Article

Gayservatives on Gab: LGBTQ+ Communities and Far Right Social Media

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Abstract

In the United States, LGBTQ+ individuals are often imagined as inherently politically progressive, but this assumption overlooks the experiences of self-identified LGBTQ+ conservatives. Likewise, although social media platforms are recognized as spaces of identity and community production for LGBTQ+ people generally, less work has considered how they provide a similar forum for "gayservatives." In response, this article engages in a critical discourse analysis of LGBTQ+-oriented groups on the far right social media platform Gab. Results indicate that far right social media is utilized to connect with other politically similar LGBTQ+ individuals perceived to be absent in one's offline community. Participants do so via discourses that both regulate and celebrate LGBTQ+ identities, particularly as it relates to hegemonic masculinity. These strategies generally reinforce, but at times reframe, stereotypical narratives about LGBTQ+ individuals. This study provides groundwork for more nuanced understandings of both LGBTQ+ conservatives and the ways power is socialized and embodied through discourses about sexual and gender identities.

Keywords

discourse analysis, far right, Gab, hegemonic masculinity, LGBTQ+

Despite the modern US conservative movement's antipathy toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities (Berg & Syed, 2019), the number and visibility of individuals and organizations who claim both LGBTQ+ and conservative identities are continuing to increase (Denizet-Lewis, 2019).[1] Highly mediated examples include conservative influencers and political commentators, such as Brandon Straka, Tammy Bruce, and Andy Ngô; political advisors, such as Richard Grenell; mega-donors, such as Peter Thiel; and organizations, such as GOProud and the Log Cabin Republicans.[2]

Much research discussing conservative ideologies and nonnormative sexualities has centered the incongruence between the two positions, focusing on the restrictive nature of the former on the latter, particularly as it relates to both de jure and de facto disenfranchisement (Nadal, 2013). Additional research has approached the topic by examining how conservative ideologies intersect with various political, economic, and cultural fields as regulating and normalizing mechanisms of power (Ahmed, 2004; Dhoest, 2020; Duggan, 2002; Warner, 1999 among many others).[3] This work has often examined the juncture from a top-down perspective, highlighting how "analytics of power coalesce" (Puar, 2013, p. 337) in ways that allow liberal-identified LGBTQ+ individuals to subscribe to more conventional and traditional

ideologies to be included and valued, even when this bent toward normativity alienates or excludes marginalized identities within, and adjacent to, the LGBTQ+ community.

In contrast, little research has examined the ways in which conservative LGBTQ+ individuals grapple with these intersecting identities, especially in the face of explicit anti-LGBTQ+ sociopolitical movements. In fact, the rarity of scholarship focused on conservative LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations has created an incorrect assumption, via omission, that LGBTQ+ identity always implies progressive politics (Lockhart, 2022) and that conservative ideologies overlapping with LGBTQ+ identities are unthinkable (Halberstam, 2011).

Our project helps to fill this gap in research by considering a particularly compelling example—how LGBTQ+ community and identity are cultivated on Gab, a social media platform associated not just with conservatism writ large but with the far right in particular. Despite the contradictions and historical conflicts between LGBTQ+ persons

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and ultra-conservative ideologies, LGBTQ+ identified individuals participate in these spaces, and their posts and discussions contribute to larger narratives about political ideology and marginalized gender and sexual identities.

To accomplish this study, we conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 294 posts from four groups created as LGBTQ+ friendly spaces on Gab. We focus on *how* LGBTQ+ individuals navigate these subjectivities in digital spaces, *what* dominant reason(s) LGBTQ+ individuals give to explain why they seek out these spaces, and *how* political, social, and cultural power dynamics, assumptions, and dominant narratives shape this process. This study differs from much of the previously-mentioned research in that it takes a bottom-up approach: It examines discourses produced by, rather than about, self-identified LGBTQ+ conservatives. In addition, it sees conservative and LGBTQ+ identities as concomitant rather than mutually exclusive.

Understanding how conservative ideology and LGBTQ+ sexuality intersect at an individual identarian level is important, especially because there is "considerable conflict within identity categories about how to perform one's identity" (Brekhus, 2003, p. 11). Ultimately, results from our study could help to better understand the multiple ways that LGBTQ+ identity is entangled with political identity and provide a template for future projects to examine how marginalized sexual and gender identities intersect with conservative political and ideological communities.

Background

In the following sections, we provide context for our study by describing how members of the LGBTQ+ community have historically used digital spaces to build communities, the emergence of far right online movements and platforms, and the *gayservative* movement.

