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Article

Imagining Community Through Counterspeech

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Abstract

As online spaces have become increasingly hostile, some internet users have begun to organize collectively to counter hatred through what is known as counterspeech. This article explores how loosely affiliated individuals come to feel a strong sense of community in such efforts, even when they have never met in person. Using digital ethnographic data collected on the international counterspeaking group #iamhere, I argue that participants build imagined rhetorical communities: affective bonds forged through shared moral language and collective communicative action. Although members are geographically dispersed and largely unknown to one another offline, they nonetheless experience a sense of solidarity rooted in their common linguistic and ethical framework. This article shows how rhetorical practices, particularly those focused on empathy and civil discourse, become the glue that holds these activist formations together. By examining the ways moral discourse enables both individual agency and collective identity in counterspeech, this work offers new insight into how human groups form online to resist hatred and assert shared values.

Keywords: counterspeech; community; digital ethnography; group identity

1. Introduction

Digital life routinely produces connections that are partial, fragile, and dispersed across space and time. Some online groups emerge and quickly dissipate, while others persist, allowing for the creation of shared meaning and a sense of group identity. This raises a fundamental question for anthropology: how do communities form and endure when participants are geographically separated and often unknown to one another offline? My study of the counterspeaking group #iamhere suggests that one answer lies in language itself. Through the maintenance of discourse norms, predictable interaction patterns, and shared moral framing, participants create practices and alignment that make community feel tangible. In this sense, Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities remains analytically useful, offering a framework for understanding how large-scale collective identities can be cultivated through structured, affectively resonant communication.

In Imagined Communities, Anderson (1983) argued that large-scale collective identities such as nations are not natural or based on direct relationships but are instead "imagined" into being. People come to feel part of a community, he wrote, not because they know one another personally, but because shared languages, symbols, and communicative rituals allow them to picture themselves as connected to countless others. Print capitalism once provided the infrastructure for this collective imagination: reading the same newspaper or novel created a sense of simultaneity and belonging among strangers. Today, digital communication platforms perform a similar function, enabling dispersed individuals to

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imagine community through recurring linguistic and affective practices that make distant others feel proximate and morally aligned.

While Anderson's concept of the imagined community was originally formulated to describe national communities whose members rarely interact directly, it remains analytically useful for understanding online communities, albeit in a modified sense. Unlike nations, online communities often involve sustained, reciprocal interactions. At the same time, the absence of physical interaction means that frequently, although people are interacting in the same digital "space" (such as a comment thread) they may not be having meaningful interactions with one another as individuals. For groups to form online, participants must actively construct shared meaning through symbolic and communicative practices, highlighting the "imagined" work of community formation. Similarly to how correspondence can foster deep social bonds among geographically dispersed individuals, online communities illustrate that physical proximity is not necessary for meaningful social cohesion. In this way, the term "imagined" captures the cognitive and symbolic labor involved in creating and maintaining a shared identity across distance, without implying that these connections are unreal or superficial.

As public communication has increasingly moved online, the spaces where people encounter one another have expanded and blurred. Social media platforms, in particular, bring together audiences that once would have been separated by geography, social context, or interest. This "context collapse" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) not only makes a broader range of perspectives visible but also exposes users to hateful and harmful speech they might never have encountered in offline life. In response to this heightened visibility of hostility, many users have also turned to collective forms of counterspeech—countering speech that falls outside of the bounds of what they deem acceptable with the goal of undermining it. While counterspeech aims to challenge harmful rhetoric, this paper does not evaluate whether such interventions change broader public discourse. Instead, I focus solely on the formation of community among participants.

This article explores how loosely affiliated individuals come to feel a strong sense of community in such efforts, even when they have never met in person. Drawing on a digital ethnography of the international counterspeaking group #iamhere, I argue that participants build imagined rhetorical communities: affective bonds forged through shared moral language and collective communicative action. Although members are geographically dispersed and largely unknown to one another offline, they nonetheless experience a sense of solidarity rooted in their common linguistic and ethical framework.

