The Dark Side of Affinity Spaces for Teacher Professional Learning

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Biographies

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Abstract

The affinity space framework has proven useful for explaining and understanding teacher activity on social media platforms. In this study, we explore the "dark side" of teacher affinity spaces by documenting a partisan teachers' group on an alternative social media platform. We used a mix of *a priori* and emergent coding to analyze screenshots of posts and comments from a public teachers' group and group administrators' activity on the broader platform. Findings indicate that although the group administrators began with a focus on teachers, most participants were non-teachers with political (rather than professional) concerns about U.S. education. Furthermore, administrators both freely engaged with political talking points in their activity outside the teachers' group and allowed the broader platform culture—including conspiratorial thinking, explicit racism, and out-group villainization—to seep in. We conclude by describing how these findings correspond with the key characteristics of an affinity space, including an overlapping of affinities, a lack of concern for professional qualifications, and influence from the broader platform. These findings provide an illustrative example of how teacher affinity spaces can drift from their stated intention within the larger platform context.

Statements on open data, ethics and conflict of interest

a. For privacy and ethical reasons described in the study, we cannot publicly share our data. Interested parties can contact the authors with specific questions regarding access.

b. We have ethical obligations toward those who produced the data we studied in this project. This remains true even though these data were public and our institutions therefore did not require ethical approval or participant consent. Recognizing our position of power over unwitting participants (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2021; Suomela et al., 2019), we have gone to great lengths to protect them. In particular, we concealed their identities by not identifying the

platform or group, using pseudonyms for both user and account names, and lightly editing screenshots to hide personal information.

c. We have no conflict of interest to disclose in this study.

Structured Practitioner Notes

What is already known about this topic:

- Social media spaces have been conceptualized as affinity spaces for educators
- Most studies provide optimistic accounts of teacher professional learning on social media
- Most research has analyzed teachers' use of mainstream platforms

What this paper adds:

- We offer detailed analysis of a partisan U.S. teacher group on an alternative platform
- Initial efforts to focus on teaching devolved into in-group identification and out-group villainization
- This study highlights how the characteristics of affinity spaces can be detrimental to teacher professional learning

Implications for practice and/or policy

- Administrators of online groups should recognize their important role in ensuring group purposes are enacted
- Educators should assess whether the larger platform is conducive to cultivating affinity around the group's aims
- Scholars and educators should consider that the characteristics of affinity spaces can be either positive or negative for teacher professional learning

Introduction

Gee's (2004, 2017) *affinity space* framework has proven useful for explaining and understanding teachers' activity on social media (Hashim & Carpenter, 2019). In response to the *community of practice* framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998), Gee argued that focusing on shared *spaces* could account for social learning in less well-defined contexts. For example, Gee has invited researchers to consider how learners might focus on a common affinity, placing little emphasis on formal membership, qualifications, or shared identity (Gee, 2004, Gee & Hayes, 2012); likewise, learning contexts may be idiosyncratic, overlapping, or loosely-bounded (Gee, 2017). These observations have allowed for examining teachers' professional learning in spaces where anonymity is normative (e.g., Staudt Willet & Carpenter, 2020, 2021), across spaces that differ in terms of activity or objectives (e.g., Author, 2021; Staudt Willet, 2019; Staudt Willet & Carpenter, 2021), or in distinct subspaces within broader contexts (e.g., Greenhalgh et al., 2020).

Yet, not all affinity-focused activity is "good or valuable" (Gee, 2003, p. 46). For example, Staudt Willet (2019) observed that a high degree of activity in one teacher affinity space was dedicated to self-promotion; in later work, he and colleagues revisited this data through the lens of spam (Carpenter, Staudt Willet, et al., 2020). In other contexts, research has demonstrated that affinity spaces may pit insiders against outsiders (Gee & Hayes, 2012) or contain discrimination according to race, gender, and class (Pellicone & Ahn, 2018). Likewise, scholars have proposed expansions of the original framework to better consider obstacles posed by power dynamics (Barden, 2016) or platform design (Oliveri & Carpenter, 2024).

In a similar vein, we seek to demonstrate in this paper the "dark side" of teacher affinity spaces by examining a conservative teachers' group on an "alternative" social media platform.

The platform we studied describes itself as providing an online space for "free speech," but it is widely recognized in practice as a far-right platform by media outlets and scholarly research because of the users attracted to the platform. In this largely U.S. context, we understand as "far-right" political positions and perspectives that go beyond traditional U.S. conservatives' emphasis on free markets, limited government, and pro-Christian attitudes in embracing authoritarianism, nativism and racism, and explicit Christian nationalism. As we have previously argued (Authors, 2021), the rise of far-right social media platforms has important implications for scholars of informal learning on social media, and we here intend to explore these implications. However, in raising concern about far-right or conspiratorial fringe beliefs held by some teachers, we do not aim to villainize conservative teachers broadly. Indeed, conservative educators have always existed within and contributed to schools, and we do not intend to contribute to feelings of ideological isolation (e.g., Journell, 2017).

Nonetheless, we acknowledge some inherent ambiguity in our project—and suggest that the affinity space framework is therefore particularly appropriate for our purposes. The group that we study describes themselves as "conservative teachers"—a population that we do not intend to critique—and some of their positions are not markedly different from those of more mainstream U.S. conservatives. Nonetheless, far-right figures and movements sometimes "pose as clean-cut conservatives" (Owen, 2023, para. 1) to serve "as a rhetorical bridge between mainstream public discourse and white nationalism" (Hartzell, 2018, p. 1). Given this context—and the platform's clear ties with the far right—we feel that it is most prudent to understand this teachers' group as a far-right phenomenon, even when it more ambiguously uses the language of the broader U.S. conservative movement. While we will make some effort to make distinctions

between overlapping affinity spaces (see Gee, 2017), our theoretical framework highlights the difficulty of fully doing so.