LGBTQ+ Communities and Digital Spaces

Research has documented the myriad ways in which LGBTQ+ communities have used social media. These studies, while too numerous to list exhaustively, have focused on how LGBTQ+ individuals utilize social media to create community and socialize (Gray, 2009; Gross, 2003; Miller, 2015), construct and manage identity (Cavalcante, 2016; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Griffin, 2016; Lucero, 2017; Owens, 2017), find romantic partners (Campbell, 2004; Mowlabocus, 2016), and challenge cisnormative and heteronormative understandings of subjectivity (Jenzen, 2017). This literature has also highlighted the ways in which sexuality and gender are co-constructed by new technological platforms and algorithms (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Gieseking, 2017; MacAulay & Moldes, 2016). Edited volumes (O'Riordan & Phillips, 2007; Pain, 2022; Pullen, 2014; Pullen & Cooper, 2010) and special issues in academic journals (Burgess et al., 2016; Shaw & Sender, 2016) have further unpacked LGBTQ+ digital cultures from a variety of perspectives (global, youth, etc.) and in ways that recognize how these spaces can both facilitate and foreclose particular identities, conversations, and practices. Overall, the extant literature has identified digital worlds as "queer utopias" (Cavalcante, 2019, p. 1716), while at the same time acknowledging the contradictions inherent to online identification practices and the conflicts faced by queer users of social media platforms (Cho, 2018; Geeng & Hiniker, 2021; Raj, 2011; Rubin & McClelland, 2015). This research has produced nuanced and varied findings related to LGBTQ+ identity and community production, though it has often focused on platforms branded as either LGBTQ+-friendly or -neutral. In contrast, research has not focused as acutely on how LGBTQ+ individuals utilize digital platforms within spaces that are decidedly unqueer, such as far right social media.

The American Far Right and the Internet

Far right and White nationalist movements in the United States (and around the world; see Fielitz & Thurston, 2019) have long used the Internet to promote their ideas and their aims (e.g., Bjork-James, 2020; Daniels, 2018; Thompson & Hawley, 2021). However, it was not until the emergence of the "alt-right" on platforms such as 4chan and Reddit, and their influence in the 2016 US presidential election, that this phenomenon came more fully into the public consciousness (Hawley, 2017; Thompson & Hawley, 2021; Wendling, 2018). Although the alt-right as such has largely declined since 2017, it has always overlapped with other "radical pro-White movements" (Hartzell, 2018, p. 7), and it is clear that online far right movements continue to exist (and even inform mainstream US conservatism). Particularly important in the context of this study are "alternative" social media platforms (e.g., Gab, Parler, Gettr, Truth Social) that explicitly cater to the right. In short, as "Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram limit the presence of violent and racist discourse, these conversations are migrating toward sites that protect hate speech" (Bjork-James, 2020, p. 188).

In this study, we focus on Gab, one of the older and more controversial of these platforms. Gab was first launched (in beta) in 2016. Although the platform received immediate criticism after its launch, these critiques intensified after it became associated with the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting (Van Dijck et al., 2021). Like many alternative platforms, Gab markets itself as free speech-focused; although it does forbid some content (including pornography, which is largely protected as free speech in the United States), it moderates much less content than mainstream platforms. Indeed, extant research on Gab has underlined the prevalence of hate speech (e.g., Zannettou et al., 2018) and conspiratorial thinking (Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022) on the platform.

The current version of Gab is based on open-source code from Mastodon, a microblogging platform similar to Twitter; however, Gab's CEO identifies the site as "more like Facebook" (Torba, 2022), and its core feature set includes

affordances common to many social network sites (see boyd & Ellison, 2007). Gab users can establish profiles, follow other users, post text or multimedia messages, and interact in groups. The specifics of Gab's feature set have evolved over the years, and the Gab Social main platform is supplemented by offerings such as the Gab Chat messaging service and the Gab TV video hosting platform. The breadth of Gab offerings reflects its CEO's emphasis on creating a "parallel economy," a priority also demonstrated by its various revenue sources, including paid Gab Pro accounts, an in-house advertising platform, a Gab Shop that sells related products, and a GabPay payment processing service.

While Gab is of clear scholarly interest because of the insights it provides into far right populations, it also allows researchers to study the way these populations overlap (perhaps unintuitively) with other populations. For example, Greenhalgh, Krutka, and Oltmann (2021) argued that the existence of Gab—and the established presence of teachers on Gab—serves as an invitation for educational technology researchers to rethink their assumptions about learning and social media. Similarly, the importance of normative sexuality and gender within the American far right may make it unintuitive for there to be LGBTQ+ groups on platforms like Gab. Appeals to masculinity have long served as recruitment strategies for far right movements (Kimmel, 2018). For example, the alt-right's 2016 playbook had much in common with the 2014 misogynist Gamergate movement (Massanari & Chess, 2018), and the Ku Klux Klan's (KKK) endorsement of Donald Trump during his 2016 campaign invoked more queerphobic than racist rhetoric. Indeed, both the online far right and the *manosphere* (see Marwick & Caplan, 2018) of anti-feminist and misogynist online spaces are informed by the *red pill* metaphor (Wendling, 2018; Zuckerberg, 2018), which argues that only they are aware of a purported reality of gender, race, and/or politics to which most of the world is blind. Yet, if the presence of LGBTQ+ groups on Gab is unexpected, it is perhaps more worthy of scholarly attention.

Contextualizing and Defining Gayservatives

Pinpointing the emergence of LGBTQ+ conservative and right wing identities in the United States is difficult; however, one of the first formal organizations, the San Francisco-based Concerned Republicans for Individual Rights, was formed in 1977. The organization grew throughout the 1980s, and gay conservatives created individual chapters throughout California as the Lincoln Club, before establishing a national presence as the Log Cabin Republicans (Tafel, 1999). Importantly though, gay rights groups such as the Log Cabin Republicans are "rarely recognized or consulted by mainstream or national parties" (Lockhart, 2022, p. 14). Further research on the Log Cabin Republicans (Rogers & Lott, 1997) found that members claimed primarily majoritarian identities, especially in terms of race, ethnicity, gender,

and social class; disliked the association with "libertine lifestyles, queer theory, or direct action, confrontational politics"; and pushed back on media representations of the community as overwhelmingly progressive (p. 500). These findings were further supported by Dillard (2001), who identified how gay conservatives' desires for, and attempts at, assimilation involved the minimizing of identity differences in order to benefit from the privileges normally retained solely for members of majoritarian culture, and by Lockhart (2022), who found that "the fewer material and social challenges one faces, the easier it is to claim to be beyond material and social challenges," especially those associated with LGBTQ+ identities (p. 22).

