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Constructing homonationalist identities in relation to religious and LGBTQ+ outgroups: a case study of r/RightWingLGBT

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ABSTRACT

Recent research on homonationalism addresses the ideological and electoral combination of LGBTQ+ politics and radical-right populism. However, right-wing LGBTQ+ identities remain seemingly paradoxical, as right-wing Christianity-rooted conservatism is generally hostile to LGBTQ+ empowerment. Grounded in literature on populist radical right and its relationship with religion and sexuality, as well as social identity theory, we argue that right-wing LGBTQ+ people resolve identity tension by creating a positive group image. Analysing over 2,500 posts on a prominent (new/alt/populist) right-wing LGBTQ+ Reddit community, r/RightWingLGBT, we found right-wing LGBTQ+ users maintain a positive self-identity by positioning themselves against ‘degenerate, liberal, non-binary queers’, thus limiting themselves to narrow iterations of acceptable queerness which are congruent with hetero- and cis-normativity. Islam replaces Christianity as the primary anti-LGBTQ+ outgroup, which, alongside a normalisation and naturalisation of religious-rooted moral selves, helps to reconcile LGBTQ+ identities and right-wing populism and establish homonationalism as a bottom-up phenomenon.


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Introduction

Despite an evolving relationship with gender and sexuality, the populist-radical right (PRR), (neo-)far right, and digital ‘alt-right’ continue to propagate heteronormative family values and sexual moralities echoing Christianity (Verloo and Paternotte 2018, 1–5). Despite this, the PRR also mobilise liberal LGBTQ+ equality rhetoric when framing nativist anti-Islamic sentiment. A constructed opposition between Islamic values and LGBTQ+ rights values helps to justify the defence of Western societies from a

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constructed Islamic threat (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 177–185; Schminke, 2020, 59–74; Spierings 2020, 41–58, 41–58, 41–58; Wielowiejski 2020, 135–146; Puar 2018).

A growing body of literature assesses the relationship between sexuality and radical right populism (e.g. Puar 2018; Spierings, Lubbers, and Zaslove 2017, 216–237; Spierings 2021, 171–182), primarily from a top-down perspective, but how right-wing LGBTQ+ people reconcile their own seemingly conflictual identities remains unexamined. This study contributes to an initial analysis of such identities. Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that individuals strive for positive self-image through identification with socially constructed ingroups and comparison with outgroups (Blanz et al. 1998, 697–729; Tajfel et al. 1979, 56–65). Given the paradoxical relationship between right-wing politics, traditional Christian morality, and the wider LGBTQ+ community, it is unclear which groups right-wing LGBTQ+ people might compare themselves or identify with.

By connecting this SIT framework to the predicament of right-wing LGBTQ+ people, this study dovetails two goals. Firstly, it sheds light on how sexual identities, religious undercurrents, and right-wing ideology relate to one another, contrasting existing literature (e.g. Puar 2018; Spierings, Lubbers, and Zaslove 2017, 216–237; Spierings 2021, 171–182) by taking a bottom-up approach, and focusing on a digital subculture about which little is known. Secondly, allowing for an original expansion on a classic theory, it applies SIT in a unique context of potential identity tension, examining identity management strategies used by people who are actively both right-wing populist and queer. As their dual identities are associated with opposing poles of an ideological dichotomy they may experience identity tension, either internally or due to confrontation with societal expectations.

We empirically investigated posts on the US-centric 'r/RightWingLGBT', an online discussion board of around 17,000 users who identify as both LGBTQ+ and right-wing. It is situated in the context of digital culture wars within which queer identity politics is a point of ideological demarcation (Nagle 2017; Beran 2019), with non-normative queer identities being associated with a new digital left, and criticism of such identities with the digital 'alt-right'. r/RightWingLGBT's LGBTQ+ community focus and situation in the contemporary right-wing digital context renders it an ideal case to address our puzzle.

In the U.S. context, the mainstreaming of such digital ideological affinities has been linked to the rise of contemporary right-wing populism (Beran 2019), although similar processes have been observed in European democracies (e.g. Fiers and Muis 2021, 381–402; Korolczuk 2020, 165–167), implying a wider relevance of our analyses.

This study examines ingroup/outgroup categorisations and the use of identity management strategies in this community, via the grounded coding of approximately 2,500 posts from March 2016 – April 2020. Through these

analyses, we examine *how LGBTQ+ people in a digital right-wing community define and demarcate ingroup from outgroup, and how they define themselves and these others, as well as what strategies they use to create or maintain a positive ingroup identity in this context*. Examining these identities lends greater understanding to the complex intersection of liberal pro-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, Christian morality, and anti-Islamic nativism underpinning many contemporary right-wing populist ideas.