Background

The rise of social media in the 21st century has resulted in profound changes to communication, social organization, and political movements. Initially, social media was hailed as a democratizing force (e.g., Ghonim, 2012), but numerous scandals, debates, and research have shifted sentiment to recognize increasingly complex effects (e.g., McNamee, 2020; Tufekci, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Teachers on Social Media

Like other areas of society, social media has resulted in changes in education, including how schools communicate information to community members (Michela et al., 2022), what information schools reveal about students (Rosenberg et al., 2022), and how students feel about themselves (Wells et al., 2021). There has also been substantial scholarship focusing on how teachers use social media platforms for professional learning purposes. These platforms include X/Twitter (Malik et al., 2019; Tang & Hew, 2017), Instagram (Carpenter, Morrison, et al., 2020), and Reddit (Na & Staudt Willet, 2022; Staudt Willet & Carpenter, 2020, 2021), among others.

Most scholarship on educational uses of social media has praised how platforms afford educators opportunities to share resources, find support, and grow networks (Author, 2021; Greenhow et al., 2020; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). However, scholarship has also addressed problems of social media related to education (Author et al., 2019; Nagle, 2018; Veletsianos et al., 2018). These issues include problematic resources on Pinterest (Rodríguez et al., 2020), tensions between social justice efforts and the for-profit business model of Instagram (Shelton et

al., 2023), and the participation of inauthentic accounts in teacher hashtags on X/Twitter (Author et al., 2023).

Far-Right Social Media

With the rise of social media, scholars and public commentary initially focused on the benefits of *participatory cultures* (Jenkins, 2006). Social media activism was also seen as supporting pro-democracy and civil rights movements; in particular, Facebook was cited as supporting Arab Spring revolutions (e.g., Ghonim, 2012) and X/Twitter as supporting anti-police brutality movements in the U.S. (e.g., Brewster, 2014). Adding more nuance, Tufekci (2017) illustrated how social media platforms have been utilized successfully by both grassroots, pro-democracy activists and by state information operations intended to stifle democratic action, such as Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA).

Recently, there has been more scholarship about U.S. far-right networks that consist of a complex ecosystem of right-wing political influencers and conspiracy theorists. This includes the QAnon network who believe a global ring of child molesters are conspiring against 45th (and, at time of this writing, soon to be 47th) U.S. president, Donald Trump (Marwick & Partin, 2022). Marwick and colleagues (2022) explained that the Internet does not simply cause radicalization, but social media accelerates the spread of ideas, community formation around ideas, and normalizes conspiratorial thinking and institutional distrust. Far-right actors are able to mainstream fringe ideas "by using edgy humour to disguise the loaded racism of their messaging" and promoting extreme, in-group identities (Crawford, 2020, para 3).

Methods

In this section, we describe our mixed methods study that utilized iterative, emergent coding (Charmaz, 2014) to analyze digital data collected from social media platforms to study educational phenomena (Author, 2021).

Positionality and Research Ethics

We acknowledge that our research is influenced by our own understandings, experiences, and circumstances—often referred to as *positionalities* or *subjectivities* (Bhattacharya, 2017). In particular, we share a number of privileged identities as white cisgender men who work in U.S. academic spaces, and we recognize that these positionalities influenced observations and interpretations. For example, we have not been the subject of racialized abuse, and our interpretation of racist language in this context may be overly abstract. Likewise, despite some passing familiarity with global aspects of the contemporary far-right, other researchers may have been able to offer more insight into fleeting participation by Argentine-, Lusophone-, and French-presenting accounts.

Similarly, we have ethical obligations toward those who produced the data we have studied. This remains true even though our institutions do not require ethical approval or participant consent for public data; for one, we note that ethics committees are but one, sometimes insufficient element of a broader infrastructure that encourages and supports ethical research (see, e.g., Knight et al., 2024). Markham and Buchanan (2012) describe traditional distinctions in research ethics between "private" and "public" as insufficient in the context of contemporary internet research. In response, and recognizing our position of power over unwitting participants (Fiesler & Proferes, 2018; Gilbert et al., 2021; Suomela et al., 2019), we have gone to great lengths to protect them. In particular, we concealed user identities by not identifying the platform or group, editing screenshots to hide personal information, and using

pseudonyms for both account and user names. Similar to microblogging platforms like X/Twitter, a user's main identifier on this platform is an *account name* composed of letters, numbers, and limited punctuation. While account names may reference a user's "real world" identity (e.g., @msabigail), this is not required (e.g., @galaxydog). Some users share their full identity (e.g., "Abigail Blake") through a more freeform *user name*, but others do not (e.g., "Galaxy Dog"). We employed pseudonyms that maintained as much as possible original cultural, stylistic, and platform elements.

Despite these considerable efforts, we acknowledge that privacy itself is not the only salient ethical consideration in this research. For example, although we generally write from positions of privilege and power, studying far-right spaces on the internet potentially exposes all scholars to risk (Massanari, 2018; franzke et al., 2020; Suomela et al., 2019), and we have been attentive to this possibility throughout the research process. Conversely, despite our efforts to protect the specific users that we have studied, we recognize that our findings could nonetheless be used to subject teachers more generally to scrutiny; we emphasize that we do not believe that the real concerns raised in this paper would justify broad surveillance of already overburdened teachers. We also acknowledge that—given the influence of individual social media platforms on user activity (e.g., van Dijck, 2013) and research considerations (e.g., franzke et al., 2020)—we do other researchers a potential disservice in not specifically identifying the platform that we have studied and synthesizing our findings with other work on the same platform.

Data Sources and Collection

Data for this study includes 49 posts and 209 associated comments (we refer to both collectively as *contributions*) in a teacher group on a far-right social media platform. In terms of the features it offers, this platform is primarily patterned after the design of Facebook and similar

social networking sites. A user's home page displays *posts* from users they follow (or content *reposted* by those users; when appropriate, we refer to *original posts* to distinguish them from *reposts*) and posts made to groups they have joined. Users may also see *comments* replying to those posts. An in-house ad system displays promoted content or products alongside content the user has chosen to follow, and users can make some tweaks to how or what content is displayed, including opting in to see recommended or popular content. Users can also directly bring up profile or group pages to see a feed of only that content.