In this study, we use the term *gayservative* to refer to this population. The term is meant to be inclusive of all non-normative sexual and gender identities while also reflecting the dominance of cisgender gay male identities in this space. While we did explore the usage of terms such as queerservative and LGBTQ+ conservatives (so as to not exclude any identity marker under the LGBTQ+ umbrella) we settled on gayservative because it more accurately reflects the categories and identities preferred by the users we studied and was, in fact, a term deployed by some to refer to themselves and others. As such, our usage of the term aims to reflect the ways in which these users already categorize themselves. In addition, because our sample skewed white, male, and cisgender, we offer this term in the hopes that future studies will further examine if it is equally used by those who do not possess these specific identity positions. We also deliberately use the term *conservative*, rather than *Republican*, because Gab users did not coalesce around a particular party affiliation but rather unified around particular views and values that were seen as conservative or, more often, as non-liberal.

Method

This study applies established CDA methods to *digital traces*, data produced as "a by-product of people's everyday action" in digital spaces (Salganik, 2018, p. 13). In this section, we describe each of these influences on our research design; however, we begin with a discussion of research ethics and positionality.

Research Ethics and Positionality

There are a number of ethical considerations that are either distinct to or compounded by research in online spaces (e.g., Fiesler & Proferes, 2018; franzke et al., 2020; Gilbert et al., 2021; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). These considerations are complicated by the fact that most research institutions, including ours, do not require ethical review for analyses of public social media data because it is not considered "human subjects research." Despite this position, we acknowledge that our collection of Gab users' data without their explicit

Table 1. Description of Gab Groups Considered in this Study and Post Distribution.

Group number	Group subject	Number of collected original posts	Number of collected reply posts	Number of total posts
1	Conservative and pro-Trump politics from a gay perspective	9	17	26
2	Conservative and independent politics from a gay perspective	101	109	210
3	Video games and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community	21	14	35
4	Pro-Trump topics from a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender perspective	12	11	23

consent puts us in a position of power (e.g., Suomela et al., 2019) and that our ethical obligations still exist despite the lack of formal ethical review. We have therefore taken steps to protect the privacy of these users, especially those who claim identities traditionally marginalized in far right contexts. For example, we do not identify the groups or users that we have studied. Furthermore, because otherwise-anonymous social media text can often be found through a search function (Greenhalgh, Koehler, et al., 2021), we have sometimes paraphrased or modified posts and/or entered quoted language into Gab's search feature to ensure it did not return the original posts. However, we also argue that Gab users' "expectations and comfort are a critical component, but not the only component, of research ethics" (Gilbert et al., 2021, p. 11). In short, the same concern for power relations that creates our ethical obligations toward unwitting research participants also inspires our critical analysis of far right movements, which seek to exercise power over others.

Relatedly, the members of our research team claim a variety of majoritarian and marginalized identities. Our access to various subjectivities related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and politics both allowed us to bring diverse experiences, frameworks of analysis, and positioning to this study and required us to acknowledge the biases and privileges that affect our research.

Finally, our attempt to convey and capture the connection between discourse and power, and the material consequences of these practices, means the following analysis includes slurs related to the LGBTQ+ community (as posted by individuals with self-proclaimed LGBTQ+ identities). We have only reproduced this language when it was necessary to discuss and unpack how communication practices work to strengthen ideologies (Kukla, 2018).

Data Collection

We began data collection by identifying groups on Gab that were relevant to the focus of this study. We searched for terms germane to LGBTQ+ topics, including "gay," "LGBT," and "trans." Using the search results, we identified 11 public groups whose titles indicated discussion, support, or criticism of LGBTQ+ topics. The second and third authors collected the unique URL for each post in each

group and then collected screenshots of each post using the *webshot* package for the R programming language (Chang et al., 2019). Because some screenshots failed or left out replies to posts, we filled in gaps with a second round of screenshot collection. This process was completed between September 2021 and January 2022. Before proceeding to analysis, we removed two groups whose names and descriptions explicitly indicated queerphobia and five groups that purported to be LGBTQ+ friendly spaces but had been overrun by queerphobic posting; thus, our analysis in this paper focuses on four public groups clearly established, and experienced, as LGBTQ+ friendly spaces.

Table 1 identifies these groups and the amount of data we retrieved from them. We describe each group using phrases present in its official description, and the posts counted include all still-available (i.e., not since deleted) posts from each group, going back to each group's creation. All four groups were created in January 2021, a period of increased interest in Gab because of Joe Biden's election in the United States. As suggested in Table 1, their activity levels were relatively low and it was not uncommon for days, weeks, or months to go between posts in each group.

