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Platform Anarchy: Exploring the Micro-sociality of Caring In-common Through Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

This paper explores the micro-sociality of caring in-common through social media platforms as a prefigurative experience of communal anarchy grounded in mutual aid. The concept of micro-sociality developed from sociological work that re-emphasises the communal as central to understanding community. My theoretical framework engages with communal micro-sociality through the taxonomy of care, constituted by inter-related primary, secondary, and tertiary circles. Drawing on 12 months of netnographic data, my analysis focuses on the micro-sociality of caring in-common across social media users in two contexts—fans of the UK rock band IDLES and fans of Fantasy and Science Fiction Literature. My findings excavate how social media platforms can operate as sites of common encounter, through which the micro-sociality of caring in-common emerges. More specifically, I outline how secondary care relations grounded in mutual aid act as a foundation for more intimate, primary care relations as well as solidarity orientated tertiary care. In closing, my discussion considers the prefigurative implications of how the micro-social relationships and bonds which constitute caring in-common serve to define it.

Keywords Ethics of care · Mutual aid · Digital platforms · Micro-sociality · Netnography · Prefiguration · Social media

"Anarchists are simply people who believe human beings are capable of behaving in a reasonable fashion without having to be forced to." David Graeber (2000)

Introduction

Research concerning ethical forms of living in the capitalist political economy is an important field of organisational-management studies (OMS) and critical management studies (CMS) (Gibson-Graham, 2011; Just et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2014; Phillips & Jeanes, 2018). Thus far, contributions have been made regarding formal organisational initiatives—such as the social solidarity economy, the sharing economy, the development of common property and social movements such as Occupy (e.g., Cornée, et al., 2020; Daskalaki et al., 2019; Peredo & McLean, 2020; Reinecke, 2018; Ridley-Duff

& Bull, 2021; Wruk et al., 2019; Zapata Campos, 2024). A thread which links these studies is the prefigurative potential of experimenting with ‘actually existing’ alternative ways of organising or living in practice (Monticelli, 2021; Reinecke, 2018; Wilson, 2024). Yet there has been little attention explicitly paid to how communal activity and ethics of care can provide prefigurative ways of living at the micro-social level (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021). This paper takes a human centred approach (D’Cruz et al., 2022) grounded in the ethics of care to explore the micro-sociality of caring in-common on social media platforms.

As digital capitalism and social media platforms have become ubiquitous throughout social and economic life, ethical concerns have been raised regarding the implications for their users (Ahsan, 2020; Bally et al., 2024; Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020). Critical studies tend to emphasise the ‘dark side’ of digital capitalism and social media platforms which facilitate new methods of accelerating consumption cultures, promoting regressive political discourse and monitoring workers (Pignot, 2023; Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020). However, social media platforms offer unprecedented opportunities

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for non-hierarchical forms of organizing to emerge and thrive, despite their integration into market logics (Levine & Prietula, 2014; Pignot, 2023; Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2021). There is a nascent field of critical research concerning the ethical use of digital infrastructure for community resistance and alternative organisations and economies (e.g., Döbbe & Cederberg, 2024; Hoelscher & Chatzidakis, 2021; Jones & Arnould, 2024; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021). This paper contributes to the latter stream of research and was inspired during in the COVID-19 lockdowns by the plethora of localised mutual aid groups which emerged on *Facebook* in response to the failure of market and state infrastructure to provide essential forms of care (Preston & Firth, 2020; Swann, 2022). During in this time many other groups were noticeably also operating on a basis of mutual aid through social media platforms. Whilst this latter form of communal activity has thus far not been the focus of research, I argue that further exploration of this context provides important insight into how ordinary spaces of capitalist social media can serve as prefigurative here-and-now spaces of common encounter (Cloke & Conradson, 2018), defined by the ethics and relations of care which emerge within them.

The ‘ethics of care’ contrasts to the neoliberal capitalist emphasis on individualisation by asserting the importance of communal, relational and moral considerations (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Richards, 2022). Recent literature has highlighted the contributions of care ethics to self-esteem, self-development and social fulfilment, fostering social recognition between individuals within formal organisations (Au & Stevens, 2022; Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2012; Fan & Cunliffe, 2023; Islam, 2013). Moreover, the emergence of mutual aid groups on *Facebook* during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that “caring for a wide range of people by offering forms of support beyond immediate kinship networks is one hallmark of a caring community” and means we must recognise “that care can be carried out by people with a wide range of kinship connections to us” in a range of contexts (The Care Collective, 2020: 25–29). Yet despite calls for expansive infrastructures of universal care, the lived realities of everyday care work and limits to emotional and physical capacities must be acknowledged. There remains scope for further insight into the emergence of ethics and relationships of care within such contexts and additionally in appreciating how this works in balance with the limits of people’s caring capacities (Power, 2019; Traill et al., 2024). This paper therefore expands on the analysis of care ethics in formal organisations (e.g., Au & Stevens, 2022; Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2012; Fan & Cunliffe, 2023; Islam, 2013) by drawing on a nascent body of feminist and anarchist critical literature (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Swann, 2022; Traill et al., 2024). To do so, I

enrol the anarchist concepts of mutual aid and prefiguration to explore the micro-sociality of caring in-common.

The concept of ‘micro-sociality’ refers to how social activities form the foundation of community (Rogaly, 2016; Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016). In this paper, the concept of micro-sociality is adopted to provide insight into communal being through caring in-common. The concept of caring in-common is developed from previous works addressing to the micro-sociality of ‘being in-common’ (Rogaly, 2016; Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016) and refers more explicitly to the community activities and relationships which emerge around care for a common interest. Care ethics constitute a relational sociality often identified in dyadic relationships between giver and receiver (Noddings, 2003) which form the most intimate and ‘primary’ care relationships. However, exploring care in the context of communal activities requires a broader exploration of care deemed ‘tertiary’ and ‘secondary’ care relationships (Lynch, 2007). The theoretical framework for this paper therefore integrates the concept of micro-sociality (Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016) with the taxonomy of care, to explore the dynamics of caring in-common, which span primary, secondary and tertiary circles (Lynch, 2007). This approach is consistent with previous work concerning the taxonomy of care as a micro-social aspect of creative industries (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021) and the nascent interest in mutual aid as a foundation for reciprocal care relations (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Power, 2019). I enrol a netnographic methodology to explore the micro-sociality of social media users in two online groups. The first group consisted of fans of the UK rock band IDLES, and the second consisted of fans of science fiction and fantasy literature. My analysis of these two groups explores how the taxonomy of caring in-common can balance caring capacities, as a prefiguratively experience of anarchy across social media platforms.

In the following section, I outline recent studies concerning the limits to care and the growing emphasis on the mutual provision of care through alternative community infrastructures, which can be understood through the anarchist concepts of mutual aid and prefiguration. My theoretical framework outlines the conceptualisation of micro-sociality as the study of communal being in-common, before exploring the ethics of care theories through which it is possible to conceptualise the notion of communal caring in-common. In my methodology section, I contextualise two communities as data sites for this study and provides an overview of the netnographic process of data collection and analysis. My findings illustrate the emergence of caring in-common through recognition and like-mindedness, the hybridity and multiplicity of the communities’ socio-cultural history, and the creative expressions and outputs of affective and material care. In closing, my discussion addresses dynamic taxonomy of caring in-common, considering the

prefigurative implications as a direction for future research into human centred ethics on digital platforms.