The group we studied was created on November 8th, 2020. This group's creation was likely part of a broader migration by U.S. conservatives to right-wing social media platforms in the aftermath of the November 3rd U.S. presidential election (e.g., Brandom, 2020, Author, 2023). In response to contemporary reporting about this migration, the second author began searching for educational content on the broader far-right platform and identified this group as the most prominent one dedicated to education; some time after data collection, journalists' coverage of the platform would also identify this group as noteworthy in more general terms. In response, on January 9th, 2021, the second author collected the unique URL associated with each post composed since the creation of the group through that date; he then collected screenshots of those posts (and their associated comments) using the *webshot2* package (Chang, 2022) for the R programming language. He also collected screenshots of the profile feed for the group's two administrators, including as many of the original posts and reposts as fit in the dimensions of the screenshot.

The group described itself as for "conservative teachers" resisting perceived left-wing propaganda in United States schools. A screenshot of the "About" page for the group taken during data collection suggests that there were over 4,800 members. However, only 78 accounts

had actually contributed to the group, 50 of those accounts had only contributed once, and only 16 accounts composed posts (rather than commenting on others' content). These numbers may be misleading—or possibly the result of widespread lurking. To further illustrate patterns of activity within the group, we summarize the top-five contributors in Table 1.

Data Analysis

We conducted *a priori* and emergent coding of data. A priori coding included identification of the type of contribution (original post, repost, comment) and professional identity of the account (educator, non-educator, unclear). However, most coding was conducted through an iterative process of memo writing, code identification, and theme development (Charmaz, 2014). This process included multiple, iterative reviews of the data as we expanded and contracted codes, sub-codes, and topics to create categories that represented the breadth and depth of the phenomena. Thematic codes were not mutually exclusive; that is, each contribution could receive multiple codes.

Table 1

Summary of top five contributors to the group.

User	Professional Identity	Total Contributions	Posts	Comments
@msabigail	Teacher	90	20	70
@galaxydog	Non-Teacher	21	6	15
@its_me_melissa	Teacher	18	10	8
@MozillaChild	Teacher	6	0	6
@JacobOaks	Teacher	6	0	6

Limitations

This study is not generalizable. We remind readers to attend to how our positionalities affect our interpretation of data as outsiders of the social media group. It is possible we decoded

messages in ways that depart from the encoded messages of group posters. Because we conducted emergent, iterative coding, our results are not replicable. While we sought to stay close to the data through emergent coding, there is the potential we oversimplified or misinterpreted posts in our attempt to make sense of the complex data.

Results

Our analysis resulted in the codes listed in Tables 2 and 3 (see full codebooks in Appendix). When possible, we kept the codes for our two data sets (group contributions and administrators' site-wide contributions) identical or similar, allowing for clearer connections across the data. We focus in particular on two users, applying these codes to describe patterns of activity in and across both contexts. The first user is Abigail (@msabigail), a Black woman who described her experience as an English teacher and school librarian in the South/Southwest of the United States. Abigail linked to videos and a personal website that collectively suggested that her profile picture was an accurate representation of her true identity. We identified less corroborating evidence for Melissa (@its_me_melissa), who presents as a white woman who teaches high school science in the South of the United States. We focus on these users because they were the administrators of the teachers' group that is the main focus of our study; however, to understand that group, we must also understand the platform context it exists within.

The Broader Far-Right Context

Our screen capture of Abigail's profile feed included two original posts and 17 reposts in which she focused on material that promoted a far-right *Platform Identity*. For example, we coded two of her posts as *Affirm Platform Purpose*: In the first, she reposted a comment from the platform CEO celebrating perceived growth of the platform; in the second (one of only two original posts), she linked to a video from the CEO and expressed pride in being associated with

this platform. Abigail frequently reposted others' content that *pushed against out-groups* including the U.S.-based anti-racist Black Lives Matter movement (n=5), Antifa (n=5), big tech (n=4), COVID-19 mitigation policies (n=2), the media (n=2), China (n=1), and 46th president of the United States Joe Biden (n=1). Abigail also shared six posts which we coded as *Push Political Whataboutism*, named after the logical fallacy "in which an accused party responds to the accusation by changing the subject to a fault of the accuser" (Pearcy, 2021 p. 18). For example, she reposted content from VDARE (a white supremacist website) that exaggerated a Black Lives Matter protest in Washington D.C. as "an attempted siege of the White House in late May of 2020" and offered the conspiratorial comment that "it's an event we aren't supposed to remember." These kinds of posts were intended to create a more favorable interpretation of the January 6th U.S. Capitol attack, which aimed to derail the certification of 45th president of the United States Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election. Abigail also reposted one meme image (Figure 1) featuring burning property and an American flag with quotes attributed to female U.S. politicians. The quotes leave out context (Cox, 2021) in order to imply that women, especially Black women, had encouraged the destruction of property and violence, including against members of President Donald Trump's cabinet (a collection of executive department leaders and appointed advisors). The post included the vague and conspiratorial caption, "You're not supposed to remember this." Another meme that Abigail reposted compared mask mandates to rape (Figure 2).

