understanding of the problem of the far-right movement so that, one day, a solution may be found.

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Appendix A – Codebook

Communication		Components	Sub-components	Example from the data	Count
Message	Us-vs-them	Constructing ‘us’	Celebrating in-group	<i>“Remember [they] called us conspiracy theorists [...] I hope it’s sinking in for those who didn’t believe us”</i>	G: 14 R: 20
			Patriotism	<i>“Americans should be taught to love our country, honor our anthem, and proudly recite the Pledge of Allegiance”</i>	G: 10 R: 13
			In-group as victims	<i>“Violence by the left is a good thing [...] but conservatives get suspended [from Twitter] for stating biological facts”</i>	G: 15 R: 14
		Constructing ‘them’	Vilifying out-group	<i>“...left-wing Democratic attempts to undermine Americans’ right to keep and bear firearms”</i>	G: 34 R: 9
			Mocking out-group	<i>“[the left] tell you right to your face ‘we will take your guns and raise your taxes!’ and yet, morons still vote for them!”</i>	G: 10 R: 29
			The left	Criminals	<i>“[Hillary Clinton] didn’t lose because [she’s] a woman, you lost because [she’s] a criminal”</i>
	Hypocrites	<i>“Does anyone else see the hypocrisy in all of this?”</i>		G: 11 R: 18	
	Hyper-sensitive	<i>“Here’s a meme that won’t offend anybody [white square]” “Why’s it gotta be white?”</i>		G: 7 R: 10	
	Scapegoating				

		The government	Conspiracy	<i>“If the United States has food shortages it’s 100% government controlled”</i>	G: 23
					R: 7
		The media	Censorship	<i>“The Gov is talking openly about what we can and can’t say and how to pass laws to enforce it”</i>	G: 8
					R: 1
		The media	Censorship	<i>“Let’s invite back [to Twitter] all the doctors who were censored and had their integrity insulted!”</i>	G: 5
					R: 9
		The media	Left-biased	<i>“Twitter’s interpretation of the context is affected by their left-wing bias”</i>	G: 7
					R: 11
		Minority groups	Immigrants	<i>“Did you know illegals can file a tax return with a temp ITIN and, also claim relatives that still live in Mexico...”</i>	G: 2
					R: 3
			Racial minorities	<i>“...riot in the streets with the BLM [...] destroying my city with bricks and masks”</i>	G: 6
					R: 4
LGBT community		<i>“They used to warn us about adults who discussed sexuality with children and ask them to keep secrets”</i>	G: 3		
			R: 8		
Format	Humour	Mocking out-group	Appropriating memes	<i>“Say the line Bart” becomes “say the line lib”</i>	G: 3
					R: 15
		Insults	<i>“Talcum X” (a play on Malcolm X, referring to Sean King)</i>	G: 4	
			R: 18		
		Laughing at misfortune	<i>“Get woke, go broke!”</i>	G: 12	

					R: 2	
		Fake content	Edited content	<i>Snoop Dogg</i> song added to Tucker Carlson.	G: /	
					R: 12	
		Fake content	Satirical content	<i>"Keep it up and I'll deport Aladdin," DeSantis tells Disney</i>	G: 4	
					R: 3	
	Writing style	Leading language	Inflammatory	<i>"there's no way all these threats [...] are a coincidence. This is a deliberate crisis being created on purpose"</i>	G: 28	
						R: 15
			Suggestive	Suggesting an audit of the 2020 election: <i>"Nothing to hide, then nothing to fear. Just do it."</i>	G: 29	
					R: 29	
			Leading imagery	Photographs	<i>"Facebook can be held liable for sex trafficking on the platform"</i> *Mark Zuckerberg looking shocked/scared*	G: 22
						R: 15
			Leading imagery	Emojis	<i>"Busted. 😂"</i>	G: 6
						R: 4
		Persuasive language	Emotional	<i>"My rage is endless. The treatment doled out to me by Twitter [...] burns in my guts"</i>	G: 14	
					R: 8	
		Persuasive language	Conspiratorial	<i>"Notice how the Brooklyn subway shooting has already been memory-holed"</i>	G: 29	
					R: 9	
Performance	Self-victimisation	Based on Identity	Religion	<i>"world's first Lesbian bishop calls for church to remove crosses, to install Muslim prayer space"</i>	G: /	
					R: 2	












