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Free Speech or Free to Hate?: Anti-LGBTQ+ discourses in LGBTQ+-affirming spaces on Gab Social

In 1996, John Perry Barlow published "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," in which he optimistically declared that:

> We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.
>
> We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity. (paras. 7-8)

Events during the (more than) quarter century since Barlow's declaration have mounted a fierce challenge to this optimism. In recent years, Tufekci (2017) and Schradie (2019), among others, have argued that networked technologies are not the obvious boon for antiauthoritarian and social justice movements that many have long believed them to be. That is, while social media platforms have played an incontestable role in protesting injustice and sparking change, they have not served as the great equalizer that Barlow, and many others, had hoped. In fact, some scholars have argued that the same democratic characteristics of the Internet are in fact the qualities that allow for a greater number of individuals to participate in anti-social acts, such as the production of hate speech (Brown, 2018; Topinka, 2018).

In order to better understand how hate speech circulates on free speech platforms, the following article engages in a critical discourse analysis of 767 posts within five group pages on the social media platform Gab. More specifically, we examine groups that were originally

intended to be spaces *for* Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) communities, but had, instead, become de facto spaces of queerphobia.[1] This examination allows us to better understand how discourses of hate circulate without content moderation. Therefore, results from our study have implications that relate both to how queerphobia is produced online—which has potential connections to offline violence and acts of bias—and the (in)efficacy of "free speech" as a content moderation policy.

LGBTQ+ Communities and Online Spaces

The aforementioned need to temper utopic idealizations of the internet with more sobering realities is also reflected in scholarship that examines internet usage by LGBTQ+ communities. For example, while some research has found that sexual and/or gender minorities benefit from their engagement with social media (Craig et al., 2021; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Aguaded, 2022), other studies have highlighted a more complicated relationship (Brough et al., 2020; Cho, 2018; Hanckel, et al., 2019; Rubin & McClelland, 2015). It is true that social media platforms have long served as spaces for the LGBTQ+ community to safely gather (e.g., Gray, 2009; Gross, 2003; Owens, 2017), but this most often occurs on digital platforms positioned as LGBTQ+-friendly, or neutral. These sites also have deliberate content moderation policies aimed at cultivating (at least the appearance of) a safe space for marginalized identities. Alternatively, less work has examined how members of the LGBTQ+ community experience alternative social media platforms that situate themselves as spaces of free speech. Better understanding how LGBTQ+ communities are invoked on these platforms is important since research has found that communities built via social media platforms become resources that individuals use to "judge the world around them" and to "discuss their judgments with others" (Feenberg, 2009, p. 81).

[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.

Examining LGBTQ+ communities on online platforms is particularly important because research has found that hate speech, defined as "the use of aggressive violent or offensive language" that targets a specific group of people (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021, p. 5), is easily spread online (Darakchi, 2019). Hate speech has serious potential to further marginalize and stereotype particular communities (Papacharissi, 2004), especially when produced within online discussion forums (Herring et al., 2002). This is particularly acute for gender and sexual minorities, given current increases in both general anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment (GLAAD, 2022) and anti-LGBTQ+ violence (Ronan, 2020) as well as the fact that LGBTQ+ individuals report suffering direct online hate abuse at twice the rate of their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Williams, 2019, p. 22). In the wake of Florida's "Don't Say Gay or Trans" bill, "discriminatory and inflammatory" content about the LGBTQ+ community increased by over 400% across social media platforms (Human Rights Campaign, 2022). These discourses have potentially severe consequences since hate speech attacks have "been associated with increases in self-rated stress levels, and increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol in LGBT victims" (Williams, 2019, p. 17) and because exposure to hate online increases prejudice through desensitization (Soral, et al., 2018). These discourses and platforms (especially purported "free speech" platforms) may also inform real world violence (Müller & Schwarz, 2019). For example, in the weeks and months leading up to their aggressive disruption of Drag Queen Storytimes in California and South Carolina in 2022 (Helmore, 2022), the far-right Proud Boys used transphobic, homophobic, and violent language on their Gab group pages to discuss LGBTQ+ individuals, and drag queens in particular[2] (see also Bajak et al., 2021 for a similar example related to the January 2021 Capitol riots).

[2] The groups also used these pages to defend their actions after the fact, most often referring to the need to protect, and stand up for, innocent children.

It is also important to note that queerphobic discourses are produced not only by straight cisgender individuals but also by members of the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, research on self-identified LGBTQ+ conservatives on Gab found that they positioned themselves in ways that connected them to discourses that primarily benefit majoritarian identities (Brody et al., 2022). Additional research on the LGBTQ+ community in general has further found instances of internalized homophobia (Nguyen & Angelique, 2017; Parmenter et al., 2021), the promotion of hegemonic masculinity (Miller, 2015), racism, (Callander et al., 2015; Patel, 2019), transphobia (Weiss, 2011), and ableism (Santinele Martino, 2016), among other biases.

Content Moderation and "Free Speech" Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms face difficult issues in terms of governance. Gillespie (2018) notes that platforms have a vested interest in portraying themselves as "truly 'open'" (p. 5), but that moderating content is, in fact, an essential part of what it means to be a platform. While content moderation has always been an important aspect of platform governance, the past decade has brought more attention, and controversy, to the subject. Events like the aggressively anti-feminist #Gamergate movement, COVID-19 misinformation, and conspiracy theories surrounding the 2020 U.S. presidential election have caused platforms to increase their moderation efforts, bringing the phenomenon more into the public eye.