Theoretical background

Sexuality, religion and radical right populism

Traditionally, radical right actors championed nuclear families, normative heterosexuality and 'natural' male and female roles. Homosexuality found little acceptance in such movements (Claus and Virchow 2017). Modern conservative parties are more divided on sexuality, which occupies an especially complex and versatile position in populist-right politics (Spierings 2020, 48–49). Selective pro-LGBTQ+ rhetoric is often incorporated in a nativist narrative, highlighting the cultural threat of the (often Muslim) 'immigrant other' (Spierings, Lubbers, and Zaslove 2017, 216–237). Puar (2018) terms this intersection of LGBTQ+ and nativist interests 'homonationalism', a phenomenon symptomising the biopolitical encapsulation of queer subjects into the imperial interests of Western nation-states, provided such subjects are 'homonormative'. Homonormativism refers to a depoliticised homosexuality, which supports and is included in heteronormative institutions and values through gender conformity, passing as heterosexual, and heteronormative models of family, marriage and kinship (Rosenfeld 2009, 617–638; Duggan 2002, 175–194).

The incorporation of pro-LGBTQ+ arguments could be seen as symptomatic of secularisation in radical right populism, but can also be understood in the context of 'covert' religiosity (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 177–185). This Christianity is less overt, occurring as a discursive dichotomy between a morally good or 'sacred' people versus those who are responsible for the degeneration of Western society (Zúquete 2017, 445–466; DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 177–185; Puar 2018). Who those others are depends to some extent on the cultural and national context (e.g. Dudink 2017). The digital, U.S.-centric case at hand is particularly influenced by the positioning of religion, as Christianity has long been overt in U.S. politics (Michael, Corbett-Hemeyer, and Matthew Wilson 2014). Even Donald Trump, despite a comparatively non-Christian identity, manifested covert Christianity by drawing evangelical support through an oppositional racial politics echoing white Christian nationalism (Gorski 2019, 165–183). Similarly, although the digital alt-right is largely atheist membership and disdainful of Christian theological practices, it uses Christian symbolism in discourse and imagery

(Shaw 2019, 79–92). Further suggesting a paradoxical relationship with sexuality, the alt-right has previously welcomed prominent gay figures amongst its ranks (Minkowitz 2017) but echoes Christian morality by linking gay and women’s liberation to civilisational decline and degeneracy (Nagle 2017; Woods 2019, 39–59).

Key to this paradox is populists’ mastery of the art of ‘normalisation’. We adopt the term normalisation to describe a process depicted by Norocel (2015): the ‘performative process by which a specific set of experiences are presented as “natural”’. Norocel understands this concept in relation to the disciplining of masculinity; some masculinities are naturalised as normative and desirable, and others are excluded as abnormal. Such normalisation contributes to the construction of what is, or is not, part of the mythical common origin underpinning a civilisation. The PRR may not engage in overt Christian theology, but moral logic inextricable from Western Christianity is integrated in their depiction of what constitutes a normal, natural and moral individual. Alongside this, right-wing populist Christianity becomes less theological and more civilizationist (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 177–185), as secular-Christian society becomes positioned against the degenerate, invading other – most notably Muslim immigrants.

The intertwining of secular-Christianity with the notion of a superior Western democracy is what facilitates homonormativity: limited forms of queerness normalised as part of the native culture. Right-wing populists underpin an anti-Islamic agenda by claiming to defend nativist conservative values *and* liberal tenets of ‘modern Western culture’ – including the rights of some LGBTQ+ people. However, (covert) Christian morality and notions of outsider degeneracy are historically problematic for LGBTQ+ people, and it remains unclear how right-wing LGBTQ+ people construct themselves against this backdrop. Does homonormativity and homonationalism occur from the bottom-up, within identity management, and how is identity tension confronted?

Social Identities

Social identity theory (Tajfel et al. 1979, 56–65) posits that individuals feel an innate need to identify with others. To fulfil this need, they form, and identify with, groups premised on common identity. The formation of such ingroups also results in the formation of outgroups: positive ingroup distinctiveness can be achieved through favourable comparison with a salient outgroup (Tajfel et al. 1979, 56–65). When positive ingroup identity is threatened, groups may use ‘identity management strategies’ in relation to comparative outgroups to resolve this (Blanz et al. 1998, 697–729).

By the logic of SIT, the preoccupation of the (digital) right with abject qualities of LGBTQ+ communities threatens the positive identity of LGBTQ+ people situated in this context. SIT would suggest that right-wing LGBTQ+ people compete with anti-LGBTQ+ people (a higher status group in this context) for

status, or deny their LGBTQ+ identity in an attempt to escape negative connotations. However, members of r/RightWingLGBT do not leave or oppose either group, suggesting more creative identity management strategies.

Scholars of SIT have theorised multiple identity management strategies (Tajfel et al. 1979, 56–65; Blanz et al. 1998, 697–729), of which Blanz et al. provide a comprehensive taxonomy, categorising twelve strategies as individual vs. collective and behavioural vs. cognitive (see Appendix A). The categorisation of individual or collective is dependent on the target who should benefit: the single subject (individual strategies) or the entire ingroup (collective strategies). Behavioural vs. cognitive refers to whether the strategy occurs on the behavioural or cognitive level.