By examining how rhetorical practices (particularly those focused on empathy, human dignity, and democratic values) become the glue that holds these activist formations together, this article extends Anderson's theory into the digital sphere. It shows that moral discourse and routine interaction can generate a felt sense of belonging that transcends geography, and that the architecture of #iamhere's Facebook group—its daily rituals, rules, and coordination structures—provides the infrastructure that many online movements, as Tufekci (2017) notes, often lack. In doing so, the paper contributes to broader conversations about how online publics move beyond performance to cultivate genuine, enduring forms of community in the face of hate.

2. Understanding Online Communities

Research on online community formation has converged on two related insights. First, communication practices and platform affordances shape how users perform collective identity online. Second, affective engagement and ritualized interaction often stand in for the slower, institutional processes that historically produced durable collective identities (Baym, 1993, 1995; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). Early studies of online

publics emphasized how users created shared meanings and practices inside virtual spaces (Baym, 1993, 2000), while more recent work has focused on how social media practices, like posting hashtags, retweeting, and forming groups, mediate those processes (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Milner, 2016; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Work on digital communities grows out of a long-standing body of work on group identity, work that offers several useful insights that complement an anthropological approach to digital publics. Classic social identity theory highlights how individuals come to categorize themselves and others into meaningful social groups (Tajfel et al., 2001), while self-categorization theory further emphasizes how shared norms and communicative styles produce a sense of "we-ness" (Turner et al., 1987). Although these models focus on cognitive processes rather than lived sociality, they help illuminate why recurring moral language, stylistic alignment, and predictable interactional patterns within #jagärhär may foster a sense of belonging. At the same time, the present analysis follows anthropological work in foregrounding how group identity is felt, narrated, and reproduced through everyday practices rather than inferred from categorization alone.

Several scholars have mapped mechanisms through which online collectives appear to form. Shared vocabularies, slogans, and circulating tokens can act as the glue of emergent publics (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Milner, 2016). Zizi Papacharissi's concept of "affective publics" highlights how sentiment and emotion on digital media can generate a sense of community rapidly, although these ties of association are generally thinly organized (Papacharissi, 2015). Bennett and Segerberg's logic of connective action further explains how personalization and networked sharing coordinate large numbers of people without traditional organizational structures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Extending this argument, Tufekci (2017) observes that networked forms of organizing produce extraordinary tactical capacity for rapid mobilization but often lack the strategic capacity and durable organizational routines needed to sustain communities over time.

While this body of work is invaluable for describing how online collective identity is achieved rhetorically and technologically, it also exposes a core methodological limitation. Many studies infer felt solidarity from performative traces. For example, they use the presence of communal language ("friends" "family") or us vs. them framing as evidence that members share a collective identity (Collins, 2025), without measuring participants' subjective experience of belonging. Content analysis can document repeated rhetoric and mutual reinforcement but cannot determine whether participants actually feel a sense of communal identity rather than merely performing one. Similarly, research on digital education communities shows that discursive markers of social presence (e.g., greetings, addressing others by name) signal interactional closeness, but may reflect role performance, task compliance, or platform affordances as much as deep affective bonding (Chen & Bogachenko, 2022).

Studies on online groups have also documented some of the mechanisms through which group identity may form. For example, Wielk and Standlee's (2021) work on youth climate activism shows that identity performance, hashtag networks, and emotionally charged narratives can produce durable offline mobilization when online rituals and event infrastructures are present. Graham et al. (2016) similarly found that political discussion forums can generate sense of mutual recognition that can sow the seeds of political action that moves beyond talk. At the same time, work on far-right spaces demonstrates that discursive repetition, grievance narratives, and platform stability can also create affective bonds (Collins, 2025), underscoring that rhetorical form alone does not determine political valence. Rather, it is the combination of moral content and social infrastructure that shapes whether perceived ties are prosocial and durable or antagonistic and brittle.

The studies discussed above demonstrate how moral phrases and shared narratives serve as mechanisms through which dispersed actors perform community (Milner, 2016; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). This study extends these findings by examining how online communities become durable. How does platform infrastructure and routinized interaction mediate whether the performance of group identity becomes felt solidarity? When networked action is embedded in recurring rituals and durable group architecture (e.g., Facebook groups with norms, moderators, and daily response rhythms), it provides the "infrastructure" that Tufekci (2017) argues networked movements often lack, converting ephemeral affective publics into more stable imagined communities.

