

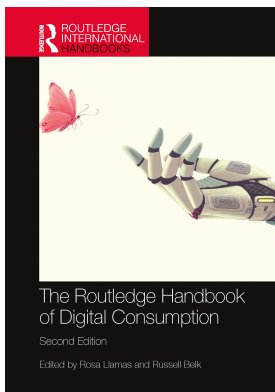
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## The Routledge Handbook of Digital Consumption

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### **They aren't secret, they aren't hiding, and some online communities are more dangerous than ever**

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## 19

# THEY AREN'T SECRET, THEY AREN'T HIDING, AND SOME ONLINE COMMUNITIES ARE MORE DANGEROUS THAN EVER

*Ekant Veer*

When I wrote the original chapter on secret online communities there was a burgeoning incidence of online communities that came together because of a collective interest in a topic, experience, passion, or belief that was perceived as being stigmatized by 'mainstream' society (Veer, 2012). I explored notions of secrecy and sense of separation that accelerated marginalized people to coalesce in spaces online where they felt a sense of belonging and acceptance. However, due to the stigmatized nature of the community much of the online engagement was done in hidden spaces that are difficult to find and experience by those outside of the community. Much has changed in the last 10 years. The desire to seek a sense of belonging and acceptance remains and, if anything, is stronger than ever. The ability to find others online who share similar beliefs and practices is easier than ever. However, these communities are not secret, they are not hidden, they are not even stigmatized in many cases but rather, within online and offline communities their beliefs and ideology are very much considered mainstream. One may ask why not allow the gatherings of communities around beliefs when their views and practices are considered mainstream? Simply because these groups have and continue to have dangerous consequences. These groups are generally referred to as being 'conspiracy theory' groups whereby the group's beliefs are strongly held within their community against all other, usually scientifically proven, evidence. This is not a chapter that will explore the validity of conspiracy theory groups' beliefs or specifically look at one or two conspiracy theory groups in detail but rather focus on the role that digital spaces and places allow for the gathering of groups that may not have any real scientific support and yet thrive to the point where their beliefs are deemed by many as being normalized. I explore the impact of echo chambers online, confirmation bias, hegemonic structures, and the role of non-human actors (such as social media and online advertising algorithms) to reinforce beliefs held by members of such communities.

### **Open secrets**

Secrets exist in all aspects of our lives (Bok, 1989). Keeping secrets, knowing a secret, holding knowledge, and creating an imbalance of power through secrets are all aspects of secrets that are relatively well understood but are not readily researched (Kelly & Yip, 2006). Keeping secrets, or purposefully hiding information from others (Margolis, 1974), is most often

discussed in the psychotherapy literature rather than from a sociological perspective. As such, most of the theories surrounding secrets and secretive behavior focus heavily on how it negatively impacts relationships, rather than whether having a second/secret life can be used as a basis for self-expression. Here, I focus more on the latter perspective in an attempt to show how a secretive existence can be beneficial for those who feel they cannot express themselves freely in an offline life.

Some research has been done on the need for consumers to express their multiple selves through a variety of channels (Lee, Im, & Taylor, 2008). Other research looks closely at how being able to express one's self, without prejudice, can be used as a means of finding attachment and belonging in social groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); and the consumer behavior literature is awash with research looking at the importance and impact of self-concept and multiple selves (Mandel, 2003; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Saltz, 1993; Reed, 2004; Schouten, 1991; Sirgy, 1982). However, relatively little looks at 'secret selves' or the purposeful concealment of a part of one's self from others. One reason for this is, that by its very nature, a 'secret' identity is difficult to discover and study as it is concealed. This chapter focuses specifically on the use of the Internet as a means of expressing a side of one's self that is often kept secret to offline social networks.