Data Analysis

CDA guided our analytic approach. CDA examines how particular groupings of text and images produce understandings about the world and its inhabitants: "it constructs reality by making ideas and events meaningful in particular ways that uphold, and/or challenge cultural ideologies" (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 1878). Influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (1972), CDA positions discourse as productive: it brings things into being and produces meanings that inform and organize identity formation while making some identities legible and obviating others (Brody, 2019). It acknowledges how active subjects are (co)agents in the production of reality and how they can both contribute to and resist structures of power in society through various discursive planes: "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart" (Foucault, 1990, pp. 100–101). Rather than determining whether discourses are right or wrong, this approach focuses on how their production, dissemination,

and reception "conditions the formation of subjects and the structuring and shaping of society" (Jäger, 2001, p. 35), especially because discourses are connected to different power mechanisms and institutions.

Because this study focused on social media, we utilized a multimodal analytical lens, which allowed us to further examine how other resources, such as images and sound, are studied *in addition to* text/language (Kress, 2012). The aim of multimodal discourse analysis is to understand how a cultural product, in this case an individual post on Gab, utilizes both images and text to better understand its ideological function and material effect. Incorporating this approach was useful because the data set included posts that were text only and posts that integrated text and images.

During the first round of analysis, the first author read every post, made note of the formal qualities (e.g., text, image, font, layout), and interpreted the role of each in how it contributed to the overall messaging (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020). After this initial round, they then re-examined each post and attributed codes to each based on the various formal aspects. This sometimes meant that a post was assigned more than one code dependent on the specific language and images used. Particular attention was paid to how text and/ or visuals were utilized to anchor meanings to make the intent of the post as monosemous as possible. Throughout the process they engaged in memo-writing to record observations. The third author independently analyzed the posts and either placed them in the corresponding codes identified by the first author or created a new code based on their interpretation. All three authors met to discuss any codes that did not match to agree upon final labels.[4] The codes were then assigned to discursive themes (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020) with a focus on how particular rhetorical strategies, such as discussions of sexual orientation, contributed to overall meanings related to sexual and gender identities and communities.

Findings and Discussion

In this study, we employed CDA to explore how LGBTQ+ identity and community were produced, regulated, and explored by gayservatives on the far right social media platform Gab. These findings are based on an analysis of 294 posts from four groups. These groups were both explicitly defined as LGBTQ+ friendly in their descriptions and demonstrably LGBTQ+ friendly in their group activity.

Our analysis yielded five dominant discursive practices deployed by gayservative Gab users: "Finding My Tribe": Conservative Isolation in Liberal Spaces; Creating Community; Reinforcing Hegemonic Masculinity; Reframing Religious Rhetoric; and Celebrating and Regulating Gay Male Desire. Overall, these strategies all worked to cultivate a particular type of LGBTQ+ community at the intersection of nonnormative sexual identity and conservative ideology.

"Finding My Tribe": Conservative Isolation in Liberal Spaces

A discursive analysis demonstrates some of the reasons gay-servatives give for engaging in an LGBTQ+ group on Gab. In short, this speaks to *what* motivates their participation. In a general sense, users spoke of the importance of this kind of digital space as a way to find and connect with others going through similar experiences. This was noted as especially important given how LGBTQ+ identities and conservative ideologies are often positioned orthogonally. As one user wrote, "I'm an old, Christian, gay, gun-toting Republican, so it's taken me a while to find my tribe."[5] This was echoed by another user, who identified as a trans man but was concerned about the LGBTQ+ community's response if he shared that he leaned right politically. For another user, this general concern about the assumed liberalness of the LGBTQ+ community was also combined with feelings of isolation engendered by experiences on mainstream social media platforms: "I didn't know if there were any other gay conservative Republicans out there. Queers and liberals both booed me off Facebook, but this place has been nothing but friendly." Users' general reasons for participating on Gab reflect, and are shaped by, previously stated discourses that imagine gayservatives as unthinkable or contradictory.

More specifically, many users attributed their need for a digital community to the isolation caused by geographic locations perceived to be exceedingly liberal. For example, one participant introduced himself in a thread as follows: "being conservative here in Washington is like a death sentence." Another exchange involved a post that read: "Hey guys, I'm a California gay guy. I'm new to Gab and looking to find my tribe." Another user responded: "I was in San Francisco for ten years and thought I was the only gay conservative around!" To which another poster responded, "I've been in the Bay Area my whole life. I'm more independent, but here, you're conservative if you aren't left wing liberal." When another user wrote that they were from Los Angeles, someone responded, "Nice to see the West Coast represented." This prompted the initial poster to state how disappointed they were by the lack of representations of gay conservatives from the West Coast.

Taken together, these posts show the necessity of a digital space for gayservatives to explore the various facets of their identity they feel they are unable to engage with in other, especially physical, spaces. The discourse produced by these posts provides support for the idea that urban and rural members of LGBTQ+ communities are not pitted against one another in terms of political orientation, but rather overlap. Here we see how sexuality "is not merely additive to geography; rather" they are always co-constituted (Wang, 2014, p. 98). Based on our analysis of the users' posts, the urban or progressive spaces of California and Washington, among others, are imagined as devoid of, and hostile to, gayservative identities, no doubt a reflection of the way that the

politics of gay visibility "tether LGBT identities to cities" (Gray, 2009, p. 4) and how metronormative (Brody, 2020; Halberstam, 2005) assumptions conflate LGBTQ+ identity and the urban in a manner that harnesses assumptions about political ideology to particular locations and identities.

