Reddit: Affordances as an Enabler for Shifting Loyalties

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Abstract

This paper examines the affordances of *Reddit*, a digital media platform where Users share and discuss content. The aim of the study was to understand the affordances of Reddit, and how the affordances of Reddit through various features of the platform lead to outcomes, specifically those relating to political loyalty and the creation of political narratives. The study contributes an insight into the evolution and understanding of affordances as a result of examining the ways in which individuals who were previously members of another political group constructed narratives around switching their support to the Trump campaign in the 2016 US presidential elections. The study specifically focusses on an exclusive membership community called r/*The_Donald*. As a result of analysing posts on common themes using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), we conclude that the features enable membership of a community to be rewarded, switched or denied. As a result, this study has identified five affordances of Reddit, which include credibility, expressing oneself freely, echoing beliefs, creating membership and the meta-affordance 'Redpilling'. The outcomes of these affordances are that ingroups are created, support can be switched, extreme or hateful views are legitimised and a new brand of conservatism is given credibility. This in turn is concluded to have realised impacts outside of the virtual environment in this case on the self-reported behaviours of voters.

Keywords Reddit · Digital media · Trumpism · Political · Membership · Affordances

1 Introduction

In this post-truth era of politics, it has increasingly become difficult to distinguish between objective facts and constructed narratives. As Sismondo (2017) argues, US politics has been in the post-truth arena for a long time where echo chambers of both social and older media subsequently lead to the manipulation of voters. Given the increase in usage of digital media platforms, the ways in which people are communicating are varied and continually evolving. This has subsequently led to the construction of affordances. "'Affordance' refers to the perceived and actual properties of a thing, primarily those functional properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used."(Salomon 1993, p. 51). In other words, these are the uses particular features of objects/technologies afford users. These uses of particular features of technologies enable different forms of communication and self-expression. For instance, Facebook affords its users the indication of their preferences through likes, Twitter does this through retweets. Various studies demonstrate how social media affordances influence how individuals express themselves (see Halpern and Gibbs 2013; Morrison 2014; Fox and Moreland 2015). Relatedly, the influence of affordances of social media on political expression has gained traction (see Christensen 2011; Hapern and Gibbs 2013; Kreiss et al. 2017; Motivated by the importance of affordances, our study focusses on the digital media platform, known as Reddit, as a legitimate data source. We focus on the role of Reddit itself in the social construction of *Trumpism* by Users of the platform with a particular focus on how affordances of Reddit influence narratives by enabling certain types of self-expression. We are particularly interested in the material affordances of communication (Hutchby 2001b; Markus and Silver 2008) provided to Users i.e. how those Users utilise particular features and settings of the platform in order to construct membership. These constructions of membership were first observed in the Users that appeared to use the platform to justify their support of Donald Trump, the Republican Party candidate after previously being Bernie Sanders, or Democratic Party supporters.

This study contributes to the Information Systems literature by addressing the way in which the construction of

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membership and resulting behaviour changes that it brings can be mediated by social media, in ways which are not seen outside of these platforms. Using political support expressed during the 2016 USA elections as the source of data, this is of importance because of the potential advantage that it provides when used in the representative democratic process, where influencing and persuasive narratives are key tools for candidates (Bennett 2012). To this end, we particularly explore the concept of affordances to understand the power of the social media platform Reddit and similar sites that enables the construction of membership narratives.

Studies on Facebook and Twitter dominate the studies on social networking platforms (see Huberman et al. 2008; Bollen et al. 2011; Ellison et al. 2007; Pempek et al. 2009), but the Reddit community is relatively under-researched; Bergstrom (2011), Weninger et al. (2013) and De Choudhury et al. (2014) being notable exceptions. Recently, Buyukozturk et al. (2018) looked at collective identity on a specific subreddit and demonstrated how the social media platform Reddit impacts social movement processes. They specifically looked at Gamergate controversy and studied Gamergate supporters on the subreddit, providing insight into collective identity and membership within a Reddit community.