Finally, this synthesis underscores the need for a mixed methodological approach. Discourse-centered "netnography" maps ideographs and performative routines, while participant-centered methods (interviews, surveys, diaries) assess felt belonging. Such a combination addresses interpretive limitations of content-only studies and allows researchers to determine whether the rhetorical structures that create the appearance of community (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Collins, 2025; Chen & Bogachenko, 2022) also produce subjective experiences of solidarity.

3. Materials and Methods

This study draws on semi-structured ethnographic interviews and participant observation[1] to explore how members of the Swedish counterspeech group #jagärhär (Swedish for "I am here") understand and enact their participation in online efforts to resist hate speech. The group was first formed in 2016, when a Swedish journalist named Mina Dennert created the Facebook group as a response to the rise in hateful and xenophobic rhetoric that followed the increase in refugees into Europe in 2015. At that time, Sweden had one of the most generous asylum policies in Europe and received over 160,000 asylum seekers, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Pew Research Center, 2016). While the country initially prided itself on its openness, public discourse shifted dramatically as populist political parties like the Sweden Democrats began framing immigration as an existential threat to the welfare state and Swedish cultural identity (Fernández, 2020). Online, people began to see xenophobic comments repeating the talking points of far-right groups coming from those who used to describe themselves as moderates. Hate, it seemed, had moved from the margins to the mainstream.

According to the group's founder, the name, #jagärhär, carried a double meaning. "It has the meaning of 'this is where I am, and I need help here in this comment field,' since we call for each other to help out. It also has the meaning: 'I am present. I can see what you are doing here, and I don't agree. I am here too.'"[2] Members of the group began intervening together in the comment threads of Swedish media outlets, countering hate with calm, fact-based, and empathetic speech. They worked according to a set of simple rules that emphasized respect, accuracy, and tone: no insults, no spreading prejudice or rumors, and no condescension. Their comments were often liked by other members, pushing them to the top of the comment section making them more visible and ideally burying hateful comments. This trick leverages Facebook's comment algorithm, which rewards engagement. According to Facebook, on pages "with a large number of followers," comments are automatically set to sort by "relevance"—a ranking determined at least in part by the number of "likes" or replies that each comment elicits.[3]

The project grew quickly. By the end of its first year, tens of thousands of Swedes had joined. Four years later, the group had over 70,000 members. Although Sweden's high-trust political culture, long-standing commitments to egalitarianism, and dominant norms of public civility shaped both the emergence and rhetorical form of #jagärhär, the group has inspired similar movements in more than a dozen other countries, all using local-language

versions of the name "I am here" (#ichbinhier in Germany, #jesuislà in France, #iamhere in the UK, Canada, and Australia). Individual groups have their own routines, rituals, and styles but all abide by the same overarching commitment to respond to hatred with facts and respect. The Swedish group has remained large and had around 69,000 members as of October 2025. Collectively, the groups in the #iamhere International Network have become one of the largest and most coordinated civil society efforts to counter online hate speech in the world.

While the empirical focus for the study was primarily the Swedish group, my data also draws on observations from the broader international #iamhere network. For this study, I interviewed 25 members of #jagärhär. To recruit participants, I constructed a sampling frame consisting of all users who had interacted with #jagärhär's Facebook page (through commenting or "liking" posts) during a two-week period (N = 5580). From this list, I drew a random sample and invited those selected to take part in interviews. Interviews were conducted in English via Skype or Facebook Messenger with participants who consented to participate. Questions focused on participants' history with counterspeaking and jagärhär (e.g., when they joined, what made them want to join, whether they were counterspeaking before joining, and if so, how it was going) and their current counterspeaking practices (e.g., how they define success, how frequently they engage with online hatred, and their perceived positive and negative consequences of counterspeaking). I continued interviewing until thematic saturation was reached; that is, until no substantively new themes emerged from additional interviews. Interviews were carried out between July and December 2019 and again in July and August 2020, with primary analysis occurring between January and March 2020.

To contextualize these interviews and develop a more holistic understanding of the social world of #jagärhär, I also engaged in digital ethnographic observation of the broader #iamhere network. As with all ethnographic work, my interpretation of the #jagärhär community is shaped in part by my own proximity to the field. I joined the Swedish group and the other #iamhere chapters during the period of study in order to observe their everyday practices and interactional rhythms, types of content shared, and discursive norms. Posts were made inside the groups describing who I was and the study that I was conducting. I did not participate in counterspeaking actions or intervene in comment threads, but I followed the group's daily discussions closely and was familiar to moderators and active members. At the completion of the research, I presented my results to group members through a webinar and have shared publications that have emerged from the research.