While previous research has found that LGBTQ+ individuals do look for more progressive or urban spaces, our study found the opposite is true as well. As such, in the absence of physical locations, online communities provide a place to explore identities and contribute to community resources for LGBTQ+ people perceived to be living in hostile spaces (Dym et al., 2019; Gray, 2009). However, our results also show that what is deemed a "hostile" space needs to be contextualized beyond assumptions related to gender and/or sexual identity: that "we cannot examine the social relations of power that produce the meaning of LGBT identities without a careful consideration of how locations" matter to those relations (Gray, 2010, p. 291). Digital spaces such as Gab provide gayservative individuals an opportunity to expand their experiences of belonging and allow for more varied representations of the LGBTQ+ community.

Creating Community

This section demonstrates how members of these Gab groups discursively set out to build communities and welcome participants. That is, if the previous section touched on *what* motivations existed for these communities, this one indicates *how* those communities were enacted.

Some of the practices associated with these discourses are common to typical interpersonal, and digital, settings. For example, one post read: "I'm new here and interested to see what Gab is all about." Another user responded by guessing that most users were new but that he was happy to connect with other gay conservatives. These types of exchanges were replicated by a user posting "Wassup, friends?" with waving emojis, to which others responded, "make yourself at home" and with messages of gratitude that they had learned about the group. These posts illustrate how users invite one another to feel comfortable, to reach out, and to make connections. These types of discursive strategies were most predominant in the early posts establishing a group. For example, the first post in one group suggested that users introduce themselves and follow one another. This poster not only used traditional interpersonal approaches but also tied them to specific digital practices, such as "following," that are unique to the affordances of a social networking site.

Other practices are more clearly related to the previously identified motivation for these groups. That is, having established the need for a digital community for gayservatives, participants were able to use the community to crowdsource questions, seek advice, and wrestle with their lived experiences. For example, users on Gab looked to this digital community to help them work through some of the realities of being a gayservative, specifically when it came to dating. As one user simply wrote: "Where can I meet other Republican singles?" Another user engendered a larger conversation when they asked others about their relationships with liberal men, including whether politics ever got in the way of the relationship. Multiple individuals responded to this post to discuss their experiences dating individuals with a different political ideology and the strategies they used with their partners to work through it. For example, one user replied "My boyfriend is liberal. He'll call me an idiot, and then I call him a snowflake and remind him I conceal and carry, then we have sex and it's all better." Another disagreed, describing his relationship as difficult and commenting that he reacts with disgust whenever his partner praises Joe Biden. Interestingly, this conversation was initially motivated by a discussion in the "Gay Conservatives Telegram chat," showing the way users, and discourses, migrate between platforms creating networked gayservativism.

However, the cultivation of community did not always revolve around specifically conservative topics. For example, in one group devoted to gaming, an individual asked what video game networks people used (e.g., Xbox Live or PlayStation Network) because he needs "more online gaming buds," and yet another announced a live game stream for gamers in the group to join. Here we see how a space designed for affinity first, and identity second, "allows for people to approach a space without attaching tenuous aspects of their identity to the work happening there" (Dym et al., 2019, p. 23).

Reinforcing Hegemonic Masculinity

Within these communities, a dominant discursive practice by gayservatives on Gab was the reinforcement and promotion of ideals and beliefs associated with hegemonic masculinity. These instances were predominantly conveyed by cultural values and ideologies that undergird patriarchy via everyday practices and institutional structures, in particular through an emphasis on heteronormativity and homophobia. Hegemonic masculinity, as a concept, refers to "how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance" (Carrigan et al., 1985, p. 592). For example, one user situated a particular understanding of masculinity by writing, "I only date MAGA men: masculine, clean cut, gritty, protective, stable, hardworking, has values, owns a truck, driven, low debt." Discourses surrounding sexuality circulate within structures of power that benefit particular groups, such as those with economic power (e.g., low debt; *owns* a truck) and symbolic power (e.g., masculine, gritty). Furthermore, within a US context, hegemonic masculinity is co-constructed according to particular characteristics, such as physical strength, moral authority, and occupation, among others (Chesebro, 2001), and these social reproductions of hegemonic masculinity are evident in the user's list.

Figure 1. Meme comparing Freddie Mercury and Perez Hilton.

In addition, the usage of hegemonic masculinity by members of the LGBTQ+ community reflects a historical pattern within the gay community to reproduce some aspects of this ideology, notably toughness and physical aggression, as a way to assimilate (Donaldson, 1993). However, as Scott Ritchie (2022) further explains, "when hegemonic masculinity gets taken up in the gay community, it often contributes to anti-femme, straight-acting homonormativity" (p. 239). By positioning themselves as individuals who identify as gay, but are not identifiable as gay,[6] these users attempt to reclaim the power afforded via hegemonic masculinity by elevating material reproductions of masculinity—such as particular purchasing habits, ways of dressing, and ways of acting—that are institutionalized as traits of a conservative ethos situated as universally recognized and desirable. This is especially true for gayservatives, whom Dickey et al. (2022) have described as using social media to discursively produce a tolerated ingroup that is "binary-gendered" and "does not possess outwardly 'queer' traits" (p. 16). For example, one user posted an image contrasting Freddie Mercury, with his trademark mustache and leather jacket, and an unflattering image of Perez Hilton, wearing pink underwear and a pink wig. The caption read, "Gay men: What the fuck happened?"[7] (Figure 1). Within these cultural narratives, "gayness" is associated with effeminacy and positioned as a threat to hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, "society pressures gay men to negotiate who they are according to hegemonic masculinity to compensate for their same-sex sexual preference" (Eguchi, 2009, p. 194), which situates a gendered power struggle at the core of gay male identity. This internalized heteronormative masculinity, and its subsequent rules, then

Figure 2. Almost politically correct redneck meme.

leads individuals to regulate the behavior of both themselves and other gay men (Thepsourinthone et al., 2021), as evidenced by the discourses produced on these groups.