There are often reasons for not sharing or expressing one's self to offline social networks. Crandall and Eshleman (2003) discuss how in offline social interactions one's desire to express a prejudice could be suppressed if the person wishing to express the prejudice does not feel it fits with the social norms of the current interaction. That is, if a person who is racially biased against a particular race does not feel they are surrounded by others that also hold a similar prejudice, they may suppress their prejudicial feelings and not overtly express any of their inner feelings. However, where they feel a sense of empowerment or entitlement to hold such a belief, especially when they feel that the belief is normalized in their collective 'in-group' then we can see the manifestation of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that others may feel are wholly inappropriate. So, while some behaviors may be kept hidden the sense of socialized normalcy around beliefs that are espoused online can manifest themselves in offline behaviors and expressions of self. I explore this more later, but finding that sense of belonging and connectedness is a crucial aspect of this phenomenon.

### **Finding belonging online**

Being part of a collective is part of human nature (Turner, 1987). Separation from others, although not impossible, is not a state that many choose to endure (Tajfel, 1982). Being a part of those with whom one wants to be associated not only aids in feeling part of a larger collective but allows the individual to more freely express him or herself, knowing others are likely to accept him or her (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & McGarty, 1990; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel, 1974; Turner & Oakes, 1986). What the Internet has offered Digital Consumers is the ability to not only belong to offline groups and communities but to exist equally in online communities; almost like living a second life that could either be a reflection and representation of who they are offline (Schau & Gilly, 2003) or be completely divergent from who they present themselves to be offline (Veer, 2010). In either case, the Internet plays a vital role in allowing users to find communities online to be a part of, or create communities with relative ease. Digital Consumers are able to keep these communities secret and frequent them only when they choose to engage with the community.

In the original chapter, I presented example cases of communities that exist online, although their existence is often kept secret from offline social relationships. Today, we explore

situations where behavior, attitudes, and beliefs may not be considered ‘mainstream’ but there is a sense of connectedness and belonging in online spaces that gives the community a sense of belonging and empowerment. In the original cases, the individuals are willing to present personal information to anonymous strangers, while keeping the same information hidden from those personally close to them, as opposed to the more commonly understood concept of sharing intimate details with close friends, and keeping them secret from strangers (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). In the new case data the situations Beyond vlogs on YouTube, there exist a number of online communities that have thrived for many years, especially if it is perceived that being open about an identity in the offline world could subject the individual to persecution. For example, Alexander (2002) discusses the importance of online communities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and queer (LGBTQQueer) people who choose to express their identity in a forum where they will find social support, rather than separation. Similarly, Shaw (1997) identified the role that online communities played in bringing gay men closer together through their online narratives and how online communities were instrumental in aiding gay men in understanding their gay identity. The cases presented here reflect a similar pattern of expression when offline expression is, in the minds of the vloggers, not possible. What is different in these cases is that each of the vlogs operates in a public sphere where anyone can watch and comment, as opposed to the LGBTQQueer communities where specific access is often necessary. Having permission-based communities allows greater control over members and easier censorship of members, if necessary. This is still possible on YouTube, but not to the same extent. The vloggers are opening their views to those who are part of the community and those who are not, making their expressions more open to attack. However, the vloggers still express a sense of safeness about presenting online, compared with offline.

### ***Alternative health advocates***

In the original article there was a greater level of focus on Pro-Anorexia Nervosa (Pro-Ana) online communities. These communities have been the focus of much of the attention with regard to ‘secretive’ online activity in the past (Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006) and a number of researchers have looked at the role that online pro-ana groups can cause a triggering effect, encouraging others who do not suffer from Anorexia Nervosa to engage in Anorexia-like behaviors (Bardone & Cass, 2006, 2007; Fox, Ward, & O’Rourke, 2005; Overbeke, 2008; Shade, 2003). However, at the time, relatively few have looked at the way in which online communities, such as pro-ana groups, act as a means of self-expression. Although referred to as ‘Ana-sanctuaries’, these sites are also used as a means of promoting the pro-ana lifestyle with ‘how to’ advice and encouragement from other members to continue with one’s fast (Dias, 2003). In general, the role of websites that are unilaterally pro-ana sites has been condemned by many countries. However, this has not stopped the online pro-ana movement from infiltrating other, more generic sites, such as YouTube. What has grown since the original chapter is a proliferation in other advocates for promoting health and well-being that can also be extremely unhealthy and promote dieting behavior that is not backed by medical science.