Reddit is reportedly the 6th most popular website in the world.[1] Registered Reddit community members can submit text posts, links or videos that are discussed by invited or open communities in the subsequent discussion threads. This article has two elements – the first is examining the affordances of the platform itself, as per the theory of affordances of communication technology developed by Ian Hutchby (2001a, b, c). The theory suggests that media technologies have functional and relational aspects which give opportunities for, or invite, actors to undertake action. (Hutchby 2001a, b, p. 444). The second element is considering how these affordances are used to construct political or membership narratives and recruit members. Reddit was chosen because of its reported influence on voters during the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and the rise of *Trumpism*[2] as a whole (Rohlinger and Bunnage 2017).

To this end, two contributions are provided: First, we identify how the affordances of Reddit distinguish it from other social media platforms thereby contributing to the study of Reddit; second, we examine the affordances of Reddit in influencing political narratives.

The paper is organised as follows. We discuss how Reddit is a unique platform, then discuss the theory of affordances which leads us to our research questions. We then provide the method, our findings on the platform and its affordances

followed by a discussion of our results in which we focus on the ways in which social media affords a different, and potentially harmful, collection of political narratives than would be voiced in person.

2 Features of Reddit

Digital media is considered the most complex of media sources due to the nature of internet; i.e. a network of networks (Couldry 2012). However, the materiality of these networks has been overlooked and the focus instead has overwhelmingly been on content or the audiences that consume it (Gillespie et al. 2014). Drawing on Boczkowski and Lievrouw's work (2008), Gillespie et al. (2014) argue that scholars have overlooked the interwoven relationship between the material and the symbolic. In this paper we address this by looking into the materiality of Reddit and its relationship with the way that narratives are constructed by its users.

The content shared on Reddit is diverse, including but not limited to videos, text posts, articles and images. Reddit is organised into categories which are known as *subreddits*. Users or 'Redditors' as they identify themselves, can submit Posts that may comprise text, a link or an image or video which are then voted and/or commented, on by other members. 'Karma' is a term utilised by Users to refer to points provided to a submitter based on the popularity of a submission. Submissions with the highest votes have the highest 'karma' and rise to the front page and receive more views. The 'karma' rating of any User is found next to their name and can be viewed by any User. It is worth noting that Users can only vote for a post once but they can change their vote once logged. The duration for which a Redditor has been active can also be viewed. These are some of the material features provided to Reddit Users that are not available on other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter.

A User does not require a Reddit account to access the majority of content and, unlike Facebook or Twitter, anonymity (via unvalidated, multiple and easy to start accounts) is allowed for those that do register. Both of these features, while seemingly simple, are of importance because they provide anonymity to the user. Anonymity is one of Reddit's differentiators amongst social media platforms and may be the reason that it is one of the most popular platforms.[3] Accounts do not require personal data and it is considered standard practice to create throwaway accounts whilst posting on sensitive or personal matters. However, as Bergstrom (2011) points out, there is still an expectation of truthfulness amongst community members.

Once a User signs up on Reddit it is possible for them to subscribe to one or more subreddits. Some subreddits are

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[1] Data from www.Alexa.com. On 28th May 2018 it was the 6th most popular website in the world with Users spending an average of 15 min per day on the site.

[2] *Trumpism* in this paper refers to philosophy and approach espoused by US President Donald Trump and his supporters.

[3] Other platforms such as 4chan, 8chan, Pinterest, Tumblr also provide anonymity but are not as popular as Reddit.

exclusive and can be viewed upon invitation only, but the majority are open and usually dedicated to a specific topic within Reddit and allow subscription.

3 Influence and Persuasion in Social Media: A Review of Existing Studies

A study by Hossain et al. (2018) looks at planned and unplanned behaviour which contributes towards an understanding of why people share political content on social media. Their study sheds light on the cognitive mechanisms that help us understand the reasons why individuals share certain types of content. Through a Goffmanesque lens Richey et al. (2018) examine self-presentations and increased levels of self-disclosures on social media. They elucidate the existence of a liminal mental state where the differences between formal and informal contexts are minimised and actor's transition from the front stage to the back stage. Therefore, is an array of explanations as to how and why individuals share their views in such spaces and we argue that this is shaped by the affordances of such spaces explained in more detail later in this paper.