These types of discursive strategies were also demonstrated when a user posted a version of the "almost politically correct redneck" meme with the text "Yea, I'm gay. But you won't catch me acting like a fag" (Figure 2). Here, a particular type of masculine gay identity is situated in a

hierarchical manner compared with positionalities understood as feminine. The user is discursively contributing to the "fag discourse" (Pascoe, 2005) by situating *gay* and *fag* as separate identities. *Gay* is positioned as an indicator of sexuality that still allows men to be "potentially masculine" and retain patriarchal claims to power (Scott, 2011, p. 150), whereas *fag* is "by definition, the opposition of masculine" (Pascoe, 2005, p. 337). Furthermore, the use of the meme allows for discursive aspects of the narrative to be yoked to particular symbolic representations coded as masculine: White, Southern, bearded, truck-owning, and mullet-sporting.

In addition, these anti-feminine homonegative discourses extend to users' embrace of sexual misogyny, which is closely related to sexual racism. While the latter speaks of "discrimination between potential sexual or romantic partners on the basis of perceived racial identity" (Callander et al., 2015, p. 1991), the former relates to how discrimination circulates on the basis of perceived masculinity. For example, in a discussion of conservative online personality Christian Walker,[8] one user wrote "I don't like effeminate guys but he's not taking prisoners."[9] These discursive practices point to the ways that systems of patriarchy and misogyny can affect who gay, pansexual, and bisexual men seek out for sexual and romantic partners, just as previous research has found that these decisions are affected by "systems of colonialism, prejudice, and Whiteness" (Callander et al., 2015, p. 1992). The users not only discursively discipline themselves but also construct normative gender expressions and expectations for other gayservatives via the promise of sexual and/or romantic relations.

Interestingly, gayservative users did not tie masculinity to sex organs, as seen in queerphobic discourses produced by straight-identified individuals elsewhere on the platform; however, they did reproduce discourses that connected masculinity to gender identity in hierarchical ways. For example, one user wrote "I prefer FTM transgenders because they're nicer and chiller than MTF." Here, the issue was not what sex organs the individuals possessed but rather how their gender identity reflected stereotypical assumptions (masculinity as relaxed and femininity as hysterical). These users discursively reproduce power relations, specifically as they relate to the ascendancy and dominance of men and expected roles and gender norms for men *and* women.

Particularly important in this context is the way that users also conflated gender and femininity with liberalness. For example, one user posted "if you don't think like liberals, they'll go from zero to bitch in 10 seconds"; another wrote "The left is canceling masculinity"; and yet another added "He said he voted Democrat. I asked to borrow a tampon." These discursive patterns all work in the service of a particular type of conservative homonormativity (Duggan, 2002; Puar, 2007), wherein members of the LGBTQ+ community create and recognize a "normal good gay," or "mainstream gay" who is gender conventional, representative of traditional family values

and conservative nationalism, and who personifies economic individualism (Seidman, 2002). While this type of homonormativity is often configured as nonpolitical, the results of our study provide further evidence that it actually represents "the gay right wing, self-constituted as the new center" (Duggan, 2003, p. 65) and that it is a product of both moderate center-right and far right politics, which in turn allows for the interests of the right to be substituted in place of uniquely gay ones (Lockhart, 2022).

Taken together, these discursive cultivations of masculinity not only position it as inherent to conservatism but also recast effeminacy as a universally undesirable affect created by the left, generally, and circulated and bolstered by *liberal* transwomen and gay men, specifically.

Reframing Religious Rhetoric

While gayservative users on Gab did reinforce conservative discourses related to masculinity, many reframed traditional discourses that position LGBTQ+ individuals as incompatible with religious beliefs, particularly Christianity. This is not to say that gayservative users were unaware of these dominant discourses. For example, one user complained that "even if you're conservative, the Christians will always throw you under the bus," and one respondent agreed: "Damn right they will." However, other responses took a different approach: One simply responded to the original post with "no," another argued that "You need God and Jesus," and yet another acknowledged the original poster's frustration while trying to defend Christianity: "I get your point, but not all of them."

Importantly, many responses utilized conservative and far right discourses to dismiss concerns about Christian rejection of LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, one user conceded that after he came out some Christians may have started avoiding him, "but that's their choice." This example reframes the action not as bigotry, but as an exercise in freedom, in keeping with Gab's emphasis on free speech (and corresponding dismissal of concerns about hate speech). Another employed a common racist conservative homonationalist discourse (Puar, 2007) when they used Islamophobia to dismiss the original poster's concerns: "Muslims will execute or imprison us, honey. You'll survive if a Baptist grandma throws you under the bus." The user attempted to reframe the bias associated with Christianity by positioning it as a safer, less violent, and more genteel form of bigotry compared with Islam.