Today, physical health continues to be one of the most hotly discussed topics online (Wpbeginner.com, 2018). These blogs support advocates whose advice ranges from providing healthy food recipes to some quite alternative health practices that can also lead to dangerous side effects (Gold, 2021). Some of these health advocates’ advice can be easily spotted by the discerning consumer; however, others are less obvious and even have backing

from celebrity influencers. Most notably, the UK's National Health Service has been vocal about Gwyneth Paltrow's 'Goop' brand and has said that the advice provided both online and via the Netflix series poses a 'considerable health risk' to the general public (Boseley, 2020). Extensions of what users consider to be 'alternative health advice' extend to the anti-vaccination movement online, which has grown considerably in the last 10 years and has risen to further prominence as the COVID19 vaccine rollout begins across the world. Burki (2020) reported over 31 million followers of anti-vaccination pages on Facebook and a further 17 million followers on YouTube. Where these users differ from previous instances of hidden participation online is that their behaviors are now being reflected in offline interactions and online communities may be directly affecting the health of others, as a result.

Beyond alternative health advocates is a more extreme example of online community that has the potential to cause real bodily harm. Potentially one of the most salient advances in online 'secret' groups is the rise of alt-right conspiracy groups online. Although these are considered 'fringe' by some and harmless, others have the potential to cause significant harm to health and well-being, such as anti-vaccination groups and the QAnon movement. In these more extreme cases an 'echo chamber' effect exists where critical thought is replaced with conspirational thought and hypercoherence is preferred over debate (Priniski, McClay, & Holyoak, 2021). This chapter is not a deep exploration into these groups but it is important to understand that the sentiment that drives these groups is very similar to those that are expressed in other online communities; however, care should be taken not to assume that a person suffering from depression the same as a person who has found a sense of belonging in a QAnon or anti-vaccination group. These two should be treated very differently.

### *Depression vlogs*

One area where online communities have begun to show some positivity is in the way that online spaces can enable de-stigmatization and normalization of mental well-being. In this update I explore the role that online communities have formed around issues of mental illness to provide a sense of support and community. Depression is the most diagnosed mental illness (American Psychological Association, 2021) and continues to be the basis of significant social stigma (Schwenk, Davis, & Wimsatt, 2010). Depression is a condition that substantially impairs an individual's ability to cope with daily life and can, in the most severe cases, lead to suicide (Seligman, 1975). Very few studies actually look at the link between depression and online activity. Finkelstein and Laphsin (2007) show that the stigma associated with depression can be reduced through online media. However, most studies that explore opportunities to support mental well-being focus on curing individuals' suffering through medication or psychotherapy, rather than on how online spaces and places can be used as means of expressing one's self and how these online spaces may support future well-being. In the first edition of this chapter, I presented the findings of how some Digital Consumers can use the Internet as a means of expressing their identity as a depressed individual, without having to share such personal details with those close to them in their offline social networks. However, in the last five years there has been a rise in the number of younger people creating and sharing memes and other online content that normalize and even glamourize mental illness. Suicide memes are commonplace in sub-forums on as reddit and 4Chan where difficult mental conditions are made light of, and this content is then shared with friends outside of these usually anonymous spaces. In this updated chapter I explore this idea of how the normalization of depression and mental illness has gone on to also be a force for good and evil, depending on how those that engage in this space subsequently react to the content they view.

