"It Feels Like Coming Home": Dutch Far-Right Echo Chambers as Identity-Driven Communities

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Abstract

Contemporary right-wing extremism has largely shifted from the offline environment to the digital sphere. The Internet not only allows the far-right to optimize its activities' effectiveness, it also provides a space where the far-right network has constructed decentralized, close-knit communities. Scholarship on online extremism, primarily stemming from Media Studies or counterterrorism, has defined these communities as echo chambers in which constant interaction with like-minded peers facilitates the reinforcement, amplification, and internalization of extremist thought. However, little research exists on what draws people to extremist echo chambers. This thesis responds to this gap in the literature by developing a framework of echo chambers as identity-driven communities. After identifying the mechanisms of the desire to belong, the need for a secure sense of self, and the protection of human needs, these three elements are analyzed through a case study based on secondary data of the Dutch far-right, with specific attention to the identitarian, alt-right, and accelerationist strands. The thesis finds that the desire to belong and the experience of relative needs deprivation are most prevalent in mobilizing individuals to join online extremist echo chambers. To this end, it offers valuable academic insights and encourages an alternative approach to future policy development.

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1.   Introduction

"Actually, almost nobody in my life is in my bubble - except the people I know from the Internet," explains an alt-right member about his social life in Sterkenburg's book exploring the Dutch far-right network.[1] This statement encapsulates the experience of many adherents to the far-right movement, which is defined by its "pursuit of a homogeneous cultural or ethnic state through the curtailment of the civil liberties and fundamental rights of religious and ethnic minorities, whether by force or otherwise."[2] In recent years, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) has signaled that the far-right is gaining prominence in the Netherlands, and this rise primarily occurs online.[3] Since the emergence of the Internet, far-right groupings have increasingly utilized the online sphere for their activities, communications, and organization.[4] As a result, the current extreme right predominantly exists online in the form of decentralized, close-knit communities with collective identities. Simultaneously, offline adherence to the far-right has steadily declined.[5] The Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) estimates that Dutch far-right organizations currently consist of no more than several dozen active members, while their online social media channels each draw hundreds or even a thousand participants.[6]

These developments suggest that the digital space offers adherents to right-wing extremism something that the offline world does not. A relatively young but growing research agenda investigates the links between the Internet and extremism, aiming to understand better how individuals immerse themselves in online extremist communities.

[1] Nikki Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen* (Amsterdam: Das Mag, 2021).
[2] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 22.
[3] Mensje van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief* (DSP-Groep, 2021), 5; Fleur Valk, Léonie de Jonge, and Pieter Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism: A Case Study of the Northern Netherlands," *Journal for Deradicalization* 35, no. Summer (June 2023): 77; Mattias Wahlström, Anton Törnberg, and Hans Ekbrand, "Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-right Social Media," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 11 (August 2020): 3290.
[4] Ghayda Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content Could Lead to Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Empirical Evidence," *International Journal of Developmental Science* 12, no. 1-2 (September 2018): 72; Daniel Koehler, "The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet," *Journal for Deradicalization* Winter 2014/15, no. 1 (2014): 126.
[5] Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan, "Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem: An Analytical Framework and Research Agenda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 46, no. 9 (December 2020): 1600; Willem De Koster and Dick Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort. Over Virtuele Gemeenschapsvorming Door Rechts-extremisten," *Sociologie* 2, no. 3 (September 2006): 242; Koehler, "The Radical Online," 126-127; Robby Roks and Jolijn Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online: Een Verkennend Onderzoek Naar Extreemrechts Op Social Media," *Tijdschrift Voor Criminologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2019): 226.
[6] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024* (2024), 28.

Previous research has implicitly and explicitly approached the digital turn of the far-right as *echo chambers*.[7] Echo chambers are defined as "environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic get reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes."[8] Joining an echo chamber is a self-selected process, as users consciously search for communities that suit their belief systems.[9] In this way, the Internet today has become a safe haven for many, offering a personalized digital reality based on past searches, online activity, and interests.[10]

Scholarship on extremist echo chambers can broadly be divided into a Media Studies approach, which focuses on online discourses and social media analyses, and a securitizing lens, which frames these developments through a traditional counterterrorism perspective. For example, in Hassan et al.'s literature review on the links between violent extremism and the Internet, the authors argue that intense interaction between like-minded individuals reinforces and amplifies extremist beliefs.[11] In the counterterrorism field, Mølmen and Ravndal assert that such reinforcement of beliefs inside echo chambers can legitimize violence.[12] Furthermore, they find that individuals within echo chambers start to identify themselves in association with the group, which can lead to polarization if such communal identity involves antagonistic attitudes towards other societal groups.[13] Törnberg and Törnberg, who take a more discursive approach, similarly include the notion of identity by arguing that echo chamber members construct a collective identity through a shared language and culture, often in opposition to out-groups.[14] Recognizing the central factor of hostile attitudes in extremist echo chambers, Mareš and Mlejnková argue that the harm of online extremist communities lies not in the likelihood of physical violence but in the spread of hatred against specific demographic groups in society and the subsequent internalization,

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[7] Wahlström, Törnberg, and Ekbrand, "Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-right Social Media," 5, 17; Guri Nordtorp Mølmen and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation: How the Internet Affects the Radicalisation of Extreme-right Lone Actor Terrorists," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 15, no. 4 (October 2021): 468.

[8] Matteo Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 118, no. 9 (February 2021): 1.

[9] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?: Ontwikkelingspaden En Handelingsperspectieven*, (2023), 74.

[10] Adrian Lüders, Alejandro Dinkelberg, and Michael Quayle, "Becoming 'Us' in Digital Spaces: How Online Users Creatively and Strategically Exploit Social Media Affordances to Build up Social Identity," *Acta Psychologica* 228 (August 2022): 1.

[11] Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content," 84.

[12] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 468.

[13] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 468.

[14] Petter Törnberg and Anton Törnberg, "Inside a White Power Echo Chamber: Why Fringe Digital Spaces Are Polarizing Politics," *New Media & Society* 26, no. 8 (September 2022): 17.

normalization, and justification of polarization and discrimination.[15] Lastly, research points out that the Internet and social media are more conducive environments to the establishment of echo chambers than offline spaces.[16]

While the media and security approaches provide crucial knowledge of discourses, online extremist behavior, radicalization trajectories, and security strategies, there is a remaining lack of understanding of why and how *mobilization* towards extremist communities on the Internet occurs. This thesis addresses this research gap by investigating what draws individuals to the digital far-right. To achieve this, it integrates the echo chamber concept with traditional identity theories from Conflict Studies to understand how individuals mobilize to join online extremist groupings. Thus, it conceptualizes online echo chambers as identity-driven communities. Based on these considerations, the following research questions are formulated:

> *How can we understand online echo chambers as spaces for Dutch far-right membership mobilization after 2020?*
>
> a. *What are the key historical developments of Dutch far-right extremism?*
>
> b. *How do echo chambers affect the desire to belong?*
>
> c. *How do echo chambers affect the need for a secure sense of self?*
>
> d. *How do echo chambers affect the experience of relative needs deprivation?*

To answer these questions, this thesis conducts a qualitative single-case study of the contemporary far-right in the Netherlands using secondary data. The data collection method constitutes publicly available information on the Dutch far-right on the Internet, drawn from governmental and non-governmental reports and interviews with Dutch extremists conducted by Nikki Sterkenburg.[17] The data is analyzed through three analytical categories based on the

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[15] Miroslav Mareš and Petra Mlejnková, "Propaganda and Disinformation as a Security Threat," in *Challenging Online Propaganda and Disinformation in the 21st Century*, ed. Miloš Gregor and Petra Mlejnková (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 89.

[16] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 463-487; Jillianne R. Code and Nicholas E. Zaparyniuk, "Social Identities, Group Formation, and the Analysis of Online Communities," in *Social Computing: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*, ed. Subhasish Dasgupta (IGI Global, 2010), 1346-1361; Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content," 71-88; Koehler, "The Radical Online," 116-134; Ryan Scrivens et al., "Right-Wing Extremists' Use of the Internet: Emerging Trends in the Empirical Literature," in *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada and the United States*, ed. Barbara Perry, Jeff Gruenewald, and Ryan Scrivens (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1339-1356; Lüders, Dinkelberg, and Quayle, "Becoming 'Us' in Digital Spaces," 1-9.

[17] *Sterkenburg*, Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen, 15-260.

elements evident in identity theories. These comprise the need for belonging, security, and human needs.

This thesis contributes to the academic debate by further developing the concept of the echo chamber as a community and, in doing so, aiding the comprehension of mobilization to right-wing extremism. It builds on and complements previous Media Studies and counterterrorism research by incorporating additional insights from Conflict Studies theories. This thesis' societal contribution is to encourage the development of government responses that go beyond traditional counterterrorism, offering practitioners an alternative perspective on the contemporary far-right. Indeed, despite recognizing that the online far-right environment facilitates the normalization of extremist beliefs and hostility against groups and institutions in society, the latest terrorist threat assessment by the NCTV, which serves to guide national security policies and strategies, focuses exclusively on the potential threat of physical violence.[18] The normalization of hatred is considered a component that can lead to such violence rather than being examined as violent in itself.[19] This traditional radicalization narrative of physical security is no longer sufficient for understanding contemporary right-wing extremism and undermines the harmful effects of normalizing extremism in society. A critical assessment of what draws individuals to online extremist communities is essential before appropriate policies can be formulated.

The thesis first provides a historical overview of the Dutch far-right movement to contextualize contemporary developments in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 develops the theoretical framework by conceptualizing the extremist echo chamber as an identity-driven community. It first discusses previous definitions as conceptualized by discursive and securitization approaches before expanding on the concept by integrating identity theories from the Conflict Studies field, resulting in three analytical categories. Chapter 4 outlines and justifies the methodological approach, followed by Chapter 5, which applies the identified analytical categories to the Dutch far-right. This analysis explores the trajectory toward online membership of three strands of the Dutch far-right. Chapter 6 concludes with the findings' implications and recommendations for future research projects.

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[18] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024.*
[19] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024.*

2.   The Dutch far-right: An overview

To understand online echo chambers as spaces for mobilization, it is vital to examine how mobilization has previously occurred. The rise of the contemporary far-right must be considered a continuation of a decades-long evolution of right-wing extremism, not a separate movement existing in a vacuum. This background chapter, therefore, serves to situate the current far-right scene in its historical and cultural context. Accordingly, it answers the question: *What are the key historical developments of Dutch far-right extremism?* The findings to this question are organized into key historical events and underlying ideological and organizational foundations. This organization helps highlight specific changes to the far-right's presence, discourses, and shape. Rob Witte's historiography of the Dutch right-wing extremism in *The Dutch Far Right: From 'Classical Outsiders' to 'Modern Insiders'* serves as an important basis for this chapter.[20] Firstly, the chapter outlines how key historical events have fostered the normalization of extremist thought. Then, it discusses how various strands interpret right-wing extremist ideology. Lastly, it highlights how far-right organizations have evolved from traditional hierarchies to flexible, individualistic networks.

