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Fertile ground to problematic views? How dark and mainstream social media relate to conspiracy beliefs and fake news

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Sharing of fake news and conspiracy beliefs are prevalent concerns in online spaces, especially in contexts that involve politicized topics and identities. However, it is less clear to what extent social media platforms and users partisan identities are associated with such behavior and beliefs, especially when comparing traditional and non-traditional partisan groups. Using a cross-sectional survey of Alt-Right supporters and non-Alt-Right Democrats and Republicans in the U.S., we investigate how political identity and use of mainstream and dark social media platforms is related to fake news sharing behaviors and beliefs in two conspiracies (QAnon, 5 G causes COVID-19). We find that both mainstream and dark social media use are associated with more fake news sharing and conspiracy beliefs among those with Alt-Right beliefs compared to non-Alt-Right groups. This study adds to our understanding of how user characteristics and platform dynamics can separately and in tandem influence online behaviors in democratic societies.

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Introduction

Social media platforms and instant messaging services give online users extensive options for information seeking and sharing of content. Many people use these platforms to seek news and information about current events, politics, and science, including issues like the COVID-19 pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2023). However, social media can also expose users to inaccurate or misleading information, contain alternative truth claims that challenge hegemonic epistemologies, and contribute to the spread of *fake news* and *conspiracy theories* (see Ahmed et al., 2022). Neither fake news nor conspiracy theories are new; they have circulated in different forms for hundreds of years (Pennycook and Rand, 2021), but their circulation specifically on social media is frequently discussed as a major issue facing society today, for example, during the 2024 U.S. elections (Minici et al., 2024).

Previous research investigating when and why individuals share dubious information has identified political ideology (Sutton and Douglas, 2020), mainstream social media use (i.e., widely used platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp), and especially alternative social media use (i.e., “dark platforms” like Parler or Gab) as important factors associated with engagement with questionable content (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021). While extensive research has examined the role of false information in online spaces, there are still areas that deserve further attention. For example, less is known about how social media use and political identity interact to influence outcomes related to fake news and conspiracies, especially when considering non-traditional partisans and alternative platforms. This study responds to calls to address this societal issue (Camargo and Simon, 2022) with an empirical investigation of how political identity and social media use are associated with and interact with fake news sharing and belief in conspiracies. In doing so, we make three main contributions.

First, we investigate how our outcomes differ between established and alternative political groups, i.e., from Democrat and Republican as well as those who identify with *Alt-Right* beliefs. While research has examined far-right content online (DeCook, 2018; Jasser et al., 2023; Jones, 2023; Lewis, 2018; Marwick and Partin, 2022), this population is seldom surveyed in public opinion research and the social sciences more broadly (Hawley, 2017), allowing us to make novel comparisons about how their attitudes and behaviors differ from other partisans (see Hawkins and Chinn, 2024). Second, we explore the role of “dark platforms” (e.g., Parler, Gab) and (semi-) private communication environments (i.e., instant messengers) that deserve more attention from communication research and continued systematic study in survey research (Mahl et al., 2022). Finally, the current study provides much-needed insight into the attitudes and behaviors of recipients of questionable content (e.g., false information, fake news, and conspiracy claims). This component of misinformation research has been termed the “demand side” of dubious online content; it focuses on what motivates audiences’ exposure to questionable content and how exposure to false information affects the recipient (e.g., attitudes, emotions, behaviors etc.). This approach differs and complements the rich amount of “supply side” research in this area (Albertazzi and Bonansinga, 2023; Marwick and Partin, 2022; Schroeder, 2019; Schulze et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2019), which documents the quantity and quality of dubious online content, focusing on its features, prevalence, and diffusion across online spaces. While supply side research into misinformation on social media and the far-right is well developed, less research has studied the demand side by investigating how exposure to misinformation shapes attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, especially in the context of the U.S. (for European examples see Chadwick et al., 2018; Chadwick et al., 2021;

Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020). Overall, going beyond previous research and addressing recent works calling for platform-specific social media research, our methodological approach distinguishes between different social networking sites and instant messaging services (Kakavand, 2024). These contributions address major caveats within the field of research on digital platforms and networked societies (see Camargo and Simon, 2022).

Mainstream and dark social media platforms. In the past decades, a variety of social media platforms have emerged with different user demographics, governance, and platform architecture (Burgess et al., 2018). Platform differences across these dimensions can help to categorize them and distinguish between different types of platforms, like social networking sites and instant messaging services. Recently, people have begun categorizing social media platforms as “mainstream” or “alternative” based on differences across these dimensions (Jamieson et al., 2022). Of interest, those who use alternative social media often deliberately refrain from using mainstream platforms (Kor-Sins, 2021). Mainstream social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) have wide reach among the public and (allegedly) promote hegemonic political or epistemological claims. Other social media can be conceived as alternatives to these mainstream platforms (e.g., Gab, Parler, 8kun), as they often appeal to niche audiences and challenge presumed elite influence as well as counter-hegemonic truth claims (Gehl, 2015). Public opinion data tells us that individuals who use alternative spaces value free speech on these platforms and the feeling of having found a community (Pew Research Center, 2022). Additional reasons for migrating from mainstream to alternative platforms include disapproval of capitalist business models, concerns about state surveillance, and resistance to algorithmic curation (Mannell and Smith, 2022). Altogether, this has led scholars to describe social networking sites and messaging services that provide alternatives to mainstream platforms as “free-speech’ social media platforms” (McNerney et al., 2022) or as “Alt-Tech’ platforms” (Donovan et al., 2019).