Capitalism, Anarchism and Care

The ethics of care developed in feminist theory that “characteristically sees persons as relational and interdependent, morally and epistemologically” (Held, 2006: 13) and is grounded in a relational rather than individualist ontology. Previous studies have identified the contribution of care ethics to the formation of resilient relationships and interdependencies within formal organisations (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012) and highlighted how care relations provide a foundation for social recognition and embeddedness within their roles as workers (Islam, 2013). Further research has provided insight into how an ethics of care drives different possibilities for transformative value across different community service orientations (Parsons et al., 2021), and emphasised how organisations may move beyond responses to suffering, to provide new agency by empowering organisational communities (Fan & Cunliffe, 2023). Yet in many instances, care is often overlooked in comparison to work or profit-orientated goals, as the “masculine competitive and market-driven business cultures” (Hamington, 2019: 91) contrast with the integral element of recognition required for care relations (Islam, 2013; Richards, 2022). The social implications of this contrast mean care is often accessible only to those who can afford it (Fraser, 2016), placing burdensome, conflicting, and can frequently place unmanageable obligations on certain workers (Au & Stevens, 2022) or care providers (Heath et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2017). As such, simply providing more of, or universal care, is not necessarily a simple solution, because the infrastructures which seek to provide more care can place greater demands on those who are providing it (Power, 2019; The Care Collective, 2020; Traill et al., 2024).

Despite these complexities, alternative infrastructures which re-centre care within everyday life and address the ongoing care deficit can and do exist in a range of contexts. There has been a recent resurgence in theories concerning the emancipatory potential of such instances in creative industries, community food hubs and food poverty organisations and ad hoc political interventions (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Parsons et al., 2021; Traill et al., 2024). What these perspectives tend to share is an emphasis on the role of mutual or reciprocal care, expanding collective capacity through mutual aid (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Power, 2019; The Care Collective, 2020). In the following, I outline how this understanding of mutual aid as an integral form of reciprocal care has prefigurative potential through an anarchist lens.

Exploring the Anarchy of Care: Mutual Aid and Prefiguration

“Anti-state, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-hierarchical, antiauthoritarian: anarchism and other forms of radical politics are criticised for being anti-everything, begging the question, what is anarchism for?” (Heckert, 2010: 187).

Anarchism can be difficult to define and is often misunderstood and misconstrued by anarchists and non-anarchists alike (Kinna, 2019; McLaughlin, 2020). This often leads to an understanding of anarchism centred on what it is against rather than what it is for (Heckert, 2010). In this paper, *anarchism* is defined as the belief in the desirability of anarchy, whereas *anarchy* is defined in the realization of alternative social norms, practices, relations, institutions, and structures (McLaughlin, 2020). Anarchy is therefore understood in this paper to occur between the cracks of hierarchy and domination throughout everyday experiences (Graeber, 2004; Wilson, 2024), which aligns with past assertions by Colin Ward (1973) that “an anarchist society, a society which organises itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow” (Ward, 1973: 11). Further, many anarchists understand care as an important factor in the micro-politics of everyday life (Shepard, 2015), and examples of this have previously been identified in the communal actions of those who often would not explicitly identify as anarchists (e.g., Ward, 1973; Graeber, 2000, 2004). As such, this paper explores how experiences of anarchy can be understood through collective care and the affordances of an ethics grounded in relationships (Heckert, 2010; Kinna, 2019; Shepard, 2015; Ward, 1973). In the following I explicitly engage with this understanding of care ethics through the anarchist concepts of mutual aid and prefiguration.

Mutual Aid

Emerging from the work of anarchist philosopher Kropotkin (1972), mutual aid is grounded in “the notion of caring for one another and participating in actions that unlock the potential of local networks to reduce isolation and vulnerability in society” (Kaltfleiter, 2021: 119). It requires a specific form of care grounded in communal reciprocity (Cornée, et al., 2020; Kaltfleiter, 2021; Spade, 2020). This can at times occur in hybrid forms, with aspects of state or market infrastructure “being appropriated, repurposed or hacked to create conditions for social recomposition or communisation” (Firth, 2022: 94) as well as being an important factor in the organisation of cooperatives and alternative economies (Cornée, et al., 2020; Ward, 1973). A recent example of mutual aid in action include the emergence of

support groups in the COVID-19 lockdowns, which used capitalist platforms such as *Facebook* to provide essential forms of care – ranging from online social and emotional support for those who felt isolated, to providing and delivering essentials for those struggling or who were isolating due to testing positive for the coronavirus (Preston & Firth, 2020; Swann, 2022). As such, whilst mutual aid is often associated with political movements, reciprocal forms of care can emerge in communities which do not exist for an explicitly political function, or for purposes of pure altruism, but operate instead on a basis of mutual benefit. This aligns to previous literature which highlights how mutual aid is ever-present across daily life; occurring in a range of community contexts (Cornée et al., 2020; Graeber, 2000, 2011; Ward, 1973). For the purposes of this research, mutual aid is conceptualised as the “common experience of the informal, transient, self-organising networks of relationships that in fact make the human community possible” (Ward, 1973: 8). This conceptualisation relates to the purpose of this research as a study of micro-social care which emerges through the recognition of mutual benefit as a form of caring in-common.

Prefiguration

Prefiguration offers community-orientated political insights as it “strives to embody alternative forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, belief systems and direct experience” (Monticelli, 2021: 112). The term prefiguration has become increasingly pervasive in organisational literature in recent years (Parker, 2021; Schiller-Merkens, 2022), identified in examples including ecovillages and degrowth communities (Schiller-Merkens, 2022; Skoglund & Böhm, 2019) alternative organisations (Parker et al., 2014), movements within organisations (Schiller-Merkens, 2022) and within social movements such as Occupy (Reinecke, 2018). Whilst at times this can be overtly political in its objectives, as was the case with Occupy, it can also mean experimenting with or organically developing forms of organising which provide alternative ways of collectively experiencing everyday life (Graeber, 2013; Yates, 2015). Many examples of prefiguration are underpinned by mutual aid and the associated notion of ‘solidarity not charity’¹ (Spade, 2020), but they are not confined to it. Rather, mutual aid provides a care orientated foundation that makes social life and community organising possible; ever-present yet often overlooked (Graeber, 2000, 2011; Ward, 1973). This is because the “social relations we

create every day prefigure the world to come...they are truly the emergence of that other world embodied in the constant motion and interaction of bodies” (Shukaitis, 2009: 143). In this sense, experience of anarchy by those who are not explicitly deemed anarchists, or even directly motivated by political purpose, can still hold prefigurative possibilities. However, despite this growth in use of the concept, there has thus far been relatively little consideration given to prefiguration from an anarchist perspective in management studies (Schiller-Merkens, 2022)—or how it might align with or emerge from experiences of care.

In the following, I outline my theoretical framework for exploring the micro-sociality of caring in-common in community contexts. I first focus on previous works which outline how community can be understood through the micro-social activities of the membership (Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016). I then outline the taxonomy of care framework (Lynch, 2007), which is applied to explore the micro-sociality of caring in-common for this research. Exploring care in this fashion expands on the prefigurative implications of how caring in-common is underpinned by a culture of mutual aid, “rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society” (Ward, 1973: 11).

The Taxonomy of Micro-social Caring In-common

The concept of ‘micro-sociality’ refers to an understanding which places “sociality and being-ness the centre of an approach to community” (Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016: 613). Through the concept of micro-sociality, the meaning of community is not static (Rogaly, 2016; Studdert, 2006). Rather, meaning is created and sustained “in common” through acts of social recognition and “the inter-relational linking of action” (Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016: 618). This in turn contributes a dimension of hybridity to communal experiences, which occur through the multiple socialities of their members. As such, “multiplicity and hybridity are both ongoing processes, both present in every community and both contained in the action of sociality as it constructs and re-constructs our communal being-ness” (Studdert, 2006: 2). From this perspective, community is understood through experiences of being in-common, which are constructed and reconstructed through the ongoing micro-sociality of inter-related communal activities. In the following, I adopt the concept of micro-sociality as a foundation for exploring communal activities which construct and re-construct caring in-common.