			Race (whiteness)	<i>"WHITE LIVES MATTER TOO: wonder who would share this?"</i>	G: 2
			R: 1		
			Politics	<i>"...if I go to a Trump rally Covid-19 magically appears"</i>	G: 20
			R: 12		
		Censored	In their votes	<i>"The evidence [of election fraud] is massive and irrefutable"</i>	G: 12
			R: 3		
			By the media	<i>"...now that free speech is coming back to Twitter..."</i>	G: 11
			R: 12		
	Projecting strength	In-group winning	Powerful/strong	<i>"Trumps Troops: Millions strong America tough"</i>	G: 8
			R: 13		
			Smarter	<i>"It usually takes about 10 minutes to debunk their BS"</i>	G: 9
			R: 19		
		Vindicated	<i>"Delta to restore privileges to travelers barred over mask violations"</i>	G: 9	
			R: 13		
Victorious		<i>"The Florida senate just passed DeSantis' congressional map that creates four new GOP-leaning districts"</i>	G: 13		
		R: 16			
Out-group losing	Losing support	<i>"Growing number of Democrats call on Biden to reverse plan to end Title 42"</i>	G: 10		
	R: 12				
Being exposed		G: 16			















				<i>“They’re freaking out about what Elon will find behind the curtain”</i>	R: 9	
			Getting comeuppance	<i>“Disney should have spent less time smearing parents and praising the Chinese Communist Party”</i>	G: 7 R: 10	
	Credibility	Content sources	Partisan news sources	e.g., Breitbart News, The Gateway Pundit, and Fox News.	G: 7 R: 7	
			Partisan public figures	e.g., Donald Trump, Jack Posobiec, and Kevin Sorbo.	G: 24 R: 10	
			Partisan platforms	e.g., Truth Social, Telegram, and AnonUp.	G: 10 R: /	
			Partisan organisations	e.g., Act for America and For America.	G: 10 R: 5	
			Misleading info	False	<i>“100,000 kids are sex trafficked every day in the United States”</i>	G: 16 R: 7
				Cherry-picked	<i>“In 1948 [...] Earth had 130,000 glaciers, today, just 73 years later, only 130,000 glaciers remain”</i>	G: 12














Appendix B – Gab’s Custom Emojis















Table 4.1












Custom emojis on Gab.

Emoji	Emoji Name	Description
	1911	A colt 1911 pistol.
	ak	An AK-47 rifle.
	alexjoneswant	Alex Jones, the host of <i>Info Wars</i> .
	aoc	Democratic politician, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.
	ban	A red circle with the word ‘ban’ in the centre.
	bernie	Democratic politician, Bernie Sanders.
	bitcoin	Bitcoin (cryptocurrency) symbol.
	bruh	The Gab frog, with the word ‘bruh’ above its head.
	chad	‘Chad’ from the ‘Virgin vs Chad’ meme (see below).
	christianflag	The Christian flag.
	cometakeit	Texas ‘come and take it’ flag (see below).
	confederateflag	The flag of the confederate army.

	cozy	The Gab frog, wrapped in a blanket.
	deusvult	The deus vult meme (see below).
	gab	The Gab logo.
	gabby	The Gab frog.
	gabbygun	The Gab frog with a gun.
	gabsmile	The Gab frog, smiling, with its thumb up.
	gib	The Apu Apustaja meme (see below).
	harris	Democratic politician, Kamala Harris.
	heteropride	A blue and pink flag with a white heart in the centre.
	honk	The Clown Pepe meme (see below).
	hyde	An image of Sam Hyde, a far-right internet celebrity.
	imfine	The I AM FINE Wojak meme (see below).
	jesus	A cartoon Jesus.
	joebiden	United States President, Joe Biden.

	letsgo	Gab frog with 'let's gooooo' written above his head.
	marmot	A marmot.
	merica	The Betsy Ross American flag.
	NFSChina	The flag of the New Federal State of China.
	npc	The NPC Wojak meme (see below).
	nuke	A cartoon drawing of a nuclear explosion.
	oof	Writing that says 'OOF'.
	pew	A gun.
	pirate_flag	A pirate flag.
	qanon	A red letter Q, for the QAnon conspiracy group.
	salute	The Gab frog wearing a military helmet and saluting.
	scar	The FN SCAR rifle.
	sip	The 30-year-old boomer meme (see below).