Distinguishing mainstream and alternative platforms can be helpful for investigating who engages with different platforms and how use of different platforms may shape attitudes. However, Zeng and Schäfer (2021) have proposed abandoning the term alternative social media. They argue that this analytical category ignores the contingency of alternativeness – because what may be an alternative for non-traditional political groups may not be for voters of mainstream parties. Instead, they introduced the concept of “dark platforms” (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021). Dark platforms, such as 8kun, are often perceived by users “as hubs of ‘free speech’ without ‘censorship’” (Mahl et al., 2022), and some dark platforms like Gab even market themselves as such (Pew Research Center, 2022). Additionally, they offer technological architectures and communicative features, i.e., “affordances” (Kakavand, 2024), that accommodate critics of mainstream platforms through their regulation and moderation practices, the worldviews of their users, and the political slant of platform discourse (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021). Overall, Zeng’s and Schäfer’s conceptualization of “dark platforms” has many parallels to conceptions of “alternative social media.” However, it has arguably sharper conceptual boundaries. Moreover, the concept of dark platforms has usefully informed empirical studies (e.g., Collins, 2024; Mahl et al., 2022; Zeng and Schäfer, 2021). Importantly, while most of social media that are categorized as “dark” (often for the U.S. or European contexts; see Al-Rawi, 2019; Swart et al., 2018) are easily accessible to users (e.g., Gab)

and may be used by broad segments of the public (e.g., Telegram in European contexts), some dark platforms present themselves (or are perceived) as rather secretive or exclusive – hence the label “dark” (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021, p. 1322). We therefore rely on a distinction between *mainstream* and *dark* social media (rather than alternative social media).

Further considering how usage of dark platforms influences users, particularly concerning fake news sharing and beliefs in conspiracies, is instructive for a few reasons. First, dark platforms allow users to circumvent content moderation typically found on mainstream platforms, such as flagging of posts, stories, and narratives related to conspiracies and fake news. Second, dark platforms allow individuals to consume, crowd-source, and share claims that align epistemologically and politically with their preferences, including conspiracy theories and fake news (Mahl et al., 2022; see also Hopster, 2021; Quandt, 2018; Zeng et al., 2022). Third, users can follow their opinion leaders after they have been deplatformed or removed from mainstream platforms, as well as connect with other like-minded followers. Moreover, dark platforms often harbor Alt-Right commentary, racism, trolling, hate speech, and other forms of toxic communication. For example, although flows of information from dark to other platforms was limited in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the topics that were most influential on dark platforms were identified as more toxic (Simon et al., 2025). Overall, dark platforms can thus be assumed to have a “mutual affinity” with Alt-Right ideology (Hopster, 2021), thanks to their specific affordances that are averse to moderation practices often found (to some degree) in traditional social media platforms (Kakavand, 2024).

Extant research points to dark social media platforms as being spaces where content around conspiracy theories and fake news have the potential to flourish and spread. However, this does not mean that questionable content is not also present in mainstream media, including news and social media. For instance, data indicates that individuals are often exposed to false information through mainstream news media (Tsifti et al., 2020), whose stories and content often then trickle down to reach people on social media platforms. Other research identifies that popular mainstream social media websites such as Facebook (Jennings and Stroud, 2023; Yang et al., 2023), Twitter (Allcott et al., 2019), and YouTube (Hussein et al., 2020), all contain differing levels of false information and demonstrated needs to combat this issue. False information on mainstream platforms is especially problematic given their large user bases in the U.S. and across the world. In other words, when there is false information present on mainstream social media it has the potential to reach and be viewed by large numbers of users. This is not inconsequential as reliance on only digital spaces can make users susceptible to believing false narratives as compared to those who use a diverse number of modalities for news (Chadwick et al., 2025). In addition to exposure and potentially believing the false information they view online, features of social media can contribute to subsequent increased sharing of this problematic content (e.g., false information and conspiracies). Indeed, features of social media such as ease with which people can share content and user inattention (Pennycook and Rand, 2021) frequently contribute to false information being shared across social media. Altogether, given the amount of problematic content online, reliance on both mainstream and dark spaces for information and communication with others, and the ease/inattention with which people believe and share information, it is likely that the more time they spend in these online spaces the more potential they have to be exposed to and engage with false information and conspiracies. Considering this, we propose the following hypotheses.

H1a and H1b: More frequent mainstream (H1a) and dark (H1b) social media use will be associated with increased beliefs in conspiracies and sharing of fake news.

Alt-right, political identity, and online spaces. While we hypothesize that usage of social media (mainstream and dark) is likely to influence belief in conspiracies and fake news sharing, it is also important to consider the identity of the user, especially in the context of political topics. In the U.S. traditional partisans are typically considered those who identify as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents, with extensive research highlighting a strong connection between political identity and media use. For example, political identity can be a driving force behind the media that individuals seek out and consume (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Stroud, 2008), thus affecting the political themes and narratives individuals are exposed to. Specific to social media, how people use online spaces is tied to politically relevant outcomes such as political interest, efficacy, and participation (Lane et al., 2019).

However, given the changing political and media landscape in the U.S. and across the world, it is also important to consider other non-traditional groups in addition to traditional partisans. One political group that has recently received attention in the U.S. is the Alt-Right. The Alt-Right can be described as a group of individuals that eschew traditional political norms and hold beliefs that are often centered on right-wing, populist, nationalist, or conspiracist views (Forscher and Kteily, 2020). While studies examining the content and networks of the far-right online provide understanding of this group (Marwick and Partin, 2022), less research has sampled individuals who hold these beliefs and explored their experiences with using social media (but see Hawkins and Chinn, 2024).