Individual strategies mainly involve switching or denouncing groups, but the fact that r/RightWingLGBT users willingly participate in a dedicated LGBT *and* right-wing community suggests that they remain in both groups. As the theorised tension is premised on the possession of conflicting identities, to resolve tension they must thus durably reconcile these. Individual strategies cannot achieve this, as they often entail a loss of one or both identities. The degree of internal conflict (i.e. cognitive dissonance; Festinger 1957) caused by opposing beliefs and norms between these two identities is likely to be resolvable through other strategies. For example, they may allow for the reduction of dissonance and tension by diverting negative focus towards other, lower-status groups; changing the dimensions on which comparison occurs in favour of the ingroup; or refining the definition of the ingroup. We can thus expect that collective rather than individual strategies are applied. Three primary groups of collective strategies are distinguished.

First, collective *behavioural* strategies focus on changes in group hierarchies, encompassing (i) adjusting the group to meet the standards and norms of a superior group – *absorption*; (ii) competing with an outgroup on an existing normative dimension in order to show the superiority of /the ingroup – *social competition*; and (iii) competing with an outgroup for allocations of resources in favour of the ingroup – *realistic competition*.

Second, collective *cognitive* strategies focus on mental coping, and include (i) *re-evaluation of the comparison dimension*, applied when a low-status group changes the meaning of a comparison dimension in their favour; or (ii) selecting a *new comparison dimension* favouring them.

Third, collective groups can *change the units of comparison*, with strategies including (i) *superordinate recategorisation*, when ingroup and outgroup merge to a new common ingroup; (ii) *subordinate recategorisation*, when a low-status outgroup splits in two and one group to self-evaluates positively against the other; (iii) *changing the outgroup* to select a new comparison lower-status group than the ingroup to replace a high-status comparison group. Additionally, social comparison theory (Blanz et al. 1998, 697–729) adds (iv) *temporal comparison* and

(iv) *comparison with standard*. In the former, the ingroup compares itself with itself at a different time, and in the latter comparison is made with socially shared goals or norms, not an outgroup.

Potential outgroups of the right-wing LGBT+ community

Our main expectation is that r/RightWingLGBT users will apply collective strategies to sustain their dual identity positively, but with and against whom they will identify remains unclear. Right-wing populist discourses are thematically preoccupied with perceived attacks on 'Western civilization' by Islam *and* collaborating elites who push for liberal identity politics (Nagle 2017; Spierings 2020, 41–58). For example, anti-feminist factions of digital rightist movements reverse feminist narratives in a way which echoes wider concerns about the perceived anti-white, anti-straight, anti-male logic of liberal hegemony (Ging 2019, 638–657; Thompson and Zoë 2020, 104–118). Islam is therefore expected to function as a main outgroup vis-à-vis which right-wing LGBTQ+ will position themselves positively. The role of Christianity remains unclear, as despite its normalisation into PRR discourse, it may still represent threatening historical anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment to users.

Additionally, we do not expect users to compete with obvious contextually high-status outgroups such as heterosexual or cisgender people. This would be ideologically at odds with the digital right's concern with perceived liberal attacks on ordinarily dominant groups, despite the fact that such groups may be outgroups of the wider LGBTQ+ community. Congruently, this also suggests that right-wing LGBTQ+ people may not align themselves with the wider LGBTQ+ community. In line with a covert Christian morality, homonationalism and homonormativity, those that fall outside the current normalisation practices, such as those who violate societal gender norms, may be constructed as an outgroup.

Research design

Case: r/RightWingLGBT

To assess identity formation and tension, we zoom in on a platform associated with the digital left-right culture war. The right in this context is constituted of various groups, most often opposed to political correctness, liberal identity politics and egalitarianism, which are associated with the degeneration Western society. This positions them alongside other forms of right-wing populism. The poignancy of liberal identity politics in this context makes the case at hand ideal.

Reddit provides access to otherwise hard-to-reach groups, via text-based posts, images and links that can be submitted, commented on and rated on the platform. Communities thereon are known as 'subreddits'. It is also an

'anonymous media site': users can use pseudonyms or maintain anonymity by using 'throwaway accounts', allowing free discussion of taboo or sensitive topics. Consequently, the populist, anti-egalitarian and often extremist right has thrived on Reddit (Ging 2019, 638–657; Marwick and Caplan 2018, 543–559). However, shortly after data collection, the subreddit was deleted as part of a site-wide purge of communities deemed to promote hate.