Content moderation is a genuinely difficult task and rightly invites nuanced criticism (Gillespie, 2018). For example, while content moderation is sometimes reduced to the idea of removing *hateful* content, moderation policies may also be cisnormative or heteronormative in defining what kinds of content should be taken down; instead of protecting marginalized communities, this approach to moderation further exacerbates that marginalization (Crawford & Gillespie, 2016; Southerton et al., 2021). However, right wing figures in the U.S. have often

leveled oversimplified accusations of bias and censorship against platforms because they moderate content, even as these same figures have “learned to leverage the communicative and technological affordances of digital and social media… to reach larger audiences, mobilize followers, and gain power” (Wodak, 2021, p. 17). One consequence of these criticisms has been the emergence of so-called “alternative” social media platforms like Gab, Parler, and Truth Social, which boast a strict adherence to (U.S.) ideals of free speech. In reality, each of these platforms also moderates content protected as free speech in the United States (e.g., Colburn & McCarter, 2020; Collings, 2022; Hunt-Majer, 2022); these contradictions suggest that “free speech” is understood specifically in these online spaces as permission to share racist, sexist, homophobic, and other similar content without repercussion.

Our particular focus in this study is Gab, one of the older and more controversial “free speech” platforms. Gab has courted controversy since its creation in 2016 and more especially since 2018, when the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter announced his intentions for the attack on the platform. In response, other actors in the online ecosystem have engaged in strategies of "blocking access to distribution, demonetization, and the disabling of infrastructural services" (van Dijck et al., 2021). For example, Gab's web hosting provider severed ties with the platform, and Apple and Google refused to carry the official Gab app in their mobile app marketplaces. These same strategies would later be applied to another "free speech" platform, Parler, after it became associated with the 2021 U.S. Capitol riots. However, while Parler has made concessions to regain access to important tech infrastructure (e.g., Lyons, 2021), Gab has been unyielding in the face of these pressures. Indeed, Gab CEO Andrew Torba has frequently criticized competing "free speech" platforms for banning hate speech or engaging in other content moderation (e.g., Torba, 2022a). Recent events have shown that the controversy surrounding Gab is unlikely to die

down anytime soon. For example, in 2022, Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano faced criticism for his payment of $5,000 to Gab (Gabriel, 2022) and Gab faced internal controversy about how the platform responded to users who made threats to FBI agents after the raid of Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence (Goforth, 2022).

In terms of features, Gab has always followed the model of social networking sites built on (semi-)public profiles and connections with other users (see boyd & Ellison, 2007). While early versions of the site were more similar to microblogging sites like Twitter (van Dijck et al., 2021), the contemporary version of the site is—deliberately—patterned off of Facebook (Torba, 2022b). In response to the deplatformization efforts begun in 2018, Gab redesigned the platform based on open-source code associated with the *federated* microblogging service Mastodon. This strategy had two potential benefits: First, it allows Gab to build on the work of others; although Mastodon objects to Gab's use of their code (Mastodon, n.d.), the open license applied to the code means that Gab cannot be prevented from using it. Second, the *federated* nature of Mastodon is meant to make distinct social media services cross-compatible and interoperable; unless platform admins or app developers take specific action (like many have), Gab posts and accounts can find their way into app stores and onto other platforms. Sensitive to deplatforming efforts, Gab has also begun offering services such as a video-sharing platform, an encrypted chat service, and an alternative payment processing platform.

Scholarship on Gab has offered further insight into the platform. Early research (Zannettou et al., 2018) determined that this platform was characterized by more hate speech than mainstream platforms like Twitter (though still less than some other toxic online spaces). Mirroring these developments, Ali et al. (2021) present evidence suggesting that many suspended Reddit and Twitter users will respond by creating accounts on Gab; their findings also

suggest that "users who move to Gab after a suspension tend to become more active and more toxic" (p. 5). This complicates the question of content moderation, in that mainstream platforms' suspension of problematic users may lead to further radicalization of those users (see also Dehghan & Nagappa, 2022).

Method

This study combines *digital methods*, in particular, "the use of online and digital technologies to collect… research data" (Snee et al., 2016, p. 1) and analytic techniques associated with critical discourse analysis. In this section, we discuss our positionality and approach to research ethics before addressing each of these methodological foundations.

Positionality and Research Ethics

The members of our research team collectively represent a variety of identities related to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and politics. Our analysis must be understood through these lenses that we bring to this research project. In particular, we note that between the three authors, we claim both majoritarian and marginalized identities along these different dimensions and that we intentionally brought these identities (as well as associated experiences and analytical frameworks) into conversation with each other in order to best understand the data that we collected.

Questions of identity also directly informed our ethical commitments while completing this project. Studies examining publicly available internet data are typically not considered "human subjects research" and therefore do not require ethical review at U.S. universities (including our own). However, this widely used distinction fails to capture all of the ethical dimensions associated with internet research (see, e.g., Markham & Buchanan, 2012). It is therefore critical that internet researchers be attentive to ethical issues related to their studies.

Rambukkana (2019) provides a helpful overview of ethical issues related to what he describes as *gray data* existing "between textual analysis and human subjects research" (p. 312); this overview is especially helpful here for its consideration of these issues in the context of research on the far right. Our approach to these issues was to apply an ethics of care framework focused on questions of power (see Suomela et al., 2019).