### ***Self-Harm vlogs***

The final case discussed in this chapter is that of people who share their experiences and lives as self-injurers or *Cutters*. Cutters are described as persons who actively, consciously, and purposefully cause themselves physical harm (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Self-Harm has been closely linked with borderline personality disorders and suicidal tendencies (Pattison & Kahan, 1983). However, other authors suggest that rather than attempting to end one's life, many Cutters use their behavior as a means of eliminating negative sides of themselves, rather than as an attempt to destroy their entire body (Brown, Comtois, & Linehan, 2002; Harris, 2000). This may help to explain why so many are turning to Social Media sites to express themselves to anonymous parties, as they feel they need to share their stories in an attempt to purge the negative aspects of themselves and attain a feeling of catharsis from such behavior (Bloom-Feshbach, 2001; Mienczakowski, Smith, & Sinclair, 1996). In the updated study on this case there has been evidence of a proliferation of support networks on mainstream sites and, like the health advocacy cases, both positive and negative support from celebrities who have personal experience in this area. Of the three, this case continues to be the most stigmatized; however, it is showing aspects of socialization into the mainstream allowing for both positive and negative health outcomes.

From these three cases the following three themes are presented. The interactive nature of these themes is also discussed along with the implications of the studies and the impact they have on understanding Digital Consumers.

### ***Sharing***

As before, every vlog, blog, and online social media site, by its nature, shared a part of the creator for the audience to observe and, if so wished, comment upon. User-generated content by a content creator is at the heart of many of these sites with the wider community both active and passive in their engagement with the material. Previous research has shown that some vloggers behave in an exhibitionistic fashion, presenting overly personal and sensitive information in order to attract greater support and attention from their watchers (Veer, 2010). Similarly, sharing parts of one's self acts as a way to draw closer to those you wish to attract as part of your in-group (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Haight, 2001). Belk's (2010) concept of 'Sharing In' helps to understand how one can aid in expanding one's sense of extended self to incorporate others. Thus, by blurring the boundaries of what is 'you' and 'me' by sharing intimate details, the vloggers are able to actively encourage others in as part of their extended self, with the vlog being used as a ritualistic tool to encourage this extension (Belk & Llamas, 2011).

In this study it was evident that both sensitive and deeply personal parts of the vlogger's self and identity were presented but also that some videos were extremely transactional in nature. In these videos, vloggers offered practical hints, tips, and strategies to aid watchers who had found their videos. In the case of Fran, she discusses the best makeup to use to cover scars left by self-injury. I have purposefully not revealed the names of the brands discussed by Fran in order to not inadvertently associate these brands with a behavior that it is likely the brand owners do not support:

Alright...you have to stay with me because I'm going to go through this at lightspeed. Also, write down what I say because those bastards at YouTube are sure to delete this pretty soon. If you have light coloured skin, like mine, then brand [X] is the way to go. Rub it on lightly from the centre of your scar to the outside. Don't go against the grain

as it'll clump and look like a shadow. Just gently like this and you'll be able to cover them up enough that a person glancing won't notice...not, if someone grabs your arm and stares, you're fucked, but this will get most of you through your normal day without hassles. Most important thing, if you're really worried, is coverage. Sleeves are back in, wear them! This is one of my favourite striped tops [holds up long sleeved blouse] and I got it from [Retail Store] for only \$15 – such a bargain, get one!

*(Fran, female, late teens, Cutting vlogger, 18 subscribers at the time of posting)*

In this vlog, Fran was able to share a huge amount of detail about how to physically cope with the after-effects associated with Cutting and help others cover the stigma they carry from being cutters. Much of what Fran shared could be described as being highly secretive information that would not have been able to be discussed openly without others who support her. However, through her Vlog she was able to feel as though she has given back to help those who may be struggling to conceal the scars left from their cutting behavior. Followers of the vlog have gone on to share personal details about themselves and identify information so that others can see the results of this video. Since its posting a number of followers have used the video not just as a way of covering their own scars but also as a sense of belonging and acceptance in this space with some going on to say that their everyday engagements with people have been far more positive knowing they can cover their cuts.