The influence of social media can be validated through several noteworthy events – for instance, Bonilla and Rosa (2015) shed light on how social media platforms have become influential sites for recording and challenging incidents of police brutality and misrepresentation of racialized bodies in mainstream media by examining the aftermath of the fatal police shooting of an unarmed teenager Michael Brown, in 2014. Through "hashtag activism" social media users were able to show that "#Ferguson is everywhere"— not only in the sense of a broad public sphere but also in the sense of the underlying social and political relationships that haunt the nation as a whole" (p.12). Corroborating the importance of social media in political participation, a study by Tufekci and Wilson (2012) demonstrated that social media, Facebook in particular, greatly increased the odds of participants attending protests in Tahrir square on the first day of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. Lee et al. (2015) examined the impact of tweet features on the diffusion of two types of messages during the 2013 Boston marathon tragedy. Oh et al. (2015) also examined the role of social media in the Egypt revolution and found that situational awareness was maintained through the use of hashtags. Xenos et al. (2014) found a strong positive relationship between social media use and political engagement among young people in UK, USA and Australia. Grover et al. (2018) investigated whether the nature of social media discussions have an impact on voting behaviour during an election and found that discussions on Twitter could have polarized users significantly. Consequently, as these studies demonstrate that social media influences political participation and social movements, we argue that this

influence is facilitated by the affordances that the unique features of the media platform allow.

4 Affordances

The theory of affordances of communication technology (Hutchby 2001a, b, c) proposes that they are "the functional and relational aspects of media technologies which frame, while not determining, the possibilities of agentic action in relation to an object" (Hutchby 2001a, b, p. 444). The underpinning concept of affordances developed by Gibson (1979, 1982) describes opportunities for, or invitations to, action that 'things' present to actors. Gibson's affordances have three key qualities; they are functional, relational and learned. Hutchby's approach focusses on technological devices as these 'things'.

According to Turner (2005) the interpretation of affordances can be divided into simple and complex affordances. The first one relates to the concept of the ideal, proposed by Ilyenkov (1977), as tangibly prevailing in the world in the form of significances shaped by purposeful human activities. Complex affordances relates to Heidegger's phenomenology where context and affordances were seen as synonyms. Similar to the notion of complex affordances, Vyas et al. (2006) propose an understanding of affordances where affordances are socially and culturally constructed and emerge in practices and activities. Seidel et al. (2013) identify functional affordances required in environmental sustainability transformations contributing to a better understanding of IS enabled organisational change; they argue that functional affordances allows us to look at how individuals "interpret material properties of information systems (i.e. technical objects) with the objective of creating more sustainable work practices." (p.1279). The study by Seidel et al. (2013) identifies the pertinent contribution functional affordances can make towards assisting organisations, in this case it is about making a difference through contributing towards environmental sustainability. The authors found that "information systems afforded possibilities for cognitive activities through which individuals across the entire organization could frame, inter- pret, and understand the multilayered and complex issues related to the environmental sustainability transformation"(p.1281). This underscores the importance of Information Systems and affordances in the interpretation and understanding of various issues.

Nevertheless Evans et al. (2017) highlight that there are inconsistencies with the term affordances – they identify three major inconsistencies. Firstly, scholars describe affordances without engaging in existing research which addresses the same affordance. Second, some studies provide lists of affordances without conceptually defining individual affordances. Finally, affordances are used where they do not meet the commonly accepted definitions of an affordance. We therefore have aimed to address these inconsistencies in this

paper. For instance, Majchrzak et al. (2013) in their study, define affordances with a tangible outcome, such as metavoicing, triggered attending, network-informed associating and generative role-taking – which are closely linked to features in Evans et al's critique (2017) while others use more intangible affordances that are more likely to be perceived by a third party, like Visibility, Editability, Persistence and Association (Treem and Leonardi 2013). It appears that the manner in which each researcher engages with the concept of affordances is different. This is corroborated by Nagy and Neff (2015). Critiquing the traditional concept of affordances, they propose the term "Imagined affordance" to emphasise the importance of imagination in affordances. "Imagined affordances are expectations for technology that are not fully realised in conscious rational knowledge" (p.1). They argue that affordances can include the expectations and views of users even if they are untrue and they should be delineated to include properties of technology imagined by users. This is relevant to our study, as we consider not only the material affordances of Reddit (how the features allow the users to interact with each other) but also the affordances imagined by Reddit users, where they believe that by upvoting a political narrative post, they will be able to influence the views and support of others. For the purpose of this paper, we understand affordances as 'the uses that particular features of an object afford its users, which can be both imagined as well as material affordances'. For instance, the imagined ability for a community to find the so-called suspects of the Boston bombing can be seen as being related to imagined affordances, where the users expressed belief that the thread was able to find the culprit of the tragedy.