Just as our positionalities as researchers include both majoritarian and marginalized identities, our relationship with the Gab users whose posts make up our dataset is characterized by two kinds of power relationships: On one hand, we exercise power over them—especially because we have not obtained consent to study their data. We therefore feel an obligation to provide some protection for users' privacy and have obscured information (such as group names, usernames, and the exact text of some posts) that could identify the unwitting participants in our study. On the other hand, these users identify with far right movements that seek to exercise power over other populations—including identities claimed by members of our research team. We therefore argue that it is important to take into consideration the dangers posed by far right movements and "weigh participant expectations against… the importance of the knowledge generated by the research" (Gilbert et al., 2021, p. 11; see also Rambukkana, 2019). Furthermore, we echo Massanari's (2018) argument that contrary to traditional expectations about the power balance between researchers and participants, far right populations on social media have shown an ability to exercise power over researchers and other public figures– especially those with social justice-oriented research agendas or from marginalized backgrounds. Not only does this strengthen our rationale for our research, but it also highlights the importance of applying the previously mentioned ethics of care framework within our research team,

especially given the "psychological impact of reviewing the digital artifacts of online harassment and hate speech" (Suomela et al., 2019, p. 12; see also Massanari, 2018).

Data Collection

As part of a separate research project, we identified eleven Gab groups with titles containing terms relevant to LGTBQ+ topics (e.g., “gay,” “trans,” LGBT”) and used the *webshot* package for the R programming language (Chang et al., 2019) to collect screenshots of each post in each group. The first project focused on groups that were LGBTQ+ friendly spaces and examined the data associated with the four groups that met that description (Authors, 2022). In this project, we extend that work by examining five groups that are presented as LGBTQ+-friendly spaces in theory but are, in reality, sites of abuse and hate speech. Table 1 describes these groups and the amount of data we retrieved from them.

Table 1

Description of Gab Groups Considered in this Study and Post Distribution

Group Number	Intended Group Focus	Number of Original Posts Collected	Number of Reply Posts Collected	Number of Total Posts Collected
1	conservative politics from an LGBTQ perspective	31	39	70
2	LGBTQ topics; homophobia and hate speech expressly forbidden by group	112	58	170
3	right-wing politics from an LGBT perspective	158	82	240
4	transgender topics	11	3	14
5	transgender people and their friends and	117	155	272

family

Data Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) guided our analysis. CDA is a useful analytic tool for studying queerphobic social media posts because of its ability to "describe and explain how power abuse is enacted, reproduced or legitimized by the text and talk of dominant groups or institutions" (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 84). Taking direction from the work of Michael Foucault (1972), our approach sees discourse as productive, as bringing particular identities and their hierarchical positioning into being. Importantly, CDA allows for a connection of text to social practice in ways that highlight the relationship between discourse and the production of knowledge (Brody, 2019). In particular, CDA seeks "to discern connections between language and other elements in social life which are often opaque," such as the connection between language and social relations of power and domination, between language and ideologies, and between language and the production of personal and social identities (Fairclough, 2001, p. 230). These foci also make it a useful analytic technique to study sexual minorities (Aguinaldo, 2012).

Our analysis followed Fairclough's (2001) three levels of inquiry. The first author began by familiarizing themselves with the social media posts and making note of, and recording, the formal qualities (e.g., image, text, layout, font, etc.). They then engaged in open inductive coding to identify the key aspects of each post. Next, they grouped relevant codes together into thematic categories, paying attention to how the posts operated as discursive practices that explain what kind of people exist in the world and how they should be understood. At this point the second and third authors reviewed the first author's codes before placing them into the corresponding themes made by the first author. The authors met to discuss any discrepancies before deciding on final themes. At this point the first author examined how the various multimodal discursive

formations connected to broader hegemonic and ideological power structures. Throughout this analysis special attention was paid to the multimodal interplay of text *and* imagery so as to better understand how they work in conjunction to make texts as monosemous as possible (Hakokõngäs et al., 2020). In particular, the authors examined how LGBTQ+ identity and communities were invoked, with special attention paid to how heterosexual and cisgender identities and communities are reproduced, hierarchically, via these discursive formations. Additionally, the authors situated these multimodal discourses alongside previous queerphobic discourses in order to better understand how homophobic and transphobic discourses map onto, or are altered by, digital spaces.

Findings and Discussion

In this study, we employed critical discourse analysis to examine groups on the social media platform Gab that were explicitly stated as spaces for LGBTQ+ members in theory, though dominated by anti-LGBTQ+ discourses in reality. Our analysis of 767 posts from five groups uncovered five dominant discursive strategies deployed by Gab users, specifically as they relate to LGBTQ+ persons and communities: Discourses of Difference, Not Commonality; LGBTQ+ Persons as Abominations… But What Kind?; The Promotion of Violence; LGBTQ+ Identity as Undermining Hegemonic Masculinity and Femininity; and LGBTQ+ Identities as Sex Acts and Sex Organs. Overall, the majority of posts were decidedly queerphobic in nature despite the fact that each of the groups analyzed were originally situated as a space *for* the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, as evidenced by (out-group) language use, the posts analyzed were primarily composed by individuals who did not identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community and who followed historical and commonly used discursive strategies aimed at denigrating the LGBTQ+ community. Ultimately, these strategies work together to

reinforce the boundaries of acceptable practices for conservative-identified individuals and to cultivate particular understandings of the LGBTQ+ community.