Another instance occurred when one user posted an image of a sign from a pro-LGBTQ+ rights march that read, "If god hates gays why are we so cute?" The post, which follows the "God Made Me This Way" logic (Ghazzawi et al., 2021), highlights some of the contradictions illuminated by gayservatives. While gayservatives used this discursive strategy to relieve their own conflict between sexual and religious identities, a process known as "intrinsic adaptation" (Brennan-Ing

et al., 2013), they did not apply this same logic to effeminate individuals, who were denigrated by users on Gab rather than supported as "God's creation." Overall, the reframing or excusing of discourses related to religion illustrates the varied and complex ways that larger conservative and LGBTQ+ discourses intersect in this space.

Reframing as Reinforcement? While seemingly presenting contradictory engagements with hegemonic ideologies, the discursive manner in which gayservatives reinforce and reframe narratives provides additional support for the argument that power and discourse are intimately connected (Foucault, 1991). For example, gayservatives promote ideals and beliefs related to hegemonic masculinity that confer power upon them as men, but only if they distance themselves from more effeminate estimations of gayness positioned as unequal and less than. Conversely, the drive to articulate an LGBTQ+ identity as compatible with religion—and even defend Christianity when criticized by other gayservatives—discursively positions this identity in relation to the power conferred via Christianity. This finding echoes previous research that argued that one's interests as a White, middle class man usually wins out over contradictory gay interests and identities (Rogers & Lott, 1997).

Gayservatives' reinforcement and reframing of these hegemonic ideals cannot be disarticulated from the larger legitimizing discourses that work to create and maintain normative ideals. There are specific social consequences of these discourses in that they operate as a regulating function to discipline subjects; however, this process both creates gayservatives *and* is deployed by them. As evidenced by the aforementioned results, gayservatives challenge stereotypical discourses more often when those discourses cleave LGBTQ+ persons from sites of power, especially when these individuals are already connected to normative positions such as Whiteness, maleness, and Christianity, rather than as an opportunity to resist or subvert social, economic, or cultural hegemony.

Celebrating and Regulating Gay Male Desire

Another common discourse produced on Gab by gayservatives revolved around a celebration of gay sexual desire.[10] For example, one commenter, in response to a post that showed shirtless men holding a rainbow flag and a Trump flag, wrote, "I'll take the whole set." In another post that showed shirtless men, this time with the American flag draped across them in a manner that suggested they were fully naked (Figure 3), a user posted "I'm at attention now . . . Sir!" with another commenting "either raise the flag or lower it . . . don't keep our cocks at half mast!" In response to a post that showed shirtless men holding a rainbow flag and an American flag, another commenter asked where he could make friends like them. Another responded to the news

Figure 3. Shirtless men and the American flag.

that British actor John Barrowman had exposed himself to co-workers by saying that he would make an exception for Barrowman. One user added that they only watched American football to see the players' tight pants and yet another, in a discussion of a picture from a Log Cabin Republicans event that featured various speakers, wrote, "Why are Christian Walker's sexy legs not in this photo? They are everything!" Users did not shy away from discussing same-sex desire and acts; rather, they bonded over and celebrated them. Furthermore, while previous posts about *identity* adhered to the language of "straightness," via the promotion of masculinity and the devaluing of effeminacy (Eguchi, 2009), this strategy was not replicated in discussions related to same-sex desire and sex acts.

These posts also exemplify the ways in which multiple ideologies are embedded in single posts. In particular, there was frequent, overt usage of the American flag in posts related to sexual desire. While conservatives are often less open than liberals to sexual activities that fall outside of traditional family relationships (Chan, 2019; Northey et al., 2020), the usage of the American flag works to situate these representations of same-sex desire as patriotic. Furthermore, the usage of the American flag symbolically acts as a counterbalance to the rainbow flag, which represents a version of LGBTQ+ identity and community loathed by gayservatives.[11] The users deliberately work to connect same-sex activities to identity; however, it is a nationalistic identity rather than a queer one. This was further evidenced by a post that read "patriots don't care who you sleep with, just the Constitution and what you believe in." Fidelity to patriotism and textualist understandings of the constitution, both hallmarks of conservative ideologies, are considered key and valued identities, while the

practices normally associated with LGBTQ+ identities, such as sexual desire, are conceptualized as seemingly neutral acts (as opposed to contested identities).

This multimodal discourse further reflects the "tensions" found among gayservatives as they attempt to "make sense" of differing discourses (Lockhart, 2022). Gayservatives positioned homosexuality as sexual desire alone, "rather than particular lifestyles" (Cassidy, 2016, p. 2631), and as separate to (and removable from) sexual identity, making it more compatible with prevailing conservative discourses. Conversely, while this language often revealed a "post-gay" framing, the usage of the rainbow flag in images and as emojis, without contestation, connected gayservatives to dominant understandings of the LGBTQ+ community that they simultaneously attempted to define themselves in opposition to.

These types of discourses also demonstrate how same-sex desire maps onto, and is altered via, sociotechnical arrangements. For example, a discussion about the various applications on Gab quickly turned into a more flirtatious engagement when one user responded to another in the thread, "Can I lick your balls?" The user this was directed toward did not get upset but rather responded, "Giddy up." The first user then sent a shirtless picture of himself prompting the other to give his Telegram handle. This shift in platforms is interesting given that Gab provides its own chat features. While these users saw Gab as providing an opportunity to create communities, they also seemed to prefer other platforms for one-to-one private communication.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions

This exploratory study set out to better understand the ways LGBTQ+ identity and community are cultivated on far right social media. Initial findings illustrate how gayservatives seek out these spaces because of a perceived lack of connection to others in their offline lives, especially if they live in geographic areas assumed to be liberal; correspondingly, gayservatives make use of Gab affordances to cultivate a community of like-minded conservative LGBTQ+ individuals.