Social media platforms are diverse and different in their ability to shape narratives; Halpern and Gibbs (2013) contribute to a greater understanding of social media's impact on deliberation by contrasting social media platforms – Facebook and YouTube which differ in the affordances of identifiability and networked information access. By examining which messages posted by the White House successfully initiated conversations among users, they found that messages in YouTube were considered to be more impolite than messages in Facebook because YouTube is more anonymous, demonstrating the importance of the affordances of communication of a social media platform. The study by Halpern and Gibbs (2013) highlights the importance of recognising the uniqueness in affordances of digital media platforms which subsequently influence narratives. Therefore the way that narratives are constructed on digital media platforms is dependent on their affordances.

Many social media platforms share some features and users, therefore there is necessarily an overlap between the affordances that may be found on each. However, these platforms all exist in a competitive dynamic, where numbers of clicks or time spent exposed to ads or content on the platform is the currency. For these platforms to thrive in this competitive environment they need to differentiate, therefore it makes sense that the unique synthesis of its features and affordances creates that differentiation and in doing so an accepted 'disposition'. This is the first reason why we chose to examine Reddit; it is similar in popularity, shares some features to mainstream rivals Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram yet invites a completely different use.

The second reason, is that online spaces such as Reddit are particularly relevant in the rise of the alt-right.[4] As Flisfeder (2018) points out, alt-right are seen as dangerous due to the fact that they appear as intellectual and cultured in online spaces, often espousing opinion and bias as fact and are influential as a result. Reddit is an online space where this same principle is able to give power and legitimacy to the online support for the otherwise controversial figure of Donald Trump. Therefore, we look into embodied human practices and interaction involving Reddit, and the affordances it provides to the Users seeking to influence others.

Thirdly, the importance of studying this platform is enhanced because of the risks that are presented by users maliciously using the platform to discredit or sow doubt about individuals or communities. This comes about because users are increasingly exposed to user-generated content that seems as believable as fact-checked journalistic content but with no reliable way of discerning which is true. There are examples of Reddit influencing beliefs and allowing rumours to propagate into credible beliefs. The Boston Bombing incident resulted in users of Reddit groundlessly accusing some individuals which was unsubstantiated, demonstrating the dangers of such a platform. After the Boston bombing thread wrongly named several individuals as suspects, Reddit publically apologised for having fuelled an online witch hunt. This tragedy created a huge amount of traffic on Reddit (about 272,000 people) according to Google Analytics. Therefore, the manner in which narratives are constructed is different in this online space.[5] Several conspiracy theories unique to the platform exist which makes it necessary to consider the impact of such platforms more thoroughly. There used to be a subreddit called r/pizzagate which is now banned; the users of the subreddit claimed that there was a paedophilia ring run by the members of the Democratic National Convention.

While Housley et al. (2017a, b) look into interactions on Twitter using membership categorisation and considering affordances of communication, a detailed exploration of how membership works on Reddit and how this is mediated by the unique portfolio of features and subsequent affordances of Reddit has not previously been examined.

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[4] We are careful not to equate all Trump supports to the Alt-right. While the alt-right makes up some of the Trump supports, the alt-right is a loosely defined group referring to white supremacists, Neo-Nazis, Neo-Fascists amongst others.

[5] See https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-22263020

We also examine this process of membership and the manner in which users of a particular subreddit (r/The_Donald) create membership and influence other members in order to create support on otherwise controversial views.

In light of this and the need for further research into the affordances of Reddit, we identified three research questions:

1) What are the features and affordances of Reddit?
2) In what ways do these features and their affordances mediate membership and recruitment behaviours?
3) What is achieved by the use of these affordances?

5 Research Methods

We examined Reddit posts and subsequent comment threads. Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was used to analyse the data. This method systematically describes the meaning of qualitative data (Mayring 2000; Schreier 2012). The focus of QCA is to create a coding frame aimed at reducing the amount of material. This method was chosen as it is highly systematic. Given that Reddit contains millions of posts and comment threads, these had to be sifted through in a systematic manner. The flowchart in Fig. 1 explains the process.