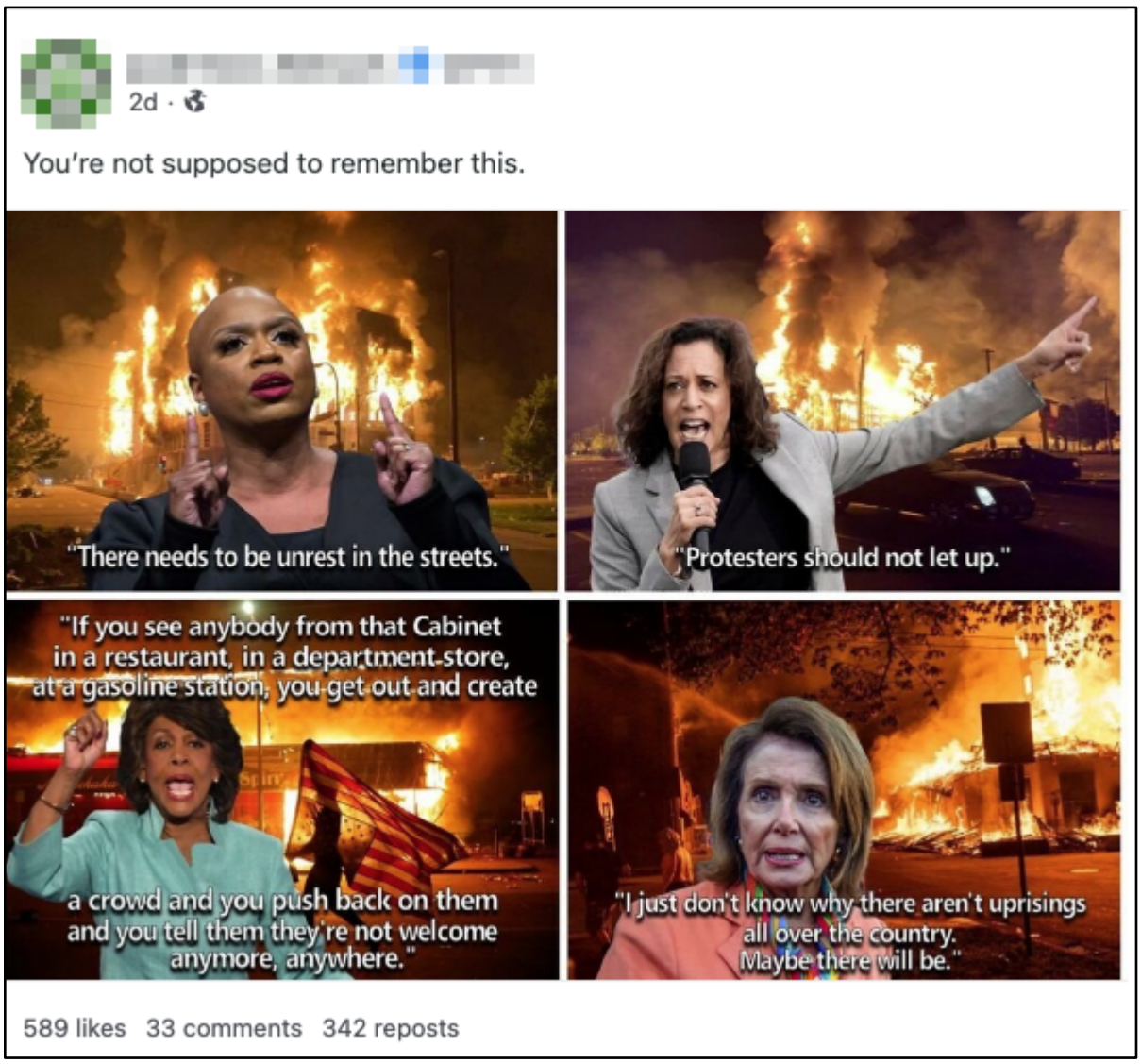

Fig. 1. An image meme criticizing protestors reposted by the primary group moderator, Abigail.

Fig. 2. Image meme criticizing mask mandates reposted by group moderator, Abigail.

Melissa showed a similar affinity for far-right politics on her feed (which contained 17 original posts and 12 reposts). Two posts (coded *Affirm Group Purpose*) were profile feed versions of posts to the teachers' group, and a third (coded *Share About Self* and apparently shared with another group on the platform) showed a picture of a place near her home. However, we coded all of her remaining posts—like Abigail's—as related to *Platform Identity*. We applied

the *Push In-Group Identity* code 17 times to posts in which Melissa and Abigail promoted Christianity, Christian Nationalism (e.g., "Jesus is still on the throne, is not up for re-election, and can never be impeached"), alternative news outlets, Donald Trump (e.g., "President Trump: Can you hear us ROAR?"), and conspiracy theories related to the January 6th Capitol attack. Melissa's posts were more extreme than Abigail's. For example, she posted a series of messages promoting a QAnon-style conspiracy theory that suggested that Donald Trump had been planning to "speak on the EBS [the U.S. Emergency Broadcast System]" to address the nation in the wake of the January 6th insurrection but was being impeded by corporate and "deep state" actors (i.e., government employees and financial leaders purportedly working to exert secret influence) in an "act of war."

Table 2

Codes generated from an analysis of the administrators' site-wide posts.

Code	Subcode	Topic	Count	Percentage of Total Codes
Platform Identity			**66**	**95.7%**
	Push Against Out-Group		*39*	*56.5%*
		Anti-Big Tech	6	8.7%
		Anti-Media	6	8.7%
		Anti-BLM	8	11.6%
		Anti-COVID-19 Policies	2	2.9%
		Anti-Kavanaugh protestors	1	1.5%
		Anti-Antifa	6	8.7%
		Anti-Biden	2	2.9%
		Anti-China	1	1.5%
		Anti-Left	2	2.9%
		Anti-GOP	1	1.5%
		Anti-Election	1	1.5%
		Anti-Government	3	4.4%
	Push In-Group Identity		*17*	*24.6%*
		Insurrection Conspiracy	8	11.6%
		Christian	2	2.9%

		Christian Nationalism	2	2.9%
		Generic	1	1.5%
		Insurrection	1	1.5%
		Pro-Trump	1	1.5%
		COVID-19 Conspiracy	1	1.5%
		Alternative News	1	1.5%
	Push Political Whataboutism		*8*	11.6%
		Capitol Insurrection	8	11.6%
	Affirm Platform Purpose		*2*	*2.9%*
Group Identity			**2**	**2.9%**
	Affirm Group Purpose		*2*	*2.9%*
Relational			**1**	**1.5%**
	Share About Self		*1*	*1.5%*
TOTAL			**69**	100%

Table 3

Codes generated from an analysis of the group contributions.