Studies that have sampled this group find that individuals who hold Alt-Right beliefs differ in key ways from members of traditional U.S. political groups (Republicans and Democrats) with respect to both their politically relevant attitudes (e.g., internal expressions of bias and social dominance orientation) and more importantly their media use (Forscher and Kteily, 2020). In the context of attitudes toward media and use, those holding Alt-Right beliefs were more likely than traditional partisans to trust alternative sources as opposed to mainstream sources (Forscher and Kteily, 2020). Trust in alternative sources, such as dark social media platforms outlined above, has important implications. Indeed, Hameleers et al. (2022) find that those who hold stronger beliefs in misinformation are more likely to consume news from alternative sources. This is in part because these alternative communication environments such as Gab (Fair and Wesslen, 2019) or 8kun (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021) harbor content that challenge dominant epistemologies, with this content often taking place in the format of fake news and conspiracy theories. Considering the use of alternative information environments for those holding Alt-Right beliefs, as well as their different political and social attitudes compared to traditional partisans (Forscher and Kteily, 2020), we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a & H2b: Participants who identify with Alt-Right beliefs will report more frequent fake news sharing (H2a) and have a stronger belief in QAnon and COVID-19 conspiracies (H2b) as compared to both Democrats and Republicans who do not identify with the Alt-Right.

In addition to considering social media use and political identity separately, it is likely that there is a connection or interacting influence as well. Research focusing specifically on users with Alt-Right beliefs has identified reasons why these individuals might turn to non-mainstream social media more so than other partisan groups. Indeed, Alt-Right communities may turn to these platforms because their opinion leaders have been deplatformed from mainstream platforms, because they disapprove the political stance of discourse on these platforms, because they oppose platform policies and content moderation practices, or because they assume censorship of ‘free speech’ (Jasser et al., 2023; Kor-Sins, 2021; McNerney et al., 2022; Rogers, 2020).

Consequently, scholars have diagnosed an “affinity” of social media and right-wing, populist, or nationalist ideation, which presumably relates to the circulation of conspiracist claims and fake news on both mainstream and dark platforms (Mede et al., 2024; Waisbord, 2018). Such diagnoses led communication researchers to assume that social media users who identify with Alt-Right beliefs are more likely to believe and spread these claims (Schroeder, 2019). But most evidence for this assumption is mostly drawn from studies that take a *supply-side* perspective, i.e., the prevalence and spread of conspiracy claims and fake news in social media discourse, typically measured with content analyses. For example, analyses of Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and Gab messages indicate that Alt-Right communities frequently promote conspiracy theories and share fake news (Albertazzi and Bonansinga, 2023; Schulze et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2019).

However, supply-side research on conspiracy theories and fake news sharing offers few insights into demand-side phenomena, that is, self-reported *attitudes* concerning conspiracy beliefs and willingness to share fake news. This is especially true when examining these relationships among those who identify with far-right beliefs in the U.S. and how they compare to other traditional political groups. Obtaining such insights necessitates demand-side studies, such as surveys of social media users who deliberately identify with these beliefs. Existing research has investigated similar connections in countries across Europe (Chadwick et al., 2018; Chadwick et al., 2021; Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020). However, in a U.S. context such surveys are scarce, as most extant research does not focus on the Alt-Right in particular, but on conservatives more generally (Grinberg et al., 2019).

Additionally, it is important to consider the interconnection between supply and demand in the context of social media content and its subsequent effect. Existing research has highlighted the various ways in which supply and demand are related to each other (Mols and Jetten, 2020). This dynamic is often represented by the rabbit hole idiom, which suggests that online users demand more follow-up and in-depth information when they experience abundant supply of information (Sutton and Douglas, 2022). Specific to social media, the presence of false information in one’s social media diet could create further demand, leading users to ‘go down the rabbit hole’ of dubious online content. Subsequently, higher demand may increase exposure to this content, for example, because of recommender algorithms exposing users to content they demand.

In sum, the supply side literature (Schroeder, 2019) suggests that use of social media likely interacts with political identity to promote conspiracy beliefs and fake news sharing for some groups. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses.

H3a & H3b: Mainstream (H3a) and dark (H3b) social media use will moderate the relationship between political identity and *sharing fake news*, with both mainstream and dark social media use being positively associated with more fake news sharing among participants who identify as Alt-right as compared to Democrats and Republicans who do not identify with the Alt-Right.

H4a & H4b: Mainstream (H4a) and dark (H4b) social media use will moderate the relationship between political identity and *belief in QAnon and COVID-19 conspiracies*, with mainstream and dark social media use being positively associated with increased belief in conspiracies among participants who identify with Alt-Right views as compared to Democrats and Republicans who do not identify with the Alt-Right.

Methods

Participants. Our sample consisted of 740 individuals who self-identified as White Americans, reported using social media, and received monetary compensation for participation in this study.

Data were collected from a *Qualtrics* panel that used quotas related to political party identification and Alt-Right beliefs to select those who fit the three quota groups proposed in this study, Alt-Right supporters, non-Alt-Right Republicans, and non-Alt-Right Democrats. Altogether, 258 self-identified as Republican and not Alt-Right, 239 as Democrat and not Alt-Right, and 243 as holding Alt-Right beliefs. Identifying those whose ideas aligned with the Alt-Right was established by adapting methods described in existing research (Forscher and Kteily, 2020). Forscher and Kteily (2020) explored three separate but interrelated strategies for identifying Alt-Right supporting participants in a national sample. First, they asked participants using a binary (yes/no) question. Second, they used a measure of identification with the Alt-Right. Third, they used a combination of the first two strategies. While all three strategies were recognized as effective, we chose to employ the second strategy given the lack of potential variance in a binary yes/no option. Indeed, we considered participants holding Alt-Right beliefs to be those who scored five or above on a 7-point measure of identification with Alt-Right views and who also identified as Republican. Democrats and Republicans who were considered not Alt-Right reported a four or lower on the identification with Alt-Right views measure. Participants who identified as Democrats and also scored five and above on the Alt-Right views measure were not included or considered Alt-Right given that these two political identities are completely contradictory to each other. Further demographic information showed a roughly equal split between female ($N = 348$, 47%) and male ($N = 392$, 53%) participants, $M_{age} = 57.92$, $SD = 16.32$. A majority of our sample listed their religion as Christian ($N = 578$, 79.3%), with no other specific religious group or belief consisting of more than 10% ($N = 162$, 20.7%). This research was part of a larger study investigating the digital media experiences of Alt-Right, Democrat, and Republican individuals.