Discourses of Difference, Not Commonality

An overarching discursive strategy seen across all five groups was the positioning of LGBTQ+ users as different from straight-identified posters. Even when LGBTQ+ individuals attempted to situate their commonalities, they were rebuffed. For example, when a user with a profile name and picture that clearly identified them as a member of the LGBTQ+ community posted an anti-COVID-19 vaccine meme, another user mocked them for "trying hard to be relatable" and dismissed the LGBTQ community as having "the highest risk of contracting AIDS," and, therefore, immutably unrelatable. Users situate LGBTQ+ identity and conservative values as intractably at odds with one another. Because the non-LGBTQ+ identified posters have also tied their conservative identity to patriarchal gender roles and religious dogma, LGBTQ+ individuals present an identity threat. As Harel et al. (2020) found, one way to deal with this type of threat is to position the source of this information as an out-group member, since "information is easier to distort or dismiss when the source is an out-group member rather than a member of our own identity group" (p. 3).

Moreover, the number of anti-LGBTQ+ discourses used throughout these pages, despite the situating of the pages as decidedly pro-LGBTQ+ in their creation and motivation, reflects how Gab works to reproduce particular types of somatic norms (Puwar, 2004).[3] A somatic norm refers to the corporeal imagination of power as naturalized in the body of white, male, straight,

[3] While this study was focused on LGBTQ+ spaces, identities, and communities, it is important to note how other biases presented themselves within the groups analyzed. In particular, there were explicit invocations of hegemonic Christianity via denigrations of Islam and Judaism. Muslim individuals were discussed in xenophobic and orientalist ways that positioned them as antithetical to, and bent on destroying, the American nation-state. Jewish individuals were disparaged as conniving globalists who had created transgenderism and "rainbow politics" as part of their plan to steal money from, and create discord amongst, "true" Americans.

cisgender, Christian individuals, and those who do not meet these criteria are deemed "space invaders." Despite the fact that Gab is situated as a free speech community, the overwhelmingly prevalent discourses that are normalized are those that reinforce whiteness, maleness, straightness, cisnormativity, and Christianity as normative, and privileged, identities. Even when LGBTQ+ users attempted to enter into these circles through language that signaled commonality (often through a disparagement of non-conservative individuals and ideals), their attempts were rebuffed by other users because they did not replicate normativity fully, as seen by their nonnormative sexual orientation. For example, when one transgender conservative posted that they were excited to meet other trans folk who shared similar ideological sentiments, they were met with a reply on their post stating "You're disgusting. There's no such thing as a based tra**ie."[4] This discursive positioning exemplifies the "fallacy of difference," which attempts to draw a rigid dividing line between the privileged ingroup and marginalized outgroup through appeals to clear distinctions and distinctiveness between the two (Wodak, 2021, p. 77). Alternatively, queerphobic discourses were overwhelmingly supported and entrenched through threaded replies.

LGBTQ+ Persons as Abominations… But what Kind?

Situating queer people as abominations, and therefore as threats to American society, was another common discursive strategy used to frame LGBTQ+ identities and communities. This finding reflects how "members of an in-group socially construct the other as a dangerous threat" (Harel et al., 2020, p. 7), an approach that dehumanizes others in order to justify their antipathy for out-group members (Wodak, 2021). Interestingly, while postings coalesced around this general finding, there was no uniformity in how these abominations were defined. Instead,

[4] "Based" is a term used by individuals, especially on social media, to signal their support of far right ideologies.

LGBTQ+ individuals were discursively positioned within one or more of five sub-categories: moral abominations, religious abominations, mental abominations, medical abominations, and national abominations.

The variations, and overlap, in these rhetorical devices show a lack of uniformity in the ways that queerphobic discourse is understood and disseminated; indeed, they further demonstrate how different discursive strategies work to cultivate anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. Put another way, these varying rhetorical strategies allowed for queerphobic discourse to circulate in different ways that allowed anti-LGBTQ+ posters to not only create community by finding other queerphobic individuals but also disseminate persuasive strategies that spoke to the widest possible audiences. In fact, one user seemingly gestured to this approach by using the term diversity to represent the various ways one can "hate" before writing "diversity is our strength."

Moral Abominations

Research has found that moral panics and sexual politics in the United States are utilized strategically to achieve political hegemony, especially as a way to tap into the fears and anxieties of a broad range of people (Herdt, 2009, p. 2). A moral panic is defined as social and personal expressions that are out of proportion with the threat posed by the so-called evildoers (ibid, p. 1), and these panics have become increasingly more frequent and more prominent in the media and in online spaces (Walsh, 2020). Historically, the LGBTQ+ community, and in particular the gay male community, has been situated within a "moral panic" framework: They were connected to pedophilia and configured as threats to children, as an effect of biased fears that gay men were "compulsive, obsessive, and uncontrollable in their impulses" (Terry, 1999, p. 322). This legacy was further entrenched via media news narratives that placed stories about men sexually abusing or murdering children alongside stories that covered crimes related to homosexual acts among

consenting adults and by the Religious Right, which historically deployed campaigns that mentioned homosexuality in combination with pedophilia so that one came to symbolize the other (Fejes, 2008; Herman, 1997).

These discursive patterns were similarly evident on Gab. One user posted a video that showed an image of an outlandishly effeminate man with the text: "Turns out many of them are registered sex offenders." The same user doubled down on this assessment later in the post, writing "fa**ots are pedophiles."[5] Another suggested that criminalizing homosexuality would reduce "scheming against children," and yet another praised Vladimir Putin's 2013 Russian "gay propaganda" law. Another post included an image of a drag queen storytime event with the text "Predator's story hours" and yet another wrote "A tra**y is a degenerate who thinks they are a woman."