Conversely, advocates for scarring have started to emerge with some bloggers showing that sharing one's scars is a sign of body positivity and not something to be ashamed of or covered up. Traditional body positivity advocates seek to challenge societal appearance ideals around body shape and size (Cohen et al., 2019, 2020); however, this does not typically extend to Self-Harm. This presentation is completely divergent from the previous 'hidden' nature of behaviors that would be otherwise stigmatized in mainstream society. The bloggers actively state they speak out to normalize this behavior and encourage others to love themselves and their bodies and to stand out and share their raw life experiences, rather than cover their scars up to fit in. One blogger writes:

...for me, I want you to know that no one decides what you show and what you don't. You are beautiful in every way and your scars show that. It's who you are, so unsubscribe from the make-up videos and chuck out that thick concealer. Present yourself to the world as you are and f\*ck the haters that hold you down.

*(‘Diamond’, pro self-harm advocate online)*

There are also vloggers who share less practical information, but rather express their own thoughts, feelings, and personal history to viewers. Again, it should be noted that many of these viewers are anonymous and not part of the vlogger's offline social network, who the vloggers feel would disapprove of their behavior. One prominent web logger (blogger) and vlogger on depression introduce herself by saying:

I was once told not to tell anyone about my depression, that it should be my personal secret. But I believe keeping secrets only adds to the stigma attached to depression.

*(Annie, female, mid 40s, Depression vlogger, 382 subscribers)*

Annie expresses a very personal part of herself that others offline have told her to keep a secret. By sharing such information, she is able to overtly delineate which viewers she is aiming her vlogs to. In the same way those groups are able to distinguish in-group members

from out-group members by sharing the focus of the group and the core values of the group (Brewer, 1979; Struch & Schwartz, 1989).

Today, more and more personal information is being shared by content creators and apps being developed that specifically bring together those suffering from serious mental health issues. The 'I Am Sober' app seeks to help users break their addictions but also allows users to interact and share personal information with other users to create online support networks. These networks are unmonitored by professionals and, although can be validating, can also be dangerous to a person's recovery and also can have serious privacy issues (Torous et al., 2018).

### ***Personal validation***

In all three cases the vloggers discuss the need to seek personal validation through their videos. That is, rather than making the videos for anyone else, many overtly share a need to do this for themselves. This is particularly relevant in the health advocate space where content creators often share their own journey as a starting point for creating the content, as described by Sam:

Ok, so my posts here are for me, but if they help you, then great. But I'm here to keep myself accountable and show me that I can do it. I can get healthier and if I can do it then anyone can! I also need to get this out of me – I've held this in for too long and it's time to own up that I'm here, I'm not happy with how I feel and I'm ready to make a change.

*(Sam, mid-30s, advocate for health and wellbeing through alternative medicines)*

As with the previous iteration of this chapter, Sam's need to share her story is driven not from a need to help others but from a need to express. A number of studies have looked at the importance of expression to stimulate a cathartic effect (Bloom-Feshbach, 2001; Bushman, 2002; Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001; Bushman, Baumeister, & Stack, 1999; Feshbach, 1956; Kaplan, 1975; Konecni & Doob, 1972; Mieniczakowski et al., 1996; Vieira da Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008). In particular, Kearney (2007) discusses the importance of narrating one's life and pain in a controlled manner as a way to aid understanding of one's life and struggles. The issue here is that Facebook, YouTube, and other online fora offer an unmoderated forum for expression, which can be both constructive and destructive (Vieira da Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008); as opposed to a therapy session, where a facilitator can lead the individual through a path of constructive expression and catharsis (Bushman, 2002; Bushman et al., 1999).

Instead of simply looking for an opportunity to share one's experience, some look to share and seek acceptance from their openness and honesty. As vloggers gain more attention from viewers and their community grows there are more examples of vlogs that express an attachment to the online community and a detachment from their offline social networks. For example, Carol shares her frustration with the dual life she has found herself in:

No one really understands what I go through, my parents would think I've gone crazy and send me to THAT clinic but it makes me feel so tired sometimes, and suppressed, and alone...thank you guys so much, I mean it... it's nice to have someone that I can relate to and talk to...love you all and thanks for all your supportive messages... it's such a relief to finally be able to discuss this without people thinking that I'm a freak!