Procedure. This study was approved by an institutional review board, and all participants began the survey by providing informed consent. Participants then answered a series of demographic questions to identify whether they were eligible for the study and which quota group they fulfilled. Next, they were asked about their experiences using social media, including the type of content that they regularly see online. This was followed by questions assessing their attitudes and beliefs as well as behaviors they engage in related to their social media use. All participants read a prompt adapted from previous research (Forscher and Kteily, 2020) to allay any concerns about their identities being revealed.

Measures

Identification with Alt-Right views. One item was adapted from previous research (Forscher and Kteily, 2020) to determine identification with Alt-Right views: “How often do you identify with the views of the Alt-Right?” The Alt-Right was briefly described to participants as “a set of far-right political ideas, groups and individuals.” Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*) ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 2.12$). This item was used to distinguish non-Alt-Right Democrats and Republicans from those who hold Alt-Right views. Participants were identified as holding Alt-Right beliefs if they identified as Republican *and* scored five or above on this item.

Mainstream social media use. Participants were asked the extent to which they use mainstream social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp) on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*most days*). The eight items were combined into a composite measure of

mainstream social media use and were found to be reliable, $\alpha = 0.88$, $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.08$.

Dark social media use. To assess dark social media use, individuals were asked how often they use platforms that were classified as “dark” in previous research (Al-Rawi, 2019; Swart et al., 2018; Zeng and Schäfer, 2021) on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*most days*). These platforms, which are all also associated with far-right use (Schulze et al., 2022; Zeng and Schäfer, 2021), included Parler, Gab, Telegram, and 8chan/8kun. Similar to above, the four items were combined into a composite measure of dark social media use and were found to be reliable, $\alpha = 0.90$, $M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.97$.

Experiences sharing fake news. Rather than being asked about explicitly sharing fake news, which can result in social desirability biases, participants were asked about if they have shared false information. This strategy was used in previous research where the authors argue “These questions have the advantage that they allow people to express a number of

different options on a continuum of possible behaviors and they are much more preferable to

a blunter question that simply asks people if they shared fake news” (Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019, p. 14). Indeed, participants were asked how often in the past month they had shared a news story that: (1) “Seemed accurate at the time, but you later found out was made up,” (2) “Was exaggerated, and you were NOT aware of this,” and (3) “Was exaggerated, and you were aware of this.” These three items were combined to create an index of fake news sharing and participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*most days*), $\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.20$.

Belief in QAnon and COVID conspiracies. Individuals were asked about their agreement with beliefs related to two conspiracies that were common and frequent narratives on social media at the time of data collection. This included their belief in “How much of the social media content related to QAnon do you believe is true” measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*none of it*) to 5 (*all of it*) and “I believe that 5 G wireless technology is related to the spread of COVID-19” measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These items were found to be significantly correlated ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$) and were thus used to assess belief in these two conspiracies, $M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.95$.

Demographic controls. Participants were asked demographic questions that were used as controls in all of the following analyses. This included sex, age, income, and education. See Table 1 for the bivariate correlations of key measures.

Results

Data analysis. The following analyses were conducted using SPSS version 30.0. For relationships that included a continuous predictor we conducted linear regressions. For relationships using a categorical predictor we conducted ANCOVAs. To explore the moderating relationship between variables the PROCESS macro Model 1 with 5000 bootstrapped samples was used aligning with standards set forth by Hayes and Preacher (2014). As the nature of this study and the purpose of the analyses were primarily explorative, we did not preregister specific hypotheses or analytical plans.

Experiences sharing fake news. Our first hypothesis proposed that use of mainstream and dark social media would be associated with increased sharing of fake news. A linear regression showed that both mainstream social media, $b = .25$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, and dark social media, $b = .50$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, were significantly and positively associated with experiences sharing fake news. Next, we examined the influence of political identity and whether participants holding Alt-Right beliefs would have more experiences sharing fake news compared to traditional groups, Democrats and Republicans (H2a). An ANCOVA test found a significant influence of political identity on sharing of fake news, $F(2, 733) = 10.14$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = .03. This was followed up using a post-hoc Bonferroni analysis which showed that participants who identified with Alt-Right views ($M = 2.27$) reported more experiences sharing fake news as compared to Democrats ($M = 1.82$), $p < .001$, $d = .36$, and Republicans ($M = 1.93$), $p = .003$, $d = .34$. Thus indicating support for this hypothesis. There was no significant difference between Democrats and Republicans, $p = .989$.

To further explicate the mechanisms behind social media, political identity, and sharing of fake news, we explored the moderating influence of mainstream (H3a) and dark social media use (H3b). This analysis used the PROCESS macro Model 1 (Hayes and Preacher, 2014) with 5000 bootstrapped samples and participants with Alt-Right views considered as the reference group. First, significant interactions were found between political identity and mainstream social media use for both the comparisons of Alt-right vs. Democrats, $b = -0.19$, $SE = .09$, $p = .025$, and of Alt-Right vs. Republicans, $b = -0.23$, $SE = .10$, $p = .023$. These significant interactions were further interpreted by examining the conditional effect at low ($-1 SD$), medium (mean), and high ($+1 SD$) levels of mainstream social media use.