2.1.   Historical developments

Looking at the body of scholarship on the developments of Dutch right-wing extremism, it is discerned that the current far-right scene has gradually been taking shape since the end of the Second World War. Van der Valk states that, throughout the decades, the movement has shifted from 'traditional' extremists, consisting of anti-Semitic (neo-)Nazis who largely operate in isolation from society, to the contemporary far-right, which emphasizes anti-minority and Islamophobic beliefs and progressively occupies mainstream spaces.[21] This shift has coincided with a trend of increasing racist violence and a normalization of far-right discourses in the public and political arenas.[22] Witte describes that post-1945, the Dutch climate was considered particularly hostile to right-wing extremism.[23] Both the public and the political sphere linked anti-Semitism and racism to Nazism and the terror of the Second World War. Nevertheless, racially motivated violent incidents still occurred in the 1950s, with

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[20] Rob Witte, "The Dutch Far Right: From 'Classical Outsiders' to 'Modern Insiders,'" in *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*, ed. Max Taylor, P. M. Currie, and Donald Holbrook (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 105-28.
[21] Ineke van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism: Comparative Cases From the Netherlands," in *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*, ed. Max Taylor, P. M. Currie, and Donald Holbrook (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 138.
[22] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 138.
[23] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 106-107.

increasing prevalence throughout the rest of the 20th century. For example, in 1981, a mob of around 100 people attacked a family of Surinamese descent in Tilburg, and in 1983, a Nazi perpetrator murdered an Antillean teenager in Amsterdam. Witte finds that these racist acts have progressively targeted Muslim minorities due to an emerging perception that the Dutch culture was incompatible with the worldviews and lifestyle of immigrants in the Netherlands.[24]

This discourse of irreconcilability eventually seeped through into the political arena.[25] In 1971, the nationalist-socialist Nederlandse Volks-Unie was established, which became the first Dutch political party radically opposing immigration.[26] From the 1980s onwards, more right-wing extremist parties appeared in the mainstream political sphere, with various cases of electoral success.[27] Notably, Witte asserts that during the decades of rising violent incidents and the following normalization of extremist thought in Dutch politics, there was a failure to securitize these trends as a threat of structurally growing extremism.[28] While the violence was politically deplored, potential racist or far-right motivations were dismissed. Instead, political authorities explained the anti-immigrant and racist violence and discourse through personal issues or socioeconomic grievances of the perpetrators.[29]

The dominant discourse towards immigrants especially sharpened during the 1990s. Tolerance for multiculturalism diminished as the concept of integration became increasingly scrutinized politically and publicly. An important catalyst in the securitization of migrants was a speech held by the political party VVD's leader in 1991, Frits Bolkestein. He claimed that Islam and the Middle Eastern region stood irrevocably opposite to Christian and Western values, and he considered Islam fundamentally linked to a lack of integration. This discourse of incompatibility between the Christian Dutch population and the Muslim minority groups was previously exclusive to right-wing extremists. However, since this speech, framing the Muslim community as a threat to Western society has become an increasingly prevalent and accepted narrative among the public.[30]

These trends continued and accelerated in the 2000s and 2010s. Several incidents sparked civilian and political unrest, hardening the polarized climate. Important events leading to a rise in anti-Islam violence include the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States,

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[24] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 106-108
[25] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 108-109.
[26] Willem Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes* (Anne Frank Stichting, 2021), 9.
[27] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 108-109; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*.
[28] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 106-112.
[29] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 106-112.
[30] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 110-113.

jihadi terrorist attacks in Europe, and the murders of two public figures critical of Islam, Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn and filmmaker Theo van Gogh.[31] The 2015 refugee crisis fuelled anti-immigrant sentiments and further normalized extreme right sentiments in politics. Far-right groupings have also become more visible in the public domain as they became involved in several protest movements, such as farmers' protests and the anti-COVID-19 policy movement. Thus, the taboo surrounding right-wing extremists in the aftermath of the Second World War has largely dissipated.[32] It can be argued that the normalization of extremist discourses in society has legitimized far-right views and subsequently lowered the threshold for association with and membership in the far-right.

The greater tolerance for right-wing extremist beliefs since 2015 is best exemplified by the renewed electoral success of far-right parties in the Netherlands and across Europe in the last few years, proving that the radical right has become not only publicly accepted but also politically legitimate.[33] The most notable example in the Dutch context is the Party for Freedom (PVV). Since its establishment, the PVV's discourse has centered around anti-immigration and anti-Islam topics. While its party leader has made efforts to distance himself from being associated with right-wing extremism, he has been an influential factor in the continuation of the discourse that Islam cannot coexist with Dutch or Western culture.[34] The influence of the PVV was once more underlined with their landslide victory in the 2023 general elections.[35]

In short, polarizing worldviews traditionally considered characteristic of right-wing extremism have transferred over time into the accepted dominant discourse and have gained political legitimacy.[36] Witte identifies this shift as the turn toward contemporary extremism, in which the explicit call for physical violence has been replaced with a normalization of extremist thought in the public domain.[37] Indeed, extremism in its traditional form has

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[31] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 114-118; Van Der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 132; Daniel Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future," *PRISM* 6, no. 2 (2016): 87; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*, 11.
[32] Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe," 87; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*.
[33] Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe," 87; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*, 20.
[34] Bruno Castanho Silva, "Populist Radical Right Parties and Mass Polarization in the Netherlands," *European Political Science Review* 10, no. 2 (March 2017): 224; Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 123.
[35] "Politieke Aardverschuiving: PVV Veruit De Grootste, Coalitie Afgestraft," *NOS*, November 23, 2023, https://nos.nl/collectie/13958/artikel/2498924-politieke-aardverschuiving-pvv-veruit-de-grootste-coalitie-afgestraft.
[36] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 132.
[37] Witte, "The Dutch Far Right," 122.

become marginal in the Netherlands.[38] These historical developments provide crucial context for making sense of the far-right today. Considering these developments, it can be inferred that the normalization of extremist beliefs in public and political debates erased the traditional extremist echo chamber in the form of extremist communities that were largely isolated from mainstream society. Additionally, mainstreaming such polarizing worldviews may spark an interest in some individuals, encouraging them to seek even more radical environments. These new environments are sought online, creating new echo chambers. The next section of this chapter delineates the foundations of traditional and contemporary right-wing extremism in the Netherlands.

2.2. Ideology and organization

While right-wing extremism is a diverse and highly dynamic movement that cannot be easily typified, three tenets characterize the Dutch far-right ideology.[39] Firstly, and most prominently, there is a firm rejection of the alien and a strong preference for the 'known.' Protection of the in-group, 'us,' is perceived to be necessarily achieved through violence or resistance against the out-group, 'them.' This 'Us-vs-Them' dichotomy is often constructed along ethnic lines but can also involve a biological, nationalist, or religious dimension.[40] Right-wing extremists especially perceive Western identity to be under threat, against which they resist through a "strong articulation of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and racism."[41] In the Dutch context, this translates to hostility against migrant minorities and Muslims.[42]

Secondly, the Dutch far-right rejects the political establishment. Its adherents generally criticize the current state of Western society and its heavy emphasis on individualism.[43] Moreover, regional discontent with Dutch politics, especially in the rural

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[38] Fleur Valk, Léonie de Jonge, and Pieter Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism: A Case Study of the Northern Netherlands," *Journal for Deradicalization* 35, no. Summer (June 2023): 85; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*, 3.

[39] Van Der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 136; Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 86.

[40] Robby Roks and Jolijn Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online: Een Verkennend Onderzoek Naar Extreemrechts Op Social Media," *Tijdschrift Voor Criminologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2019): 227; Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131; Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 79.

[41] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131.

[42] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 79; Van Der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131-137.

[43] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131; Willem De Koster and Dick Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort. Over Virtuele Gemeenschapsvorming Door Rechts-extremisten," *Sociologie* 2, no. 3 (September 2006): 235-237.

areas, has resulted in institutional mistrust and anti-governmentalism.[44] In recent years, right-wing extremist thought has increasingly influenced and been influenced by anti-government movements, leading to a mixture of different ideological components.[45] The third tenet of the current far-right is a preference for a more authoritarian society or state.[46] In sum, as Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga formulate, central components of the extreme right are "the combination of nativism, racism and authoritarianism."[47] While the specific translations of these narratives vary between and within ideological groups, the foundational content of these far-right echo chambers has remained stable through the years.

The Netherlands hosts several ideological strands of right-wing extremism, each with its own nuances. The traditional factions of the far-right can be broadly distinguished as identitarian strands and neo-Nazi strands.[48] The identitarians, consisting of groups such as Identitair Verzet and Voorpost, focus on the ideal of a united Dutch population located in the territory from which they historically originated. The 'us' for identitarian groups is based on Dutch culture and language. Accordingly, its ideology considers the alleged 'replacement' of the Dutch people a serious threat. Identitarians lament outside influences and multiculturalism in their protection of Dutch origins and history. These influences include not only Islam and immigration but also the Americanization of Dutch culture.[49] Neo-Nazi groups focus on biological and racist characteristics to distinguish the 'us' from the 'alien.' Their primary drivers are Nazism and anti-Semitism. The neo-Nazi movement has become marginal within the Dutch far-right. Its active members have stopped making efforts to recruit new members, causing the movement to significantly decline in numbers over the years.[50]

Contemporary far-right strands on the rise in the Netherlands include the alt-right movement and accelerationism.[51] The alt-right, or alternative right, is an international movement that originates from American white supremacy. It holds an ethnonationalist ideology, which translates to a heavy emphasis on ethnic homogeneity in society and the desire for each ethnicity to live in separate states. The movement also strives towards a more

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[44] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131; Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 80-81.
[45] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 85.
[46] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131.
[47] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 79.
[48] Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*, 5.
[49] Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 229-234; Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 87; Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*, 17.
[50] Mensje van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief* (DSP-Groep, 2021), 17; Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 138; Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen* (Amsterdam: Das Mag, 2021), 114.
[51] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 86-87.

authoritarian society. Additionally, it explicitly targets the higher educated by presenting their activities in a more 'intellectual' manner, such as by organizing conferences. The alt-right is founded on an online subculture consisting of a network of ideologically based web pages, discussion forums, and digital meeting spaces. The most notable alt-right formation in the Netherlands is Studiegenootschap Erkenbrand.[52]

Groups adhering to accelerationism largely overlap with the ideology of the alt-right but believe in the necessity of a race war to prevent a 'replacement' of the white, Western population with non-Western immigrants. The end goal is the establishment of a white ethnostate. Most illustrative in the Netherlands are the so-called Active Clubs, which aim to foster white male resilience and focus their discourse on traditional masculinity, mental and physical health, and male support systems.[53] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga find that these two streams, together with identitarianism, constitute the most prominent and rising movements in the current Dutch extremist climate.[54] Table 1 offers an overview of the four strands' key characteristics and entities. The membership size indications are based on estimations provided by Sterkenburg, Wagenaar, and Goldenberg and Verschoor, and exclusively refer to offline manifestations.[55] Understanding the differences in these strands' grievances and motives helps contextualize the analysis process.

Table 1. Overview of the Dutch far-right

	Traditional		Contemporary	
	Neo-Nazism	**Identitarianism**	**Alt-right**	**Accelerationism**
Ideology	Nazism	Monoculturalism	Ethnonationalism	Accelerationist ethnonationalism
Aim	Biological homogeneity	Single united Dutch territory	Ethnic homogeneity	Ethnic homogeneity through a race war

[52] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 165-166; Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 229; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*, 14-15; Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 87.
[53] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?: Ontwikkelingspaden En Handelingsperspectieven*, (2023); Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023* (2023).
[54] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 86-87.
[55] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*; Or Goldenberg and Samuel Verschoor, "Witte Strijders Werven," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, February 7, 2024.

Table 1 (continued)

	Traditional		Contemporary	
	Neo-Nazism	**Identitarianism**	**Alt-right**	**Accelerationism**
Notable entities	Nederlandse Volks-Unie	Identitair Verzet; Voorpost; Pegida	Erkenbrand	Active Clubs
Member ship size	50-60	100-110	100-200	25-50

Scholarship on the current manifestations of extremism shows that the Dutch far-right scene is characterized by organizational and ideological fragmentation. As opposed to traditional extremism, organizations have decentralized into loosely tied online and offline networks. Similarly, whereas ideologies used to be clearly demarcated, they now consist of various combinations of beliefs suited to individual-level interests and grievances.[56] In Sterkenburg's research into the Dutch far-right national network, it is evident that many activists collaborate in their activities despite adhering to different ideological strands or subcultures.[57] Sterkenburg also identifies several so-called freelance activists who are not formal members of any organization but join activities whenever it suits their interests and needs.[58] The organizational aspect of the far-right has thus evolved from clearly delineated ideologies and group boundaries to fluid, flexible networks. These traditional organizations, internally close-knit and highly closed-off for outsiders, can be regarded as far-right echo chambers in the 'offline' environment and have largely evaporated into a more individualistic network over time.