Furthermore, we found that hegemonic masculinity was promoted as an idealized trait, while effeminacy was configured as a liberal, and therefore negative, quality. In contrast, anti-LGBTQ+ narratives that were connected to religion were reframed to lay claim to the advantages associated with Christian identity. Ultimately, this dual act of reinforcement and reframing signaled how gayservatives attempted to position themselves in ways that connected LGBTQ+ conservatives as closely as possible to discourses that have historically benefited majoritarian identities and groups, further providing evidence for the idea that regimes of power produce subjects who are simultaneously objects *and* vehicles of oppression (Foucault, 1991).

Finally, gay male desire was navigated and celebrated in various ways that point toward a need to better understand how gayservatives position the relationship between same-sex desire and identity/community. Although this research is inherently connected to politics, given the identification of the users and the description of the website, the types of discursive power we highlight are not solely about political power but also about how power is socialized and embodied through discourses produced by individual and institutional ideologies and in ways that normalize and regulate sexual and gender identities.

While our study produced nuanced and important findings, it was not without limitations. One limitation is that we only analyzed a single social networking site. Examining multiple groups on Gab allowed us to track discourses across the site; however, engaging with more far right platforms in the future could help to understand the ubiquity of these discursive strategies. An additional limitation is related to our method: While examining Gab users' posts allowed us to capture authentic activity in these unique spaces, interacting with users themselves would have allowed us to better understand nuance and intent. Future research might utilize semi-structured interviews with self-identified LGBTQ+ conservatives to better ascertain their reasons for posting.

Furthermore, while this study found that gayservatives use differing discursive strategies to both connect to and disarticulate themselves from the larger LGBTQ+ community, future research should more explicitly probe these contradictions to better understand what they tell us about the intersection of LGBTQ+ communities, regulatory discourses, and internalized (homo)negativities. Finally, while we were unable to confirm the exact demographics of the individual Gab users, best attempts to answer this question indicated that our sample skewed male, White, and cisgender. Although this is an important finding in our context (given the association of conservative discourses with these identities), additional research might sample more deliberately on the basis of race, ethnicity, and gender identity, among other variables. Furthermore, future research might examine these discourses in direct relation to theories that focus on communication practices by marginalized communities, such as co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998).

In recent years, right wing policies, as motivated by conservative and religious groups, have focused on attacking LGBTQ+ rights in the United States, with a particularly outsized negative effect on the most marginalized members of the community (Lavietes & Ramos, 2022). Yet even as some gayservatives have expressed concern over these priorities, the number of Log Cabin Republicans continues to grow, even after the organization's embrace of more far right ideologies in 2020 (Neugeboren, 2022). Our study provides the groundwork for a more nuanced and robust understanding of gayservative predispositions, priorities, and concerns, especially as they are navigated on far right digital platforms. No longer unthinkable or antithetical, conservative-identified LGBTQ+ communities provide a new venue for better understanding how power structures discourses, circulates as

a social practice, and affects larger understandings of the diversity, and biases, inherent to LGBTQ+ communities and identity formation.

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Notes

1. We use the "+" to signal the range of marginalized orientations, non-cisgender gender identities, and sex distinctions which are included within the umbrella term.
2. Interestingly, the Log Cabin Republicans did not support Trump as a candidate in 2016 but did support his bid for re-election in 2020, despite his record advocating against LGBTQ+ equality while in office (Stableford & Wilson, 2019).
3. These studies often focus on LGBTQ+ individuals who support conservative ideologies while still voting for liberal or left wing candidates.
4. The second author became familiar with the posts during data collection and contributed to discussions related to codes, final themes, and reports of those themes.
5. As previously noted, we are not including profile names to protect user anonymity but have selected quotes from unique handles to reflect the number of individual users participating in these groups.
6. Here the assumption is that gay identity is only legible and/or exposed via effeminate traits.
7. Mercury's visual appearance additionally provides evidence that supports how hegemonic masculinity makes itself legible to, and influences, multiple communities to maintain its dominance. For example, Mercury's representation of masculinity is decipherable within both LGBTQ+ and straight communities because of its association with Leathermen and (outlaw) motorcycle gangs, respectively.
8. Christian Walker is the son of former NFL player and 2022 US Senate candidate Herschel Walker. Christian has stated that he is attracted to men but is not gay: "I'm attracted to men but I refuse to identify with the rainbow cult. I don't believe in indoctrinating children. My whole identity isn't my sexuality. And I don't go to gay bars. Don't call me gay" (Walker, 2022).
9. Without minimizing the amount of racism that circulates in both conservative *and* LGBTQ+ communities, independent of one another, it is worth noting that posts, and responses, that invoked non-White bodies, such as Walker, Mercury, and Hilton, featured negative comments about masculinity but not race. Relatedly, it is also important to recognize that all three of these individuals benefit from the privileges of light skin and/or their ability to pass as White.
10. We use gay to signal same-sex male desire that is produced by various sexual identities (gay, bisexual, pansexual, etc.).
11. For instance, in its description, one group specified that they are "against Rainbow/Pride politics."

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