A growing body of literature has underscored the value of digital ethnography or "netography" for understanding sociality in online spaces (Kozinets, 2006; Schellewald, 2021; Thach et al., 2024; Underberg & Zorn, 2013). As with traditional ethnography, sustained observation allows the researcher to become familiar with the community's norms, values, and communicative practices. This cultural understanding, in turn, grounds the analysis of interview data in the lived context of participants' digital interactions. In this study, ethnographic observation therefore functioned both as a mode of data collection (revealing how the group's rhetorical and moral culture operated in practice) and as a tool of interpretation, informing the coding and thematic analysis of interview materials.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using an inductive, thematic approach informed by grounded theory principles. Initial open coding was conducted to identify recurrent patterns in participants' narratives, such as motivations for joining the group, strategies for responding to online hostility, and perceptions of community belonging. Through an iterative process of axial coding, these patterns were refined into broader analytic themes. A key advantage of grounded theory is that it does not require researchers to predetermine the analytical categories in advance; instead, themes emerge

inductively from participants' own accounts. In this study, for example, with the exception of a single question about whether members knew one another offline, I did not ask directly about belonging or identity, yet these concerns surfaced repeatedly and became central analytic themes through the grounded theory process.

Ethnographic observations were recorded as detailed fieldnotes, which were then analyzed in parallel with the interview data. Observational insights such as the timing and tone of moderators' posts, members' use of the #jagärhär hashtag, and the emotional cadence of group interactions helped contextualize participants' accounts and illuminate the shared moral and rhetorical norms that structured the group's communicative practices.

The integration of interview and observational data enabled a richer understanding of how participants collectively imagine community and enact democratic values through everyday online communication.

4. Results: From "I" to "We"

Much of the scholarship on online communities relies on textual traces—hashtags, posts, shared slogans—to infer that participants are performing group identity. What such analyses cannot establish, however, is whether participants feel a sense of belonging. The findings from this study address that gap. Members of #jagärhär not only perform community through recurring the use of moral language; they also describe an explicitly felt sense of solidarity and emotional safety that arises from recognizing others who speak and reason in similar moral terms.

In interviews, many participants recounted narratives of isolation that preceded their engagement with #jagärhär. Several described how, around 2015, they watched the tone of social media in Sweden shift sharply. People they had long considered "good people" began posting xenophobic comments online, often without challenge. The resulting silence produced a deep sense of alienation: participants felt politically and morally alone. One member described this moment as a turning point.[4] Before joining #jagärhär in 2017, she had long participated in online forums and even moderated one for tennis players. But she became increasingly unsettled by comments asserting that immigrants posed a threat to Swedish culture and identity, and even some claiming that increased immigration could lead to a "white genocide." At first, she believed these were the views of a small extremist fringe. When such comments began dominating multiple threads on her Facebook feed, however, she began to question whether she was part of a shrinking moral minority. Her discovery of #jagärhär offered an immediate sense of relief:

It was a big comfort to find them because it is really horrible out there in the comment threads," she said. "It's almost that I was thinking, 'is this the new way?' But then I found them (#jagärhär), and I thought, ok, I can feel safe. It's not the new way. I was thinking in the right direction.[5]

This member's experience is typical. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of participants spontaneously reported that joining #jagärhär made them feel "less alone." As one moderator put it, "You don't feel that you are the only one who thinks some way."[6] Others described how collective participation provided emotional as well as moral support: "When I am working with other #iamhere members, I'm not alone. I can get emotional support."[7] Another explained that membership helped sustain her engagement in civic life:

"Just to not feel alone in all of this—in all this struggle. Over the last years, I have felt kind of alone in this, not feeling like anything is happening to change things."[8]

A key mechanism through which members experienced community was a sense of discursive predictability, the ability to anticipate how others in the group would respond, both in tone and in moral orientation. Participants emphasized that the comments they encountered within #iamhere followed a familiar pattern: calm, empathetic, and fact-based

contributions that reliably contrasted with the volatility of the broader digital sphere. This predictability generated a feeling of emotional safety, allowing members to enter contentious comment threads with the assurance that others who shared their communicative style would be present. One participant explained that this consistency made the group feel restorative: "#iamhere is somewhere where you can charge your batteries somehow," she said[9] Rather than merely encountering aligned opinions, members came to rely on the familiar rhythms of response such as supportive emojis and a calm, measured tone as signs that they were not alone. In this way, discursive predictability functioned as a stabilizing infrastructure, transforming dispersed individuals into an imagined moral community that felt both dependable and sustaining.