A key feature of QCA is its flexibility in that both concept driven and data driven categories can be utilised (Schreier 2012).

Reddit Users were initially discovered using Reddit's own search function and an online Reddit search engine called RedditCommentSearch.com which allowed a more specific search function. These Users described themselves as former Bernie Sanders or Democratic Party supporters that switched to supporting Donald Trump (in particular, rather than the Republican Party). The Reddit behaviours of these Users were investigated and sub-communities, such as the subreddit called r/The_Donald (a subreddit dedicated to Trump and his supporters) and the 'Bernouts' (an invitation-only group of former Bernie Sanders supporters) were discovered. A search of the content within r/The_Donald subreddit found that a specific identity of such Users was used to refer to Bernie Sanders supporters who switched their support to Trump; these Users called themselves "Afterberners" or "Bernouts".[6]

Subsequent searches of Reddit using the term "Afterberners" led to a list of posts by and about AfterBerners. These were then sorted using the site's own function, based on top results which had the most number of upvotes (endorsements by the community of readers). Each link in the first 100 posts was examined, with a specific analysis focusing on Redditors who had mentioned the reasons why they switched their support.

The initial phase of data search comprised searches of the entire site and later on r/The_Donald subreddit, using the terms 'Afterberner' 'Bernout' 'Sanders' 'Bernie' and combinations of these terms. Posts and Users were included in the data where Users referred to previously being supporters, identified with Bernouts or Afterberners (either using these terms to describe themselves, or through describing behaviour as such) and stating or describing support for Donald Trump. This initial examination of the data comprised posts and their subsequent replies.

The original posts by Redditors who either described themselves as Afterberners or Bernouts, or could be described as such by the statements they made and the responses to those posts were grouped under broad themes. As we were interested in interactions between Redditors, the replies to each post were also analysed.

After this initial phase of inquiry, content analysis was undertaken. All posts were coded and an initial coding frame was developed as shown below.[7]

– Features and Affordances (see results in 6.1)
– Switching support
– Bernie Sanders (see results in 6.2.1 and 6.2.2)
– Hillary Clinton (see results in 6.2.3)
– LGBT (See results in 6.2.4)
– Social justice warriors (See results in 6.2.5)
– Russian Involvement (See results in 6.2.6)
– Social Construction (see results in 6.3)

Subsequent analysis of these codes was undertaken to determine the main points of narrative that Redditors used to construct their and Trump's legitimacy and sense of community identity. Second stage analysis sought to identify the ways in which in-group language or codes were used to display membership. All data is in the public realm, all contributors are anonymous and no effort has been made to identify or provide identifying characteristics.

A final analysis was undertaken in the light of other social media platforms. In particular, the online dialogue about Donald Trump on Twitter was examined for comparison.

5.1 Building a Glossary

To understand how social construction worked in Reddit, we had to first translate or interpret some of the language used. As part of our reflexive discussions, we recognised that we represented an outgroup; language was used in a way that was unfamiliar to us at the outset. It was clear to see that the use of in-group language was highly prevalent. To memorialise this

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[6] Afterberners in both communities came from an initial group for Sanders supporters called "r/SandersForPresident".