By portraying the LGBTQ+ community as pedophiles and degenerates, and therefore as threats to the safety of children, this rhetoric further undergirds the idea that LGBTQ+ individuals pose a threat to society (Herman, 1997). This discursive strategy also works to situate transgender individuals as social contagions infecting America's children. As V. Jo Hsu (2022) argues, "by framing transgender identity as an attack on children and the 'American family,' anti-trans activists have used trans topics to shore up protections for white, middle-class respectability and gender norms" (p. 63). Additionally, comments, such as "Why not support straight people whose families have been affected by degeneracy?" illustrate a discursive attempt to redefine equality as a concept that threatens cisgender women and children by privileging policies meant to support marginalized groups, such as trans individuals.

[5] For the purposes of this paper, we have deliberately chosen not to recreate the slurs posted by Gab users; however, it is important to note that these slurs were not censored by the users, or the platform, and appear without asterisks in the original data set.

This narrative portraying transgender individuals as an abomination and social contagion is not limited to the United States. In Southeast Asia, the terms “Khawaja Sira” and “Hijra” are used to define people who identify as transgender. These individuals are traditionally viewed as people of a lower caste and have historically been underemployed and/or employed in contingent, low-paying, and unsafe/unregulated professions, such as sex work. The aforementioned terms are also used effusively as curse words to ridicule and emasculate.

Religious Abominations

On Gab, LGBTQ+ persons were also situated as religious abominations, which echoes previous research that has found that queerphobic discourses often frame homosexuality as sinful and incompatible with religion, especially Christianity (Cilliers, 2007; Mongie, 2016). This framing is further based on the argument that same-sex sexual desires are unnatural (Afshar, 2006). In this same vein, research has also found that “religious rationales and regimes have long been (and remain) implicated in the subjugation of transgender people” (Robinson & Spivey, 2019, p. 192). This approach by the Religious Right has also been replicated in their attacks on transgender children. In particular, this discourse relies on the guise of religious liberty as a justification for the discriminatory statements and has an “overwhelming focus on” trans girls and women compared to trans boys and men (Stone, 2018, p. 2). Situating the argument in this way allows individuals to see homophobic and transphobic sentiments as upholding religious beliefs, which thereby normalizes them and makes them something to be encouraged and proud of (Butler et al., 2003). For example, one user wrote “You can’t be a Christian and a sodomite,” and another argued that homosexual or transgender Christians were “in fact, liars.” Another post used a reference to the Bible and an image of a rainbow-colored snake to depict the LGBTQ+

community as devilish. Other posts included text that read “What the world calls love, God calls abomination” and “Hell awaits.”

Mental Abominations

The further construction of LGBTQ+ individuals as mental abominations is representative of discourses that refer to non-normative sexualities as a psychological flaw (Fetner, 2005). This rhetorical device can be traced historically, as homosexuality was pathologized throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, labeled as a perversion, and medicalized as “insanity” (Terry, 1999, p. 77). Additionally, the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* classified homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973 (Drescher, 2015). This linkage between mental illness and LGBTQ+ identity has also been disseminated through a variety of media texts (Fleming & Manvell, 1985; González & Cavazos, 2016; Johnson, 2016; among others), and research has found that non-normative manifestations of gender have are often described as mental disorders (Farrimond, 2017). This discursive positioning was evident on Gab; one post, for example, compared transgender identity to the children’s story “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in which a foolish monarch is tricked into wearing non-existent clothes, and described the idea as a “delusion.” Other posts described non-normative sexualities as mental disorders resulting from childhood sexual abuse or suggested that drag queens were mentally ill and Jewish. When one trans woman identified herself as “Christian, Republican, and conservative,” another user retorted that she was “a mentally ill fa**ot that needs a good neck stretching.” These classifications further entrench the idea that LGBTQ+ identity can be differentiated, scientifically and medically, from, and regulated adversely compared to, a normative body (Foucault, 1990).

National Abominations

Queer individuals are also situated as national abominations in arguments that position their LGBTQ+ identity as contrary to the goals of America. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals were constantly portrayed via imagery that insinuated their allegiance was to the rainbow/Pride or Black Lives Matter flags. Conversely, non-LGBTQ+ individuals were portrayed as allegiant to America through imagery of the American flag. These findings reflect some of the ways in which sexual identity is used "as evidence of otherness and illegitimacy" in discussions of nationalism (Kerrigan & Pramaggiore, 2020, p. 110) and "how collective notions of manhood are intertwined with notions of nationhood" (Hughson & Free, 2011, p. 118). These findings also relate to how self-identified LGBTQ+ conservatives use American flag imagery in order to connect gay male sexual desire to patriotism and nationalism, instead of "rainbow politics" (Brody et al., 2022).

Furthermore, a multitude of posts concentrated on stereotypical traits associated with LGBTQ+ individuals and situated as unpatriotic—such as the idea that they do not support free speech and debate or that they censor other's views. For example, one user defined "homophobe" as a term used by "pedophiles" to describe men who wanted their sons to "start families and live God-fearing lives." Again, this approach has historical salience in that conservative groups have often positioned themselves as oppressed minorities and have labeled pro-LGBTQ+ calls for respectful dialogue and debate as "incongruent with 'American values'" (Stewart, 2008, p. 78). Within this approach uncivil and biased language is recast as descriptive, rather than evaluative, and instead words like "bigot" are reconfigured as an "attempt to cut off democratic debate through name-calling" (ibid, p. 79).