Similar to the diversity of extremist strands, motivations to join extremist movements can be highly individualistic. Still, the typical member is often young and male and experiences social and societal isolation. This rejection or disapproval from the social environment causes them to look for a community elsewhere.[59] Members generally do not join an extremist group out of ideological convictions. Instead, adherence to the ideology is built while within the extremist community. In addition to a desire to belong in a community, important mobilizing factors towards membership include a negative outlook on ethnic minorities, mainstream society, or the government. Right-wing extremists tend to join and

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[56] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 88-89.
[57] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 63.
[58] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 63.
[59] De Koster and Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort," 238-240.

exit the movement when they are teenagers or adolescents.[60] Membership in offline far-right organizations can be active or passive. Van der Valk describes active members as those who organize meetings, arrange plans, or spread and protect the group's ideology.[61] Passive members do not take on organizing roles and participate in group activities with less intensity and frequency.[62] It follows that the individualistic and flexible nature of the contemporary far-right encourages passive membership, explaining the decline in the active core of far-right groupings.

2.3. Looking back to move forward

To summarize, the mobilization and expression of the Dutch far-right has many faces. Historically, the Netherlands has seen a consistent increase in racist and extremist violence, which has accompanied a mainstreaming of extremist discourse in the public and political arenas. Anti-immigrant and Islamophobic belief systems have become central. Ideologically, right-wing extremism primarily involves an 'Us-vs-Them' dichotomy, but different strands within the movement express this in various ways. There is also a rejection of the political establishment and a preference for a stronger, more authoritarian society. The contemporary far-right has become more decentralized in its organization and ideologies, with the most prominent strands being the alt-right and accelerationism. The more traditional identitarian movement also remains influential. Far-right echo chambers have changed shape as clearly demarcated groups have largely dissolved. In terms of content, echo chambers have remained stable as narratives continue to be built on the same foundations. This background chapter has outlined how the far-right has mobilized in the past and how it has evolved over time. This knowledge provides a crucial backdrop before the thesis explores the mobilization of contemporary right-wing extremists in the digital space.

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[60] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 133-34.
[61] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 134-39.
[62] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 134-39.

3. Theoretical framework: Echo chambers as communities

Scholarship on the contemporary far-right has aimed to make sense of the digital turn in various yet unsatisfactory ways. The academic debate generally approaches right-wing extremist online communities through either a Media Studies perspective, which analyzes discourses and online content, or a securitizing perspective, which emphasizes risks for physical violence and counterterrorism strategies. While these approaches provide critical insights into the effects of right-wing extremism by helping understand the perpetuation of hatred through discourses and radicalization processes towards terrorist acts, they fail to investigate how individuals are mobilized to join online extremist communities. For this reason, this chapter develops a theoretical framework that examines online echo chambers as communities where mechanisms of identity formation encourage extremist membership. The chapter begins by defining the online echo chamber as a space of shared realities, a perspective primarily provided by scholarship in Media Studies. Then, it explores how echo chambers can facilitate extremism, as found by radicalization scholars. Observing that identity-driven mechanisms are central in forming and immersion into echo chambers, the concept is integrated with identity theories from the Conflict Studies field to make sense of the echo chamber as a community of agents. First, however, a definition of the contemporary far-right is imperative.

3.1. Defining the contemporary far-right

Extremism, as defined by AIVD, involves the aim of societal changes that threaten the democratic legal order. The far-right, then, involves ideological foundations related to these aims. As described in Chapter 2, these include a rejection of the alien and a strong preference for the 'known,' a rejection of the political establishment, and a desire for authoritarian structures.[63] Sterkenburg explains that different terms for right-wing extremism reflect internal nuances inside the broader movement.[64] The far-right is an umbrella term for the radical right, constituting those whose activities remain within legal democratic limits, and right-wing extremism or the extreme right, which does not necessarily aim to remain within legal bounds. She also identifies that the radical right tends to focus on cultural homogeneity, whereas right-wing extremists focus on ethnic homogeneity. Combining these elements,

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[63] Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging* (2018), 4.
[64] Nikki Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen* (Amsterdam: Das Mag, 2021), 21-22.

Sterkenburg defines the far-right as "the pursuit of a homogeneous cultural or ethnic state, through the curtailment of the civil liberties and fundamental rights of religious and ethnic minorities, whether by force or otherwise."[65] By definition, these aims mean that far-right ideology clashes with the principle of equality.[66] This thesis uses the terms far-right, radical right, right-wing extremism, and extreme right interchangeably to refer to Sterkenburg's definition of the far-right.

Contemporary right-wing extremism exists for a large part online. Previous scholarship has found that the far-right has utilized the digital space for various purposes since the advent of the Internet. This online presence has enlarged its reach and improved the efficacy of its activities. The Internet offers groupings a cheap, easy, and anonymous way to communicate and organize.[67] However, the digital space has had more far-reaching consequences beyond activities. Indeed, the Internet has fundamentally changed how people acquire information and shape their worldviews. Today, it offers each individual a personalized digital reality based on their past searches, online activity, and interests.[68] Consequently, as Törnberg and Törnberg conclude, the digital world affects how people construct their identities.[69] The far-right has leveraged this development by actively advancing a shared identity in their online communications. As a result, extremist groupings have built decentralized yet closely connected online communities while also reaching a larger public audience.[70] The formation of online communities based on shared identities can effectively be analyzed by employing the concept of echo chambers.

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[65] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 22.

[66] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 21-22.

[67] Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan, "Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem: An Analytical Framework and Research Agenda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 46, no. 9 (December 2020): 1600; Willem De Koster and Dick Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort. Over Virtuele Gemeenschapsvorming Door Rechts-extremisten," *Sociologie* 2, no. 3 (September 2006): 242; Ghayda Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content Could Lead to Violent Radicalization: A Systematic Review of Empirical Evidence," *International Journal of Developmental Science* 12, no. 1-2 (September 2018): 72; Daniel Koehler, "The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet," *Journal for Deradicalization* Winter 2014/15, no. 1 (2014): 126-27.

[68] Matteo Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 118, no. 9 (February 23, 2021): 1; Adrian Lüders, Alejandro Dinkelberg, and Michael Quayle, "Becoming 'Us' in Digital Spaces: How Online Users Creatively and Strategically Exploit Social Media Affordances to Build up Social Identity," *Acta Psychologica* 228 (August 1, 2022): 1.

[69] Petter Törnberg and Anton Törnberg, "Inside a White Power Echo Chamber: Why Fringe Digital Spaces Are Polarizing Politics," *New Media & Society* 26, no. 8 (September 2022): 5.

[70] Robby Roks and Jolijn Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online: Een Verkennend Onderzoek Naar Extreemrechts Op Social Media," *Tijdschrift Voor Criminologie* 61, no. 3 (December 1, 2019): 225-226; Koehler, "The Radical Online," 126-127; Baele, Brace, and Coan, "Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem," 1600.

3.2. Defining the echo chamber: Shared discourses and shared realities

Cinelli et al. explain that people prefer receiving and interacting with information that suits their worldviews and interests.[71] Hence, it is attractive to join online echo chambers on social media, defined as "environments in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief of users about a topic get reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes."[72] The resulting shared discourse and culture foster the establishment of group boundaries and the construction of a collective identity. The individual's identity eventually becomes intertwined with the group's social identity.[73] Subsequently, a new "shared reality" emerges inside the community of the echo chamber.[74] In other words, the echo chamber is a community of like-minded peers with a shared identity, culture, and language, where intensive interactions continuously reinforce the preferred narrative.

This thesis distinguishes between echo chambers and the concepts of filter bubbles and rabbit holes. These latter two concepts embody personalized content selected by algorithms. Algorithms aim to optimize engagement by presenting content that fits the user's interests and values.[75] By contrast, echo chambers refer to self-selected personalized content. Users look for content that fits their belief systems and consequently may enter online communities of like-minded peers. In the academic literature, there is not always a clear differentiation between echo chambers, filter bubbles, and rabbit holes.[76] This thesis employs the lens of the echo chamber because it reflects the user's agency in seeking out and entering communities, as well as the centrality of interactive processes in identity formation. Examining echo chambers emphasizes how individuals are mobilized to join extremist communities rather than merely the type of content individuals encounter through algorithmic processes.

This thesis further argues that the online environment presents an ideal space for echo chambers to emerge. Whereas offline echo chambers may constitute isolated communities meeting behind closed doors at home or at conventions, online echo chambers are found on

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[71] Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," 1.
[72] Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," 1.
[73] Guri Nordtorp Mølmen and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation: How the Internet Affects the Radicalisation of Extreme-right Lone Actor Terrorists," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 15, no. 4 (October 2021): 468; Törnberg and Törnberg, "Inside a White Power Echo Chamber," 1-23.
[74] Törnberg and Törnberg, "Inside a White Power Echo Chamber," 17.
[75] Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*, 22; Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?: Ontwikkelingspaden En Handelingsperspectieven* (2023).
[76] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 74.

online forums, chatrooms, and social media webpages.[77] Several characteristics of online communication are conducive to echo chamber mechanisms. Finding content and individuals with similar beliefs and worldviews is easier on the Internet than in the offline environment, as there are no territorial limits or resource constraints.[78] A 2013 RAND study also finds that the Internet enables a higher tendency towards confirmation bias, in which pre-existing beliefs are affirmed and reinforced.[79] Furthermore, the digital environment offers more anonymity than possible offline, encouraging unrestricted and more honest self-expression. This disinhibited ability to share personal beliefs aids in establishing relationships with like-minded others and the development of self-identity. The expression of beliefs, therefore, becomes an important identity marker online, on which group membership is based.[80] In other words, the digital space increases the likelihood of finding and forming identity-driven echo chambers compared to the offline.

Cinelli et al. demonstrate the existence of online echo chambers in their research on online interactions on controversial topics across various social media platforms. They conclude that users primarily engage with people with whom they share political beliefs. They find that, as a result, these clusters of like-minded users tend to be exposed to similar content as opposed to users outside the cluster.[81] Figure 1 below offers a simplified illustration of interactions inside an echo chamber. The large circle visualizes the perimeters of an echo chamber, and the small circles depict individual users. The two different arrows symbolize the difference in intensity of interaction. Individuals inside the echo chamber maintain more intense and reinforcing interactions with other members than with those outside the community boundaries.

[77] Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," 1.
[78] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 468; Jillianne R. Code and Nicholas E. Zaparyniuk, "Social Identities, Group Formation, and the Analysis of Online Communities," in *Social Computing: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*, ed. Subhasish Dasgupta (IGI Global, 2010), 1346-1347.
[79] Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content," 83; Koehler, "The Radical Online," 124; Tiana Gaudette, Ryan Scrivens, and Vivek Venkatesh, "The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism: Insights From Former Right-Wing Extremists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 7 (July 2020): 1351.
[80] Koehler, "The Radical Online," 18; Lüders, Dinkelberg, and Quayle, "Becoming 'Us' in Digital Spaces," 3; Code and Zaparyniuk, *Social Identities, Group Formation, and the Analysis of Online Communities*, 1346.
[81] Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," 1-8.