Through these narratives, we can observe the transition from discursive alignment to felt community. Members describe a sense of solidarity that persists despite never meeting in person or forming close interpersonal relationships online. As one explained, "You feel that if I get jumped at, I will have my friends in back to cover me. That is very important."[10] Another elaborated: "It feels like being with friends, even though you don't know them. But you know they want the same things, so they feel like friends."[11]

5. Discussion

5.1. Rhetorical Boundaries of Community

This sense of kinship emerges not from physical proximity but from moral and rhetorical recognition—the experience of seeing others articulate values in ways that mirror one's own. Here, Anderson's (1983) notion of "imagined community" offers a powerful frame: participants imagine themselves as part of a dispersed yet morally unified collective through shared linguistic and affective practices. Reading morally aligned comments in the same threads produces a sense of simultaneity, an awareness that one's moral stance is collectively held. In Anderson's terms, the shared moral language functions much like print capitalism once did—creating the conditions for imagining a community of like-minded others.

This moral and rhetorical recognition was reinforced through the patterned predictability of communication within #jagärhär as well as through the difference between internal and external discourse norms. Members repeatedly described the comfort of knowing how others in the group would respond to their posts (by, for example, using familiar emojis, affirming comments, or expressions of shared outrage and care). This anticipatory knowledge created a sense of stability and intimacy within the imagined community. One participant explained,

When it comes to a certain topic, you can feel that the only way that people react is with hate. But you can always bring it up in #jagärhär and get a totally different reaction. It's much closer to what you want to see. It's a group with similar values. It's very powerful. It makes me more secure in my own values.[12]

The ability to anticipate such reactions suggests that members were not simply aligned in belief but also attuned to the group's communicative rhythms. These shared patterns of response functioned as evidence that one's moral stance was not only accepted but echoed by others who could be trusted to "speak" in the same way. The sense of discursive predictability that participants described resonates with longstanding observations in linguistic anthropology and mediated communication research: that stable interactional norms allow individuals to anticipate how others will respond, thereby generating feelings of safety, coherence, and social alignment. Goffman (1981) and later Baym (2000) note that predictability in conversational form (e.g., tone, stance markers, expected uptake) serves as an important scaffold for facilitating feelings of belonging and trust. In online environments, where cues are often thin and interactional frames unstable, scholars have shown

that the emergence of routinized discursive patterns can function as a kind of normative infrastructure that supports trust and group continuity (Herring, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015).

This discursive predictability also operated as a mechanism through which the imagined community was continually enacted. In Anderson's model, citizens of a nation imagine others reading the same newspaper each morning; here, #jagärhär members imagine others composing, reacting, and responding in familiar, recognizable forms. Through these repeated interactions, the group's moral and linguistic norms became internalized as part of a collective identity.

Many of the norms and repeated practices inside the group have developed over time, but not all have emerged organically. Shortly after the group emerged and began to grow, Dennert noted that some methods being used by members appeared to be counterproductive. "Even anti-racists, even people who meant well, were making things worse. It could be very condescending. It was very much like, 'you're wrong, you're right.' And I just thought, this isn't getting us anywhere," she said. To address the problem, Dennert wrote a list of guidelines for members to follow when responding to online hatred. Members are encouraged to amplify constructive comments—by liking, reacting, and offering supportive replies—while avoiding direct engagement with hateful comments, since reacting to them boosts their visibility. They should think for themselves but remain factual, never spreading hate, rumors, or personal attacks, and avoid critiquing others' spelling or writing. A respectful tone is required at all times, both in the group and in external comment threads. Fact-based debate should happen only in the linked comment sections, not within the group itself, as the private group is designed to serve as a place of coordination rather than a discussion forum.[13]

The group's moderators ensure that members adhere to the guidelines. When a rule is broken inside the Facebook group, moderators delete the comment and privately explain their reasoning to the poster. If the violation occurs outside the group, (for instance, during an action) moderators capture a screenshot and send it to the member along with an explanation of the issue. Very rarely, there are cases of serious or repeated infractions, such as posting racist or xenophobic remarks. In those cases, moderators may remove the member from the group altogether. Members generally described being in support of the guidelines. However, it is quite possible that those who disagreed with the guidelines had already left or been removed from the group. The fact that I was unable to interview any such individuals is a limitation of this paper.