Code	Subcode	Topic	Count	Percentage of Total Codes
Relational			**129**	**44.6%**
	Respond to Post		*85*	*29.4%*
	Share About Self		*28*	*9.7%*
	Discuss Group Norms & Resources		*11*	*3.8%*
	Inquire About Others		*5*	*1.7%*
Group Identity			**153**	**52.9%**
	Push In-Group Identity		*81*	*28.0%*
		Education	27	9.3%
		Homeschooling	15	5.2%
		Conservative Education	10	3.5%
		COVID-19 Conspiracy and Misinformation	5	1.7%
		Christian	5	1.7%
		White Supremacy	4	1.4%
		Alternative Health	4	1.4%
		Islamophobia	3	1.0%
		COVID-19 Conditions	3	1.0%
		Election Fraud	2	0.7%
		QAnon	1	0.4%

		Pro-Gun	1	0.4%
		Gendered Education	1	0.4%
	Push Against Out-Group		*64*	*22.2%*
		Anti-Public Schools	17	5.9%
		Anti-Left	17	5.9%
		Anti-COVID-19 Policies	15	5.2%
		Anti-Social Justice	7	2.4%
		Anti-Government	3	1.0%
		Anti-Big Tech	3	1.0%
		Anti-Media	1	0.4%
		Queerphobia	1	0.4%
	Affirm Group Purpose		*8*	*2.8%*
NA			**7**	**2.4%**
	NA		*7*	*2.4%*
TOTAL			**289**	100%

A Conservative Teachers' Group

Although our data do not indicate how Abigail and Melissa met, it is clear from context that after doing so, they collaborated to create a group for teachers. Many of their initial contributions suggest that their intent behind the group was to provide a space for informal professional development, in the same vein as other teacher-focused affinity spaces on social media platforms. *Relational* contributions (mostly comments) were prominent in the early days of the group (see Table 3). For example, there was a concentration of the *Inquire About Others* (n=5) and *Share About Self* (n=28) codes shortly after the group was created. Abigail authored a post that encouraged new members to "get to know each other better" by sharing their "expertise." Fellow teachers replied to this request with information about their teaching experience (e.g., in Christian private schools), including grade levels (e.g., junior college or pre-kindergarten) and content expertise (e.g., physical science, reading). As we will discuss later, many group members were not themselves teachers; some of these participants responded by mentioning other professional experience. Likewise, *Discuss Group Norms & Resources* contributions (n=11) helped keep the group focused on education. Shortly after Abigail's request

for introductions, Melissa posted a set of group norms that established her and Abigail as administrators, encouraged participants to "stay on topic" by announcing that contributions unrelated to education would be removed, and suggested that the group was "here to offer solutions and hope to those seeking educational assistance."

In particular, Abigail embraced a role as an administrator who facilitated an affinity space. Indeed, she was responsible for 34.9% of total activity in the group, providing 20 out of 49 posts and 70 out of 209 comments. Much of this high level of activity was due to her *Relational* involvement in nearly every post present in the group. Two contributions involved enforcing group norms, asking a user to take down a fundraising link. However, we coded another 52 of her 90 contributions (57.8% of her personal activity) as *Respond to Post*. Although everything coded *Respond to Post* was a comment, this code goes beyond simple indication of a comment; rather, these short and nonsubstantive comments (e.g., "gotcha!", "awesome! Thank you! I'll drop them a line!", "absolutely agreed! Welcome to the latest crazy, lol!") did not advance meaningful discussion of educational issues. Although Melissa was the third-most active member in the group with 18 contributions to the group (10 posts and eight comments, for 7.0% of total activity) she was much more hands-off as an administrator. In two *Group Identity*-coded posts, she shared one resource recommendation (an article on "Google Classroom time savers," which began a conversation on alternatives to Google products) and posted a meme image depicting a teacher in November as a bedraggled, exhausted variation of Mona Lisa. However, despite one post announcing that she had "cut the cord" to Facebook and would be "on here 100% of the time," she did not show the same eagerness as Abigail to comment on others' posts.

Whatever the administrators' original intentions, much of the group content was ultimately influenced by the politics informing the broader platform—and they seemed to accept that shift. For example, Abigail composed noncommittal or implicitly affirming comments on other participants' political posts and wrote eight posts related to the COVID-19 pandemic, some of which shared misinformed skepticism related to mask-wearing and vaccines or called for "a class action lawsuit against school districts for mandating mask wearing." Like on her profile feed, Melissa was more active in her partisan signaling. For example, one of her comments composed some time after the 2020 U.S. presidential election outcome had been called by media outlets used the language "if Biden is elected," indicating a conspiratorial skepticism about the validity of Joe Biden's electoral victory to become the 46th president of the U.S.; she also linked to a teacher-written article defending Betsy Devos's tenure as Secretary of Education and shared a teacher's blog post expressing concern about the implications of a Biden presidency.

Although Abigail and Melissa's work sought to cultivate a space for teachers to communicate with and support each other, only 18 of 78 accounts (23.1%) who contributed to the space explicitly identified themselves as teachers. Three of these accounts described themselves as leaving or having left teaching (though we still coded them as teachers), with two of the three decrying "indoctrination" in schools. Of the remaining accounts, 16 (20.5%) explicitly identified themselves as not being teachers, while 44 (56.4%) were ambiguous about their professional status. Self-identified educators nonetheless accounted for over half of the activity within this group: 144 out of 258 contributions (55.8%). However, this finding is influenced considerably by Abigail's 90 contributions (34.9% of overall activity) and Melissa's 18 (7.0%). Only three of these other teachers' contributions were posts, with the remaining 33

comments on others' posts; furthermore, even the two most prolific of these educators contributed only six times apiece.