	sjw	Chanty Binx, a feminist mocked by the far right.
	sloth	A sloth.
	snek	The 'don't step on me' yellow snake flag.
	soy	The soyjak meme (see below).
	stonkdown	The stonks meme (see below), with stocks falling.
	stonkup	The stonks meme (see below), with stocks rising.
	straightpride	A greyscale rainbow flag, to represent straight pride.
	tank	A tank.
	think_bread	Bread loaf with its hand at its chin, as if thinking.
	thunk	A poorly-drawn thinking emoji.
	tor	The onion from the Tor Browser logo.
	trump	Former United States President, Donald Trump.
	trusttheplan	A white letter Q, for the QAnon conspiracy group.
	tulsi	Democratic politician, Tulsi Gabbard.

	tux	A cartoon penguin.
	virgin	'Virgin' from the 'Virgin vs Chad' meme (see below).
	vomit	An emoji throwing up.
	wut	The Gab frog, surprised.
	wwg1wga	A blue letter Q, for the QAnon conspiracy group.
	yanggang	Democratic politician, Andrew Yang.
	yeenaw	A sad emoji wearing a cowboy hat.
	yeet	The word 'yeet'.
	yikes	The word 'yikes'
	youtried	A gold star and the words 'you tried'.
	zoomer	The zoomer wojak meme (see below).

Explanation of references to internet subculture

Given that some of the phenomena referenced by these emojis are elements of internet subculture that may be unclear to the reader, they are briefly explained below.

The 'Virgin vs Chad' Meme

This is referenced in the 'chad' and 'virgin' emojis above. It is used to compare two types of men, somewhat following an alpha male/beta male ideology. *Chad* is the alpha male, successful and confident, especially with women. *Virgin* is the beta male, who is awkward and unappealing to women (Know Your Meme, n.d.-k).

The Texas 'Come and Take It' Flag

The Texas 'Come and Take It' flag originated from the Battle of Gonzales, which marked the first battle of the Texas Revolution in 1835, during which American soldiers refused to return a cannon to Mexican soldiers (Hlavaty, 2018). This is the reason that the flag has the cannon on it, and the flag itself has "come to symbolize defiance against someone or something looking to grind you down or deprive you of a right or privilege" (Hlavaty, 2018).

Deus Vult

'Deus vult' is Latin for 'God wills it'. The saying was a battle cry during the crusades, and recently has been co-opted by Donald Trump supporters (Know Your Meme, n.d.-e) and white supremacists (Ulaby, 2017).

Apu Apustaja & Clown Pepe

Referenced in the 'gib' emoji above, *Apu Apustaja* (or Helper Helper) is a poorly-drawn image of *Pepe the Frog* (Know Your Meme, n.d.-b). Pepe the Frog is a cartoon frog used as a reaction image in various spaces across the internet (Know Your Meme, n.d.-g), but especially by the far-right (Neiwert, 2017). The 'honk' emoji references another version of Pepe the Frog: *Clown Pepe* (Know Your Meme, n.d.-d).

Wojak Memes

Wojak is a drawing of a man used as a reaction image around the internet (Know Your Meme, n.d.-m). Like Pepe the Frog, *Wojak* appears in several variations, some of which are referenced by Gab's custom emojis.

First is the *I AM FINE Wojak* meme, in which *Wojak* wears a mask with a smile on it, but underneath he is crying (Know Your Meme, n.d.-l). Next is *NPC Wojak*, where NPC stands for Non-Playable Character (as in video games), who "is meant to represent people

who do not think for themselves or are incapable of having an internal monologue” (Know Your Meme, n.d.-f).

Soyjak, then, is used to mock so-called ‘soy boys’ (Know Your Meme, n.d.-h), or men who are not perceived (by the far-right) to be masculine enough (Know Your Meme, n.d.-i). *Zoomer Wojak* represents members of Generation Z and is used to mock them (Know Your Meme, n.d.-n), the same way that the *30-Year-Old Boomer* version of Wojak is used to mock millennials (Know Your Meme, n.d.-a).

Stonks

Finally, the ‘stonksup’ and ‘stonksdown’ emojis reference the *Stonks* reaction image, which features *meme man* and the word stocks misspelt as ‘stonks’, in front of a chart (Know Your Meme, n.d.-j).