Care ethics are often considered to occur in dyadic relationships between giver and receiver (Noddings, 2003), with phases of caring understood to develop between two

¹ ‘Solidarity not charity’ is an anarchist notion which rejects the inherent hierarchies reproduced by the function of charities making political choices as to who constitutes the ‘deserving poor’ -turning aid into a competitive and consumerist enterprise having designated givers and receivers (Firth, 2022).

individuals (Tronto, 1993), as this is the most intimate and ‘primary’ form of care relationships (Lynch, 2007). However, recent research has highlighted how care can emerge through here-and-now spaces of common encounter, emerging in a range of relations (Cloe & Conradson, 2018; Geiger et al., 2024) and Lynch’s (2007) “taxonomy of care” framework asserts that care can be understood through interconnected and intersectional concentric circles shown in Fig. 1. Through this framework it is possible to explore the dynamics of care across communal activities (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021) in spaces of common encounter (Cloe & Conradson, 2018; Geiger et al., 2024).

The taxonomy of care shown in Fig. 1 offers a framework for exploring the micro-sociality of care, as different interactions, responsibilities, and relationships occupy different concentric circles (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Lynch, 2007). The innermost circles signify primary care relationships addressed by Noddings (2003), such as families and close friends, which generally entail an intimate and intensive care relationship between two parties. Secondary care relationships, such as those within certain communities of friends and neighbours, understood to operate on a basis of mutuality, and tertiary care relationships operate on a basis of solidarity are represented in the outer circles. As

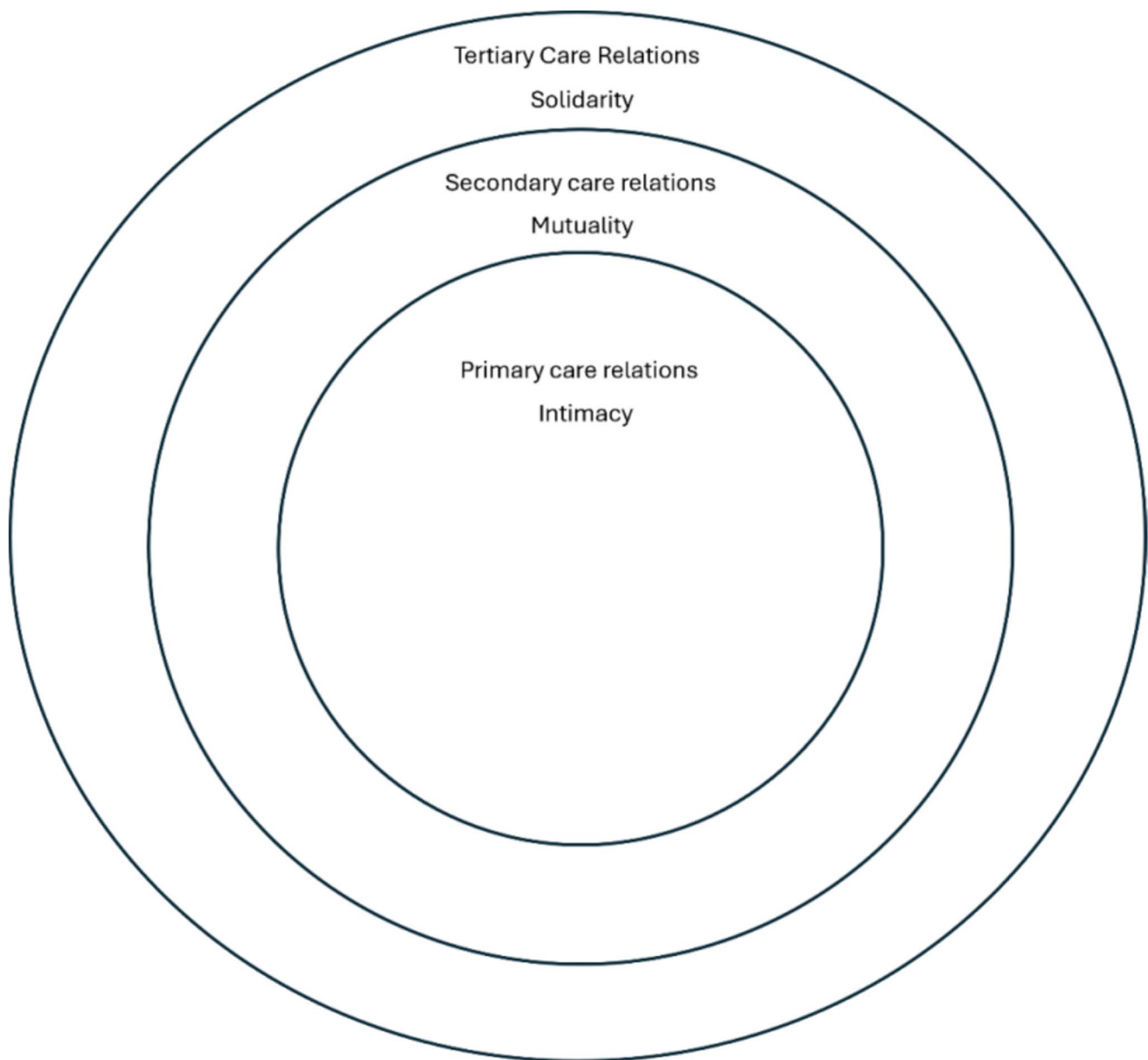


Fig. 1 The taxonomy of care: Concentric circles of care relations, adaptation created by author from Alacovska and Bissonnette, (2021: 141) and Lynch (2007: 556)

demonstrated in Alacovska and Bissonnette's (2021) findings, when studying labour in the creative industry, the intersections of these different circles of care can be affirmatory and emancipatory for those involved.

At the level of intimate, primary relations, care be still understood to function through as occurring on a reciprocal or mutual basis:

“Even though the carer may perform tasks for the benefit of the cared-for that the cared-for cannot reciprocate, the persons in a caring relation are not competitors for benefits, hence altruism is not what is called for. Caring is a relation in which carer and cared-for share an interest in their mutual wellbeing” (Held, 2006: 34–35—emphasis added by author).

By defining care relations on the basis of mutual wellbeing, Held (2006) highlights how care differs from other social relations, because it operates under an ethic of what has been termed ‘other-centeredness’ (Lynch, 2007; Lynch et al., 2021). However, exploring care in the context of communal activities involves what can be deemed secondary and tertiary care relationships (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Lynch, 2007) can be further understood through consideration of literature concerning collective approaches to caring *with*, as opposed to caring *for* (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Power, 2019).

Tronto's (1993) linear conceptualization of care is understood through four phases, consisting of ‘caring about’, which refers to attentiveness to the needs of others; ‘taking care of’, which refers to responsibility in relation to those needs; ‘care giving’, which refers to the fulfilment of needs, and ‘care receiving’, which refers to the process of considering whether the need has been fulfilled. However, Tronto (2013) later identified a more dynamic conceptualisation of ‘caring *with*’, theorised to emerge through ongoing cyclical engagement with the former four phases, which provides more radical and specifically democratic dimensions of trust and solidarity. Power (2019) developed this notion of caring *with* at the scale of communal organising, highlighting how this is reliant on an equal distribution of care and caring responsibility and emphasising the need to consider the material, spatial and temporal networks that impact the capacity to care. From this basis, care can be considered a continuous activity which exists as an ongoing process of experimentation across different activities and contexts (Power, 2019; Traill, et al., 2024; Tronto, 2013). Further engaging with the notion of caring *with*, Hobart and Kneese (2020) draw on anarchist concept of mutual aid to stress the importance of viewing care as an expression of solidarity and emphasise the affective implications of care. This emergence of what Hobart and Kneese (2020) refer to as caring *with* is defined as the affective connection between an inner self and an outer world, which occurs as a feeling of caring

with others—as opposed to feeling for them through mutual recognition. This is framed by Hobart and Kneese (2020) as a strategy for responding to crises through temporary and ad hoc communal interventions. Yet it provides essential insight into the acknowledgement of the others, and the need to bond across similarities and differences between the inner self and the outer world, whether in dyadic or more expansive communal relationships.