*(Carol, female, 31, Anorexia Nervosa vlogger, 57 subscribers at the time of posting)*

Here Carol offers a clear example of a need for belonging and validation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When a lack of interpersonal belonging exists in real life for these vloggers



they attempt to seek validation and belonging elsewhere. Some vloggers continue to build this need for belonging by further displacing themselves from their real-life friends and families. Without a feeling of being understood by their friends and families and a deep sense of vulnerability, they crave the understanding of those on YouTube. Therefore, as close relationships are formed on YouTube, face-to-face relationships may progressively diminish:

I have to spend time with my mother today....not only is she going to complain how I'm not eating but I have to actually have a CONVERSATION with her....I really don't want to go and want to spend time with you guys...she is just going to start crying and complaining that she doesn't know how to help me...I DON'T NEED HELP!...Anyway...I promise to let you guys know how it went and will be making a video sooooo!

*(Fran, female, 24, Anorexia Nervosa vlogger, 22 subscribers)*

Fran's quote not only shows the lack of enthusiasm toward face-to-face interaction but also reveals the closeness of the relationships formed online. Many of the vloggers studied show a desire to spend time with their online viewers rather than with their families. This indicates that YouTube users form online relationships that can be of more value than those formed over many years with their parents or partners as the vlogger finds themselves expressing their 'true' selves to online viewers, resulting in the formation of a stronger connection and therefore high levels of affection and closeness, as shown by Levi who frequents groups dedicated to QAnon, a community dedicated to conspiracy theories:

I can't talk about this stuff at my school because the teachers think I'm mad and bully me, but you've all warned me about that. I keep providing them the facts but they won't listen. I really think they've already sold out to the lies, so I have to watch myself around them but I know I don't need to do that here. Thank you all for keeping me strong!

*(Levi, male, 18, QAnon group member and regular poster about conspiracies in the US)*

The separation from one's offline social relationships and connection with anonymous online interactions are evident of how Social Identity Theory describes our need to find affirming in-groups and separate ourselves from out-groups that do not represent a self we wish to be associated with (Hogg & McGarty, 1990; Hogg et al., 1995; Turner, 1987, 1991; Turner & Oakes, 1986). It is also evident from these online 'secret' posts that affirming in-groups are created and that the vlogger derives significant validation from the community's support.

### ***Community-driven validation***

In each case and for every vlogger followed as part of this study it was evident that the vlogger was not in isolation, but part of an interactive and evolving in-group that formed around their vlogs. The more that the vloggers posted and interacted with those that commented on their videos the closer the vlogger and the community of commenters felt. This is particularly evident in Kylie's post regarding her Self Injury vlogs:

Well, what can I say? I've received such positive energy from y'all about my videos. It's really cool to see and I'm really happy I can help everyone out there...it really helps me to open up and I promise I'll share more in my next videos...

*(Kylie, female, mid teens, Cutting vlogger, 12 subscribers)*

The interplay between Kylie and her commenters shows the growing relationship between the two parties but also the increasing need for Kylie to express more to please her community. Her promise to 'share more' to those that value her is also evidence of a need for the vlogger to please her community, which is akin to Belk's (1996) notion of one example of a 'perfect gift'. However, the sharing of self is also a means by which the community draws stronger together through the dissolution of interpersonal boundaries (Belk, 2010). This desire to share with the community could also be indicative of the 'mothering' nature that some vloggers take in their videos to support others and encourage them further, as shown in the interactions between Nancy and one of her commenters:

I wish I could do more for you. I wish I knew more and I was a trained psychologist who can sit there with you and talk you through your pain...But all I can do is to tell you how it feels for me...and I HOPE that is enough to help you through one more day.

*(Nancy, female, mid 40s, Depression vlogger, 72 subscribers)*

In response to this video, one commenter writes:

I don't know why or how you keep doing it, but you make me feel so loved. Keep it up hun and I hope you know that you're such an inspiration.