Education remained a topic of conversation in the group; indeed, of the *in-group* related codes, *education* (n=27) was the most common. Between them, teacher participants shared a number of educational tools and resources, including books such as *Animal Farm*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and the *Narnia* series; websites such as education.com; and other resources such as collections of "whiteboard notes." However, our observations suggest that these interactions did not rise above superficial or partisan conversations. For example, a teacher's book recommendations emphasized titles purportedly promoting conservative values (such as the Christian *Narnia* books) and argued that different books were appropriate for boys and girls. Likewise, Abigail once introduced a website with the comment "Would you believe that kids are now overwhelmingly in favor of going back to just doing worksheets instead of being on a screen all day?!?!" Abigail's evaluation of the value of worksheets seems to serve less as a pedagogical judgment than as a partisan critique of COVID-19 policies related to education. Along these lines, it is noteworthy that *homeschooling* (n=15) was the second most common *in-group* topic and *conservative education* (n=10) the third-most. Conservative education contributions ranged from sharing conservative resources to a new user asking "if I can join so taht [sic] I can learn more about our conservative America such as the constitution." Furthermore, the two most common topics associated with the *push against out-group* code were *anti-public schools* (n=17) and *anti-left* (n=17).

In this affinity space, discussions of education were most often in the context of political priorities. Consider the following excerpt from one comment as an illustration of these connections:

> I sent my son to [school name removed], an all boys school, when it became obvious he was smarter than his 4th grade teacher. He is now a Constitutional expert.….as he was recently referred to in an article written about him. If I had left him in the gov't run schools he probably would have become a druggie or a breeder for loose money hungry females.

Another user expressed that she pulled her middle school son out of public school because "I'm not interested in raising a socialist." Group members commended her decision, encouraged homeschooling, promoted conservative curriculum resources, and downplayed the importance of teacher professionalization. Abigail, for example, stated that "The state works so hard to try to shame and virtue signal parents for not being certified in education." Disdain for the broader teaching profession was common. Another group member stated, "I see public schools as holding facilities not centers of education any more," and another indicated that "A result of going to the average university in the US is actually losing knowledge rather than gaining it."

Far-Right Agenda Setting

As Table 3 illustrates, there are a wide number of in-group identities and issues that implicitly or explicitly sought to set agendas within this affinity space (or U.S. education more broadly). This pattern is perhaps best illustrated by @galaxydog, identified in Table 1 as more active than any user except Abigail (21 contributions; 8.1% of total activity). This is in spite of the fact that @galaxydog identified as an IT systems administrator (i.e., not a teacher, though they did profess some familiarity with one of the largest U.S. school systems). In an early post, @galaxydog established a running theme for their activity in this space when they expressed concern that "the left has take[n] over the education system" and argued that there was a need to "take it back." They repeatedly requested that teachers work with them in "putting together some

kind of anti-communist curriculum," using materials from U.S. libertarian and conservative education sources such as the Mises Institute, PragerU, and Hillsdale College. Although both group administrators—as well as one other teacher and a seemingly non-teacher parent—expressed interest in these efforts, none of them publicly responded to @galaxydog's persistent invitations to meet and start working. In one of @galaxydog's last posts during the timeframe of our study, they summed up their concerns in a meme image about "Children's Education" (Figure 3). The left side of the meme image read "Then" and showed a black and white picture of a young boy handling a rifle in a classroom; the right side read "Now" and showed a picture of a drag storytime (see Barriage et al., 2021; Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020).

Fig. 3. Image meme comparing boy holding a gun with drag storytime posted by participant @galaxydog.

Other non-teacher participants likewise invited far-right discourses into this space, with varying levels of connection to education. One account, @AntiIslamclass, explicitly described their expertise as Islamophobia and shared a website dedicated to advancing Islamophobia (which Abigail said she was "looking forward to going back and reading through more of").

When @galaxydog created a post asking, “Girls do you want to start working on a Anti-Communist curriculum?,” @AntiIslamclass asked in the comments: “will an anticommunist curriculum ban islam?” Another account criticized Abigail for not following a QAnon influencer on the platform, arguing that “If teachers are afraid to research and find truth. Our kids are screwed.”

Two other accounts engaged in a racist argument in response to a video Abigail posted (which clearly showed her as a Black woman). This began with the first account’s comment: “Feral libs: books are racist! You ain't need no books to burn and loot! Note that some feral [anti-Black slur] and [another slur] had to be taught how to pull down a statue." This account’s username included a reference to the “All Lives Matter” slogan (which dismisses the Black Lives Matter movement as overly narrow). A second account responded to that slogan by using anti-Semitic British Israelism to argue that White Anglo-Saxons represented a “pure… bloodline” that had replaced Jews as God’s chosen people—and were thus the only “lives” that “mattered.” There were no evident efforts (including by administrators) to moderate either the comments that sought to advance white supremacy or those that engaged in anti-Black racism.

Discussion

Although this teacher’s social media group is markedly different from those that have previously been conceptualized as *affinity spaces*, it clearly qualifies as such. As Gee (2017) has argued, affinity spaces are “devoted to all sorts of different affinities” around which participants “act, teach, learn, and produce” (p. 28), and this necessarily includes an education-focused group within a far-right social media platform. Indeed, our data suggest that the group moderators intentionally patterned this group after established examples of teachers’ gathering in social media groups to support each other’s practice; that Abigail and Melissa had a narrow, partisan

view of what that practice should look like does not disqualify it as an example of this phenomenon. Rather, the affinity space framework—as originally conceived by Gee and expanded by other authors—draws attention to the most salient parts of our findings.

Which Affinities?

As previously noted, Gee (2003) acknowledged that affinity-based learning is not necessarily good or valuable. Indeed, teacher-based social media platforms may be a blend of desirable and less-desirable activity; in an analysis of eight months of activity on the #Edchat X/Twitter hashtag, Staudt Willet (2019) concluded that posts "were almost all on-topic" (p. 284) while also raising concerns about high levels of self-promotion. Even though he and colleagues later concluded that these might not rise to the level of entirely irrelevant spam (Carpenter, Staudt Willet, et al., 2020), this could still be understood as an overlap between two affinity spaces within a shared subspace (Gee, 2017; see also Greenhalgh et al., 2020). Whereas the #Edchat example shows a possible convergence between self-promoting *teacherpreneurs* and uniquely classroom-oriented participants, our findings demonstrate a clear convergence of affinities for U.S. education and U.S. politics. Indeed, while some overlap was likely inevitable, it is noteworthy that the group administrators were seemingly supportive of the evolution from their intended affinity to members' actual affinities.