In the following, this paper adopts Lynch's (2007) taxonomy to explore the micro-sociality of care in spaces of common encounter on social media, offering insights into the dynamics of caring in-common across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Trail et al., 2024). Further, by integrating discussions of caring *with* as mutual aid within material and affective communal activities into this framework (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Power, 2019), I draw out the prefigurative implications of caring in-common as an experience of anarchy.

Methodology

This paper explores micro-social care relations on digital platforms. Due to the emphasis on micro-social care, it was appropriate to enrol a qualitative research methodology grounded in social construction. The chosen netnographic method is frequently used to understand socio-cultural experiences within digital platforms (Kozinets, 2020) and was selected as it aligns with the focus of this study concerning communal activities. Netnographic studies can focus on one or multiple research contexts. This research follows a parallel analysis of the communal activities of two groups across multiple sites, as advocated by Kozinets (2010, 2020).

Digital platforms have increasingly been identified as sites of fragmentation, conflict and polarisation, rather than sources of collective belonging (Ulver, 2022; Weijo et al., 2014). However, whilst the commercially orientated facets of platforms have led to contestations concerning the manipulation of communal activities for purposes of capital gain, the inherent “anarchic” possibilities of digital platforms (Zwick & Bradshaw, 2016: 93) offer an interesting site for research. This is because online interactions can lead strangers to “join together to discuss topics or take actions of mutual interest, forming and sustaining long-lived or even short-lived communities of interest” (Costello et al., 2017: 2) within which alternative exchange systems might develop to reinforce their interdependencies (Giesler, 2006), and provide informal sites for social education and learning (Sandlin, 2007).

In earlier netnographic research the anarchistic elements of communal activity in online environments were more evident. For instance, netnographic studies by Kozinets (1997) and Giesler and Pohlmann (2003) explored the development

of grassroots communities which emerged around interests in-common for member's mutual benefit. In these examples, various resources were freely exchanged, whether in the form of digital files (Giesler, 2006; Giesler & Pohlmann, 2003) or in creatively exchanging theories, knowledge and fan paraphernalia (Kozinets, 1997). However, with the rise of social media networks and digital platforms, the netnographic method has increasingly focussed on how the more individually orientated presentation of the self on social media began to outweigh its previous appeal as a means of information, knowledge or social interaction and relations (Costello et al., 2017). As such, online activities are now frequently understood through a more individualistic orientation to communal engagement than was previously theorised (Ulusoy and Firat, 2018; Weiyo et al., 2014).

In contrast to the growth of more individualistic and self-interest orientated studies into marketplace behaviour, this research relates to early netnographic accounts that emphasise the communal intensification that can arise around an interest in-common (e.g., Kozinets,). The focus of this research is on exploring socialisation processes, despite its neglect in recent netnographic research (Costello et al., 2017), to draw out how sociality has been transformed in the context of increasingly commodified and individualised online interaction—yet “like weeds in cracks keep existing” (Kozinets, 2020: 124). The two groups of people with an interest in-common which provide the context for this research included fans of the UK rock band, IDLES, and fans of fantasy and science fiction literature. The IDLES fans are largely (but not explicitly) UK based and more political due to the nature of IDLES punk influences and the social commentary in their songs. The fans of fantasy and science fiction literature are broader in their interest across an entire genre, and due to this had a larger membership across more sites. This latter group is less political (although not explicitly apolitical) and has a larger US based, and generally more international membership.

This research focussed on the contemporary use of ‘older’ social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Reddit*. These platforms were the focus of this research because they are enabled by specific community-orientated features, namely the group ‘threads’ on *Reddit* and the ‘Group’ page and controlled access (via administrators, or ‘admins’) on *Facebook*, both of which provide the conditions for online communal activities by providing a siloed space for them to take place. Whilst Facebook has a feed, groups can be considered to facilitate more concerted communal activities. Reddit posts are ordered through user ratings rather than algorithms that are common in other contemporary platforms, operating as a form of moderation. This offers different possibilities for communal activity that are largely absent in newer digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where social relations are algorithmically controlled via users’ feed as the main

mode of relating and is more akin to the message boards studies in earlier netnographic research.

Netnographic Process

Netnographic methods can be distinguished from other digital methodologies as they follow a “set of general instructions relating to a specific way to conduct social media research using a combination of different research practices grouped into distinct categories of data collection, data analysis and data interpretation” (Kozinets, 2020: 7). The process of data collection for this study followed Kozinets (2020: 194) three steps of *investigation*, *interaction* and *immersion*. In line with netnographic methodology, the data collection and analysis for this study were thematic and multimodal, incorporating textual data and transcribed interviews as well as videos and images posted by users (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2020).

The *investigative* aspect of this research involved identifying groups within these two areas (music and literature) across different platforms which were suitably active. In this instance, both communities were accessed via Facebook ‘group’ pages, for which I had to be accepted as a member, as well as Reddit threads which are open access to the public. This involved seeking consent from Facebook group admins before including the group and a degree of active participation in disclosing to groups I was present in my role as researcher.

The research design for this study focussed on active phases of *immersion* into the respective online communities (Costello et al., 2017). This process incorporated a descriptive, and observational phase before directly engaging with group members to organise interviews (e.g., Ewing et al., 2013; Wilkinson & Patterson, 2010). The immersive data provided insight into how different communities developed and operated on a day-to-day basis.

The *interaction* aspect of this netnography entailed contacting members and admins of Facebook groups to request, arrange and conduct semi-structured interviews. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews entailed open-ended questions and prompts which cover general themes of interest for the research, to allow as much free-flowing conversation as possible (Kozinets, 2020). The purpose of this is to allow for “spontaneous moments of revelation” rather than calculated and deliberate answers (Kozinets, 2020: 253), fitting with the spontaneous nature of the interaction between strangers around a shared interest the research focuses on. The interviews were conducted over Zoom with transcripts generated for each interview. These transcripts were then edited to ensure accuracy and anonymisation. All identifiable information was removed in each transcript and pseudonyms have been used to preserve the anonymity of participants.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the data collection began two months of researcher immersion which was used to develop the initial interview structure through recorded observations and contextualising screenshots. Following this two-month period of initial immersion, participants were identified and contacted for interview. The first round of interviews took place across six-month period. Towards the end of this six-month period, I performed an initial analysis on the data from 8 months of observational recordings in the immersion journal, 120 contextualising screenshots and 10 interviews, which lasted between 30 and 120 min. From this initial analysis of the data, the interview structure was developed to address any theoretical gaps before conducting further interviews. The entire data set consisted of 12 months of notes recorded in the immersion journal, 194 sets of contextualising screenshots and 20 video call interviews which lasted between 30 and 120 min, at which point thematic saturation has been reached.

The analysis of this data set followed an interpretative process of identifying themes in the data set, which is a common method in netnographic studies (Kozinets, 2020). The interviews provide the primary object of analysis in this research, with contextualising screenshots and reflections and observations which make up the immersion journal, serving to provide external validation of the themes, providing additional contextual information and reflections from the researcher. This offers a means of data triangulation through the use of multiple sources (e.g., Cherif & Mild, 2013; Brodie et al., 2013). The process of analysis involved an abductive approach of moving backwards and forwards between the literature and the data in a process of reinterpreting interviews and immersive experiences which were documented in the immersion journal and accompanying screenshots (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). This process included trialling different forms of analysis, including developing narratives from the two groups to organise and make sense of the data the coding of quotes from the interviews by theme into which contextualising data from my immersion journal and screenshots were integrated. Overall,

through this analysis, the interpretation involved a year-long period of moving between the data codes and theoretical perspectives as a process of revisiting or re-experiencing the data using different theoretical frameworks and literature concerning care, mutual aid and communality across the themes (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) whilst retaining the contextual experience of the researcher through the immersion journal and screenshots (Mason, 2002) to develop the findings presented below.