[7] Note – all posts provided below as data have been reproduced faithfully with no editing or censoring. As such the language used may be offensive. All posts are the Users own and do not represent the views of the authors.
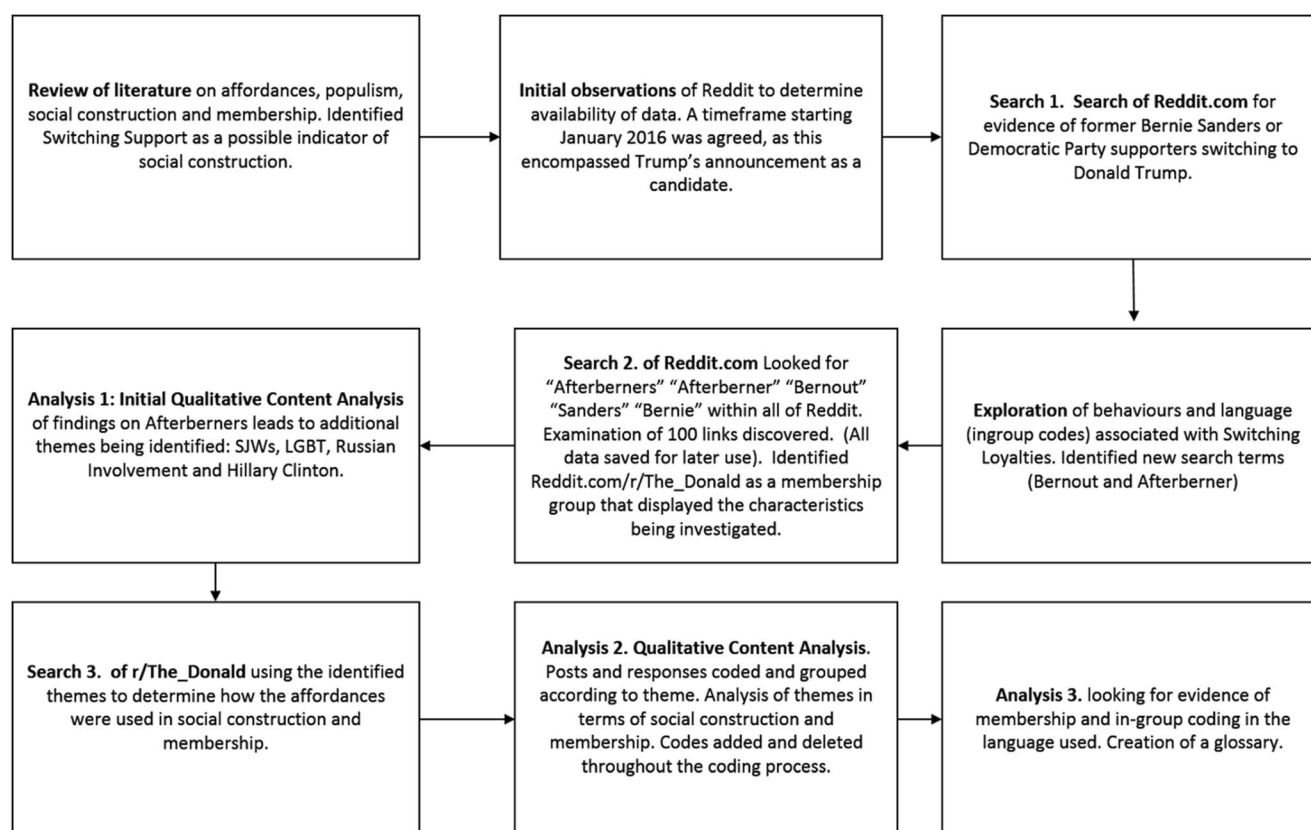
Review of literature on affordances, populism, social construction and membership. Identified Switching Support as a possible indicator of social construction.	→	Initial observations of Reddit to determine availability of data. A timeframe starting January 2016 was agreed, as this encompassed Trump's announcement as a candidate.	→	Search 1. Search of Reddit.com for evidence of former Bernie Sanders or Democratic Party supporters switching to Donald Trump.
				↓
Analysis 1: Initial Qualitative Content Analysis of findings on Afterberners leads to additional themes being identified: SJWs, LGBT, Russian Involvement and Hillary Clinton.	←	Search 2. of Reddit.com Looked for "Afterberners" "Afterberner" "Bernout" "Sanders" "Bernie" within all of Reddit. Examination of 100 links discovered. (All data saved for later use). Identified Reddit.com/r/The_Donald as a membership group that displayed the characteristics being investigated.	←	Exploration of behaviours and language (ingroup codes) associated with Switching Loyalties. Identified new search terms (Bernout and Afterberner)
↓				
Search 3. of r/The_Donald using the identified themes to determine how the affordances were used in social construction and membership.	→	Analysis 2. Qualitative Content Analysis. Posts and responses coded and grouped according to theme. Analysis of themes in terms of social construction and membership. Codes added and deleted throughout the coding process.	→	Analysis 3. looking for evidence of membership and in-group coding in the language used. Creation of a glossary.

Fig. 1 Flowchart showing the systematic method for data capture and analysis constructed for this study

insight, a glossary of terms was developed (see Appendix 1 Table 3) which is a useful resource for those not familiar with the language used in r/The_Donald.