The clear presence of political affinities within this space is particularly interesting given that an affinity space can be defined in terms of insiders, outsiders, and a hostility between them (Gee & Hayes, 2012). While we feel that our concerns about far-right activity should not be used to villainize conservative teachers in U.S. schools, we also express concern that these two political affinities so easily overlap here. Indeed, these teachers' shared hostility toward perceived left-wing out-groups shows that participants in this affinity space established some

firm boundaries while allowing for ambiguous overlap between "conservative" and "far-right.". While we echo Marwick and colleagues (2022) problematization of assumptions related to online radicalization, we suggest that spaces framed as "conservative" but deliberately open to far-right thinking could push teacher (or other) perspectives in extreme directions. Our focus here has been on teachers, but education researchers might also use the affinity space framework to consider the phenomenon of students bringing far-right views into the classroom from online spaces (see Authors, 2021; Fisher & Taub, 2019).

Despite our concerns about extreme political positions in this group, it is beyond the scope of our paper to define which affinities are appropriate within online teacher spaces. However, we believe educator affinity spaces should be grounded in teachers' professional concerns, not in/out group distinctions or culture war agenda-setting. Likewise, facilitators of online affinity spaces for teachers should clearly identify the purpose of those spaces (as Abigail and Melissa initially attempted to) and take steps to keep those spaces aligned with that purpose (as these administrators ultimately failed to).

Who Should Belong?

One defining feature of the affinity space is that it does not attempt to define membership within a space (Gee, 2004). This has been useful for understanding teacher activity on social media; for example, Author's (2016) review of 500 accounts present in teacher-focused X/Twitter hashtags found that only 54% of account holders were clearly employed in schools (though another 33% articulated ties to education). In another study, Carpenter and colleagues (2021) found that hashtags used at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic saw activity from educators working in PK-12 schools, for-profit edtech ambassadors or edupreneurs, and representatives of for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Clearly, it is impractical (and perhaps

even undesirable) for affinity spaces to restrict participation to demonstrably professional teachers. The affinity space framework allows for such a possibility without dismissing that activity as unimportant; indeed, Staudt Willet and Carpenter's (2021) discussion of anonymity in the context of Reddit highlights potential benefits of agnostic attitudes toward membership.

Yet, our data illustrate ways in which the "fuzzy boundaries" (Gee & Hayes, 2012, p. 133) of affinity spaces can be a problem in the context of teacher professional learning. Indeed, despite Melissa and Abigail's intentions of gathering a group of teachers, this particular space eventually organized itself around those with an affinity for right-wing views of education. Motivated non-professionals like @galaxydog and explicit bigots like @AntiIslamclass were permitted to direct the conversation and shape the identity of the group. Although the group administrators and members apparently did not perceive these users as bad actors, their presence highlights the way that an open membership can detract from the quality of teacher professional learning on social media. Indeed, the affinity space framework's downplaying of the importance of professional qualifications (e.g., Gee, 2017; Gee & Hayes, 2012) raises particular questions in the context of public school teachers. As previously noted, the affinity space framework has been used to account for the presence of other actors in teacher-focused social media spaces; however, our data (in which even professional teachers downplay their own status) demonstrate the need to investigate how this might relate to broader trends of deprofessionalization of teachers.

Given these findings, we suggest that teachers exploring online spaces (and those recommending online spaces to teachers) be attentive to who is present and who is promoted within those spaces. In groups such as the one we have studied, a relative absence of teachers may indicate only superficial engagement with best professional practice. In other less-obvious cases, potential participants may find that some voices (e.g., private edtech companies) are too

common or that other voices (e.g., particular context experts) are too uncommon for a space to be valuable for them. While affinity spaces' tearing down of boundaries can sometimes be useful, teachers should consider what boundaries are actually supportive of their learning goals.

What Platform Influences are at Play?

As we have previously noted, Gee (2017) acknowledges that affinity spaces may overlap with—or be entirely nested within—larger spaces with slightly different affinities (see also Greenhalgh et al., 2020). Oliveri and Carpenter (2024) have called for researchers to pay more attention to the influence of social media platforms on these spaces, and research employing other frameworks has similarly described how platform design and governance may influence teacher experience (e.g., Authors et al., 2023; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Shelton et al., 2023). We do not mean to suggest that this is a deterministic relationship—research on far-right platforms from other disciplines shows that some groups, but not others, successfully push back on elements of platform culture (Author, 2022, 2023)—but we might better understand affinity spaces when drawing from studies and frameworks that ask questions about the influence of social media platforms (e.g., van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck & Poell, 2018) or broader media ecosystems (e.g., McLuhan, 1964; Miroshnichenko, 2020; Strate, 2008).

Indeed, we suggest that platform influence may be the most striking characteristic of the affinity space. While it is not impossible for a problematic teachers' group to form on a more mainstream social media platform, the relationship between this explicitly far-right platform on this particular teachers' group is clear and compelling. Although we have previously described Abigail and Melissa as setting out to create a teachers' group only for it to be subordinated to the broader far-right affinity space co-existent with the social media platform, our own data complicate this assumption. Abigail and Melissa obviously chose—in an act of presumed

homophily—to use this social media platform and even showed a willingness to engage with conspiratorial and white nationalist discourses in the broader affinity space; although their early posts within the group suggest an intent to create a run-of-the-mill teacher space, it is ultimately unsurprising that these administrators would allow its evolution in other directions.

This study focuses on a social media platform with a particular culture that is widely recognized as political and problematic. Nonetheless, all platforms shape the activity within them to a certain degree, and researchers and practitioners would do well to ask how that may affect teacher experience, even on mainstream platforms. In particular, we suggest that stakeholders consider the case of X/Twitter, a site of historically considerable teacher activity that has seen dramatic changes since its 2022 acquisition by Elon Musk; whether this has resulted in a change in teacher perceptions of the platform would be informative for both research and practice.