Although #iamhere's communication norms are formally codified in the guidelines Dennert established, members do not describe these rules as changing how they speak. Instead, they frame the guidelines as articulating values they already share: civility, respect, and a commitment to countering hate without reproducing it. In interviews, members repeatedly mentioned how happy they were to discover others who shared their values, suggesting that the guidelines operate less as imposed constraints and more as boundary-markers that signal who belongs in the group. The rules make explicit and reinforce a communicative ethos that members recognize in themselves and in one another. This explicit naming of shared norms helps transform individual tendencies into a felt sense of community, even among people who have never met offline.

Group members also used the manner in which they communicated with one another to differentiate themselves with those to whom they were responding. When asked to describe how they imagined the people to whom they were responding, many commented on the way that "the other side" wrote, saying things such as, "they can't write properly,"[14] "they tend to write in a Swedish that isn't bad, but isn't good either,"[15] and "they tend to react fast and very emotionally without questioning the data they are basing their judgement on."[16] In contrast, #jagärhär members tend to pride themselves on writing

comments that are logically argued, well-written, and fact-based. As one member put it, "We don't call people—even though we think they are stupid—we don't say that. We try to be polite."[17] This explicit reflection on how "we" talk reveals how community boundaries were maintained through style as much as substance. Civility itself became an index of belonging, distinguishing members of #jagärhär from the hostile publics they sought to counter, highlighting the "limited" nature of communities (Anderson, 1983, p. 7). The values of human dignity and empathy also come to imbue group members' use to of the hashtag #jagärhär. It becomes an "ideograph" (McGee, 1980), a sharable term that condenses, and is used to circulate, broader ethical commitments among those who use them. When members encounter the hashtag in a comment thread, they immediately feel a sense of camaraderie.

Members' comments suggest that this imagined rhetorical community provides both cognitive reassurance and emotional safety. Recognizing others who articulate empathy, dignity, and democratic values reaffirms participants' own moral orientation and restores a sense of social normalcy that they perceived as eroding. As one put it, the group provided "a sense of community around something that is important for you."[18] In this way, shared moral discourse does more than coordinate action; it produces a genuine, felt solidarity that counters the alienation many experienced in the broader digital sphere.

The Swedish context made this kind of civic mobilization particularly resonant. At the time of #jagärhär's founding, Sweden's national self-image as an egalitarian, humanitarian society was being challenged by the rise in populist discourse that cast refugees as threats. In such a moment, members came to view participating in #jagärhär as a part of defending a vision of Swedishness itself, one that linked national identity to openness and care rather than exclusion.

5.2. The Infrastructure of Community

While Anderson's framework helps to illuminate how shared discourse and affect create the feeling of community, scholars such as Tufekci (2017) have cautioned that online activist collectives often struggle to transform that affective alignment into durable collective action. Tufekci argues that many digitally networked movements are fragile because they lack the connective infrastructure (both organizational and emotional) that sustains long-term participation and that allows online communities to react and adapt (70–71). In her view, viral mobilization can generate rapid visibility but not necessarily resilient social ties. In contrast, the #iamhere network has developed precisely the kinds of infrastructures that counter such fragility. Moderators play a central role in organizing daily activities, guiding tone, and maintaining community norms, while collective rituals provide members with continuity, care, and connection.

Unlike the ad hoc networks Tufekci describes, which surge around moments of visibility but dissipate when attention fades, groups in the #iamhere Network have institutionalized a slow rhythm of interaction. The weekly rituals of groups and their moderated spaces function much like organizational routines, creating predictability and trust. Members treat digital platforms as spaces for ongoing civic practice rather than spontaneous sites of protest. While these practices feel to participants like a form of ongoing civic engagement, the data here cannot demonstrate whether they produce measurable changes in democratic deliberation beyond the group itself.