'r/RightWingLGBT' is self-described as 'a political subreddit for LGBT people. We focus on right wing politics and discussion of the regressive left as it pertains to and damages our community'. (r/RightWingLGBT 2020). This facilitates the theorised conditions for identity tension, particularly as subscribers, by choosing to click the board's subscribe button, actively opt in to an intersection of '*right-wing*' and '*LGBT*' identity. In posts, neither this intersection is nor right-wing politics in general are contested. At the time of research, r/RightWingLGBT was a four-year-old subreddit with around 17,000, mainly American subscribers with links to other populist right, alt-right and anti-identity politics subreddits. That r/RightWingLGBT is U.S.-centric presents both advantages and limitations. Most significant for the goals of this study is that it allows more in-depth examination surrounding the contexts of the place of sexuality in the populist radical right, including Puar's relatively U.S.-centric notion of homonationalism, and the Christian undertones of US right-wing politics.

Method

An initial immersive 'netnographic' approach was used to gain familiarity with the community by observing but not interacting, also known as 'lurking' (Kozinets, Dolbec, and Earley 2014). Combined insights from this process and SIT informed the coding frame of a qualitative content analysis, performed in line with Schreier's (2012) definition of qualitative content analysis as a systematic assignment of successive parts of the analysed material to categories of a coding frame. As Reddit is a public and anonymous platform, we consider posts as public content, but all usernames were automatically anonymised during the data gathering process. As r/RightWingLGBT no longer exists due to subsequent anti-hate speech action by Reddit, there is little risk of quotes being traced to users.

To determine the most significant ingroups and outgroups, the theoretically salient and commonly used terms referring to ideological, sexual and religious groups were identified and compiled in a list (Appendix B). For each group term, a dataset of 200 randomly selected posts and comments containing the term was created. These were manually coded regarding (a) apparent ingroup/outgroup categorisation of that group from the author of the post's perspective, (b) the sentiment towards the group, and (c) explicit evidence of identity management strategies. The resulting information was quantified in

absolute (counts) and relative (percentages) to show the prevalence of ingroup/outgroup categorisations, sentiments, and identity management strategies in relation to specific groups.

Selection of Posts

Posts were selected via triangulation of netnographic immersive participant observation and automated natural language processing tools, providing context to the wider political climate of the subreddit.

Next, all available posts and comments created between the 27 March 2016 (creation of subreddit) and the day of data gathering (16 April 2020) were collected using the program 4CAT (see Peeters and Hagen 2018). To allow for natural language processing, all stop words were removed, based on the stopwords-iso list.¹ Of the resulting most-used terms, we listed the top-200 and isolated any used to denote any specific groups of people (e.g. 'straight', 'Muslim', 'liberals'), leading to a comprehensive list. Highly similar terms were combined into single categories (e.g. 'heterosexual', 'straight' and 'hetero').

Terms with low theoretical interest, low usage (< 300 mentions across entire dataset), or those not used to clearly denote groups when read in context were removed.² We also removed the term 'LGBT': almost everyone identified as such and, as an expansive umbrella term, it is not useful for the identification of sentiments towards, and categorisations of, individual groups. The final list of thirteen terms ([Appendix B](#); [Table 1](#)) includes the terms which were mentioned very frequently, seemed particularly contentious on the subreddit, were known to have ingroup/outgroup salience for either the wider LGBTQ+ community or the populist right-wing community, or were otherwise theoretically notable (e.g. Christian). From each of the thirteen final groups, a random sample of 200 posts was drawn for analysis, leading to over 2,500 post being coded and analysed.

Coding

Each sampled post was qualitatively analysed and assigned three different types of codes (for full guidelines and criteria see [Appendices A and C](#)). Where possible, posts were viewed in the context of the thread in which they appeared. Coding was performed by the lead researcher; for inter-coder reliability subsamples and ambiguous posts were checked by co-researchers throughout. During the coding, notes were made about regularities, exemplarities and irregularities that are not captured in the coding scheme but could inform the analysis of particular groups in the analysis' final step. For example,

specific news items such as U.S. legislation surrounding transgender bathroom access were noted as frequently-discussed, and it was noted when strategies in the dataset of one group consistently targeted another specific group.

Code 1 indicates whether the group being referred to was treated as an ingroup or an outgroup. Explicit and implicit categorisation was considered, but a conservative approach was used in case of unclarity (leading to more 'unclear' posts – a third category) to prevent researcher bias. The subreddit's 'flair' system – users can attach a label of 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', or 'transgender' to signify their own identity – proved helpful in reducing the number of 'unclear' posts in LGBTQ+ datasets.

Code 2 indicates the sentiment towards the group referred to. Positive and negative sentiments were coded in instances in which the poster/commenter voiced a positive or negative opinion of the group discussed, or made an explicitly favourable or unfavourable comparison with that group. If neither was present the category 'neutral' was applied.

Code 3 indicates which of Blanz et al.'s (1998) identity management strategies, if any, was explicitly present in posts (Appendix C3). For example, *individual mobility* was deemed present if the poster stated that they wanted to leave a community, and *subordinate categorisation* if the poster clearly expressed a desire to split an existing community. Coding identity management strategies required contextual knowledge and a basic familiarity of slang terms, abbreviations and ironic tones online. The immersive time spent observing the community prior to analysis, and personal experience of the authors in similar online discourses, proved valuable.