*(Commenter 132, follower of Nancy for 4 months)*

Nancy returns with a further comment:

Thank you. I wish I could do more. That I could see you all so happy, just like I want to be. Keep strong and I will post more videos...I promise!

*(Nancy, female, mid 40s, Depression vlogger, 72 subscribers)*

In this case, the vlogger is not only empowering members of the community but also drawing reciprocal validation from a member. However, there are times when the community unilaterally supports the vlogger, especially when he/she is feeling marginalized in other aspects of his/her life. For example, when the vlogger expresses deep anxiety in his/her video there is often a wave of comments of support. This is particularly evident in the pro-ana blogs with the abundance of 'ana buddies' or friends that support one another to maintain a fast. In these situations, it is clear that the vlogger is able to derive confidence and support from her commenter. This is reflected in both the improved mood subsequent vlogs as well as the increased frequency of vlogs posted soon after receiving supportive messages. As a vlogger receives validation from the community, his/her desire to share more and receive more from the community also appears to increase. Although this sense of belonging and connectedness may provide a level of normalization and destigmatization for sufferers of mental illness (Finkelstein & Laphsin, 2007) there is also the potential that online communities may deter sufferers from seeking help from medical professionals, as shown in Veer and Dobeles (2021).

One place where community-driven reinforcement excels is online 'conspiracy theory groups'. Here deeply held beliefs are reinforced in a closed system that purposefully separates its members from other critical thoughts. For example, anti-vaccination sentiment has been closely linked to social media groups (Smith & Graham, 2019) and has the potential to cause significant harm, especially in a post-COVID19 world where a lack of vaccination

against this disease (and many others) poses serious health impacts. In these groups the focus is not just on the community spreading misinformation but also on the bolstering of group belonging. Those in the group feel a sense of community and validation for being part of the wider collective. Most worryingly, any attempts to deplatform the group in order to remove it from mainstream social media can lead to further reinforcement of in-group sentiment as it reinforces the belief that the group's ideals and beliefs are being attacked. This attack can be seen as an attempt to control group members' freedoms, increasing radicalization of its members (Lane et al., 2021).

### **Conclusion: Why are people hiding less?**

Having secrets and living a secret life is not something that was created with the advent of the Internet nor is it endemic online. However, increasing access to the Internet and increasing prevalence of the Internet in almost all aspects of our lives has meant that the discussions surrounding online 'secret' communities are gaining greater attention. Future research should delve further into the world of these online communities, not as a means of judging their users, but in an attempt to understand how the Internet is transforming our interconnectedness and fostering new means of expression; especially when this is unavailable or not easily attainable in offline settings. Future research should also look at the interaction between one's offline and online self. Much of the research in the area has looked at individuals who are not stigmatized offline and as such are easily able to express a similar identity online (Schau & Gilly, 2003). However, little has looked at how online relationships may be used as a proxy for perceived deficiencies in offline relationships, as shown here.

In the original cases there existed a level of secrecy that separates the content creators from the offline world. However, this is blurring more and more and the slippage of online secret spaces into mainstream offline behaviors is becoming evident in spaces that would not have existed 10 years ago. By sharing one's secret beliefs/behaviors/ideologies with one's online community there is a level of support and power gained that has been shown to lend itself to affecting offline engagements. These online spaces create such a powerful community of support that reinforces its belief structures that any external invalidation of the community is met with resistance and contempt, creating the echo chamber effect (Cinelli et al., 2021; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). Where a consumer is able to find a community that reinforces beliefs there is the potential for the community to not only empower them with support and additional resources to justify the divergent belief but also the confidence to speak up about these beliefs in offline exchanges. From the research, the existence of content creators and community members can be described as a reinforcing community whereby the creators have shared aspects of themselves to aid in validating their sense of self that is marginalized by the offline world, as shown in Figure 19.1.