The infrastructures that sustain #iamhere are not purely technical or administrative. They are affective infrastructures (Bosworth, 2023) through which members continually reproduce a sense of moral and emotional connection. Moderators perform logistical work (coordinating posts, enforcing tone) but also emotional labor, modeling care and civility

that members then emulate. Moderator posts commonly start with affective language such as "Good evening, friends!" or "Hey best group!"

Likewise, recurring rituals serve as infrastructural maintenance, keeping moral energy circulating even in the absence of overt mobilization. Across national chapters, these rituals serve as both affective maintenance and community-making practices. #iamhereCanada's "Well-Wishing Wednesdays," for instance, celebrate individuals who contribute positively to society. Group administrators post stories about those being honored, such as Indigenous youth activist Autumn Peltier,[19] and invite members to flood the comment thread with messages of support. Similarly, #jagärhär members in Sweden participate in "love bombing" posts that spotlight acts of kindness and receive extraordinary engagement. As with the Canadian group, these posts are quite popular, with one—a tribute to a Swedish man who sewed over 6000 face masks in his home to give away during the COVID-19 pandemic—receiving over 1500 'likes.' The German #ichbinhier posted nightly "Absacker" ("Nightcap," in English) threads for a time, and its sister "Happy Place für #ichbinhier" group offered members a place to post and read feel-good stories, animal pictures, and funny memes. reprieve from the emotional labor of counterspeech. These practices provide a rhythm to community life, sustaining the collective beyond moments of reactive activism.

In this sense, #iamhere demonstrates how an imagined moral community can be made durable through intentional infrastructures of care. The moderators and recurring rituals function much like Anderson's imagined simultaneity; they create regularized moments in which members collectively attend to the same moral and emotional content, but they also move beyond imagination by establishing enduring relational structures. Through practices like these, #iamhere transforms the fleeting moral resonance characteristic of many online collectives into an ongoing experience of belonging.

6. Conclusions

The #iamhere model of collective counterspeech combines value-laden language, affective performance, and a Facebook group architecture that routinizes daily counterspeaking practices to produce imagined rhetorical communities and a group identity that members both perform for audiences and genuinely experience. Viewed through this lens, #iamhere illustrates how the moral and affective infrastructures of digital life enable new forms of social imagination. Its participants transform the thin ties of networked interaction into thick affective attachments through recurring rituals of care, moderation, and linguistic affirmation. Members not only align rhetorically around shared values of empathy and dignity but also come to feel part of a collective bound by those values. In this sense, #iamhere shows how digital publics can move beyond performance to cultivate an "imagined" yet experientially real moral community.

In anthropological terms, #iamhere extends Anderson's insight about imagined community into the domain of moral practice. Daily rituals of speech, affirmation, and moderation perform the infrastructural work that Tufekci (2017) finds absent in many digital movements, transforming what might otherwise remain affective publics into enduring moral publics. The result is a form of sociality that is at once rhetorical, affective, and infrastructural. More broadly, this case reveals how moral language and communicative practice can anchor collective identity in the digital age, offering a model for how communities of care and resistance can be built, maintained, and genuinely felt even in the absence of physical proximity.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy concerns.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 The methodology for this project was approved by IntegReview Institutional Review Board (IRB) on 3 May 2019, protocol number: BUERGERDSP-01. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.
2 Interview with author, 12 March 2018.
3 Facebook Help Center.
4 Interview with author, 24 July 2019.
5 See note 4.
6 Interview with author, 23 September 2019.
7 Interview with author, 27 August 2019.
8 Interview with author, 6 September 2019.
9 Interview with author, 25 October 2019.
10 Interview with author, 12 September 2019.
11 See note 9.
12 See note 6.
13 Summarized from a translated version of the rules that appear on the #jagärhär Facebook page.
14 Interview with author, 11 September 2019.
15 See note 9.
16 Interview with author, 18 September 2019.
17 Interview with author, 5 September 2019.
18 See note 6.
19 https://www.facebook.com/groups/2046146405670976/?multi_permalinks=2425008237784789&hoisted_section_header_type=recently_seen (accessed on 10 October 2025).

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