Findings

My findings excavate how communal interactions across digital platforms can operate as sites for a micro-sociality of caring in-common to emerge, occurring through social media platforms as spaces of common encounter (Cloe & Conradson, 2018) through three themes. The first theme makes evident how care for an interest leads to recognition of others like-minded ‘other’, as a foundation for communal relations of caring in-common. The second and third theme engage with how caring in-common is created and recreated through the multiplicity and hybridity of the membership’s affective and material activities.

Recognising Like-Mindedness: Relating Through Common Encounter

The social media platforms operated as spaces of ‘common encounter’ (Cloe & Conradson, 2018) providing users with opportunities for sociality they could not easily experience in other contexts. For instance, Andy asserted that “*none of my work buddies, for example, would sit down and have like a fantasy-sci-fi chat with me*”, and Felicity extended similar social limitations to her family as she “*can’t talk to (her) husband about these things, because he finds it stupid*”. In contrast, Theresa, a lifelong fantasy literature fan and Amy, a relatively new member of the IDLES group addressed how their interactions through social media offered a sense of

Table 1 The netnographic process

Phase	Phase 1: Investigation and Immersion	Phase 2: commencing interaction	Phase 3: immersion and interaction continued
Time	2 months	6 months	4 months
Description of activities	Where required, consent acquired for conducting research on specific data sites Immersion journal is started, and initial collection of contextualising screenshots begins to develop semi-structured interview framework	Immersion journal and collection of contextualising screenshots continued. Initial semi-structured interview questions finalised Participants for the first round of interviews contacted through posting in the relevant research sites. Interviews arranged and conducted, and analysis begins	Immersion journal and collection of contextualising screenshots continued Semi-structured interview framework is altered from initial analysis Participants for the second round of interview contacted through posting in the relevant research sites and interviews arranged and conducted

common encounter. Theresa outlined how their interest in the literature was something outside of mainstream taste, highlighting that: *“it’s nice to talk to somebody else who knows something about your speciality, especially when your speciality isn’t the most common of things, you know, that you could talk to your neighbours or people down the pub?”*. Amy similarly outlined how the IDLES group offers a space for social interaction with people you have *“a little more in common with”*.

The statements by Theresa and Amy are relevant because membership to the Science Fiction and Fantasy group affords a process through which knowledge of something which might be a *“speciality”* and a niche interest in other aspects of social life, becomes something in-common between like-minded people. There are two dimensions to this; the first lies in recognising that finding people with the same taste, which isn’t considered *“mainstream”* can be difficult. The second aspect highlights that whilst in many instances this sense of difference can limit social possibilities, here it provided a means to develop social bonds with those you have *‘more in-common with’*.

As outlined by Stan in his interview, this sense of recognising in-commonness was important for establishing communal activities and a sense of care within them, stating that: *“It does make me feel good[...] People want to talk to me [...] it makes you feel like you’re part of an actual community where people care.”* Moreover, Melissa, another IDLES fan, provided further insight into how this can lead to strong and more personal connections with like-minded others through social media platforms: *“[A] lot of people, you know, probably felt that they couldn’t [...] find people with similar musical tastes and interests and everything to talk about it, because it’s really not that the mainstream. So, I think a lot of people just bonded with that.”*

Melissa aligns music *“tastes”* in terms of IDLES, as *“interests”* which further established a sense of like-mindedness and to an extent, a sense of *‘otherness’* in terms of what is and isn’t mainstream. For Melissa, this was a key reason why she made many close friendships and a romantic relationship through the platform. Further, Melissa met her long-term partner and a large group of friends through the IDLES group stated that:

“I would say just a like-minded group of people, you know..., where people are very passionate about the music, I think [...] they’re real bonds [...] its real friendship, and real caring for each other that happens.”

What is interesting about this statement is the identified overlap between *“like-minded”* users developed through them being *“passionate”* about their interest in-common. This in turn led to what Melissa identifies as real bonds, real friendship and real caring across social media to highlight

the impact of establishing reciprocal care in-common for an interest and the connections that emerge through it. In this sense, social recognition takes place through the social media platform as an affirmation of like-mindedness (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2012; Islam, 2013), providing a foundation for forms of secondary care not always accessible in offline primary relationships with immediate friends and family to emerge. Moreover, Melissa’s insights provide an example of how care relationships may move from the second circle of mutual care across the platform towards establishing more intimate primary care relations of bonds, friendship or romantic relationships (Lynch, 2007).

It is also interesting that the recognition which emerges through common encounters in the social media platform provided members such as Alex, another fan of science fiction literature, with insight into *“another reality”* in terms of the different lived experiences of others.

“I also met this person who lives in South Asia [...] at one point, we’re sharing pictures of bookshelves because she wants to buy bookshelves. She’s like. Because there’s so much pollution here, I cannot have open bookshelves, I need doors. But these are tiny details. These are things that you don’t think about very often. And it’s only by just chatting with somebody abroad, that you’re just like, I don’t know, you learn a lot of small things of another... another reality.” (Alex).

As Alex details above, encounters of caring in-common for a specific interest provides a connection between the inner self and outer other, which develops from an initial moment of recognition in terms of not only similarities but also differences and expands their possibilities to care with (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Tronto, 2013). This is made possible because interactions through the social media platform allows people to *“take the time”* for one another.

“I often think like, if relationships and friendships started in this way, maybe there would be much stronger and maybe [...] people wouldn’t be so flippant about things and relationships if they actually took the time [...] and that’s what you have to do on these groups[...] you have to take the time to read things, get to know people, reply to people[...] they post things that definitely [...] somebody at work wouldn’t be blurting out in the middle of the corridor” (Melissa).

In Melissa’s experience, interactions were not *“flippant”*, and instead served to develop relationships of *“real friendship, real caring”*. The less formal structure of social media enabled users to *“read things, get to know people, reply to people”*. It is through social recognition that members form bonds to care not only for their common passion but *“for*

each other” as people embedded in something unique that is experienced in-common. Moreover, the recognition of like-mindedness between members takes place on a different timeframe, as profit-orientated motivations (and the constraints which arise from them) that have been found in other organisational forms (e.g., Islam, 2013) are less prevalent on social media platforms. As such, communal relations of secondary care facilitate the forging of new primary relationships which would not necessarily have emerged in other contexts. This is achieved in a way where members do not feel pressured but rather have the time and space to engage and recognise the like-minded other at a level and pace they feel comfortable with.

Through establishing this culture of caring in-common with like-minded others, social media groups can provide alternative definitions of kinship (The Care Collective, 2020) as experiences and relationships are likened to a “family” or a “support mechanism”, which Jane highlighted was an aspect of the IDLES group she was not initially expecting when she initially joined, yet now is definitive of her social experience. This is perhaps best put in a comment on etiquette from the IDLES group page, which asserts ‘*all you need to know is if someone falls down, pick them up and have fun*’.

It is a statement familiar to those of us who have attended rowdy concerts. Yet for many participants, such as Jane, it was a particularly refreshing social norm to see realised in communal activities.

“I found it so refreshing that there’s not a single bad word that said, in there, and you know, the support, and that is incredible. And there’s just nothing like it. I’ve recommended it to a number of people. And people that aren’t necessarily hugely into music, but as a support mechanism, and to read that people are going through similar things that they’re going through.”