Figure 1. Illustration of an online echo chamber
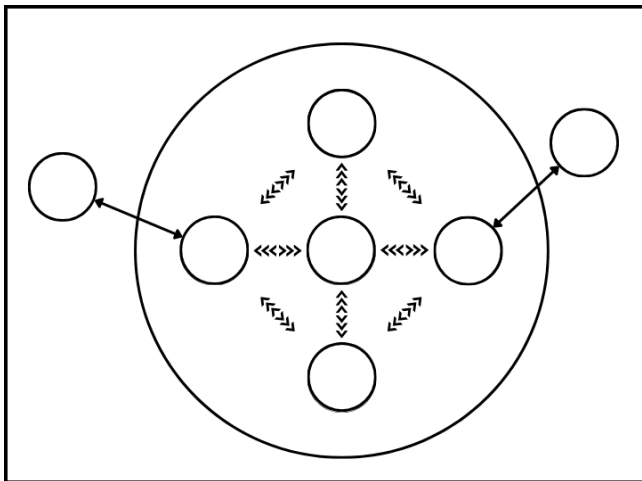
3.3.   Extremist echo chambers: Toward radicalization

Scholars in counterterrorism maintain that echo chambers can play a role in online radicalization.[82] In their research on online radicalization processes, Mølmen and Ravndal explain that the facilitation of extremism happens through echo chambers' central mechanism, 'echoing,' which in this context refers to how "constant interaction with people who hold similar and similarly extreme views as oneself may amplify radical beliefs and legitimize violent actions."[83] As shared opinions are continuously reinforced, the discourse inside the echo chamber can become more radical. In this way, the group collectively becomes more extreme. Mølmen and Ravndal conclude that echoing facilitates ideologies' development, bolstering, and legitimation.[84] Furthermore, there is "tentative evidence" that online extremist propaganda affects offline behavior and increases the propensity for violence.[85] This is particularly true for those who actively seek out extremist content themselves, as is the case with echo chambers.[86]

The collective identity built inside extremist echo chambers is characterized by "a distinct internal culture founded on the construction of a difference."[87] The identity of the in-group hinges upon antagonistic attitudes against an out-group. The internalization of such

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[82] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 481; Gaudette, Scrivens, and Venkatesh, "The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism," 1351.
[83] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 468.
[84] Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," 1; Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content," 84; Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 481.
[85] Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content," 84.
[86] Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content," 84.
[87] Törnberg and Törnberg, "Inside a White Power Echo Chamber," 17.

harmful discourses can normalize extremist viewpoints or even the use of violence.[88] As Wahlström, Törnberg, and Ekbrand state, longer-term contact with extremist content may heighten the mobilization toward and the perceived legitimacy of violence.[89] Immersion in the echo chamber builds up over time. When participating in an extremist community of like-minded people, the perception arises that the movement consists of a critical mass large enough to bring about societal change. This perception moves individuals to become more deeply entrenched and more active.[90]

The argument that the online environment facilitates the emergence of echo chambers extends to echo chambers of extremist nature. The lack of territorial and resource constraints, in combination with the higher tendency towards confirmation bias, means that the Internet provides unlimited access to extremist materials and networks. In this way, it increases opportunities for radicalization without requiring offline contact with others.[91] Furthermore, the anonymity of online activity encourages individuals to more freely express their opinions without fearing societal rejection. As a result, the individual feels less inhibited from behaving radically on the Internet, feeding their confidence and sense of value.[92] As Mølmen and Ravndal describe, the echo chamber is "a venue where the threshold is lowered for engaging in conversations about taboo subjects."[93]

The user does not already have to be radicalized before entering an echo chamber. Radical material can also evoke intrigue or fascination with extremist thought, sparking interest.[94] The ease of communication and organization facilitates the immersion of members in the extremist community.[95] Still, the extremist echo chamber is not entirely separate from the offline world. In online communities, members are often invited to join offline activities, such as demonstrations, bonding activities, or information sessions. There is a conscious attempt to heighten the offline activity of members, which often is lacking compared to

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[88] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 468; Törnberg and Törnberg, "Inside a White Power Echo Chamber," 2.
[89] Mattias Wahlström, Anton Törnberg, and Hans Ekbrand, "Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-right Social Media," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 11 (August 2020): 3293.
[90] Koehler, "The Radical Online," 121.
[91] Hassan et al., "Exposure to Extremist Online Content," 83; Koehler, "The Radical Online," 124; Gaudette, Scrivens, and Venkatesh, "The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism," 1344, 1351; Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 242; Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 469.
[92] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 468; Code and Zaparyniuk, *Social Identities, Group Formation, and the Analysis of Online Communities*, 1346-1349; Koehler, "The Radical Online," 118.
[93] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 468, 481.
[94] Gaudette, Scrivens, and Venkatesh, "The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism," 1351.
[95] Koehler, "The Radical Online," 118.

online adherence. In addition, informal bonding activities like camping trips aid in the maintenance of a shared identity.[96]

Some scholars challenge the notion of the echo chamber. A widely cited work includes Guess et al.'s review essay on the prevalence of selective exposure to American political news.[97] While maintaining that academic scholarship has demonstrated that echo chambers and filter bubbles can result in the erosion of democracy, the authors posit that the public debate on selective exposure overestimates their existence and impact. By comparing data from lab experiments and behavioral research, they find that the general American public pays relatively little attention to political news. If they do, they rarely exclusively engage with ideologically affirming content. Their data also shows that people prefer congenial information more than they bypass disagreeable information, meaning users will still be exposed to uncongenial content outside their potential echo chambers. Guess et al. furthermore emphasize that people do not exclusively consume news information but also engage with information through, for example, entertainment channels.[98] In short, the American public does not appear sufficiently intensively engaged with congenial news sources for it to constitute echo chambers.

Several objections can be raised in light of these findings. Firstly, Guess et al. examine data on the general American public, observing that while most people do not live in an online echo chamber, the construction of echo chambers is most likely for a highly motivated, politically engaged minority. People with extremist tendencies and those searching for an identity group arguably fall under this category. The authors concur that "Americans with extreme views are more likely to be embedded in homogeneous Twitter networks."[99] Secondly, the authors state that people generally do not consume news information from exclusively congenial news channels. They point out that exposure to counter-attitudinal posts is rarely fully eliminated, even when seeking out rigid ideological content.[100] Yet, the argument of the online echo chamber is not that people have no access to other information channels. Indeed, the offline lives of extremists can look entirely different from their online social contacts and activities.[101] Seeing these echo chambers as equivalent to having no other sources of information is too limited for the online-offline nexus.

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[96] Koehler, "The Radical Online," 128; Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 235.
[97] Andrew Guess et al., "Avoiding the Echo Chamber About Echo Chambers: Why Selective Exposure to Like-minded Political News Is Less Prevalent Than You Think," *Knight Foundation* 2 (January 2018): 1–25.
[98] Guess et al., "Avoiding the Echo Chamber About Echo Chambers," 5-8.
[99] Guess et al., "Avoiding the Echo Chamber About Echo Chambers," 11.
[100] Guess et al., "Avoiding the Echo Chamber About Echo Chambers," 12.
[101] Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 235; De Koster and Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort," 242.

Finally, a key component of Guess et al.'s argument against the prevalence of echo chambers is that their size is not large enough to be significant. To illustrate, they highlight that a specific far-right website falls outside the top most visited web pages. They continue: "Others may point to social media as facilitating echo chambers, but the proportion of the public that gets news on these platforms is also frequently overstated."[102] While providing nuance to the debate, the smaller size of extremist communities should not negate the importance of understanding their origins, dynamics, and impact. Guess et al.'s conclusion presents echo chambers as a security issue by claiming that "the danger is not that all of us are living in echo chambers but that a subset of the most politically engaged and vocal among us are," but the authors do not elaborate under which conditions such echo chambers may arise.[103] Therefore, the echo chamber perspective in relation to extremist communities should not be rejected. Thus far, however, the counterterrorism analysis of extremist echo chambers as radicalization environments paints only part of the picture. If the echo chamber hosts a community with a shared identity, and if joining like-minded communities is attractive, then there are arguably mechanisms other than a tendency towards violence that attract users to extremist communities. Hence, the next section introduces insights from Conflict Studies scholarship to develop an identity-based lens on extremist echo chambers.

3.4. Inside the echo chamber: The mechanisms of group identity

As established, the central dynamic of extremist echo chambers is that the in-group's identity is placed in opposition to an out-group. In other words, extremist echo chambers are founded on Us-vs-Them attitudes. These can be understood through identity-driven theories of violent conflict. Social identity theories assert that conflict involves "an escalatory process of identity group dynamics" centered around basic human needs.[104] Social identity refers to an individual's identity in relation to the social environment. It is based on similarities with the in-group and differences with out-groups. The in-group is demarcated by group boundaries, dictating who is a member. In-group members must adhere to the group's norms and values.[105] Fundamentally, social identity approaches assume that human beings have an innate

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[102] Guess et al., "Avoiding the Echo Chamber About Echo Chambers," 8.
[103] Guess et al., "Avoiding the Echo Chamber About Echo Chambers," 16.
[104] Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2016), 41.
[105] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 23-24; Code and Zaparyniuk, *Social Identities, Group Formation, and the Analysis of Online Communities*, 1347-1348.

desire to belong to a collective and require a secure sense of self, causing them to categorize themselves into a group.[106]

Individuals tend to perceive their in-group as superior to out-groups, which can trigger competitive or even hostile intergroup attitudes. Protection of the in-group's self-image is partly achieved by negatively evaluating out-groups, such as through discrimination. Group identification also encourages prioritizing the collectivity of individual traits. The individual is "depersonalized" as they increasingly associate themselves with the group and its values and norms.[107] As the individual increasingly associates themself as a group member, the collective identity is adopted.[108] Examining identity-driven mechanisms uncovers individuals' motives for mobilization in ways that Media Studies and counterterrorism scholarship overlook. Rather than studying extremist discourse or trajectories toward violence, the identity perspective helps grasp the initial drivers that draw individuals to extremist communities.

While the identity approaches reflect mechanisms evident in online right-wing extremism, their focus is on explaining how violent conflict occurs. Here, the conception of conflict involves intergroup physical violence. While extremist expressions on the Internet can indeed include a glorification and legitimization of violence, it is not physical violence that is the main product of online echo chambers.[109] Before examining the various approaches to group identification, it must first be explored what 'violence' looks like in the digital sphere, in other words, why extremist echo chambers are harmful. As described in Chapter 2, much of extremist discourse targets a specific group, which is then stereotyped, dehumanized, or otherwise negatively discussed. The most prevalent targets of Dutch extremist discourse are Muslim communities.[110] Furthermore, hateful online discourses targeted at specific groups in society are often camouflaged behind a more moderate tone to circumvent content moderation policies of social media platforms. By appearing more moderate, the far-right can also attract new members who are not yet identifying as 'extremists.' An effective illustration of this tactic is the employment of memes and irony to

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[106] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 41-42; Michael A. Hogg and Janice R. Adelman, "Uncertainty -Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership," *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (September 2013): 436.
[107] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 43-45; Code and Zaparyniuk, *Social Identities, Group Formation, and the Analysis of Online Communities*, 1351-52.
[108] Code and Zaparyniuk, *Social Identities, Group Formation, and the Analysis of Online Communities*, 1352; Lüders, Dinkelberg, and Quayle, "Becoming 'Us' in Digital Spaces," 3.
[109] Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 226; Wahlström, Törnberg, and Ekbrand, "Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-right Social Media," 3293.
[110] Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 225-45.

reach the outside public.[111] The spread and internalization of hateful narratives inside echo chambers can exacerbate intergroup and societal tensions.[112] These mechanisms foster polarization, discrimination, and systematic hatred against demographic groups who often already experience structural marginalization. The normalization of hateful narratives against minorities thus advances a form of non-physical harm. Having outlined how immersion into extremist echo chambers can be harmful, the following sections explore how various identity approaches explain group identification.