Findings

Ingroups

Table 1a shows which groups are considered ingroups and outgroups and the sentiment towards these groups. Of LGBTQ+ groups, the largest apparent ingroups are 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'bisexual'. The 'transgender' category is not always seen as ingroup; only 30.5% of posts categorise it as such and discussion around their inclusion is contentious. Closer examination suggests that their inclusion depends on adherence to a set of guidelines of 'valid' transness, particularly whether they adhere to a strictly normative binary gender. If not, they are often positioned as in conflict with 'valid' LGBTQ+ people such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals or 'real' transgender people.

LGB identities are generally discussed with 'neutral' sentiment, and the high number of 'unclear' categorisations seems to result from these groups' taken-for-granted status in the community. Unlike some of the other LGBTQ+ identity terms, these posts include fewer – or no – discussions surrounding their inclusion or expulsion from the community. This is particularly true for the

Table 1. Quantitative result on group categorisation, sentiments and identity strategies on the /r/RightWingLGBT website.
 1a. Ingroup/outgroup categorisation and sentiment by main group categories as defined in the dataset

	Ingroup/outgroup categorisation												Sentiment							
	Ingroup			Outgroup			Unclear			Total			Positive		Negative		Neutral		Total	
	n	%		n	%		n	%		n	%		n	%		n	%		n	%
Lesbian	97	48.5	7	3.5	95	48	199	100	12	6	20	10	167	84	199	100				
Gay	83	41.5	3	1.5	114	57	200	100	4	2	15	8	181	90	200	100				
Bisexual	111	55.5	11	5.5	78	39	190	100	6	3	13	1.6	181	90.5	200	100				
Transgender	61	30.5	39	19.5	99	50	199	100	17	8.5	58	29.5	124	62	199	100				
Non-Binary	10	5	133	66.5	57	28.5	200	100	9	1.5	142	71	49	24.5	200	100				
Straight	0	0	24	14	150	86	174	100	12	7	20	11.5	142	81.5	174	100				
Christian	25	12.5	53	26.5	122	61	200	100	17	8.5	44	22	139	69.5	200	100				
Jew	10	5	40	20	150	75	200	100	8	4	36	18	156	78	200	100				
Muslim	1	0.5	103	51.5	96	48	200	100	6	2	107	53.5	87	43.5	200	100				
Liberal	2	1	151	75.5	47	23.5	200	100	7	3.5	120	60	73	36.5	200	100				
Left-Wing	4	2	135	68	59	30	198	100	2	1	117	59	79	48	198	100				
Right-Wing	51	25.5	7	3.5	141	71	199	100	18	9	10	5	171	86	199	100				
Conservative	68	34	2	1	130	65	200	100	4	2	7	3.5	189	95.5	200	100				

1b. Absolute number of strategies applied on the /r/RightWingLGBT website with respect to each category (incl. only applied strategies)

	Individual Mobility	Individual Assimilation	Social Competition	Realistic Competition	Absorption	Social Comparison	Changing the Outgroup	Superordinate Recategorisation	Subordinate Recategorisation
Lesbian	1	0	17	4	0	14	0	0	7
Gay	1	0	7	2	0	7	1	0	2
Bisexual	1	0	2	1	0	2	0	0	3
Transgender	1	0	4	3	0	3	0	1	2
Non-binary	0	0	8	2	0	7	0	0	12
Straight	1	1	1	1	1	2	0	3	0

(Continued)



Table 1. (Continued).

1b. Absolute number of strategies applied on the /r/RightWingLGBT website with respect to each category (incl. only applied strategies)

	Individual Mobility	Individual Assimilation	Social Competition	Realistic Competition	Absorption	Social Comparison	Changing the Outgroup	Superordinate Recate- gorisation	Subordinate Recate- gorisation
Christian	0	0	0	2	0	0	16	0	1
Jew	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Muslim	0	0	1	6	0	0	3	0	0
Liberal	0	0	13	0	0	13	0	0	0
Left-wing	0	0	0	1	0	12	0	0	0
Right-Wing	1	0	6	4	0	6	0	0	0
Conservative	0	0	5	2	0	5	0	0	0
TOTAL	6	1	79	29	1	70	20	4	27

category 'gay', with the largest proportion of 'unclear' categorisations and a lower proportion of ingroup categorisations than lesbian and bisexual. Examination of the posts shows that there are no discussions explicitly surrounding their inclusion or expulsion from the community and little discussion of abject traits unique to or characteristic of gay people other than those generalised to the liberal LGBTQ+ community as a whole. The low frequency of ingroup categorisations can be attributed to the fact that it is not necessary to explicitly state their inclusion; their membership is uncontested. As such, a higher number of explicit ingroup categorisations for bisexuals may imply a need to defend their ingroup status, further suggested by posts contrasted them negatively with lesbians and gays.