Jane’s reflections were based on the similarities between her experiences in IDLES group and those in other cancer support group pages she was involved with, where people bond over similarities and differences of their struggles. In particular, Jane emphasised how caring in-common can often supersede the initial music-orientated interest, occurring as reciprocal social and emotional mutual aid.

Further examples of this can be found in less specific comments on posts that convey solidarity and support, including ‘*Thank-you for sharing and for being your true self, ‘we’re happy to have you! All is love! Keep fucking going!’*’, ‘*though our exact situations are different, I can relate. All is Love*’ and ‘*dismantling beliefs can be brutal, happy to hear it was freeing for you. Ride the Wave*’. Similarly, supportive IDLES lyrics were ever-present at the end of posts and comments, including ‘*in spite of it all, life is beautiful*’ and ‘*all is love*’.

Such examples demonstrate how recognising not only an interest but a space in-common between like-minded people, which can be used as a social or emotional “support mechanism” that is not typically possible in other organisational forms or social contexts. It offers a specific secondary circle of caring in-common, which differs to those they may experience in their offline social lives. Moreover, the culture of mutual aid offered a means for members to care *with* one another on a more abstracted level of solidarity (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Power, 2019), highlighting how secondary care relations of grounded in mutual aid can support the emergence of tertiary relations.

Through this theme, the social recognition which emerges through establishing and recognising care in-common provides an initial connection. This connection in turn provides a foundation for expanding circles of care, and at times, the establishment of new primary care relations or more abstract statements of solidarity (Lynch, 2007).

Shared Socio-cultural History: Hybridity and Multiplicity

The lack of centralisation across the online environment means that these interactions are embedded in multiplicity and hybridity of those involved (Studdert, 2006). Social media users are not necessarily confined to one specific space or ‘group’, and people imported experiences from other spaces into hive mind discussions. This process of delocalisation is consistent with previous notions of fluidity within and between social media groups (Weijo et al., 2014). Yet the experience can also enrich communal activities to operate as a hive mind, constituted by the experiences and knowledge of those involved (Studdert, 2006). The hive mind is drawn from the shared socio-cultural history of their interest and provides insight into communal activities which could both be specific (such as IDLES as a band and their contemporaries) and expand to encompass wider related interests (such as IDLES genre of post-punk music). Tim, a lifelong fantasy and science fiction fan and author, asserted that “*all groups have a level of history that is important to them*” and went on to outline how social media provided somewhere for members’ knowledge and experiences to “*come together in one place*” around different “*niche*” interests of new members as a common resource.

“Those communities are invaluable because no one person can possibly grasp all the stuff that’s there. And if you want to know it, and you can’t because you can’t memorise it having thousands of other people out there who can serve as like a surrogate brain for you, the hive mind is invaluable.” (Tim).

Tim’s description of the hive mind indicated a form of active social learning occurs through communal sociality,

expanding the collective capacity of those involved. This was also highlighted by Matt's awareness that he at times gets things wrong and is "*still learning*" through his ongoing participation and best exemplified by Melissa, who details that "*You get to see things that you wouldn't have found on your own*" as the communal engagement can provide "*the type of information that you wouldn't get anywhere else*". As such, Melissa provided a similar sentiment when discussing the IDLES group to Tim's description of the fantasy and science fiction groups, which offers additional insight into the "*invaluable*" nature of the hive mind as a "*surrogate brain*".

Seb, another avid reader with a penchant for science fiction, further elaborated on the importance of the hive mind for caring with others both their similarities and differences.

"There are so many people there, eventually, someone will find something or someone will suggest something, which will trigger somebody else off. And so, it does work really, really well in that respect. People have different niche interests within the genres as well. And that's the beauty of that hive mind concept as the more it grows, and the more people that come on board, the better." (Seb).

Like Seb, Alex also highlighted the social power of the hive mind as an ever-growing and expanding resource, whereby what is usually niche, and specialised knowledge contributes can find a "*trigger*" to find what is sought "*within a couple of hours*". This ongoing activity develops the collective capacity for care and responsibility not only for the self and between two individuals (Held, 2006) but also at the level of secondary and tertiary circles of care (Lynch, 2007). This is because the care around the interest in-common often extended to other social concerns, such as those of representation and visibility. For instance, the fantasy and science fiction fans incorporated voting on favourite books, authors or options on what to read or buy next as well as often involving the creation of shared resources which are difficult to find elsewhere. These resources were created for a range of reasons but often had an overarching theme of solidarity and intersectionality, including for boosting representation and awareness around trans, non-binary, feminist or non-western centric musicians, songs, authors, characters, and plots.

In screenshots taken during data collection, IDLES fans contributed to a '*quick question for the hive mind*' concerning access to filmed Glastonbury sets, songs which helped with mental health and toxic masculinity as well as suggestions for '*sick on the couch in the summer under a blanket songs*' when suffering from COVID-19. In the fantasy and science fiction group, fans advised on feminist authors and gender representation in the genre and engaged in in-depth discussions concerning the best horror books to help

a member who posted '*I feel desensitised, anything to keep me up at night*'.

Other examples included the creation of documents for people to add '*books that cover mental health or include neurodiverse characters*' because '*representation *is* important*' and compiled insights concerning the role of trigger warnings on books received comments such as '*it's a wonderful thing you are gathering thoughts on this*', '*that is such a good question, I am really grateful for what I am learning on this thread*'. As such, the hive mind requests can vary from seeking vaguely remembered books from childhood to more complex requests for books with '*A main character who struggles with mental illness or books that revolve around the subject*' and correspond to their experiences, but also which cover different gender and sexuality representation in order to include '*perspectives that differ to mine*'. This request garnered 28 reactions and 47 comments discussing and advising the subject matter with members discussing their mental health struggles and books which chimed with their experiences and helped them, such as '*Multiple diagnoses myself. I liked 'Malazan'... it felt genuine and compassionate*'. This experience expands people's capacity to care for both their interest and others who held the interest in-common.

Trevor similarly highlighted how many in-depth discussions in the IDLES group covered subjects such as toxic masculinity, mental health, and gender equality, as the subjects are easier to broach in social media groups with a hive mind of like-minded others.

"People will share quite personal stuff about it could be mental health, it could be issues that have come up, sometimes related to music, about, you know, kind of toxic masculinity. [It] could be something that's happened to them recently, something they, they don't know how to talk about with their [offline] friends [...]" (Trevor).

Moreover, Andy further outlines how the responses to people sharing personal problems within the social media as a space in-common.

"It was just great to see you can see that woman in real time, feeling better about herself, and feeling better about the situation. And that's what these Facebook groups allow you to do. It's like [...] you share this common experience. But then once you're in the group, as long as the group allows you to have those sorts of conversations so that you do make personal connections with them." (Andy).

What is of particular interest in Andy and Trevor's quote and the contextual examples are the links between common experiences and common interests. Trevor indicates how the hive mind provides a sociality held in-common for people to

turn to when they are struggling, which in turns relies of a culture of mutual aid which serves to reduce social isolation and vulnerability. Andy in particular outlined how this was an important function of social media as it enabled members to develop a sense of “*common experience*”, through which “*personal connections*” can emerge in the fashion which were discussed in the first theme as interconnecting secondary and primary circles of care.

Creative Care: Affect and Materiality

The final theme explores how exchange of outputs or expressions of caring in-common contributes across affective and material dimensions. This theme highlights how creatively exchanging outputs provided a contribute to a sense of caring in-common across affective and material dimensions through communal participation. Significantly, this occurred across a range of circles providing tangible representations of intimate relationships, as a form of mutual aid and as direct expressions of solidarity. These instances of reciprocal creative exchange incorporated fan fiction, art, playlists and other homemade tokens, foster deeper and at times more tangible personal connections and expressions of solidarity. Tim discussed this when emphasising the importance of productive, active participation in communal activities which harnesses a sense of care and creativity, using the example of fan fiction.