At low usage of mainstream social media (see Fig. 1), we did not find any significant differences between groups in sharing of fake news, p 's $> .33$. At medium usage we found a significant difference in sharing of fake news between participants with Alt-Right views and Democrat participants, $b = -0.35$, $SE = .10$, $p = .001$. This difference indicated that at medium levels of social

Table 1 Bivariate correlations for key measures.									
Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Political identity	-								
2. Problematic news	0.15**	-							
3. Conspiracy beliefs	0.26**	0.45**	-						
4. Mainstream SM use	0.00	0.41**	0.53**	-					
5. Dark SM use	0.10*	0.48**	0.61**	0.77**	-				
6. Sex	-0.09*	-0.20**	-0.24**	-0.35**	-0.32**	-			
7. Age	0.06	-0.23**	-0.38**	-0.73**	-0.55**	0.24**	-		
8. Income	-0.03	0.20**	0.22**	0.45**	0.37**	-0.29**	-0.36**	-	
9. Education	-0.05	0.14**	0.19**	0.41**	0.36**	-0.30**	-0.31**	0.49**	-
SM social media; **p < 0.001, *p < 0.05, N = 740.									

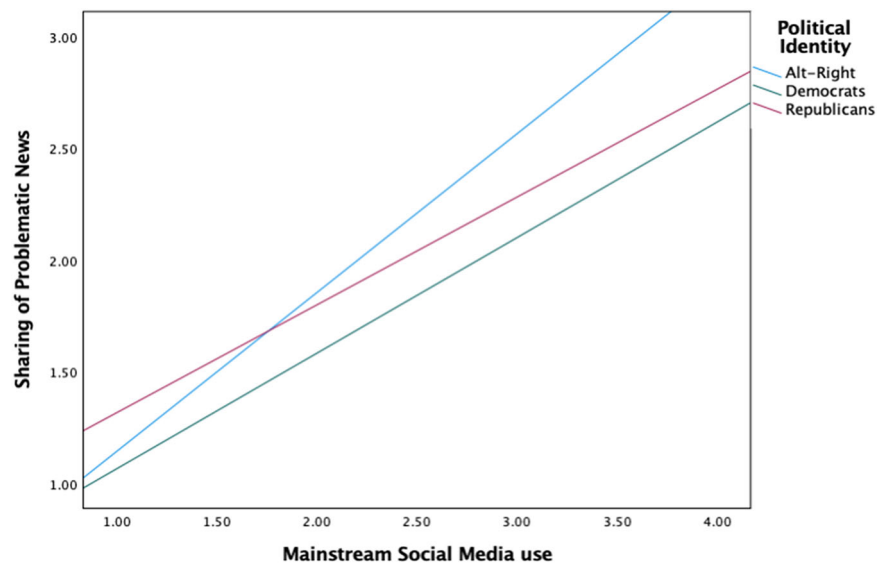


Fig. 1 Influence of mainstream social media use on sharing of problematic news for Alt-Right, Democrat, and Republican participants.

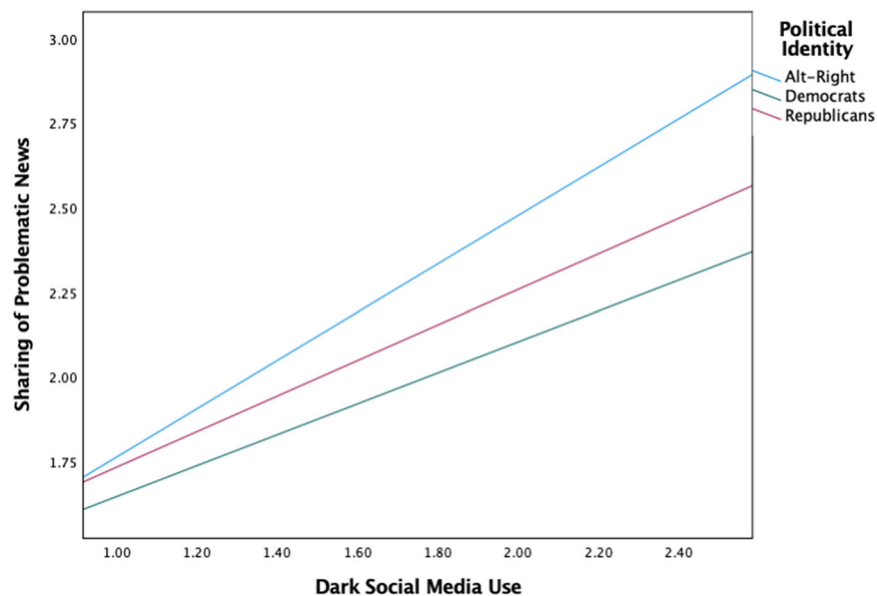


Fig. 2 Influence of dark social media use on sharing of problematic news for Alt-Right, Democrat, and Republican participants.

media use, participants with Alt-Right beliefs had increased experiences sharing fake news compared to Democrats. The comparison between Alt-Right and Republicans was non-significant, $p = .14$. At high levels of mainstream social media use, significant comparisons were found between Alt-Right and Democrats, $b = -.56$, $SE = .12$, $p < .001$ and between Alt-Right and Republicans, $b = -.40$, $SE = .16$, $p = .013$. These results provide support for H3a and indicate that as participants with Alt-Right beliefs report increasing usage of mainstream social media that they are more likely to have reported sharing fake news as compared to Democrats and Republicans.

For dark social media use (see Fig. 2 and H3b), a significant interaction between dark social media use and political identity was found when comparing the Alt-Right and Democrats, $b = -.26$, $SE = .09$, $p = .006$, but not for the comparison between the Alt-Right and Republicans, $p = .11$. The moderating influence of dark social media use showed that at low levels there were no significant differences between the groups for sharing of

fake news, $p's > .30$. At medium usage of dark social media for participants with Alt-Right views they were significantly more likely to share fake news as compared to Democrats, $b = -.24$, $SE = .10$, $p = .013$, but not Republicans, $p = .21$. Similarly, at high levels of dark social media use those with Alt-Right beliefs were significantly more likely to share fake news compared to Democrats, $b = -.49$, $SE = .13$, $p = .001$, but not Republicans, $p = .061$. While we find partial support for H3b, the moderating influence of dark social media use was only found to exist for the comparisons between Alt-Right and Democrats, and not for comparisons of Republicans.