Last, regarding LGB categories, content analysis revealed a tendency to complain of being 'pushed out' or alienated by the liberal politics of LGBTQ+ communities. Particularly, lesbians are associated with the abject traits of leftism, liberal identity politics, feminism, and the 'social justice' culture, reflected in a higher proportion of negative sentiment than gay and bisexual:

'Every other lesbian I meet (outside of this sub) us a raging, militant leftist ...'.

For all LGBTQ+ people, access to the r/RightWingLGBT ingroup depends on rejecting these liberal traits.

Beyond LGBTQ+ categories, 'conservative' and 'right-wing' have 25.5% and 34% ingroup-categorised respectively and a low outgroup categorisation of 3.5% and 1% respectively. These figures, alongside content analysis, reveal a similar phenomenon to the category gay: it is understood that the group is right-wing, and this does not need to be stated. Notably, however, posters sometimes describe their own political sentiment as 'only a little right-of-centre', but highlight that they feel unwelcome in the leftist climate of wider LGBT spaces. For example:

"I don't consider myself a complete right winger, but I also don't consider myself a complete left winger. ... I definitely don't stand with other LGBT people. ... I hate how the common discourse in the LGBT community [is]."

It is generally accepted that the subreddit is a right-wing community for right-wing people, but not necessarily far or radical right; the unifying trait is rejection of the characteristically liberal discourse of the wider LGBTQ+ community. However, a clear mixture of right-wing ideology and a consistently populist undercurrent is present.

Outgroups and 'unclear' groups

Our analysis shows four largely uncontested outgroups terms, accompanied by negative sentiment: liberal, left-wing, non-binary, and Muslim. Heterosexuals and Christians appear more ambiguous.

Liberal and left-wing groups are a defining outgroup, with 75.5% and 68% outgroup categorisations respectively. A small number of ingroup categorisations are present from users who claim some left-wing/liberal political sentiment, but still qualify their individual distinctiveness from 'most' leftists, reinforcing the understanding that the boundary is drawn at 'leftist' within the LGBTQ+ community.

Next, of all LGBTQ+ categories included, 'non-binary' is most controversial, and frequently associated with the abject traits of the wider LGBT community. Members complain that 'attention-seeking' non-binary people undermine the community:

"I despise non binary people, they ruin real transgender issues, they make us appear like a huge joke to most 'normal folk' ... [Non-binary people] are ruining our people, there are two genders, that's it."

Common criteria for excluding non-binary people include not having the intention to medically transition from male to female, not experiencing gender dysphoria, and diverging from the use of 'ordinary' pronouns such as she/her and he/him. This reflects the 'transmedicalist' perspective, in which the only acceptable transgender experience is as a linear medical condition which adheres to the normative gender binary (Zhang 2018). Lesser-known sexual minorities, such as those identifying as pansexual, asexual or demisexual are discussed to a lesser degree alongside non-binary people: as negative and invalid.

As expected, 'heterosexuals' are discussed as an implicit outgroup, but do not draw direct comparison, and a low number of *explicit* outgroup categorisations (14%) are present. They are neither discussed as part of the community, nor an object of negative sentiment. Reflecting a normalisation which positions them alongside rather than against normative sexual figurations, r/RightWingLGBT users are unpreoccupied with heterosexual people as a competing social group.

Fourth, reflecting PRR discourse, 'Muslim' is an unambiguous outgroup (51.5%), and negatively perceived (53.5%). Characterisations of Muslims are frequently couched in homonationalist terms, highlighting a perceived incompatibility of the Muslim beliefs with LGBTQ+ safety. 'Christians' are often mentioned in the same posts with the suggestion that the LGBT community should shift their focus from Christian fundamentalism to the greater threat of Islam. Some users self-identify as Christians, meaning that they are not outgroup by definition. A few posts mentioning the term 'Jew' contain explicitly radical-right antisemitic rhetoric and conspiracy theories, but these tend to elicit hostility from other users, and Jews are not a clear in- or outgroup.

Collective strategies targeting sexual minorities

The theorised ‘identity tension’ is most observable in posts which relate to the wider LGBTQ+ community; users internalise a negative attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community in general, but grapple with ways to separate themselves into a separate community, highlighting their uniqueness and positive distinctiveness from the LGBTQ+ community at large. A number of strategies used to bolster positive ingroup identity and resolve these internal identity tensions were observed. As expected, the results show collective strategies are dominant (Table 1b). Social comparisons are mainly made with those who fall across ideological lines, particularly other LGBTQ+ people, and highlight perceived traits such as fragility, promiscuity or ‘degeneracy’, over-sensitivity and self-victimhood, hypocrisy, stupidity and ignorance. The notion of sexual degeneracy is prevalent:

“They make you think that so you stay in the meat grinder of hookup apps, bars, drug culture and degeneracy. But even if you find dates as a lefty, you’re not going to find someone who values monogamy or family.”