3.4.1.   The desire to belong

Brewer's optimal distinctiveness theory considers people's need for group membership due to the innate desire to belong.[113] Brewer argues that humans have a fundamental need for inclusion into an in-group and differentiation from out-groups. Inclusion is achieved by devaluating the out-group. Distinction is threatened if individuals fear being taken over by the out-group. A threat to such intergroup distinction is then protected with hostility against the out-groups. Brewer claims that these dynamics can fuel violent conflict. In this way, the need for belonging may trigger antagonistic attitudes.[114]

Research affirms that individuals' first motivation for seeking out an online extremist community is often the desire to belong.[115] De Koster and Houtman particularly observe this desire in individuals experiencing social isolation.[116] Offline rejection drives them to search for an in-group where they can form a shared identity. This results in a strongly connected community where users find companions with similar views and an outlet for grievances.[117] Accordingly, the need for inclusion can spur individuals towards immersion in extremist echo chambers, where the community's ideology gradually becomes ingrained.[118] Indeed, former extremists have highlighted the value they attached to feeling like they belonged in the

[111] Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 241; Baele, Brace, and Coan, "Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem," 1607; Ryan Scrivens et al., "Right-Wing Extremists' Use of the Internet: Emerging Trends in the Empirical Literature," in *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada and the United States*, ed. Barbara Perry, Jeff Gruenewald, and Ryan Scrivens (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 366.
[112] Miroslav Mareš and Petra Mlejnková, "Propaganda and Disinformation as a Security Threat," in *Challenging Online Propaganda and Disinformation in the 21st Century*, ed. Miloš Gregor and Petra Mlejnková (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 89.
[113] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 48-49.
[114] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 48-49.
[115] Gaudette, Scrivens, and Venkatesh, "The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism," 1345-1346; Ineke van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism: Comparative Cases From the Netherlands," in *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*, ed. Max Taylor, P. M. Currie, and Donald Holbrook (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 133-134.
[116] De Koster and Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort," 240-34.
[117] De Koster and Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort," 240-34.
[118] Gaudette, Scrivens, and Venkatesh, "The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism," 1345-1346.

movement.[119] Far-right organizations effectively exploit these vulnerabilities as they identify and target lonely individuals for recruitment. Similarly, the online environment offers an accessible and easy medium to find like-minded peers. In particular, the freedom of expression and anonymity are considered highly valuable elements of online networks.[120]

3.4.2.   The need for a secure sense of self

Another explanation for group membership is the desire to reduce uncertainty. Hogg and Adelman's uncertainty-identity theory posits that group identification helps individuals achieve a secure sense of self.[121] They argue that belonging to a group aids the formulation of norms and values and increases predictability in the social environment. Individuals best ameliorate uncertainty by self-categorizing with so-called high entitativity groups, which are groups characterized by rigid belief systems, high levels of hierarchy, and strict behavioral norms. Hogg and Adelman judge that extremist groups have the highest entitativity, as they tend to have strong ideologies, strict internal discipline, clear organizational structures, and authoritative leadership.[122]

From an organizational perspective, the contemporary far-right no longer fits this description. As described, the movement has developed from centralized, hierarchical organizations into flexible online networks of echo chambers.[123] However, from an ideological perspective, right-wing extremists have maintained a preference for hierarchical structures with authoritative leaders.[124] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga formulate that "in practice, this often translates in a defence of social hierarchies, notably because far-right actors are driven by the belief that inequalities between people (whether they be racial, ethnic, economic, religious or cultural) are natural and desirable."[125] A shared vision of how society should be organized may thus explain how echo chambers reduce uncertainty. On the individual level, personal problems could also cause uncertainties and drive group membership. Mølmen and Ravndal find that 'typical' members of extremist communities often deal with vulnerabilities such as mental health issues, a negative home environment, or

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[119] Koehler, "The Radical Online," 127.
[120] Gaudette, Scrivens, and Venkatesh, "The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism," 1345-1346; De Koster and Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort," 240.
[121] Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," 437-46.
[122] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 50; Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," 437-46.
[123] Fleur Valk, Léonie de Jonge, and Pieter Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism: A Case Study of the Northern Netherlands," *Journal for Deradicalization* 35, no. Summer (June 2023): 89.
[124] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131.
[125] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 79.

difficulties in the work or social environment.[126] In this sense, the online echo chamber reduces uncertainty by providing a predictable space with internal consensus on norms, values, and goals.[127]

3.4.3. The protection of human needs

Human needs theorists like Azar and Gurr link group identification with the protection of basic human needs.[128] Human needs comprise material needs but also the need to be accepted in society and to have access to political and economic institutions. Accordingly, individuals construct a communal identity with their 'identity group,' characterized by shared norms, values, culture, or historical backgrounds. If human needs cannot be met, collective resentment results. Resentment may turn into protest if the communal group fears marginalization. Conflict is also more likely to break out if the identity group represents a marginalized community whose grievances are repressed or ignored by the government. Moreover, structural conditions, like the level of polarization based on communal identities, affect the likelihood of violent conflict. Strong Us-vs-Them attitudes encourage perceiving the 'Enemy' through a derogatory, stereotyping, hostile lens. Thus, the core mechanism in these approaches is the deprivation of basic human needs. Gurr emphasizes that the identity groups' experienced human needs deprivation is relative in the sense that it involves the perception that the in-group is or will soon be marginalized relative to others. This perception may trigger mobilization to collective action out of the desire to protect the in-group.[129]

The far-right heavily reflects the experience of relative need deprivation, demonstrated by the centrality of Us-vs-Them narratives and the prevalence of ethnocentrism and racism in its belief systems.[130] As discussed in Chapter 2, right-wing extremism is based around an aversion to the foreign, which is conceived as a threat toward the in-group. The conviction is held that the out-group threatens the in-group's well-being or survival.[131] This constructed Enemy primarily consists of migrant minorities. As explained, the far-right perceives Muslim populations as incompatible with the Dutch culture. Historically, minorities became increasingly criminalized as a result. Islam has been presented as a destructive force that will cause the downfall of Western society. In this context, the contemporary far-right

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[126] Mølmen and Ravndal, "Mechanisms of Online Radicalisation," 466-467.
[127] Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," 448-449.
[128] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 84-95.
[129] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict*, 84-95.
[130] Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131.
[131] Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 227; Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism," 79.

claims to protect the Western identity and culture.[132] These perceptions materialize mainly through violent discourses.[133] Wahlström et al. analyzed violent discourses in far-right online communities and found that anti-immigrant narratives often involved highly hostile emotional content surrounding topics such as crime and victimization.[134] This discourse also heavily involves the dehumanization of immigrants.[135] Extremist echo chambers are conducive environments for expressing such grievances.

3.5. Echo chambers as communities

In sum, extremist echo chambers are conceptualized as highly immersive online communities of like-minded peers where the mechanism of echoing operates actively, resulting in intensified extremist attitudes. Central to the echo chamber is the construction of a collective identity based on antagonistic attitudes. An exploration of identity-driven approaches in the Conflict Studies field produces three elements that spur group identification: a desire to belong, a need for a secure sense of self, and the protection of human needs. An experienced threat to these areas can trigger the mobilization of intergroup hostility, collective action, or violence. The concept of the echo chamber, integrated with traditional identity theories, allows for the examination of the dynamics of contemporary right-wing extremism. Understanding how individuals are immersed in online extremist communities requires approaching echo chambers as spaces where membership to the far-right is mobilized. To this end, the three mechanisms of group identification are used as analytical categories to analyze data on the Dutch far-right.

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[132] Rob Witte, "The Dutch Far Right: From 'Classical Outsiders' to 'Modern Insiders,'" in *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*, ed. Max Taylor, P. M. Currie, and Donald Holbrook (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 105-28; Van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism," 131, 138.

[133] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 49-54.

[134] Wahlström, Törnberg, and Ekbrand, "Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-right Social Media," 3290-3311.

[135] Wahlström, Törnberg, and Ekbrand, "Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-right Social Media," 3290-3311.

4.   Methodology: Single-case study using secondary data

To answer the research question '*How can we understand online echo chambers as spaces for Dutch far-right membership mobilization after 2020?*' this thesis performs a qualitative single-case study analysis based on secondary data. This chapter outlines the methodological approach by first discussing the case selection and the case study method. Then, it justifies the source selection before describing the data collection and analysis process. Lastly, the chapter reflects on ethical considerations and research positionality.

4.1.   Case study method

This thesis aims to advance the understanding of how individuals are mobilized inside extremist echo chambers through a qualitative single-case study of the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a compelling case for studying online echo chambers due to its high levels of online mobilization compared to relatively low offline mobilization. Like other Western democracies, the Netherlands reflects a trend of increasing polarization and electoral successes of far-right political parties in recent decades.[136] However, unlike comparable countries such as Germany, the Netherlands has seen a relatively marginal amount of extreme-right terrorism.[137] The NCTV writes that "historically speaking, the Netherlands has seen very little right-wing extremist violence, with only a few known incidents of violence between 2015 and 2022."[138] Moreover, despite growing electoral support for far-right beliefs, the NCTV does not observe an increase in membership to offline extremist organizations.[139] The core membership of far-right organizations generally consists of no more than a few dozen participants.[140] In contrast, Dutch far-right extremist communities attract hundreds of participants online.[141] These findings indicate a more pronounced contrast between offline and online mobilization in the Netherlands compared to other Western countries. This makes the Netherlands a suitable case for exploring online extremist mobilization. The Dutch

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[136] Daniel Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future," *PRISM* 6, no. 2 (2016): 87; Mattias Wahlström, Anton Törnberg, and Hans Ekbrand, "Dynamics of Violent and Dehumanizing Rhetoric in Far-right Social Media," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 11 (August 2020): 3290.

[137] Floris Vermeulen and Koen Visser, "Preventing Violent Extremism in the Netherlands: Overview of its Broad Approach," *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals* 128 (September 2021), 132; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 58* (2023), 28.

[138] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 58*, 28.

[139] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Nationale Contraterrorisme Strategie 2022-2026* (2022), 8.

[140] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging* (2018), 12.

[141] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024*, 28; Mensje van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief* (DSP-Groep, 2021).

far-right is also a relevant research case, as there remains little academic and expert knowledge on how the Dutch movement uses social media.[142] This highlights the need for broader and deeper knowledge of Dutch right-wing extremism on the Internet.

A single-case study is the most appropriate methodological approach for this thesis. A qualitative case study allows for an in-depth investigation into why and how a phenomenon occurs.[143] As previously delineated, the far-right is a highly diverse movement.[144] Researching a single case allows the space to identify and contextualize nuances within the case, such as ideological and organizational differences, that may be lost in a broader analysis.[145] For example, Chapter 2 characterized Dutch far-right discourse as fundamentally Islamophobic and xenophobic. This discourse developed in a historical context specific to the Netherlands. Far-right movements in other countries or regions may differ considerably, depending on their historical and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, a lower-level analysis, such as a regional case, would offer too little data to produce a meaningful analysis.

Nevertheless, case study research raises valid concerns about external validity, referring to the generalizability of the research findings, and internal validity, which considers whether external factors could have influenced the research findings.[146] However, as Toshkov affirms, the aim of single-case studies should not be generalizability beyond the case.[147] Indeed, this research aims not to provide conclusions for the far-right as a global movement but to explore an alternative perspective on digital right-wing extremism. The value of such endeavors through case studies lies in the possibility that "its in-depth study can generate important hypotheses which can then be tested in comparable case situations. If hypotheses generated from a case study are found to hold water or replicate through multiple similar cases, this can help the researcher in moving towards theory building or generalisation."[148]

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[142] Robby Roks and Jolijn Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online: Een Verkennend Onderzoek Naar Extreemrechts Op Social Media," *Tijdschrift Voor Criminologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2019): 226.

[143] Ariadne Vromen, "Qualitative Methods," in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, ed. Vivien Lowndes, David Marsh, Gerry Stoker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 243; Arya Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research: Key Attributes and Navigating the Conundrums in Its Application," *Sociological Bulletin* 70, no. 1 (November 2020): 95.

[144] Ineke van der Valk, "Youth Engagement in Right Wing Extremism: Comparative Cases From the Netherlands," in *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*, ed. Max Taylor, P. M. Currie, and Donald Holbrook (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 136; Fleur Valk, Léonie de Jonge, and Pieter Nanninga, "The Regional Face of Extremism: A Case Study of the Northern Netherlands," *Journal for Deradicalization* 35, no. Summer (June 2023): 86.

[145] Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 97.

[146] Sandra Halperin and Oliver Heath, *Political Research: Methods and Practical Skills* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 162.

[147] Dimiter Toshkov, "Research Design," in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, ed. Vivien Lowndes, David Marsh, Gerry Stoker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 234.

[148] Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 103.