“Fan fiction has a sort of a community built around, we write stuff and we read it [...] we’re all part of the fan fiction community. Because there’s this tied-in activity, which is productive.” (Tim).

This was also evident in the more artistic posts and comments, (*‘It’s time for a share your fantasy art thread!’*) which involved people sharing drawings of maps from books and promoted book covers or character interpretations they had created. In these examples, caring in-common is created and recreated through “*tied-in activity, which is productive*” and facilitates building creative outlets for expression of communal care.

The link between the communal care and the creative forms of material-affective exchange was particularly evident in the IDLES group. It was common for members to exchange homemade tokens, such as badges and stickers via the post as tokens of the relationships they forged in the group, which Jim outlined as “*Some badges. I’ve got drawings from others. Hand drawings [...] I’ve had a lot of positive messages as well*”, when prompted for further examples concerning the exchange of material or tangible items between users. Other examples included playlists of rare music and badges, and homemade T-shirts and knitted dolls of band members or people they had developed relationships with.

Amanda described how she was instrumental in setting up the exchange in the United States and provided some insight into why it was an important aspect of the communal care. Sending gifts, handwritten or painted messages and drawings made ‘*simple*’ communal relationships seem “*real*” and “*tangible*” ‘, it provided a more embodied and material dimension to the care relations users formed online.

“It makes me feel I’m more connected to people around the world [...] It just kind of makes that simple community even more real and tangible”.

For members this form of active participation makes the sociality and relations which comprise communal activities more “*tangible*”. What is interesting in Amanda’s perspective is the affective connection which comes from material exchange. In this sense, the tokens were valuable in an affective rather than monetary sense, which makes “*real*” value in the tokens of connection and care that they exchange, providing a tangible or material aspect of the caring in-common.

This is because, as stipulated by Trevor, a fan of IDLES who sends items through the mail exchange, these activities helped developed a sense of connection and intimacy between users. It involves “*bringing people together that, like have this sort of connection, and then... they’ve used that connection to build something else*” through the relations and interactions that constitute communal care. As such, whilst different forms of cultural production were evident throughout the researcher immersion and interviews, there is an evident commitment to caring in-common that motivates active and creative participation and expression.

As a direct example, Floyd once reached out to the IDLES Reddit page to enquire about replacing a lost record following his attendance at a show and offered a homemade piece of art in return.

“I didn’t realise I didn’t have it on the way home. So, I reached out on the Reddit site and said you know, if anyone can get me one and mail it to me, I’ll pay for it and I’ll make them a wood burning, or like a custom wood burning and I posted my art, and someone got back to me. And I just got my record in the mail yesterday.” (Floyd).

Further, Floyd highlighted the idea of posting the request was spurred on by similar posts in the group.

“But I posted that because I had seen other people do similar things saying like, I you know, ‘I lost my T shirt’ or ‘I wasn’t able to get ticket for my friend can someone help me out’”

The role of exchanging homemade art was a common one throughout the communities studied and discussed during the interview. As Floyd highlights above, this at times

requires a certain level of trust and a shared sense of value in the work performed, in this case, a custom wood burning. This was made possible as an extension of the gift exchange mentioned above by Amanda and the general culture of mutual aid that underpinned user interactions.

Discussion

This paper explores the micro-sociality of caring in-common, contributing human centred insight (D'Cruz et al., 2022) into how ethics of care can emerge on social media platforms to enlarge the capacity to care in-common with others as a defining factor of communal being (Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016). Throughout the findings, the secondary care relationships grounded in mutual aid emerge from the recognition of common interest and provide a foundation for intimate primary care relationships and solidarity-oriented tertiary care which manifested in a range of interactions and relationships. The first theme of my findings details how an interest in-common facilitates social recognition amongst users, which emerges through their common encounters with others on online platforms (Cloke & Conradson, 2018; Geiger et al., 2024). In the second theme, the hive mind highlights a process of sharing socio-cultural history and knowledge which draws on the multiplicity and hybridity of those involved (Studdert, 2006). The final theme shows how caring in-common can encompass creative activities that underpin the social fulfilment of participants. This theme details how affective-material activities were grounded in and offered expressions of care relations as tangible manifestations of the affective value of communal activity which constitutes caring in-common.

By excavating the commonalities, differences and variant relationships across communal activity, my findings derive insight into how ongoing communal activity constructs and re-constructs (Studdert, 2006) caring in-common. As demonstrated in Fig. 2, the relations of care were predominantly grounded in the secondary circle of mutual care, emerging from the recognition and like-mindedness that is established on social media as a site of common encounter. The intersectional connections of caring in-common which operated predominantly on a basis of mutual aid provide a bedrock for instances of social solidarity and more immediate and intimate relations emerge and develop (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; Lynch, 2007).

My findings contribute to mapping the interpenetrating taxonomy of caring in-common. Figure 2 highlights how the concentric circles of care conceptualised by Lynch (2007) and operationalised by Alacovska and Bissonnette (2021) integrate into the micro-sociality of caring in-common, visualising how a variety of interactions and relations emerge across the different circles to balance capacity and

responsibility (Power, 2019; Traill et al., 2024). Thus, Fig. 2 highlights the key theoretical contribution of this work in excavating how care operates as an important ethics of relating to other human beings through mutual aid, whilst providing insight into how caring in-common encompasses relations of intimacy and solidarity across different forms of communal activity.

This exploration of caring in-common broadly contributes ethical insight into 'who' people are as the outcome of ongoing sociality enacted in-common (Studdert & Walkerdine, 2016), manifesting as small and unheroic instances of care (Cloke & Conradson, 2018; Geiger et al., 2024). The platform functions as a space for acting 'other-wise' instead of 'self-wise' (Lynch, 2007) and thus became central to reflexive and experimental ongoing participation (Ward, 1973), grounded in the hybridity and multiplicity of the those involved (Studdert, 2006). This relates to recent ethical discussions which highlight how in-commonness can help to assemble sites of ethical responsibility for the 'other'—in this case people who were initially otherwise strangers on social media—within which caring *with* can emerge, as opposed to caring *for*. It is in this sense that communal activity encompasses reciprocal, affective connection as an experience of anarchy, connecting the individual self to the other on a basis of mutual aid (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; Shukaitis, 2009; Spade, 2020). The communal experience is defined through the relationships and bonds which constitute it. Yet this is not enforced by any specific higher authority. Rather, it emerges around people caring for one another through an interest held in-common, in a fashion that reduces isolation and vulnerability (Kaltfleiter, 2021; Ward, 1973). It does so by highlighting how communal activity and ethics of care can provide prefigurative ways of living at the micro-social level (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021).

The central contribution of this paper explores the emergence of care ethics through social media, building on previous studies by Alacovska and Bissonnette (2021) regarding the taxonomy of care and Geiger et al. (2024) regarding how care emerges in social spaces of common encounter. The development of this framework contributes to broader discussions of care, its emancipatory benefits and its tensions with profit-orientated organisation (Au & Stevens, 2022; Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2012; Fan & Cunliffe, 2023; Hammington, 2019; Richards, 2022). This paper therefore expands on the analysis of care ethics in formal organisations and its implications for social life. My findings provide novel insight into how caring in-common holds the potential to empower collective capacity by opening communal discussions and resources. More specifically, I highlight how this provides opportunities for individual and collective self-development and social fulfilment across different circles of caring in-common (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2012; Fan & Cunliffe, 2023; Zapata Campos, 2024).