Medical Abominations

Anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric often situates queer individuals as medical abominations by linking the community to diseases— such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, or syphilis— or through

visual rhetoric that accompanies text with images of emaciated individuals (Irvine, 2005). This discursive strategy frames those who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender as unhealthy, with media texts further replicating and entrenching these biased representations (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015; Riggs, 2006). These patterns were present in our data, with one post arguing that all gay people get anal cancer and another questioning why gay Gab users would be skeptical of the COVID-19 vaccine when "they already have AIDS."

Other posts also invoked disease but in other ways. One user applauded Viktor Orbán's anti-LGBTQ+ laws in Hungary as a way to "cut down on the spread of the LGBT virus." Another saw AIDS less as evidence of medical abomination and more as a divine response to abomination, created by God to preserve the White race. Thus, LGBTQ+ folk were discursively portrayed as both diseased and *a* disease, a strategy that uses seemingly scientific arguments to undergird and justify their queerphobic sentiment.

The Promotion of Violence

Many of the users on Gab relied on violent discourses and iconography in their discussions of LGBTQ+ identities. For example, one user posted a meme of a drag queen being attacked by a crusader wearing religious iconography. Another posted an image of a young man holding a wooden cross, as if warding off a vampire, in response to a prompt about what to do when you see a drag queen. This post garnered support from a commenter, who wrote "charge, then knife him good." We note that these posts are not explicit calls to violence but rather references to violence embedded in internet memes that could (and are likely intended to) be understood as jokes. However, this approach is widely used among online far right communities in order to introduce "ambiguity and ambivalence around the violence" (Askanius, 2021; see also Hawley, 2017; Wendling, 2018). This example also demonstrates how many calls for violence

towards the LGBTQ+ community were justified by the violence assumed to be inherent to individuals themselves (e.g., equating drag queens with predatory vampires). Put another way, by linking many of these statements to other concerns, such as those related to religion or the protection of children, the users were able to justify their calls for violence as necessary retribution. The discursive strategies deployed here also reflect approaches previously used by extremist groups in their online rhetoric. For example, Bostdorff (2004) found that the Ku Klux Klan utilized religious imagery and language, special attention to women and children, and the promotion of violence to promote the group and connect with members. Despite the fact that research shows LGBTQ+ individuals are disproportionately the victims of violence, not the perpetrators of it, these discourses justified violence as the only way to protect institutions and individuals positioned as under attack from the LGBTQ+ community (The Williams Institute, 2020).

LGBTQ+ Identity as Undermining Hegemonic Masculinity and Femininity

The (lack of) reproduction of hegemonic masculinity and femininity was another way in which un/acceptable identities were discussed and produced on Gab. Hegemonic masculinity is described by R.W. Connell (1987) as practices that strengthen the power and dominance of men who exhibit, and conform to, characteristics that reinforce dominant social understandings of gender. In particular, this means seeing women as sexual objects who are used to validate heterosexual men and promoting the idea that homosexuality is a threat because of its association with effeminacy (Donaldson, 1993). As Connell argues, there are hierarchies of masculinity, with hegemonic masculinity at the top: therefore, there needs to be constant reinforcement and legitimization of attitudes and conduct, via discursive regulations and the policing of behaviors,

in ways that maintain the dominance of both men and heterosexuality over women and queerness, respectively.[6]

Gab users' constant adherence to strict gendered rules, and the calling out of subversion or undermining of this order, is then a strategy deployed in the service of hegemonic masculinity by reproducing masculine practices that regulate gender, subordinate femininity, and tie gender hegemony to "heterosexual, middle-class, and white status" (Schipper, 2007, p. 88). In particular, this allows certain individuals to occupy the feminine position but only if they endorse patriarchal feminine practices and characteristics. Furthermore, research has found that anti-gay language, in particular, is used to shore up heterosexual male gender identity (Carnaghi et al., 2011).

This policing of proper masculinity and femininity can be seen via an outsized concern about trans women and gay men in particular. For example, only one post negatively discussed lesbian women and only one post negatively discussed trans men, compared to hundreds that focused on how gay men and trans women were performing gender incorrectly.[7] This discursive production was also seen through the misgendering of trans women and the constant promotion of trans women as "masculine." For example, many posts that discussed trans athletes constantly referred to them as "biological males" or used memes that depicted athletes attempting to participate in women's sports with overly exaggerated male features (facial and body hair, musculature, etc.). Another user asked for help in properly distinguishing the slurs "tra**y" and "tr*p" so that they "can be sure to misgender them both." Other posts included images of trans women (gamers, public servants, etc.) with the encouragement to misgender them.

[6] Importantly, this ignores a contradiction common in this kind of argument: that if gender and sexuality were natural and immutable, they would not need to be policed and reinforced (e.g., Petrey, 2020).
[7] This finding is consistent with research that shows that men who adopt feminine traits tend to experience higher levels of disparagement compared to women who adopt masculine traits (Bradley, 2013).

Additionally, all of these examples reflect a larger preoccupation with specific and binary gender roles and a tying of power and prestige to hegemonic masculinity and, to a lesser extent, femininity. In particular, some of the most vitriolic posts were reserved for those individuals, such as gay men and trans women, who were believed to undermine these roles. This discursive focus on trans women and gay men reflect conflations of gay men as sexual predators and trans women as immutably male (Schilt & Westbrook, 2015).