Priya states that optimizing the research's replicability can instead ensure external validity.[149] Regarding internal validity, external factors must be appropriately considered and minimized.[150] Here, it is vital to acknowledge that an identity lens may overlook other valid mechanisms that could influence individuals' entry into extremist echo chambers. However, studying additional mechanisms is beyond the scope of this thesis.

4.2.   Data collection and analysis

The thesis investigates the case through a secondary source analysis of documents, which involves using previously collected data by someone else for a different purpose.[151] This is the most suitable approach for answering the research question, as the analyzed sources embody extensive, specialized, and representative research projects and information. Primary source analysis would not have feasibly yielded such comprehensive levels of data and would have forced this thesis research to be much more limited. Moreover, the online extremist sphere can be highly closed-off and difficult to locate. It is unlikely that online communities could have been reached to such an extent that a detailed primary source analysis could be conducted. Still, several limitations are inherent to performing a secondary data analysis. First, the research depends on previously collected data, which may not be satisfactorily available to answer the research question. Second, the data collection methods are not always publicly available, and thus, the credibility of the data is only an estimation. The first limitation is alleviated through flexibility in the research development and acknowledgment that data availability may limit the analysis findings. The second obstacle is mitigated by exclusively analyzing reputable sources and cross-verifying information to ensure credibility.[152] Nevertheless, it is essential to understand that such constraints can never be fully circumvented.

The method of secondary source analysis of documents complements the existing body of scholarship on the digital far-right in the Netherlands, as it predominantly employs primary data research. For example, Roks and Schoot perform a social media analysis of three extremist groupings.[153] De Koster and Houtman also examine online content and

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[149] Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 101.
[150] Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 101.
[151] Melissa P. Johnston, "Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come," *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* 3, no. 3 (September 2014): 619.
[152] Johnston, "Secondary Data Analysis: A Method of Which the Time Has Come," 622-24.
[153] Roks and Schoot, "Het Aanpassingsdilemma Online," 225-45.

interview extremist members.[154] Valk, De Jonge, and Nanninga execute an extensive case study of extremist incidents in the Northern region of the Netherlands, performing a content analysis on newspapers, court cases, and research reports, as well as conducting expert interviews and consulting secondary data. This thesis' research approach may yield insights not yet uncovered through primary research strategies by synthesizing findings from various reports.

Source selection occurred through a purposive sampling of publicly available, non-academic reports on the online dimension of the Dutch far-right. First, reports by the AIVD and NCTV were selected. These consist of annual reports, threat assessments, and counterterrorism policy reports. However, government data on sensitive topics, such as crime, may be biased to favor the government, as illustrated by Halperin and Heath.[155] To avoid a potential political bias and include different angles in the data, non-governmental sources were selected through a targeted Internet search on the contemporary far-right in the Netherlands. These sources comprise reports from research institutions Verwey-Jonker Instituut, Anne Frank Stichting, DSP-Groep, and Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit. Additionally, Sterkenburg's 2021 book *Maar dat mag je niet zeggen* was selected. This book is based on interviews the author held with various Dutch right-wing extremists. By providing a more personal approach to mobilization, in which individuals' own perceptions and thoughts are included, this book offered crucial data complementary to the more holistic accounts provided in the research reports.

The research's timeframe, constituting post-2020, was identified out of consideration that the far-right evolves at a fast pace. The source selection aims to represent the most recent reports available. Except for the 2018 AIVD report *Rechts-extremisme in Nederland: Een fenomeen in beweging,* all selected sources were published no earlier than 2020. This temporal cutoff is based on the expectation that the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, significantly altered the right-wing scene in the Netherlands. The pandemic "caused anxiety, uncertainty, fantasies of doom, loneliness, and latent xenophobia," which increased opportunities for right-wing extremists to spread their ideologies and recruit new members.[156] The timeframe thus focuses on this post-pandemic climate. In the source selection, an exception was made for the 2018 AIVD report because it provided a detailed analysis of the Dutch far-right that was unavailable in more recent AIVD publications. It was, therefore,

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[154] Willem De Koster and Dick Houtman, "Toevluchtsoord Voor Een Bedreigde Soort. Over Virtuele Gemeenschapsvorming Door Rechts-extremisten," *Sociologie* 2, no. 3 (September 2006): 232-48.
[155] Halperin and Heath, *Political Research*, 201.
[156] Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*, 21.

deemed too valuable to the research topic to be excluded. To prevent outdated information from influencing the research results, the findings of this report were cross-referenced with more recent sources. The selected sources embody a comprehensive account of the publicly available information on the contemporary digital Dutch far-right post-2020.

The data drawn from these sources comprise information on individuals' trajectory to seek and join online communities of right-wing extremism and, more broadly, the Dutch far-right in the digital space. For information to be included in the analysis, an online dimension is required, such as the role of social media, discourses on the Internet, and online communications. Specific attention is paid to the Netherlands' three most prominent ideological strands in the Netherlands, as identified in Chapter 2: identitarians, the alt-right, and accelerationists. To understand echo chambers as communities where individuals mobilize toward extremist membership, Chapter 3 explored identity-driven mechanisms for group membership, broadly categorized as the perceived threat to belonging, security, and human needs. These mechanisms constitute the analytical categories of this thesis. Based on the findings of the theory chapter, these mechanisms are further operationalized into subcategories to analyze how they affect an individual's trajectory toward online membership in extremist communities. These elements are indicated in Table 2, which serves as the analytical framework for making sense of echo chambers as community spaces.

Table 2. Identity-driven mechanisms for group membership

Category	Subcategory	Examples
A. Desire to belong	A1. Experience of offline rejection or social isolation	Weak offline contacts; loneliness
	A2. Searching for and finding like-minded peers	Searching for content that affirms beliefs; searching for people with the same values
	A3. Freedom of expression	Desiring an outlet for grievances; expressing violent fantasies; circumventing social condemnation

Table 2 (continued)

Category	Subcategory	Examples
B. The need for a secure sense of self	B1. Formulation of clear norms and values	Discussion of rigid norms and values
	B2. High entitativity of the group	Hierarchy; rigid beliefs; rigid behavioral norms
	B3. High entitativity of the envisioned society	Authoritarianism; hierarchy; rigid norms and values
	B4. Personal issues	Problematic upbringing, negative family/work environment; mental disorders
C. The protection of human needs	C1. Experience of repressed or ignored grievances	Government held responsible for failing to protect citizens' interests; anti-institutional sentiments
	C2. Perception of in-group's survival or well-being as under threat	Rejection of multiculturalism; rejection of people of color; discussions of Dutch culture and traditions
	C3. Collective resentment of the Enemy	Derogatory language towards others; dehumanization of demographic groups; anti-immigrant propaganda

It must be noted that some subcategories can partially overlap but that different nuances apply. For example, the experience of unrecognized grievances (C1) can be directly linked to the perception that the in-group's well-being is threatened (C2). However, the first refers more to the role of the government, and the latter to developments or demographic groups that pose a threat. The provided examples demonstrate how the subcategories were interpreted. Subcategory B1 did not yield data that could not be interpreted through a different category and is therefore omitted from the analysis. Finally, the analysis includes several quotations from Dutch sources. These quotes were translated from Dutch to English through the translation engine DeepL Translate and, if deemed necessary, were edited by

hand for grammar improvements. The use of translated quotes protects the thesis' comprehensibility while adhering as closely as possible to the original content of the data. The data collection period ended on 11 June 2024.

As in any research project, this methodology requires reflection on ethical considerations. As identified by Halperin and Heath, relevant ethical concerns include avoiding bias, ensuring correct and objective reporting of the findings, and using information appropriately.[157] These considerations are especially pertinent to secondary analysis, as the analyzed data should not be mispresented to adhere to the thesis' objectives. Bias can be minimized through reflexivity on research positionality, which concerns "the process of constant reflection on one's biography, social position, values, biases, preconceptions and so on."[158] The influence of these factors on the research must be mitigated.[159] Still, positionality also "acknowledges and recognizes that researchers are part of the social world they are researching and that this world has already been interpreted by existing social actors."[160] In other words, while efforts can be made to mitigate subjectivity, the social world will always have some influence on the research. Thus, it is vital to understand and be aware of how preconceptions may have shaped the study.[161]

Personal characteristics like left-leaning political beliefs, an immigrant background, or female gender may have influenced this research through negative preconceptions about right-wing extremism. Combined with the choice for secondary analysis, the researcher also remained entirely outside the movement, which may have limited the ability to fully investigate people's motives inside the far-right. To illustrate, personal political beliefs make it more difficult to approach right-wing extremism as a movement with legitimate grievances. Further, a male researcher might have emphasized other aspects in the analysis, such as male mental health issues over anti-feminist characteristics. While acknowledging that such choices may partly stem from subjectivity, the systematic approach of this thesis hopes to minimize the influence of positionality on the research results. The analysis reflects the level and depth of information found in the data, ensuring that no aspects were over- or underemphasized. Moreover, diligent referencing is employed to ensure proper attribution to the original data collectors.

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[157] Halperin and Heath, *Political Research*, 180.
[158] Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 107.
[159] Priya, "Case Study Methodology of Qualitative Research," 107.
[160] Andrew Gary Darwin Holmes, "Researcher Positionality - a Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - a New Researcher Guide," *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 8, no. 4 (September 1, 2020): 3.
[161] Holmes, "Researcher Positionality," 4.

5.   Analysis: Mobilization through identity

This analysis applies the analytical categories identified in Chapter 3 to the Dutch far-right. Each section addresses one analytical category and is organized by the subcategories identified in Table 2. For each subcategory, information on the general far-right is discussed first. When available, specific information for the three ideological strands follows thereafter. The omission of an ideological strand in the discussion reflects a lack of available data for analysis. Each section concludes with an answer to the corresponding research question. These answers culminate in the final section of this chapter, which addresses the main research question.

5.1.   A space to belong

To answer the question '*How do echo chambers affect the desire to belong?*', this section analyzes findings related to the experience of social isolation, the search for like-minded peers, and the freedom of expression. The data reflects the finding that the experience of *social isolation* increases the propensity to seek a community online. Sterkenburg describes that social isolation increases the likelihood that individuals construct an alternative reality.[162] Considering echo chambers as communities with clear narratives and their own 'truths,' it can be inferred that people with weak or no contacts are more inclined to enter an echo chamber when experiencing social isolation. Interestingly, the experienced social isolation of alt-right adherents does not limit itself to mainstream society but extends to traditional far-right groupings. Sterkenburg finds that, rather than merely differing ideologically from identitarians or neo-Nazis, the alt-right also judges the traditional extremists to lack intellect, fluidity, or vision.[163] Those with similar convictions as the alt-right search for a community that better suits their personalities, which leads many first to alt-right webpages before joining the movement as a whole.[164]

The data also confirms that social media significantly eases the ability to find *like-minded peers* and has, by extension, lowered the threshold for joining a community.[165] Sterkenburg articulates how one of her interviewees searched online for a communal culture until he found one that suited him: "Because Bram didn't feel at home with the Lonsdalers at

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[162] Nikki Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen* (Amsterdam: Das Mag, 2021), 130.
[163] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 166.
[164] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 166.
[165] Mensje van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief* (DSP-Groep, 2021), 22; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging* (2018), 11; Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 26.

school, . . . he went searching on the Internet and ended up at an Internet forum: Holland-Hardcore. . . . Soon, Bram became a seasoned forum user and started participating in discussions as well."[166] The culture established inside online echo chambers is evident in the finding that these communities often develop a shared language only fully understood by its members. Reports by the NCTV and Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit explain that the use of codewords and visuals, such as memes, of which a layer of irony or humor hides the ideological message, is a common phenomenon.[167] Like-minded peers may thus be found without a pre-existing shared ideological foundation but instead through shared humor, which can gradually lead to the normalization and internalization of extremist beliefs. In addition, the far-right's use of humor in online messaging serves to attract new users and deny any accusations of intended harm.[168] The search for like-minded peers is also evident in the existence of extremist discussion forums or group chats, where members can vent their frustrations and exchange opinions.[169]