Conclusion

This study uses the *affinity space* framework to describe teacher activity on a far-right social media platform. The loosely-bounded and overlapping nature of this framework helps account for key characteristics of this group, including the overlap between multiple affinities, the presence of non-teachers, and the influence of a broader platform space on a specific group. Yet, these examples of affinity space characteristics—especially as they explain the presence of racist and conspiratorial thinking in teacher spaces—clearly raise questions and concerns that other examples from the literature have not. There is, of course, much more to examine concerning the role of affinity spaces for educators. Further studies could examine how affinity groups grow and change over time. Other studies might seek to conduct focus groups with participants to understand how members perceive their participation. While social media affinity spaces have genuinely provided teachers with benefits in terms of professional learning, our

study of a far-right affinity space highlights the importance of continuing to consider their dark sides too.

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Appendix

Table 4

Administrator site-wide posts codebook.

Code	Subcode	Definition	Examples (Subcode named before example)
Platform Identity		Posts in this code included posts that identified people and groups, and issues and stances, which defined the larger group identity. The four Subcodes address identify out-groups, identify in-groups, create political whataboutisms, and affirm platform purpose. We provide examples for each subcode.	See examples for four subcodes below.
	Push Against Out-Group	Posts in this subcode identify out-group issues and stances by which posters in the group identify themselves against. These include broad sectors (e,g., big tech, government, left, GOP), countries (e.g., China), policies (e.g., Anti-COVID policies), events (e.g., election), groups (e.g., BLM, Antifa, Kavanaugh protestors), and politicians (e.g., Joe Biden).	Anti-big tech: @msabigail: Big tech is the enemy #gabfam [Link to article in The National Pulse titled, "Emails reveal Facebook banned users at Hunter Biden's request"] Insurrection conspiracy: @its_me_melissa: "Reports that they have taken down the emergency broadcast system to prevent Trump from speaking. This is an act of war!"
	Push In-Group Identity	Posts in this subcode identify in-group issues and stances by which posters in the group identify themselves. These include events (e.g., insurrection), groups (e.g., Christian, Christian nationalists), politicians (e.g., Trump), and conspiracies (e.g., insurrection).	Christian: @msabigail: [repost of graphic human silhouette, sunset, and Christian cross that reads, "the most loving act you can ever do for someone is to share the gospel with them"] Insurrection Conspiracy: @its_me_melissa: "What will the new party of the conservatives be called? We

			know it's coming we should be structuring it now.”
	Push Political Whataboutism	Posts in this subcode neither fit in the in-group nor out-group subcodes, but instead used the whataboutism logical fallacy to shift the focus of an issue in ways that was departed from other Platform Identity codes.	
	Affirm Platform Purpose	Posts in this subcode expressed affirmation of the purposes of the larger social media platform. These subcodes were distinct from in-group codes as they were particular to the online context via which the group communicated.	@msabigail: "I have never been more PROUD than in the moment of listening to this video! I was looking for something to be posted last night on [platform] when [platform] wasn’t loading for me. To all our millions of new people who have joined [the platform] and have even followed my account over the past two days. Welcome to [the platform]. [shares link to platform video]“
Group Identity	*Affirm Group Purpose*	Posts in this subcode expressed support, praise, or enthusiasm for the growth or purposes of the group.	@its_me_melissa: "So I did it, I cut the cord to FB [Facebook] and will be on here 100% of the time. I had not idea we had grown this much! Hello conservative teachers!”
Relational	*Share About Self*	Posts in this subcode included posters sharing something about themselves or from their lives.	@its_me_melissa: Snow in beautiful Monteagle, TN [picture of curvy road with icy trees and snowy ground]

Table 5

Group contributions codebook.

Code	Subcode	Definition	Examples (Subcode named before example)
Relational		Posts in this subcode included posters sharing something about themselves; responding to, or inquiring about, each other; or developing or maintaining group norms.	Share About Self: @MozillaChild: "@msabigail My name is Melinda. I have been the Head of School for a classic Christian University-Model school for the past ten years… I have 4 fantastic kids. My oldest is 21 and will graduate…" Discuss Group Norms & Resources: @its_me_melissa: "GROUP RULES. Admin. Team Abigail & Melissa. 1) Stay on topic. All posts not on topic with education are subject for removal from the feed. 2) Stay positive. This is not a group gripe session. We're here to offer solutions and hope to those seeking educational assistance. 3) Keep it professional. THis includes language. Profanity will not be tolerated. 4) Spammers and hecklers will be blocked and posts removed. 5) Please do not post Gofundme links or requests for money. You may advertise your education related business or services within reason." Inquire About Others: @jesusstan: "@its_me_melissa Is that your child in your profile picture? She is very gorgeous. Sorry, I'm not sure if it's a he too ! Ha ha ha!"
Group Identity			

	Push In-Group Identity	Posts in this subcode identify in-group issues (e.g., education, homeschooling, alternative health, COVID-19 conditions, election fraud) and stances (e.g., conservative education, COVID-19 conspiracy and misinformation, Christian, White supremacy, Islamophobia, QAnon, pro-gun, gendered education) which defined the larger group identity.	Election Fraud: [In response to question and poll about homeschooling resources]: "@MIOXIO4646: The Democratic Party, represented by Biden, colluded with businessman and the media to steal the US presidential position with fake votes. Whether you believe it or not, this is a premeditated, serious coup. If you accept the coup, you have accepted humiliation. White supremacy: @ChristianPariah: "Why do all lives matter? Who says?"
	Push Against Out-Group	Posts in this subcode identify out-group stances (e.g., public schools, left, COVID-19 policies, social justice, government, big tech, media, queer) by which posters in the group identify themselves against.	Anti-public Schools: @calculatier: "@msabigail After forty years in the classroom, I cannot tell you how lucky I was to have retired in June, never go back to the terribly broken educational system in America. I wish my competent former colleagues all the strength and luck to combat the administrative and political madness." Anti-left: @ybvet: "[@ numerous accounts] By whom is homeschooling frowned upon…communists maybe?"
	Affirm Group Purpose	Posts in this subcode expressed support, praise, or enthusiasm for the growth or purposes of the group.	@1776liberty: "@msabigail I just wanna throw this out here. I think what you're doing is awesome"