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INVESTIGATING THE INFLUENCE OF HYBRID SOCIAL IDENTITIES IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

With hybrid identities becoming an increasing feature of online communities, we explored the adaptive capacity of these identities through language and showcased their influence potential for online extreme communities.

WHAT ARE HYBRID IDENTITIES?

People belong to many social groups, such as religious, gender, professional. These affiliations shape how we see ourselves and guide our actions, aligning our behaviours with the beliefs, values, and norms of the groups we identify with. According to the Social Identity Approach, our influence within a group is rooted in appealing to our shared group membership. In the digital realm of online communities, the same dynamics apply. Online communities emerge from people who have the same identity founded on shared belief systems. Yet, there is an increasing trend in the formation of online communities with not a distinct but rather a hybrid identity.

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A hybrid identity is defined as the fusion of two distinct group memberships and their corresponding belief systems. This phenomenon is on the rise and can include different types of identity mutations. For example, a feminist parent can be a hybrid identity if beliefs associated with both identities, the feministic and the parent, are intertwined in ways that shape certain kinds of behaviours. This formation of a hybrid identity has recently become prevalent in extreme online communities, such as right-wing extremist communities. For example, an eco-fascist identity can be seen as a prominent hybrid identity, where the ‘eco’ identity echoes the belief system of environmentalism and the ‘fascist’ identity appeals to populist and far-right belief systems.

The potential impact of these hybrid identities is evident in recent violent events. For example, eco-fascist ideas have been implicated in the 2019 Christchurch incident and the 2022 Buffalo supermarket attack. The possibility of such security threats necessitates a comprehensive investigation into the mechanisms through which hybrid identities can exert influence online.

HOW CAN WE EXPLORE THE INFLUENCE OF A HYBRID IDENTITY?

We can explore the influence potential of a hybrid identity through the computational analysis of language. As Hernández-Campoy indicated, language is a perfect tool for expressing social identities because language acts are themselves acts of identity. In this sense, language is the ideal behaviour to study how hybrid identities can be communicated to influence other online communities. Our project explored hybrid identities using the eco-fascist identity as a case study. We collected text data from social media forums to investigate whether a hybrid identity does indeed include linguistic characteristics of both identities or it is a merely distinct form of identity.

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Through the lens of natural language processing, we quantified a list of linguistic features that reflect how people who hold specific identities (ecological, far-right or hybrid) talk or write rather than the content or topic of the discussion. These features were then used to train and test an Automated Social Identity Assessment (ASIA) model for hybrid identities. This model can detect which identity is situationally salient based on users’ writing style. In this way, we could test whether linguistic features of the ecological and far-right identities co-existed in the hybrid identity.

As we put the ASIA model to the test on the hybrid forums, the results demonstrated that the data from these forums embodied linguistic features of both identity types. Further analysis showed that it wasn’t merely a blend of identities but a dynamic interplay, revealing the adaptive capacity of the hybrid

identity. Our analysis indicated that the hybrid users’ writing style was more reflective of the ecological identity in ecological threads and transitioned into linguistic features that were more reflective of the far-right identity in far-right oriented threads. Switching between these identities, namely adapting to the socio-linguistic style of the salient identity as a means of influence can be hard to challenge.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings shed light on the online resilience of extreme groups showcasing the role of hybridity as a means of linguistic adaptation to forum requirements, such as the topic of a thread. Our project delves into the realm of hybrid identities revealing a capacity to dynamically adjust communication styles based on the context in which they are expressed — marking a shift in our understanding of online influence. It is this very adaptive capacity that painted certain hybrid identities, such as the eco-fascist identity as resilient, namely an identity that weaves itself into diverse discussions.

In that sense, shifts in identity salience and writing behaviour may pose a risk of spreading far-right ideological positions into more mainstream online communities. Our project is the first step towards comprehending the dynamics of online hybrid communities and their influence on our collective social landscape. Future research is needed to unravel the mechanisms and consequences of such hybrid identity influences. This can combine natural language processing techniques with experimental and qualitative work to a closer examination of the trajectory of hybrid identities — a step towards mitigating potential risks and fostering a more nuanced understanding of the communicative means of this evolving socio-digital phenomenon.

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