Belief in QAnon and COVID-19 Conspiracies. Our first hypothesis proposed that use of mainstream and dark social media would be associated with increased belief in conspiracies. Similar to above, data from a linear regression showed a significant and positive influence of mainstream social media,

$b = .13$, $SE = .05$, $p = .012$, and dark social media, $b = .51$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$ on belief in conspiracies. In the context of political identity (H2b) proposed that those with Alt-Right views would have increased beliefs in conspiracies compared to both Democrats and Republicans. Our ANCOVA using belief in these conspiracies as the outcome indicated a significant effect of political identity, $F(2, 733) = 41.00$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = .10. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests showed that participants with Alt-Right views ($M = 2.43$) had higher beliefs in these two conspiracies than Democrats ($M = 1.79$), $p < .001$, $d = .60$, and Republicans ($M = 1.92$), $p < .001$, $d = .66$. Again, this demonstrated support for our hypothesis (H2b). There was no significant difference between Democrats and Republicans, $p = .252$. As above we were also interested in the moderating effect of mainstream and dark social media use on conspiracy beliefs.

Using the strategy outlined above for the moderation analyses, we first examined the influence of mainstream social media use (H4a). Significant interactions were found between political identity and mainstream social media use on belief in these conspiracies for both the comparisons between the Alt-right vs. Democrats, $b = -0.24$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$, and the Alt-Right vs. Republicans, $b = -0.43$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$. Further examination of these interactions (see Fig. 3) found that at low levels of mainstream social media use those with Alt-Right views had significantly higher belief in QAnon and COVID-19 conspiracies as compared to Democrats, $b = -0.30$, $SE = .11$, $p = .005$, but not Republicans, $p = .60$. At medium levels of mainstream social media use Alt-Right had significantly higher beliefs as compared to both Democrats, $b = -0.55$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, and Republicans, $b = -0.41$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$. At high levels of mainstream social media use those with Alt-Right views also had significantly higher belief in QAnon and COVID-19 conspiracies as compared to Democrats, $b = -0.81$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$, and Republicans, $b = -0.87$, $SE = .11$, $p < .001$. Again, we find strong support for H4a and a similar relationship as above with mainstream social media having a moderating influence and this effect being associated with those with Alt-Right views having higher beliefs in these two conspiracies as they consume more mainstream media compared to Democrats and Republicans.

Lastly, for dark social media use (H4b), we again found a significant interaction for the comparison between Democrats and the Alt-Right, $b = -0.16$, $SE = .06$, $p = .011$, and between

Republicans and the Alt-Right, $b = -0.26$, $SE = .08$, $p = .001$ (see Fig. 4). At low levels of dark social media use participants with Alt-Right views had significantly higher beliefs as compared to Democrats, $b = -0.39$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$, and Republicans, $b = -0.22$, $SE = .07$, $p = .002$. At medium levels of dark social media use Alt-Right had significantly higher beliefs as compared to Democrats, $b = -0.47$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, and Republicans, $b = -0.35$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$. At high levels of dark social media use those with Alt-Right views had significantly higher beliefs as compared to Democrats, $b = -0.63$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$, and Republicans, $b = -0.60$, $SE = .11$, $p < .001$. Altogether, this data shows support for H4b and the moderating effect that dark social media use has on increasing conspiracy beliefs associated with QAnon and COVID-19, especially for individuals with Alt-Right views.

Discussion

In sum, we find participants with Alt-Right beliefs were more likely to report having shared fake news and believe in conspiracy theories related to QAnon and COVID-19, compared to non-Alt-Right Republicans and Democrats. Additionally, use of both mainstream and dark social media platforms was related to more fake news sharing and stronger belief in conspiracies. The interactive influence of social media (both mainstream and dark) and political identity was also found to influence belief in conspiracies and fake news sharing. Indeed, media use (mainstream and dark social media) was generally associated with greater fake news sharing behaviors and beliefs in these conspiracies among Alt-Right participants than among Democrats and Republicans. This highlights clear differences between Alt-right participants and traditional partisans. However, we did find one exception: Republicans and Alt-Right supporters who consumed similar amounts of dark social media reported similar rates of sharing fake news. While overall these groups were different across most of the analyses, this specific scenario suggests that there are situations where we may see similarities in media use and fake news sharing between these two groups. More specifically, we see that consuming and engaging with information from dark social media is associated with similar fake news sharing behaviors among Republicans who do not identify with the Alt-Right and Alt-Right individuals; however, we observe differences in how dark social media use is associated with conspiratorial beliefs

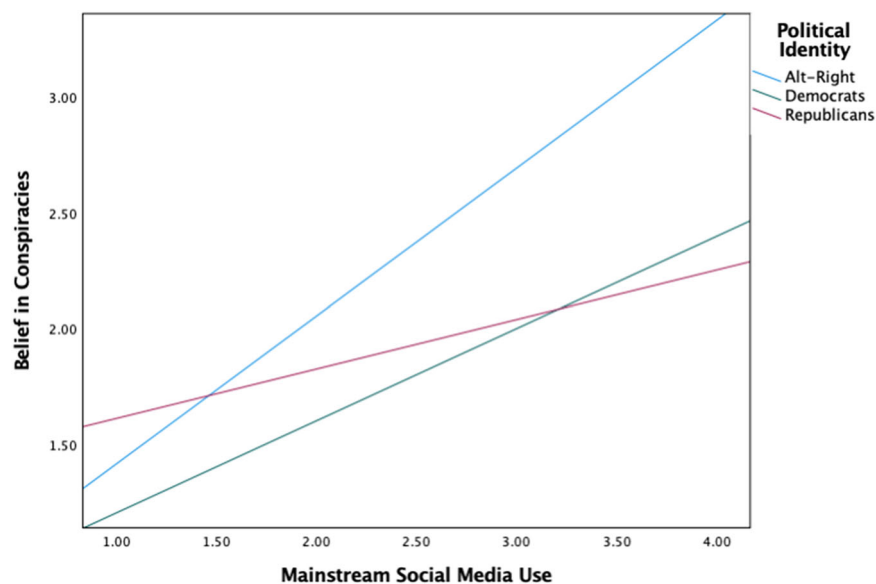


Fig. 3 Influence of mainstream social media use on belief in conspiracies for Alt-Right, Democrat, and Republican participants.