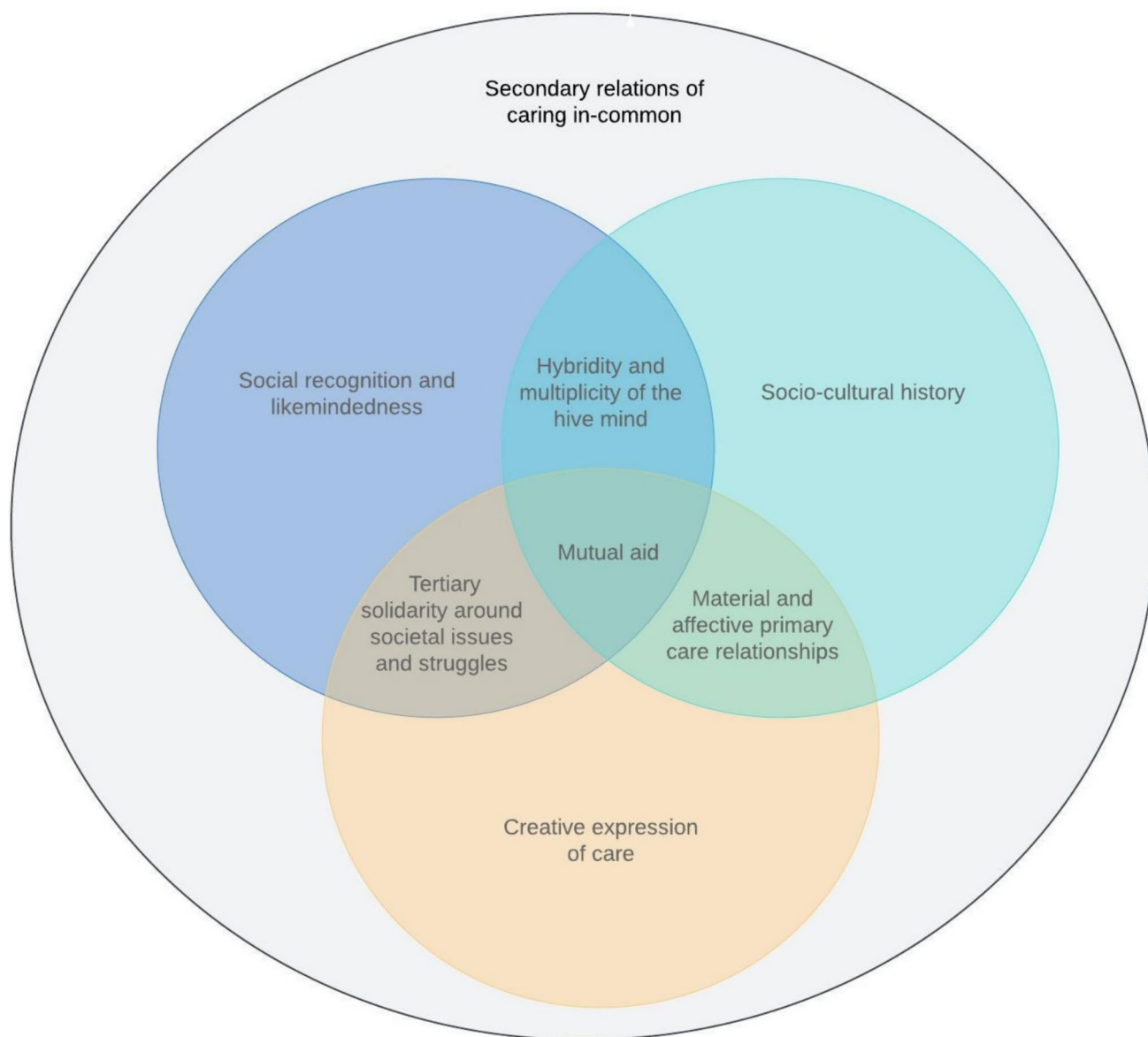


Fig. 2 The micro-social taxonomy of caring in-common. Authors creation, developed from previous models by Alacovska and Bissonnette (2021) and Lynch (2007)

A second contribution from this research relates more explicitly to studies of social media platforms. My findings indicate how the contemporary use of older form social media, and how it can be used from a less individualistic or self-interested perspective despite the delocalisation of the communities, in which users relate to the ‘other’ (e.g., Costello et al., 2017). This contribution does not refute valuable research concerning the dark side of digital platforms (Pignot, 2023; Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020). Rather, it offers insight into how social media platforms facilitate opportunities for alternative, non-hierarchical forms of anarchic relations to emerge without a central authority despite the market logics of social media

(Ward, 1973; Zwick & Bradshaw, 2016). By taking a human centred approach to social media through the ethics of care, this paper engages with ongoing discussion concerning the ethics of digital platforms, contributing to scholarship on the subject of user ethics in digital platforms (Ahsan, 2020; Bally et al., 2024; Reeves & Sinnicks, 2024) and critical research concerning the ethical use of digital infrastructure for alternative community organisations and economies previously addressed by Döbbe and Cederberg (2024), Hoelscher and Chatzidakis (2021) and Jones and Arnould (2024). My findings provide insight into the communal, human centred ethics of social media platform users and the use of platform infrastructure grounded in different logics to that

of the economic, in this instance emphasising the expansion of caring capacity through common interest.

Finally, this research contributes to understanding the prefigurative value in further exploring the impact of caring with one another around interest(s) in-common as an ethics of ‘living’ desirably in the here and now (Cornée, et al., 2020; Wruk et al., 2019; Zapata Campos, 2024). The contribution to this literature lies in understanding how care contributes to these prefigurative experiences (e.g., Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021; D’Cruz et al., 2022). The user’s participation came from a sense of otherness around their interest, and that the forms of social recognition which emerged through their interactions were not evident in other areas of their social lives. From this foundation, my findings outline how caring for a wide range of people can occur through offering different forms of support which extend beyond immediate kinship networks (The Care Collective, 2020) which provided an alternative form of ‘living’ through the micro-social taxonomy of caring in-common. These findings are suggestive of how caring in-common holds the potential to empower collective capacity by opening communal discussions and resources, which provide opportunities for individual and collective self-development and social fulfilment across different circles of care (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2012; Fan & Cunliffe, 2023; Zapata Campos, 2024). Moreover, they highlight the prefigurative implications of communal care. Social relations created in everyday interaction “prefigure the world to come”, emerging through “motion and interaction” (Shukaitis, 2009: 143) to embody a sociality that contrasts to individualistic capitalist modes of organising even as it exists within them (Reinecke, 2018).

Conclusion

This paper’s contributions lie in furthering our understanding of how alternative ways of ‘living’ in the world (Gibson-Graham, 2011; Parker et al., 2014) occur through care relations which emerge in communal activities on social media platforms. Significantly, the matter that this occurred across capitalist social media highlights how prefigurative experiences of anarchy grounded in mutual aid can occur within capitalistic infrastructure to provide new forms of collective agency and caring capacity (e.g., Cornée, et al., 2020; Fan & Cunliffe, 2023; Power, 2019). As such, my contributions highlight how this can occur despite the frequent contradictions between care and capitalist infrastructure that are identified in studies of care ethics in formal organisations in certain instances (e.g., Au & Stevens, 2022; Islam, 2013; Richards, 2022). Such insights therefore also contribute to ongoing discussions concerning the ethics of digital platforms, their users and the prefigurative potential of care in digital contexts (e.g., Ahsan 2020; Bally et al., 2024; Döbbe

& Cederberg, 2024; Hoelscher & Chatzidakis, 2021; Jones & Arnould, 2024). Further research may explore more concerted how and where possibilities for direct action and behaviour change can emerge from by experimenting with ‘actually existing’ modes of living which expand people’s collective capacity through caring in-common across different platforms and organisational contexts.

Data availability statement A data availability statement is not currently applicable. This is because the data is not currently publically available as it is from a PhD data set from which papers are still being produced.

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