LGBTQ+ Identities as Sex Acts and Sex Organs

The reduction of the LGBTQ+ community to sex acts and sex organs, another discursive device found on Gab, is reflective of longstanding queerphobic discourses. As it relates to sexual orientation, the focus on sex acts limits the definition of sexual identity to "the act of choosing a sexual partner" since "homosexuality is not integrated into the personality of an individual; it is simply the result of a choice of a same-sex rather than an opposite-sex partner (Fetner, 2005, p. 77-78). Accordingly, many users created negative posts that graphically discussed their perceptions about sexual encounters between two men. For example, one post had an image of CNN anchor Don Lemon and his husband Tim Malone. The user added thought bubbles over the images so that Malone was thinking "this is my ni**er, I fuck him in the rectum," and Lemon was responding "And I fucking love it." Another user commented on this post by writing "Imagine smelling poo while orgasming and being okay with it?" Yet another poster railed against "sodomy" with a meme that read "The primary function of the penis and vagina is reproduction. Assholes are for expelling shit," and a different user suggested that anal sex is inherently incompatible with conservatism. Another post labeled an image of baboons with pink butts with "Gays on their way home after pride weekend." Like examples in previous sections, a number of these posts use purported humor to "cloak" underlying queerphobia and racism (see

Topinka, 2018). As gestured towards previously, these discourses reduce gay identity to an all-consuming hyper-sexuality that completely defines gay men's subjectivity (Hughson & Free, 2011, p. 121). Additionally, it positions anal sex as different than normal sex, thereby further entrenching gay identities as unequal to normal (i.e., straight) ones.

Importantly, none of these posts engage with the fact that not all heterosexual sex is oriented towards reproduction, that individuals who identify as heterosexual engage in anal sex with both same-sex and opposite-sex partners, and that not all gay men define their sexual identity via a focus on the type, or frequency, of their sexual encounters. As Baker (2004) further explains, "not all gay men have anal sex (and not all men who have anal sex identify as gay). However, despite this, anal sex has become one of the main signifiers of homosexuality, particularly in homophobic discourses" (p. 103). This larger discursive practice takes a preoccupation with, and concern about, potential acts of gay sex, and applies them to all LGBTQ+ identities whether or not those individuals have actually engaged in the acts: it conflates (sex) acts with (sexual) identities in order to discursively cultivate heteronormative power.

This discursive strategy also extends to a focus on sex organs/genitalia, in particular as it relates to transgender individuals. For example, one user argued that "cutting a male dog's balls off doesn't make it a female" while another defined the slur "tr*p" as "a degenerate fa**ot" who "passes as a woman until you grab their penis and subsequently murder them." Another user offered a picture of a female identified individual standing at a urinal as an argument against voting for Democrats. An additional post depicted an exaggeratedly masculine cartoon face wearing feminine makeup alongside text that rewrote the lyrics to Papa Roach's song "Last Resort"—originally focused on suicide—to make the song about cutting off one's penis as a last

resort. Another user misgendered Republican political YouTuber Blaire White, suggesting that her voice demonstrated that "he got his dick cut off, but the Y-chromosome is still there."

This discursive pattern was first seen explicitly in 1952 when "Christine Jorgensen became the media's first sex change darling," and has been replicated by journalists "from Barbara Walters to Katie Couric in the 60 years since" (Mock, 2014). This approach allows for a fetishizing of trans identities that reduces them to genitalia, transitions, and surgery and ignores the reality of their lives: that trans folk are overwhelmingly the targets of violence, not the perpetrators of it, and that they—especially trans people of color—endure disproportionate discrimination related to housing, employment, medical care, etc. (Eger, 2018; Fischer, 2019b).[8] This preoccupation with sex organs also undergirds patriarchy (Fischer, 2019a), reinforces the idea that gender is binary and immutably linked to genitalia (Sloop, 2004), and suggests that trans folks are tricksters out to deceive and violate (straight) cisgender individuals (Ciszek & Rodrigeuz, 2020; Henderson, 2013). This discourse around trans bodies not only cultivates them as an "other" to fear but also further entrenches the notion that the phallus is inextricably linked to masculinity and violence, which posits this relationship as biological and natural as opposed to social and constructed (Halberstam, 1998; Pronger, 1999). Put another way, these posts are reflective of how trans women and trans girls are conceived of as inherently more dangerousness, compared to trans men and boys, because of the way in which "presumed *biological maleness* (the state of having a penis) emerges as a stronger potential threat than *social masculinity* (self-identifying and presenting as a man" (Westbrook and Schilt, 2015, p. 383, emphasis in original).

[8] Interestingly, while gay male desire was evident in discourses produced on Gab's LGBTQ+-friendly pages, there was little discussion of sex organs, especially as it related to transgender individuals (Brody et al., 2022).

Additionally, the general anxiety over gay sex and specific concerns about the "trickster transgender" are also reflective of the "one-time rule of homosexuality" (Anderson, 2008, p. 105) where individuals believe that any same-gender or same-sex sexual experience, particularly for cisgender men, equates to a homosexual orientation, an approach that conflates sexual orientation and sexual identity with sexual desire and sexual acts (a necessary move within a binary approach to sexual orientation, sex distinction, and gender identity).