This use of online discussion forums is particularly evident in the alt-right. As part of an international movement, its adherents are closely connected to like-minded peers through a broad digital network, where they debate societal topics like economics, the movement's goals and grievances, and efforts for collaboration.[170] The alt-right adherents interviewed by Sterkenburg underline the value they attach to having found like-minded peers with whom they can exchange ideas.[171] A member of Erkenbrand describes how he had felt out of place in society before finding similarly-minded people: "It feels like coming home. . . . I've always thought: Where are the people like me? Because I don't feel at home in society, how this is all going and how everyone behaves. I felt it was wrong, and now I have discovered people who suit me. And discovered a way of thinking of which I think: Hey, finally, that's right."[172] Another striking example of the intrigue sparked by discovering like-minded peers and ideology-affirming content is Bart. Sterkenburg describes his radicalization process before officially joining Erkenbrand: "Bart, who had long sought substantiation for his ethnonationalist ideas on the Internet, watched videos on YouTube about conspiracy theories

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[166] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 147-148.
[167] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 58* (2023), 26; Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag* (2021).
[168] Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag*.
[169] Willem Wagenaar, *Factsheet Extreemrechts in Nederland Januari-Juni 2023* (Anne Frank Stichting, 2023), 39.
[170] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 12; Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 165-166.
[171] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 159-227.
[172] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 167.

every day starting in 2015 - sometimes up to six hours a day. By his own account, he saw thousands of videos and read tens of thousands of comments."[173] Sterkenburg typifies alt-right adherents as "Ideological Seekers," who she claims desire ideological backing for their worldviews, which they find on the Internet.[174] For example, she explains how an interviewee's membership to the alt-right began with an interest in better understanding the world, after which he visited alt-right webpages that were recommended to him by an online friend.[175] Sterkenburg also finds that, for some, digital contact suffices to establish strong friendships without ever meeting in person.[176] The far-right is aware of the appeal of finding a community with similar beliefs and engages in developing online content to attract recruits.[177] Echo chambers, as spaces with a consensus on beliefs, norms, and values and a lack of dissenting opinions, thus offer ideal spaces to find like-minded peers. Their online nature makes them easier to find and explore, lowering thresholds for individuals to seek out communities that suit their interests.

The prevalence of extremist discussion forums not only alludes to communities of like-minded individuals but also reflects the *freedom of expression* experienced in the digital sphere. The anonymity possible on the Internet allows for a heightened sense of security in freely sharing opinions. One way in which this is visible is that individuals find in the extremist digital world the liberty to indulge in their fantasies and glorifications of violence. Some people join online extremist communities to watch and contribute to violent content, such as streaming a terrorist attack. In some of these groups, the glorification of violence is the driving unifying aspect. Here, there is no other ideological basis.[178] This does not mean that violent fantasies are entirely unrelated to ideological development. In its latest annual report, the AIVD describes that "admiration for violence played a larger role in the thinking of the right-wing terrorist movement in the Netherlands in 2023. Last year, the AIVD saw more often than in previous years that a fascination with aggression and gore drew (especially) young men to the right-wing terrorist scene."[179]

Furthermore, on the Internet, it is specifically extremist echo chambers that are suitable outlets for opinions. An alt-right member compares a mainstream forum to the

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[173] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 197.
[174] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 191.
[175] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 173.
[176] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 211.
[177] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 15.
[178] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023* (2023), 25; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *AIVD-Jaarverslag 2023* (2024), 15.
[179] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *AIVD-Jaarverslag 2023*, 15.

right-wing extremist platform Stormfront: "You're not allowed to say certain things over there. . . . So then I started looking: Where can I go online, with people who talk about it in the same way? Even on science forums, you can't talk about race. But you can on websites like Stormfront.org. So that's where I ended up."[180] It can be concluded that online echo chambers offer space to express fantasies and opinions freely without fearing social backlash. On such forums, users can share and watch violent content, such as school shootings, fantasize about participating in violence against specific individuals, and read terrorist propaganda and manuals.[181] Hence, the freedom of expression allowed in extremist echo chambers is attractive to users with opinions or interests that fall outside the norm in mainstream society, encouraging them to join.

To summarize, the findings indicate that echo chambers affect the desire to belong by widening individuals' opportunities to find like-minded communities. People with difficulty forming relationships or feeling like they do not fit in in the offline environment are more likely to turn to the Internet to fulfill these needs. The nature of echo chambers means a clear consensus on beliefs, norms, and values, making it easier to find communities that suit the individual's interests. The ability to express opinions without social condemnation further makes echo chambers attractive to those with extremist tendencies. Adherents to the alt-right reflect the experience of social isolation, which also extends to other far-right groups. The search for like-minded opinions and communities is also evident. Specific information on the identitarian and accelerationist movements and the freedom of expression was not available.

5.2.   A space without uncertainties

This section explores the presence of high entitativity in right-wing extremist groups' structures, high entitativity in the far-right's ideal society, and personal issues to address the question: '*How do echo chambers affect the need for a secure sense of self?*' The attraction of *groups with high entitativity* seems much less relevant for the contemporary far-right and the digital environment. Indeed, clearly demarcated groupings no longer characterize the far-right. Organizational structures have become less important, and there are generally no clear leaders or hierarchies. Instead, the movement consists of ad-hoc collaborations and a high degree of flexibility. The democratic nature of online chats and social media, through

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[180] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 174.
[181] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024* (2024), 26.

which much of extremist communication occurs, explains this shift.[182] Despite these low organizational levels, individuals remain connected in a transnational, digital network.[183] Interestingly, however, the latest Terrorist Threat Assessment by the NCTV, published in June 2024, signaled a very recent trend of more national collaboration and subsequent professionalization of Dutch far-right organizations.[184] This may indicate that far-right groupings are shifting back toward more structured organization and higher levels of entitativity, although this remains yet to be seen. Thus far, the democratic nature of online echo chambers means that the desire for high entitativity cannot be a driver in group membership, at least for the traditional right-wing extremist communities.

This analysis finds the alt-right to be an exception to the low entitativity of current far-right groups. Indeed, Sterkenburg characterizes the alt-right by its strict internal discipline and specific expectations from its members.[185] She elaborates that alt-right members strive to maximize their physical and intellectual potential. To this end, they are highly disciplined in their behavior and condemn, for example, alcohol, drugs, and pornography.[186] The alt-right movement also highly values traditional masculinity, and its members take pride in their level of intellect.[187] Sterkenburg describes how the internal discipline required inside Erkenbrand demands much of its members, an environment that she calls "suffocating."[188] She explains how, inside the group, the collectivity always outweighs the individual, and anyone who does not fit the profile of the prototypical member must adhere to the group's norms as much as possible.[189]

The alt-right also envisions a *society with high entitativity*. Erkenbrand explicitly aims for authoritarian governance to realize a white ethnostate. In this ethnostate, only white citizens are to have protected fundamental rights. Alt-right adherents judge anything else to be against nature. They view people of color and women as inferior to white men.[190] Within

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[182] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 11; Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 63; Willem Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes* (Anne Frank Stichting, 2021), 15.

[183] Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag*, 18.

[184] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024*, 29.

[185] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 192.

[186] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 192.

[187] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?: Ontwikkelingspaden En Handelingsperspectieven* (2023), 64; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 8.

[188] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 225.

[189] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 225.

[190] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 9; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 58*, 30; *Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 46.

this envisioned society, each individual has a clear place and must adhere to clearly formulated social norms.[191] Several reports express that the alt-right and Erkenbrand specifically aim to normalize its beliefs in mainstream society and attain a critical mass of people with the same ideal.[192] Similar goals are visible in the identitarian movement, whose adherents long for a hierarchical society.[193] The key narrative of identitarianism is that multiculturalism does not and can never work.[194] While the movement no longer seems classifiable as high in entitativity, the adherents do envision a society in which such rigidity in norms and governance exists. Despite these findings, the data does not indicate a specific role for the digital environment in seeking entitativity. Thus, the analysis cannot conclude that echo chambers affect the aim for high entitativity in society.

In terms of the presence of *personal issues*, those active in far-right online platforms tend to have a complexity of personal problems, including an unstable upbringing, issues in the social environment, or psychosocial problems. Such personal problems often inhibit them from finding strong social connections in the real world. These obstacles in the offline environment can be circumvented by turning to online communities instead.[195] The AIVD furthermore finds that such contact generally happens *exclusively* online.[196] These observations confirm that echo chambers are a suitable type of community for individuals dealing with personal issues.

In sum, the analysis does not find a convincing link between echo chambers and the need for a secure sense of self. Traditional far-right organizations cannot be characterized by high levels of entitativity, which concurs with the democratic nature of online echo chambers. Erkenbrand's normative expectations of its members are an exception to this. Combined with the NCTV's recent finding that groups are increasingly professionalizing, the question remains whether high entitativity could return to the Dutch far-right in the near future. Moreover, the identitarian and alt-right movements aim for an ideal society in which higher levels of entitativity are evident. While it could be argued that the freedom of expression described above could make echo chambers suitable spaces to discuss such visions for the

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[191] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 168.
[192] Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes* 18; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 8; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 58*, 30.
[193] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 71.
[194] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 46.
[195] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023*, 25; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024*, 27; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 58*, 26.
[196] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *AIVD-Jaarverslag 2023*, 15.

future, the data did not link these goals to online activity. While echo chambers seem ideal spaces for individuals with personal problems, the limited findings on entitativity mean that the need for a secure sense of self may not be confidently linked to membership in online echo chambers. Specific information for the accelerationist movement was not available.

5.3. A space where needs deprivation is recognized

This section answers the question '*How do echo chambers affect the experience of relative needs deprivation?*' by examining the experience of repressed or ignored grievances, the perception of being under threat, and the resentment of a constructed Enemy. Far-right online discourse exploits people's *grievances* by amplifying them within echo chambers. Van Puffelen finds that, on the Internet, local grievances can be tied to global problems, increasing the stakes of the perceived threat.[197] For example, concerns for the local job market caused by an influx of asylum seekers can be escalated into conspiracies of an international replacement of white European citizens with Muslim immigrants.[198] In these online discussions, the far-right also systematically delegitimizes the authority of governmental institutions, contributing to its framing as a threat to local citizens' interests.[199] This anti-government sentiment is becoming increasingly prominent. The Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit even poses that the constructed Enemy of the far-right increasingly constitutes the government as opposed to migrant populations.[200] Finding that the government fails to respond to citizens' concerns, these online discourses in far-right echo chambers provide an alternative way to see grievances recognized and openly discussed.

Within the identitarian movement, the central grievance involves the sentiment that the autochthonous population is being disadvantaged relative to allochthonous people. Adherents feel that the rights and interests of migrants are being favored over those of the autochthonous Dutch population. They hold the government responsible for marginalizing Dutch citizens and ignoring their indignation as a response.[201] Groups like Identitair Verzet target their discourse and propaganda to these grievances. They focus on connecting with citizens who worry about issues such as the influence of Islam and immigrants on the

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[197] Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*, 22.
[198] Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*, 22.
[199] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Nationale Contraterrorisme Strategie 2022-2026* (2022).
[200] Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag.*
[201] Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag*, 11; Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 46; Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 50-51.

economy and Dutch traditions like Zwarte Piet.[202] Adherents to the alt-right similarly consider mainstream institutions responsible for their grievances, blaming not only the government but also the media and the education system. The AIVD sees alt-right grievances primarily expressed in the perceived facilitation of the Great Replacement, a conspiracy theory in which a malevolent elite purposefully diminishes the white race.[203] According to this theory, these elites are facilitating non-Western immigration into Europe to replace or significantly weaken the white population. The elites held responsible vary, but often, the government or Jewish elites are suspected to be complicit.[204] Consequently, Erkenbrand is fundamentally anti-institutional.[205] Sterkenburg describes how an alt-right member she interviewed came to see the entire establishment as part of a left-wing agenda through engagement with online discourses and sources: "Although he says he was already 'leaning toward the PVV' after the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 and the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004, the online world played an important role in his development. 'Then you suddenly see that the media are leftist. The newspapers are leftist. The NOS is leftist. If you look on the Internet, you read very different things.'"[206]

Far-right grievances tend to revolve around the *perception that the in-group's well-being is under threat*. The in-group broadly includes the Dutch population, whether culturally defined by the identitarian movement or ethnically defined by the alt-right and accelerationist movements. The anti-migration narrative is a central feature in online discourse, taking different forms across subcultures. For example, immigrants may be framed as a threat to the ethnic population, traditional culture, the economy, or the sense of safety.[207] The consensus is that non-Western populations, most often Muslims, cannot peacefully coexist with Western citizens. Those outside the norm of the Dutch, white, heterosexual citizens are presented as a threat to Western identity and civilization.[208] Another common narrative in the far-right is the sentiment that powerful governance institutions like the United

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[202] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 34.