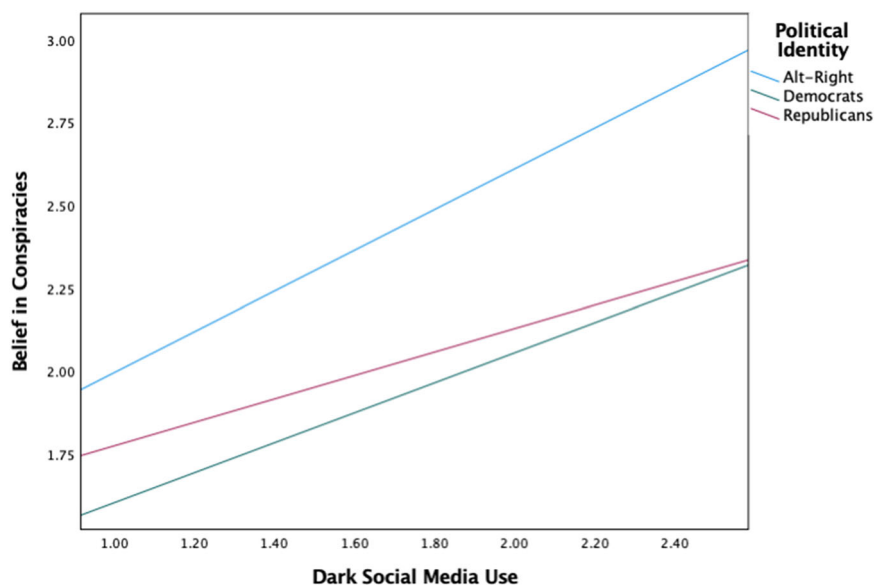


Fig. 4 Influence of dark social media use on belief in conspiracies for Alt-Right, Democrat, and Republican participants.

between the two groups. This further highlights the important implication of considering where people receive their information online and what the norms associated with these online spaces are.

However, these findings broadly show that both mainstream and dark social media use have stronger associations with fake news sharing and conspiratorial beliefs among those who hold Alt-Right views, while similar effects are smaller among institutional partisans. Examining the connections between different types of online platforms and news (real or fake) is becoming increasingly important as for many mainstream platforms anywhere between 33-59% of users report regularly getting their news from these sources depending on the platform (Pew Research Center, 2024). Of particular interest, these numbers on average were slightly higher for the two far-right leaning platforms that were included in Pew's survey (e.g., Truth Social 57% and Rumble 48%).

It is difficult to argue that fake news and various conspiracy theories have not had an effect on individuals across the world, making information about them critical to our online and offline societies. Indeed, a commentary has even proposed that the field of mis- and disinformation is too big to fail (Camargo and Simon, 2022). However, the authors note that continued data is needed to improve and more effectively understand research in this area. Such research, and research on societal milieus that avoid mainstream platforms, has at least four blind spots that require further attention: First, greater attention should be paid to dark social media platforms. Second, existing work has primarily examined social networking sites rather than (semi-)private social media channels like instant messengers. Third, misinformation research has typically adopted a supply-side rather than a demand-side angle. Fourth, it has not systematically surveyed users that are most prone or vulnerable to conspiracy beliefs and fake news sharing.

This study responds to concerns put forth by Camargo and Simon (2022) by addressing these gaps and also highlights the importance of platform-specific analyses of far-right social media communication (Kakavand, 2024). While it can be argued that Alt-Right views and rhetoric are becoming more common in mainstream discourse and politics, a foremost strength of this study is our comparison between Republicans, Democrats, and those who hold Alt-Right beliefs. By comparing those holding

Alt-Right beliefs with other groups, this study is able to compare how the attitudes and behaviors of political groups are differently associated with social media uses. Our study further responds to calls for additional research into dark and closed communication environments frequented by non-traditional groups and shows a strong effect of dark platform use on conspiracy beliefs related to QAnon and COVID-19 as well as fake news behaviors. This allowed us to explore the *demand*-side of conspiracy and fake news discourse on both mainstream and dark social media platforms and, correlately, complement existing evidence on the *supply*-side of such discourse. By looking at how political identities and patterns of social media use are associated with fake news sharing and specific conspiratorial beliefs, we provide empirical data and a media effects approach to support other studies that have used content analytic as well as big data techniques to examine the presence of harmful content on popularized online platforms such as YouTube (Hawkins and Saleem, 2021) and Instagram (DeCook, 2018).

However, there are also limitations worth noting. First, given the intention to compare Alt-Right supporters, we restricted our sample only to white participants. While this choice was made to better isolate the influence of political identity on a wide range of beliefs and behaviors surveyed (including racial beliefs), the choice restricts our understanding of the ways in which social media use and political identity affect fake news sharing and conspiratorial belief among non-white Americans.