These communities exist because people look for and need acceptance and validation. Where the research has developed is to show that a critical mass in some 'secret' or stigmatized groups has been reached where offline exchanges can also be seen. Flat Earther conventions, anti-vax rallies, and QAnon marches are all symptomatic of the same reinforcing loop that echo chambers provide. Where these groups have broken from the previous research in secret online communities is that the large online support has built a sense of empowerment and entitlement to the in-group and a staunch opposition to the out-group that online beliefs are translating into offline behaviors, which can sometimes turn deadly (Tajfel, 1974, 1982). In this way, Figure 19.1 looks to extend the original model to incorporate an understanding of how the exclusion of mainstream sentiment also further reinforces the belief structures

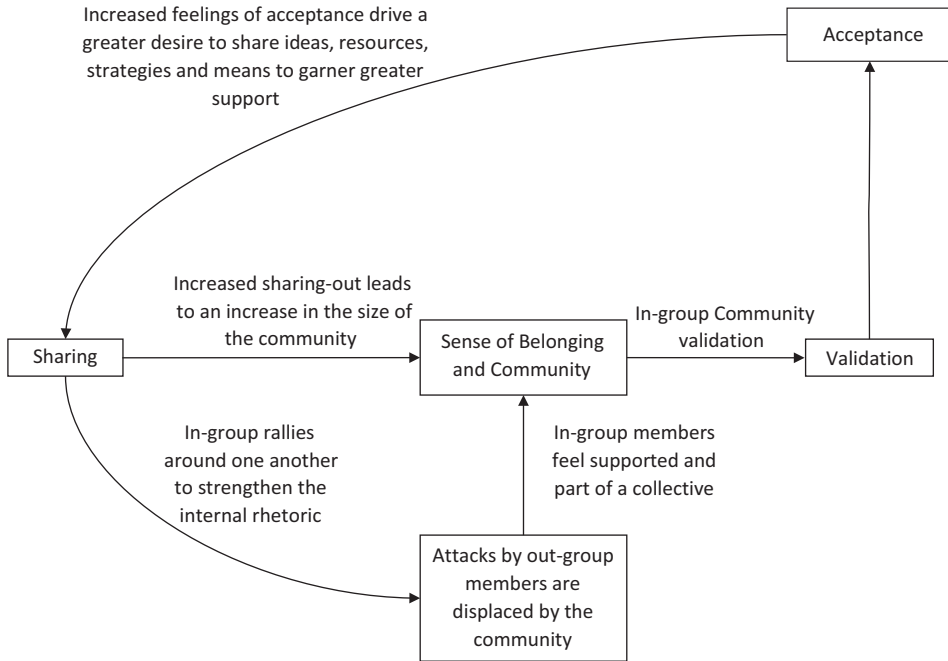


Figure 19.1 Reinforcing nature of secret online communities  
 Source: Own elaboration.

of the in-group when other voices/arguments are experienced in offline settings. Where out-group antagonism for the online community may exist the community rallies around each other using the scripts and tactics shared by the in-group to reinforce their own beliefs and ideologies and retaliate against detractors. This further builds a sense of belonging and further heightens personal feelings of validation and sharing behavior. As such, paradoxically, attacking a ‘conspiracy theory’ group or any group that is founded on a strong sense of in-group hegemonic narratives and belief structures can operate against an attacker’s best intentions. These attacks can lead to a strengthening of the in-group bias as they are warned against such attacks and that the attacks are, in fact, all part of the out-groups attempts to hide the truth or hold back the ‘facts’ that only the in-group feel they are privy to. Finding alternative means to break the cycle of echo chamber-esque in-group reinforcement and develop a sense of criticality in thought and action is paramount for future researchers in this area. Without a means to do this we will continue to see growth in communities that detract from mainstream wisdom with little scientific basis or evidentiary support. At best, these groups are a detractor from enabling healthy expressions of self and can be absorbing for the community member; at worst, these groups have the potential to cause the ill-health and death of many, many people who desperately want to feel part of a wider collective, but in turn have been duped by pseudo-science.

**Further reading**

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