[203] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 8.

[204] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023,* Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*; Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024*, 28.

[205] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 8.

[206] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen,* 213.

[207] Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag*.

[208] Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag*; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024*, 29.

Nations and the European Union have eroded people's ability to govern themselves.[209] This analysis argues that online extremist echo chambers play a prominent role in the circulation of these perceived threats. To illustrate, the NCTV observes that "in low-barrier videos disseminated through social media primarily used by (very) young people, there are often references to 'the preservation of the national identity.'"[210] Online discourses in echo chamber communities articulate and amplify experienced threats to one's well-being.

As mentioned, the formulated threat varies across ideologies. Among identitarians, the fear of being marginalized relative to allochthonous people means that the main threat to the in-group's well-being constitutes any changes to Dutch culture or traditions. They predominantly target Muslims as the core out-group threatening Dutch culture, positing that Islam is fundamentally opposite to Dutch national identity. To protect that identity, adherents contend that everyone who falls outside this norm must migrate to a country that suits them culturally.[211] Accordingly, Identitair Verzet sees no space for the presence of immigrants in the ideal Dutch society. As explained by Wagenaar, other perceived threats to the in-group include changes to the appearance of Zwarte Piet, the Anglicization of the Dutch language, the Americanization of Dutch culture, and the presence of international companies in the country.[212] Any non-native cultural aspects should be repelled from society.[213]

Alt-right adherents worry about the demise of Europe, believing that the European population is severely threatened and will eventually become a minority or cease to exist. Therefore, the most salient experienced threat is the influx and citizenship of non-Western immigrants.[214] Many adhere to the Great Replacement theory, and some believe this replacement will cause an inevitable civil war.[215] Furthermore, the alt-right expresses concerns about white reproduction, placing a high emphasis on European birth and fertility rates. Firstly, it problematizes the decline in conservative traditions in society, for which it mostly blames women and the LGBT+ community. For example, Erkenbrand maintains that

[209] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 47.
[210] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024*, 29.
[211] Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*, 15; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*, 7; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *AIVD-Jaarverslag 2023*, 17.
[212] Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*, 25, 36.
[213] Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*, 25, 36.
[214] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen,* 166.
[215] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023,* Van Puffelen, *Rechtsextremisme: Geweld Met Een Rechtsextremistisch Motief*; Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024*, 28; Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen,* 182.

the 'woke agenda' is threatening the survival of the Dutch white population. Diversity policies are also regarded as hostile to Western white masculinity. In response, Erkenbrand's members are explicitly against 'progressive' phenomena like interraciality, feminism, and non-heterosexuality, as all are labeled a threat contributing to the demise of the ethnically white population.[216] The anti-feminist stance is somewhat unique in the current extremist landscape. The alt-right seems to be the only strand that explicitly rejects women's right to labor, as they link it to a decline in white offspring.[217] Secondly, the alt-right criticizes the in-group itself. The movement has significant overlap with the manosphere, an online subculture that focuses on protecting traditional masculinity. The alt-right frequently uses issues related to masculinity in its propaganda and discourse, arguing that many experienced threats exist because European men lack masculine traits.[218] Lastly, some alt-right adherents overlap with ecofascism, which poses that the white population is in disharmony with nature as a result of immigration and globalization.[219]

The accelerationists have significant similarities with the ideology of the alt-right but respond differently to the formulated threats. In light of the Great Replacement theory and the expected outbreak of war, some desire to unleash a race war as soon as possible by conducting a terrorist attack. By doing so, they believe they can establish a white ethnostate.[220] Others aim to prepare themselves for the inevitable fight by optimizing their physical capabilities. Accelerationist groupings, such as Active Clubs, organize workshops where they work out, learn survival skills, and practice combat and mental resilience. The members of these Clubs consider these preparations for violence to be necessary self-defense of the white race.[221] Additionally, the focus on maximalizing mental and physical resilience is meant to serve as an example for the prototypical white man. This archetype is supposed to reflect Western culture and motivate online followers to join offline activities.[222] While

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[216] Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes,* 29; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023*; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging,* 9.

[217] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen,* 168.

[218] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 62.

[219] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *AIVD-Jaarverslag 2023*,15.

[220] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 21; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023*; Wagenaar, *Factsheet Extreemrechts in Nederland Januari-Juni 2023.*

[221] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023*, 26; Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *AIVD-Jaarverslag 2023*, 18; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 58*, 34; Wagenaar, *Extreemrechts in Nederlandse Gemeentes*, 60; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024,* 28, 30.

[222] Wagenaar, *Factsheet Extreemrechts in Nederland Januari-Juni 2023*, 15, 22; Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024,* 29.

accelerationist activities have an offline focus, organization and communication occur primarily in close-knit online communities.[223] Writing about Dutch Active Clubs, the NCTV finds that "online, they form a transnational network, within which the groups can communicate with and encourage one another, and organise joint events."[224]

The perceived, often existential threats to the in-group and the failure of the government and other institutions to respond to these grievances lead to *collective resentment of the out-group*. Feelings of resentment quickly escalate online discussions toward discourse characterized by racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia.[225] The analyzed data indicates that such derogation of the constructed Enemy is easily articulated in online echo chambers due to the aforementioned increased sense of freedom of expression and the legitimization of violence to deal with problems. Indeed, the far-right's online discourse is filled with hostile language targeted at out-groups. The research by Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain illustrates that users partake in the derogation of specific demographic groups in society by spreading negative stereotypes, blaming them for perceived problems, and promoting discrimination or violence against them.[226]

Furthermore, the far-right exploits resentments by systematically spreading hate against demographic communities and causing further polarization in order to spread its ideology to the public discourse.[227] In 2018, the AIVD signaled an increase in extremist content and opinions on the Internet, warning that the wide-scale presence of extremist propaganda means that users see their grievances confirmed and amplified. As a result, the discourse becomes increasingly more hostile, polarized, and extreme at the expense of those not considered native Dutch.[228] These trends contribute to greater hostility and the dehumanization of people with an immigrant background. Over the long term, such content can increasingly polarize people's beliefs and advance their identification with extremist ideologies.[229] Exposure to such discourses may thus lead users to increasingly more extremist communities and platforms.

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[223] Wagenaar, *Factsheet Extreemrechts in Nederland Januari-Juni 2023,* 39.
[224] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands: December 2023*, 26.
[225] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *AIVD-Jaarverslag 2023*, 15.
[226] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 44.
[227] Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 52.
[228] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging*.
[229] Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag*, 18; Verwey-Jonker Instituut and Textgain, *Rechtsextremisme Op Sociale Mediaplatforms?*, 20.

The spread of online propaganda and derogatory language is visible in the identitarian movement, who use social media to share negative content about immigrants and Muslims.[230] To illustrate, Pegida shared images on their social media platforms of asylum-seekers trying to ride the bus without paying for a ticket. Moreover, identitarian groups and other far-right adherents tend to refer to immigrants as 'cultuurverrijkers,' an ironic term referring to a supposed enrichment of culture, and 'cultuurverkrachters,' which translates to rapists of culture. These and similar terms are often used in response to content that shows non-Western individuals violating the law.[231] The derogation of the Enemy is as evident in the alt-right as elsewhere in the radical right, but Erkenbrand adherents explicitly reject condoning violence.[232] They also perceive the negative evaluation of the out-group as a natural phenomenon, believing it is human nature to repel the out-group from the in-group. They do not support the principle of equality because of supposed biological differences between races.[233]

Based on these findings, echo chambers alleviate the experience of relative needs deprivation by providing fruitful ground to see one's grievances articulated, recognized, and defended. The digital space also provides more freedom to articulate perceived threats to one's well-being. The online discourse reflects how these grievances and perceived threats are escalated toward extremist discourse and, subsequently, how these discourses may attract users to extremist communities. These amplifying dynamics explain the increasingly hostile and derogatory language to the resented Enemy.

5.4. How can we understand online echo chambers as spaces for Dutch far-right membership mobilization after 2020?

Combining these findings, this analysis concludes that online echo chambers constitute spaces where Dutch far-right membership mobilizes through identity-driven mechanisms. The analyzed data suggests that the desire to belong and the experience of relative needs deprivation are the most prevalent factors in mobilizing individuals to join extremist online echo chambers. It is argued that the digital nature of echo chambers facilitates these mechanisms. The relative anonymity and heightened experience of freedom of expression in the online environment enable individuals to articulate and alleviate their need for belonging

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[230] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *AIVD-Jaarverslag 2023*, 17; Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag*, 11.
[231] Expertise-unit Sociale Stabiliteit, *Factsheet Online Radicaal En Extremistisch Gedrag*, 11.
[232] Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, *Rechts-Extremisme in Nederland: Een Fenomeen in Beweging,* 8.
[233] Sterkenburg, *Maar Dat Mag Je Niet Zeggen*, 190.

and needs recognition to an extent that is not possible offline. Individuals freely indulge in violent fantasies, the formulation of threats and accompanying conspiracy theories, and violent discourse towards those blamed for societal problems. Additionally, the global nature of the Internet eases the search for individuals with similar interests and beliefs. The data most convincingly reflects these findings for the far-right in general and the alt-right movement specifically. In short, the online echo chamber offers individuals what they lack in their offline environments: a space to find like-minded individuals, content that affirms their grievances, and visions for society to deal with perceived threats. The continuous reinforcement of beliefs results in the escalation of ideology and discourse into extremist territories. Exploring identity-driven mechanisms in group membership thus reveals insights into how people are drawn to online far-right echo chambers.

6. Conclusions

This thesis aimed to provide a better understanding of how individuals are mobilized to join Dutch extremist groupings by approaching online echo chambers as identity-driven communities. The analysis concludes that the desire to belong and the experience of relative needs deprivation are most prevalent in mobilizing individuals towards extremist echo chambers. Additionally, the freedom of expression is an influential factor in all three analyzed mechanisms. By enhancing comprehension of how people are drawn to the contemporary far-right, this thesis complements and expands the existing scholarship exploring extremism on the Internet. This approach also offers an alternative perspective on the far-right beyond mere risk assessments, which is crucial before new government responses are developed. Future research could build on this thesis by collecting and analyzing additional primary data, as there is a significant lack of data on specific strands within the far-right. In particular, interviews with Dutch identitarians and accelerationists about their experiences with online communities would allow more extensive research projects on these ideological factions. Additional data would also open up opportunities for detailed comparisons between different strands or organizations. Moreover, future research could examine new cases to explore whether the same insights can be concluded. These efforts would widen and deepen academic and expert knowledge of mobilization inside extremist echo chambers.

The NCTV has highlighted that the online nature of the contemporary radical right has made the movement less predictable, complicating appropriate and effective responses.[234] As the presence of and adherence to the far-right on social media continues to grow, an interdisciplinary framework to understand what draws individuals to online extremist communities becomes ever more vital. This thesis offers an alternative perspective on extremist echo chambers to advance this dialogue further. Only if individuals' identity-driven needs are recognized, understood, and addressed can substantial efforts be made to diminish polarization, hatred, and the normalization of extremism in society.

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[234] Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid, *Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland Juni 2024* (2024), 26.

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