Moreover, it is considered abject to be overly ‘defined’ by one’s queer identity, or to be overtly queer in physical appearance or mannerisms:

“It’s fine to be openly gay, its [sic] just the people who unironically make everything they do about being gay [who are bad].”

This abjectness of visible queerness also extends to gender-nonconformity:

“[T]he scene [in my city] consists of guys who are, in my opinion, too feminine and high strung ...”

Favourable comparisons are also on the comparative dimension of validity or ‘realness’:

“Lesbian is a sexuality, bi is a sexuality, ... Being attracted to women but not wanting sex isn’t a sexuality. ... Yeah I’m coming for asexuals here. Fucking people just polluting the movement making no one want to ally with it.”

Comparisons in terms of validity/realness are especially common in relation to transmedicalism:

“being transgender isn’t just randomly invented by people you know right? ... non binary or gender fluid is made up but there’s real biological evidence for trans people. The modern day trans activists like to ignore that biology ... in order to get attention but I can assure you that the real trans people are nothing like that.”

These demarcations within the LGBTQ+ community indicate *subordinate recategorisation*. Explicit evidence of this strategy is most common for the non-binary and transgender community:

"I disagree with trans people trying to glom onto the LGB community, and see 'LGBT' as a forced alliance. . . . I'm all for dropping the 'T'."

Posts referring to lesbians contain evidence of a particularly large number of strategies overall, despite a high degree of ingroup categorisation, primarily falling into the social comparison and social competition strategies. The vast majority of the posters in this category self-identify as lesbian and are keen to distance themselves from the wider lesbian community specifically, resulting in many comparisons against the abjectness of 'most lesbians'. Additionally, lesbian posts often discuss transgender people, either when making comparison between 'real' (cisgender) and 'fake' (transgender) lesbians and constructing transgender people as harmful to lesbians.

Overall, throughout the entire subreddit, right-wing LGBTQ+ people distance themselves from the wider, liberal community, separating themselves from LGBTQ+ people who possess traits abject traits associated with the Left of digital culture war.

This reflects *subordinate recategorisation* and normalisation processes, as users split the community between abject non-homonormative and acceptable homonormative. It is noteworthy that explicit evidence of *absorption* is uncommon (Table 1b); only twice do posts voice an explicit suggestion that LGBTQ+ people should behave more like heterosexuals. However, the rejection of less normative queer people and traits suggests a homonormative assimilation by which normalisation occurs at the intra-community level: iterations of queerness which are not too overt, which avoid 'fake' or 'unnatural' expressions of gender identity, and which are not immoral within the ideological framework, are painted as 'normal' and 'valid'. There are some indications of a related realistic competition strategy, arguing in particular that gender non-conforming and abject liberal queers 'take space', a material resource, from non-abject queers. By creating a material opposition between the two groups, this contributes to the subordinate recategorisation of the wider LGBTQ+ community.

Collective strategies targeting religious outgroups

Realistic conflict is the predominant strategy towards Muslims (Table 1b), constructing Muslim immigrants in Western countries as a threat to the safety and rights of LGBTQ+ people.

"We have gay rights. Now the fight is to keep them. Do you think a 50%+ Muslim UK . . . will be ok with gays getting married, teaching in schools, being able to hold office, etc?"

When discussing Christians and Muslims together, a *changing the outgroup* strategy is used. When discussing Christians, users explicitly state that LGBTQ+ people should be more concerned about the threat of Muslims, discarding

a traditional outgroup of the LGBTQ+ community in favour of a prominent PRR outgroup. As theorised in SIT, the new outgroup is one with a low (contextual) status: Muslim migrants, in the context of PRR discourse. Simultaneously, this reflects the high status of Christianity in historical right-wing ideology. Resource competition appears to play a part too, as users suggest that Muslims' interests draw more attention from the liberal establishment than the interests of right-wingers.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study we examined *how right-wing LGBTQ+ people define and demarcate ingroup from outgroup, how they define themselves and these others, and what strategies they use to create or maintain a positive ingroup identity in this context*, by conducting a case study of r/RightWingLGBT users and analysing over 2,500 posts using a social identity theory perspective.

Centrally, our study shows that group boundaries are drawn within the larger LGBTQ+ community premised on the abject, non-homonormative traits of the 'degenerate' outgroup, and the *absence* of these traits in the ingroup. r/RightWingLGBT users resolve their identity tension by removing the traits that are the source of said tension through a discursive splitting of the wider LGBTQ+ community. The ingroup identity which is thereby implied is one which rejects many of the aspects of LGBTQ+ identity which break the underlying rules of hetero- and cis-normative society: inability to perform a binary gender identity, rejection of kinship normativity, and sexual promiscuity, visible non-heterosexuality, and 'degeneracy'. The tolerated ingroup is one which is binary-gendered, does not possess outwardly 'queer' traits, and is constructed as *moral* in its opposition to perceived perversion and degeneracy. Normalisation appears to play out at the community level, as users map their own conception of what it means to be an 'ordinary' and 'valid' queer person along homonormative lines, disavowing 'immoral' and 'degenerate' traits. In doing so, they disavow that which underpins their identity tension. This, alongside a self-positioning in opposition to a constructed invading Muslim threat, shows that homonationalism is not merely a top-down phenomenon, but is effectively internalised within right-wing queer identities, to some degree suggesting its success as an imperialist strategy.