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study set out to examine queerphobic discourses in Gab groups originally established as queer-friendly spaces. Before considering the details of our findings, the very existence of this phenomenon demonstrates the tenuous nature of the "neutrality" that platforms like Gab claim. By appealing to U.S. ideals of free speech and arguing that content moderation is a violation of these ideals, Gab does not actually facilitate equal participation on the platform so much as allow dominant identities and communities on this platform to crowd out minoritized users. That is, even if Gab's failure to intervene in cases of queerphobic abuse is framed in terms of free speech, the phenomenon we have studied suggests that a lack of content moderation disincentivizes queer users' use of their free speech on that particular platform. Conversely, in 2015, the CEO of Twitter acknowledged that "freedom of expression" can be understood "not as counter to restriction but as its outcome" (Gillespie, 2018)—that is, shielding vulnerable users from abuse on a given platform encourages those users to express themselves freely on the platform. Conversely, online communities may invoke "liberal principles" (e.g., free speech) but with the purpose of advancing a "highly illiberal practice" (Topinka, 2018, p. 2066).

Yet, simplistic views of free speech and content moderation continue to thrive—and run the risk of perpetuating queerphobic and other abuse. For example, Elon Musk, the owner and

CEO of Twitter as we write this, has taken a very different view on these subjects than his 2015 predecessor. Although Musk has engaged in aggressive content moderation against perceived business rivals (e.g., Clark, 2023), his public advocacy for a "free speech" approach to the platform has resulted in "a major and sustained spike in antisemitic posts on Twitter" (Miller et al., 2023, p. 2). If the discourses present in our data are more common on Gab than they are on mainstream platforms, it is because the latter have typically engaged in sufficient content moderation to prevent them from characterizing their platforms; indeed, Twitter's recent modification of its Hateful Conduct Policy to remove language prohibiting "targeted misgendering or deadnaming of transgender individuals" (Weatherbed & Roth, 2023), a practice common in our data. Thus, Musk and like-minded platform leaders risk making these discourses more common across the internet. Perhaps more worryingly, a number of legislatures and courts in the United States have described certain kinds of content moderation as viewpoint discrimination and, thereby, incompatible with U.S. constitutional law (e.g., Robertson, 2022). Our findings serve as a reminder that a scaling back of content moderation tends to value dominant "viewpoints" over minoritized ones.

As it relates specifically to our discursive findings, the discourses of difference used to rebuff attempts by LGBTQ+ individuals to create commonalities highlights how anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment must be actively and deliberately produced in order to signal the type of community expected on the free speech platform. Put another way, the constant denigration of LGBTQ+ individuals not only serves as a way to create a specific community on Gab but also illustrates the ways in which power, and hegemony, must be constantly won and rewon.

Findings related to the various ways in which anti-LGBTQ+ discourses are cultivated using varied discursive practices shows how a variety of groups, ranging from right-wing

political organizations to fundamentalist religious groups have historically crusaded against nonnormative sexual orientations and gender identities, though *without* the use of a singular and unified rhetorical strategy (Irvine, 2005). Rather than necessitating a unified discursive approach, platforms such as Gab provide seemingly infinite space for anti-gay sentiment to circulate, reach new audiences, and gain salience. Anti-LGBTQ+ posters are able to cultivate a decidedly queerphobic space utilizing various different rhetorical strategies that resonate differently with diverse audiences.

Furthermore, the usage of violent discourses and iconography, as well as the imagining of LGBTQ+ individuals as deserving of violence, signals a need to further unpack how online discourse translates to offline actions—particularly given a contemporary increase in offline violence towards the LGBTQ+ community. Lastly, the promotion of hegemonic masculinity and an outsized focus on sex acts and sex organs further highlights how free speech platforms have become a new "digital disseminator" of historical narratives used to denigrate and devalue the LGBTQ+ community. Overall, the constant reiteration of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment signals that these ideologies are not natural, but rather socially constructed in order to reaffirm the dominance of hetero/cis normativity in general.

While our study produced nuanced findings related to the production and circulation of hate speech on free speech social media, it was not without limitations. For example, we have only examined one platform, we have not examined detailed user dynamics associated with this platform, and we were unable to ask users about their choices of language. Future studies might examine how these discourses are prevalent on other free speech platforms and/or utilize semi-structured interviews with users to further understand their salience of these sites on their posts. For example, while our study found that various discourses circulate and build off of one

another, future studies might attempt to better understand *if* particular discourses resonate more or less with particular individuals and how these might translate into biased views and actions outside of the online ecosphere. Likewise, we encourage researchers to better understand user and platform dynamics by exploring differences between groups as well as individual users' evolving engagement with these discourses over time and between contexts.

Hateful and violent rhetoric has often targeted members of historically marginalized communities. More recently, this type of aggressive discourse has become more prominent in political contexts, aided by the vast reach of niche internet sites and applications. While researchers who study democracy and conflict do acknowledge that it is rare for adults to inflict harm on others for political reasons, they also acknowledge "that there are ways of encouraging the average person to accept violence," especially political violence, via the way that rhetoric is constructed (Feuer, 2022, para 14). Furthermore, "experts note that rhetoric does not have to directly reference violence to contribute to threats. Dehumanizing language also plays a role" (ibid, para 38) and that community support for biased discourses lowers the threshold at which volatile people will act. Importantly, the creation and dissemination of hate speech on social media allows these discourses to circulate at much higher rates than previous forms of media. While many of the findings are related to previously identified queerphobic discourses, the role digital technologies play in allowing for more bottom-up creation of discourses, as well as their ability to spread in an echo-chamber or "parallel 'discourse-world'" (Wodak, 2021, p. 27), must be acknowledged and taken seriously, in order to better provide a space "that all may enter without privilege or prejudice" (Barlow, 1996, para 7).

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