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UNEARTHING CONNECTIONS: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A CONSPIRACY BELIEVERS' FACEBOOK GROUP

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Introduction

Conspiracy theories are defined as secret plots involving powerful actors and challenging established narratives (Keeley, 1999; Mahl et al., 2021). Believers in conspiracy theories often have low trust in interpersonal and political spheres, with most research characterizing believers as paranoid and extremist (Douglas et al., 2019; Goertzel, 1994). However, there is a dearth of research that seeks to understand conspiracy theorists' experiences from their viewpoint (see Harambam & Aupers, 2017; Douglas et al., 2019). Moreover, the focus on personal characteristics may miss the role played by group dynamics. Thus, and acknowledging the potential dangers conspiracy theories pose, this research explores conspiracy theory believers' experiences and motivations for group participation. To do so, we combine current knowledge about conspiracy theories with insights from the realm of online communities.

Online communities are known to offer support and understanding, particularly to individuals facing marginalization or stigma (Van Duyn, 2020). Those dealing with stigma often seek like-minded individuals to counteract isolation (Goffman, 1963). Such communities provide a haven for those whose beliefs have isolated them, enabling to find a new sense of community (Van Duyn, 2020). Believers in conspiracy theories can similarly be perceived as a marginalized group (particularly by participants). They actively seek like-minded individuals to exchange ideas and challenge worldviews (Harambam & Aupers, 2017), thus also potentially fostering a sense of community (Douglas et al., 2017), defined as the emotional experience of belonging and the recognition of one's value by other group members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

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A key concept for our investigation is that of boundary work—the discursive attribution of qualities to online group members to draw a rhetorical limit between in-group members who consider themselves authentic, and other, less authentic members (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). Understanding how conspiracy theorists' online communities employ boundary work is crucial to grasp the group dynamics, and the role played by sense of community in their experiences. This research thus asks: How is a sense of community established and maintained in online conspiracy groups?

Methodology

To explore this question empirically, the study focuses on an Israeli Facebook group devoted to people who believe the earth is flat – Flat Earth Israel, a public group with almost 9,000 members. We employ qualitative content analysis on posts and comments from the Facebook group; interviews with group participants are planned for a later stage of the project.

To select data for analysis, we searched the group posts using keywords that, upon pilot testing, were found to reflect aspects that relate to community, as well as its boundaries: "I Identify with", "Community," "Friends," "Flatties" and "Trolls." Applying this search from January 2023 to May 2023 (a period of relative routine) yielded 36 posts and 2093 related comments. The combination of posts and comments aims to identify group dynamics. From this corpus, we eliminated posts where the use of these keywords did not refer to aspects of community. The resulting corpus of 15 posts and their 1015 related comments underwent thematic analysis, which was inspired by Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), identifying recurring concepts, and then coalescing those into key emergent themes that address the research question.

Preliminary Findings

Thanks for sharing: Appreciation and Solidarity in the Facebook Group

Expressions of appreciation and solidarity were a strongly recurring phenomenon in the group discussion. In one post, typical to the group, a participant shared her journey towards believing in a Flat Earth. Commenters thanked her: "Thanks for sharing, it's important"; while others expressed appreciation, posting comments like "I was moved by this." Such empathy and support contribute to building a sense of community in online groups (Van Duyn, 2020).

Furthermore, group participants used comments to express solidarity with experiences shared by other members in posts. For example, one group member confided that since finding "the truth" (i.e., "realizing" the earth is flat), he feels lonely and friendless. Commenters shared similar sentiments, expressing agreement and support: "I'm in the same situation" or "we all feel like that." These expressions of solidarity serve a sense of community, by affirming the author's perspective—one that, in other social contexts, could be challenging and even unacceptable to share openly. This dynamic is similar to the one identified by Van Duyn (2020), posing online communities as safe havens for stigmatized and marginalized individuals, offering support, understanding, and a sense

of belonging. Yet, in the case of conspiracy theory groups, such a sense of belonging can also have negative repercussions.

Setting the Community Boundaries

Boundary work entails a negotiation over who is, and isn't, deemed an authentic member. The group conversation characterized group members (and out-group members) based on their qualities, emphasizing openness and respect. For instance, one commenter contended: "Those who are closed-minded, will not acknowledge any form of proof, from anyone. And those who are open to testing the truth, they will receive proof." Openness thus emerges as a significant attribute among group members.

One category of individuals who are seen by participants as out-group members are so-called "trolls". One member characterized "trolls" as those "who come here not to study the subject, but to convince us that the world is round, [they] create an unpleasant atmosphere and make those who really want to be interested not dare to speak up, because they are put off by the form of discourse." "Trolls" are seen as disrespectful towards in-group members—those who believe in the flat earth—and therefore are shunned as outsiders.

Relatedly, group members often discuss whether the purpose of the group is to convince others and recruit additional members. For example, one post stated: "There are those who want me to prove [the Flat Earth] to them. [...] I prove nothing!" This statement sparked a debate on whether group members should try to raise awareness of the Flat Earth and recruit new members. Some claimed: "Discussions on the subject usually end up with neither side moving an inch from where they started..." However, others emphasized the mission to "help others find the truth." As one commenter asserted: "[we] should work and try to convince others - not leave the truth in the hands of the agents of chaos - we need a critical mass of people with awareness."

Such debates underline the group's efforts to conduct boundary work. To provide support, online communities must remain accessible yet secure, and this involves members distinguishing between authentic group members and intruders (see Yeshua-Katz & Hård af Segerstad, 2020). In the case of the Flat Earth community, "trolls" and individuals lacking open-mindedness and respect are deemed unfit for membership—or even for attempts at persuasion.

Discussion

This research examines how a sense of community is established in a Facebook group devoted to conspiracy theorists. The analysis shows that insights from the study of online communities, according to which these spaces can be havens where marginalized individuals can connect, engage, and nurture a sense of belonging (Van Duyn, 2020) can apply to conspiracy groups as well. This perspective shifts our attention from individual traits to the significant role that group dynamics can play in the experience of conspiracy theorists. By recognizing the importance of belonging and

solidarity, the study enriches our understanding of conspiracy theories and prompts consideration of solutions, such as fostering alternative avenues for community and belonging.

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