The moral undertones of such identity managements map onto the secularised Christian roots of the far-right and PRR, naturalising homonormativity and framing abjectness as an active, immoral choice. The prevalent transmedicalist discourse reflects this; the only (tenuously) acceptable transgender identities are those which are naturally-occurring, inherent medical disorders. This reflects an inherently Christian logic dividing moral, 'god given', natural identities from unnatural chosen identities.

Also significant is the auxiliary strategy by which the 'Muslim threat' is invoked as a replacement of the Christian threat against LGBTQ+ communities. This maps onto Puar's (2018) theory of homonationalism, in which homonormative LGBTQ+ people are positioned against a threatening racialised other, which helps to align homonormative LGBTQ+ people with the wider right-wing community against a common enemy, further normalising the former as a fundamental part of the Western society which must be defended against outsiders.

Additionally, our analyses indicate that the normalisation of Christianity and the covert sacralisation of Western politics (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 177–185; Norocel 2015, 143–156; Zúquete 2017, 445–466) is a potentially crucial part of homonormative and homonationalist processes. The religiosity of *r/RightWingLGBT* is covert: alongside a homonormativity which emphasises an outward appearance of heterosexuality, we see the morality and normativity of the ingroup justified not in religious terms, but by an underlying, common-sense perception of normality, decency, and naturalness, suggesting a quiet but extreme internalisation of Christian ideals. Alongside this, Christian hostility towards LGBTQ+ issues at large are downplayed and contrasted against the perceived greater threat of Islam. This is particularly notable given the U.S. context of the subreddit, in which Christianity has historically played a dominant and overt role in political rhetoric (Michael, Corbett-Hemeyer, and Matthew Wilson 2014). Whilst U.S. Christian voices are particularly hostile towards LGBTQ+ people, an opposition between Christianity and LGBTQ+ identity is relevant in many European countries too (Verloo and Paternotte 2018, 1–5), suggesting that these processes of normalisation, naturalisation, creating a new outgroup and subordinate recategorisation might be relevant in other contexts.

Thus, to understand the alliance of right-wing ideology and identities with LGBTQ+ identities, it may be necessary to bring together the roles that both Islam and Christianity play in contemporary Western politics. Whilst Islam is generally highlighted as a common enemy, the vexed question of Christianity's paradoxical and covert position has gotten little attention in the theorising of homonationalism and the role of sexuality in radical right populism (cf. Norocel 2015, 143–156; Spierings 2020, 41–58; Verloo and Paternotte 2018, 1–5; Wilowiejski, 2020, 135–146).

This study also has implications for understanding identity tension through the lens of SIT more generally. The dominance of subordinate recategorisation and implicit assimilation provides a starting point for other studies on groups at an intersection of seemingly mutually exclusive identities, such as right-wing environmentalists or Christian sex workers. Our results stress the importance of looking at how different strategies are implemented simultaneously, and the relevance of using normalisation and naturalisation to create tension-reducing group hierarchies.

Our case focus on the subreddit r/RightWingLGBT is narrow, because it presented a unique site for an in-depth study of the identity demarcation and management of right-wing LGBTQ+ citizens. Some reflection is necessary to draw out the implications of this case for other contexts. r/RightWingLGBT is U.S.-centric, and the role of religion in U.S. society is far from typical. It may be rather telling that Christianity is not problematised more, as Christian anti-LGBTQ+ forces are arguably relatively strong in the U.S. (Verloof and Paternotte 2018, 1–5). Within the increasingly popular digital ideological sensibilities of the alt-right, the influence of Christianity seems more symbolic, and civilisational rather than theological. Future research might focus on multiple digital sites in different contexts to create a better grasp of this context-dependency, for instance also considering contexts in which Christianity is a clear minority religion in an atheist society. Similarly, this digital community may not be representative of the entire American right-wing LGBTQ+ community or right-wing queer people at large. Communities on popular websites such as Reddit are often as a vessel via which discourses spread into the mainstream. This raises the question: which strategies, revolving around hetero- and cis-normativity, are internalised, reiterated and/or reproduced by populist-right queer people offline, and to what degree does this suggest the wider internalisation of a homonationalist biopolitical project? This research shows the importance of taking a bottom-up approach to identity to understand how ideological context constrains identity and guides community norms. To understand the degree to which the phenomenon at hand is multi-contextual, future research might examine the degree to which similar processes of normalisation occur in diverse contexts.

Notes

1. Drawing on >30 languages; <https://github.com/stopwords-iso/stopwords-iso/blob/master/CREDITS.md>
2. E.g. Black/White was mentioned but not as core term defining in- and outgroups.

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