Second, while we measured frequency of mainstream and dark social media use, we have no measure of the content to which participants were exposed to on these platforms. In part, this highlights the need for further suggestions and strategies for studying dark platforms. Limited research has discussed the prevalence of misinformation and conspiratorial claims to be more prevalent on dark social media platforms than mainstream platforms (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021). However, it is not clear whether individuals with different political identities would be exposed to similar content on different platforms or, more likely, that platform algorithms and architectures affected the degree of biased content seen by different respondents. Beyond that, an increasing amount of dubious online content is spread through private messaging services like WhatsApp, Line, or Discord. More comprehensive studies of dark and mainstream digital platforms should also analyze these services, even if this will be difficult and

may entail significant biases. However, recent work has proposed scalable data collection methods for private messaging services that rely on voluntary consent, allow for large-scale data collection, and can be applied to the study of online misinformation (Garimella and Chauchard, 2025). In addition, longitudinal analyses (Schulze et al., 2022) and multi-country comparisons (Sirolo et al., 2022) would contribute to and expand the understanding of temporal and cross-cultural dynamics of dark platforms. Further, because social media platforms are continually evolving it is possible that features and norms of dark platforms will be adopted by mainstream platforms (and vice versa). Future research should consider how dark and mainstream platforms differ and what delineates them, analyzing if they are either moving closer or farther apart, and what the implications of this are. Such research will need to further improve by increasing the range of platforms studied, so as to also include platforms that are only accessible through the Dark Web. In addition to expanding the range of dark platforms examined, research in this area would benefit from understanding how these different platforms are networked (Simon et al., 2023). The flows of information across dark platforms might be especially important when considering the migration of users or opinion leaders across platforms (Mahl et al., 2024). After all, the associations we observe are not causal in nature, and further research is needed to explore how different patterns of social media use may affect fake news behaviors and conspiratorial beliefs.

Third, we focused on beliefs in two conspiracy theories (QAnon and 5 G related to the spread of COVID-19) that have attracted particularly many supporters in far-right circles. We chose to examine these specific topics given their prevalence at the time of data collection. However, future studies aiming to achieve higher invariance across topics and time may use established measures of *general* conspiracy beliefs (Brotherton et al., 2013). This would address the fact that conspiracies associated with QAnon varied and mainstreamed over time (Peterka-Benton et al., 2025). Additionally, there are many other far-right conspiracy theories that individuals might believe in, such as those claiming that Haitian immigrants were stealing and eating neighborhood pets, which spread during the 2024 U.S. election campaigns (Omizo, 2025) as well as conspiracies that resonate more with left-leaning and liberal voters, such as those claiming that Russia secretly manipulates U.S. policy (Enders et al., 2022). Because of this, we can only make generalizations to the two conspiracy theories examined in the present study.

Additionally, we note that our measure of fake news sharing is a self-report outcome. We asked respondents how often they shared information that either they knew at the time or found out later was inaccurate. While these measures have been used in past work, with 42.8% of participants indicating that they have shared false news (Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019), their validity is subject to respondents' own judgments, and therefore they may misestimate the frequency of their fake news sharing. Finally, our measure of social media use was also self-report. To address issues of self-reported media use, future research should in addition explore other methods for trying to understand the media the individuals engage with (Parry et al., 2021).

Conclusions

Several recent studies have explored relationships between social media and far-right political ideologies from a *supply*-side perspective by documenting the prevalence of misinformation, conspiracy claims, and other dubious online content in nationalist, populist, and Alt-Right online communication (Schulze et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2019). This research has led to the assumption that Alt-Right users are more likely to believe and spread these claims

(Schroeder, 2019). Our research offers novel empirical findings in a U.S. context concerning the *demand*-side of two conspiracy beliefs and fake news discourse on both mainstream and dark social media platforms by surveying attitudes and beliefs of individuals with a wider range of political identities and social media behaviors. Overall, our results suggest that both mainstream and particularly dark social media accommodate the worldviews and communication behavior of people who identify as Alt-Right, at least when it comes to some *conspiracist* worldviews and *fake news sharing* behavior. The information environment online (both mainstream and dark) is becoming exceedingly important in many contexts, but theoretically even more so for informing voter decisions (Mukherjee et al., 2024), which subsequently has implications for political and social policies that are enacted after elections. The much-discussed appeal of social media platforms to the Alt-Right (Schroeder, 2019) may be partly because these platforms have features, functionalities, and architectures that help supporters of right-wing views in finding, developing, and exchanging narratives that resonate with their worldviews, whereas these features seem less useful for Democrats and Republicans to engage with narratives that correspond with their beliefs. Dark social media seem especially attractive to the Alt-Right, possibly because the specific nuances of dark platforms cater even better to the attitudinal preferences and communication behaviors of this group (Zeng and Schäfer, 2021). However, recent research showed that sharing of mis- and disinformation is not just a function of political orientation—as Lee and Jang (2023) show, for example—but also habitual (Ceylan et al., 2023) and driven by motivations to increase social engagement (Ren et al., 2023).

Future studies should build on our and other “demand-side” research (e.g., Chadwick et al., 2018; Chadwick et al., 2021) to compensate for its limitations and expand its scope. For example, further research could try to enrich self-report data for social media use by combining it with logfile data on actual use (Stier et al., 2020). Moreover, future studies should investigate other countries and across countries (see Arceneaux et al., 2021 for an example), temporal patterns, as well as further dark platforms, since existing platforms may lose importance or go offline, while new ones may emerge. Generally, it will continue to be important to connect demand-side research on dark social media (e.g., public opinion surveys) and supply-side research (e.g., content analyses), for example, through survey experiments that test the influence of vignettes/stimuli containing conspiracy claims (content) on conspiracy beliefs (opinion).

Data availability

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Author contributions

IH, NM, and SC developed the study concept/design. IH performed data collection, data analyses. IH, NM, and SC drafted the paper. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Michigan (HUM00190660 11/13/2020). The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent

Informed consent for this study was obtained starting on 3/8/2021. Before beginning the study participants read an informed consent sheet that outlined the topic, length of the survey, that there were no risks involved with participation, and that data from the survey would be published but would not include any information that would be personally identifiable. After reading this information participants provided their consent by selecting the option that they agree to participate in the study.

Additional information

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