5.2 Self-Censorship and Researcher Reflexivity

Given the provocative nature of the content of the data, we would like to acknowledge that there were a few topics that we actively did not pursue. These include views on Islam and controversial conspiracy theories surrounding paedophilia and the Democratic National Convention. Given that we were dealing with controversial content, it was essential for us to be aware of our own biases during the data collection, coding and analysis process. Due to the interpretive nature of our research, we acknowledge that it is unrealistic to fully remove ourselves from the data collection processes. Failing to take into account the place of researchers in the construction of meanings removes the researcher from the processes and allows them to make assertions on the role of others which unfortunately brings a "static understanding to meanings that are inherently fluid in nature" (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000; Easterby-Smith et al. 2015, p.181). We were both aware of our positions. One of us is an experienced User of Reddit, more neutral in political views towards Trump and the other was new to Reddit and identified with the left-leaning more than with right wing politics. The potential effects

this could have on the research process were discussed. To minimise the influence of the researchers on the research process, coding and analysis were carried out by both researchers and frequent discussions about potential bias took place. Furthermore, our study is focused on the affordances of Reddit and not on Users' individual dispositions. Therefore the extent to which Reddit itself influenced narratives was of utmost importance, rather than the content of the narratives.

6 Findings

The findings of the study are presented below in four areas: Initially those that relate specifically to "how features are utilised as affordances by Users of Reddit" (section 6.1); followed by "how these affordances are specifically used to create or maintain support around specific themes" (6.2); and, in doing so, socially construct in-groups and outgroups (6.3). Finally the findings compare the use and interactions afforded on Reddit with those seen on Twitter (6.4).

6.1 Features and Affordances of the Reddit Platform

This section describes the features and the resultant affordances of Reddit as a platform and how they are used

by Redditors to enable membership and recruitment. A summary of the findings is located in Table 1.

6.1.1 Affording Credibility and Approval through Registration, Data Sharing and Posting/Rating Features

Feature 1: Registration. Registering to create an account allows Users to be able to rate posts, post content, and respond to posts. Therefore, whilst registration is not required to view content, it is necessary to allow participation on Reddit. Whilst posting, the Users also agree to adhere to the rules of the platform as a whole, or they risk having their posts removed. The information associated with an account enables others users to see how long an individual has been active on Reddit and the 'Karma' that the account has earned (Fig. 2).

There is no verification process for setting up an account which enables users to create personas that may not reflect reality (see also 6.1.5 Freedom of Expression) and in doing so have a clean slate from which to build or join communities. If users find that their shared content or views do not achieve their goals, or attract the desired group or support, a new account creates a blank persona from which to garner support or engage with a community. Despite the lack of verification, the history of an account, and the number of upvotes carries weight, as users are able to check the profiles of other users to learn about their history on reddit, giving some indication of the credibility of users.

Feature 2: Posting/rating enabling interaction with user content and data sharing. When content is posted in a particular subreddit, there are various ways through which Users can engage with it. Redditors are able to upvote or downvote the post and reply with comments to the post (see Fig. 3) if they have an account. Additionally, other Redditors can reply to comments resulting in a comment thread. Some posts are marked "Serious" which means any humour or inappropriate comments will be removed and the net sum of the number of upvotes (+1) and downvotes (−1) is given to the left of a post. The feature itself is a simple calculation shown clearly next to a post but the affordance of this is that it provides the reader with another proxy for credibility. Posts with a high upvote score afford a level of confidence and reassurance that liking the posts will allow them to be part of that majority. Posts that have large numbers of net upvotes are promoted higher into list of posts available to view and are more likely to be upvoted as a result, creating a snowball effect. Upvotes for original posts contribute towards the karma that a particular user accumulates. The longer the history of an account, and greater the number of original post and upvotes, the greater the karma. This is explained in more detail below.

Drawing on Gibson's (1977) conceptualisation of affordances, we therefore suggest that registration, interaction with user content, data sharing and the karma afford credibility to posts and users. Credibility has not been identified as an affordance in many research articles – however Sundar (2007) describes credibility as being made of 4 affordances – modality, agency, interactivity and navigability (the MAIN model). This definition has been used to assess the credibility affordance in this case. The modality, Reddit itself, adds the heuristic of 'authority' due to its size, reported user numbers and familiar format. Agency is afforded because otherwise anonymous users are attributed as 'sources' of information, opinion or thought.

Because user accounts accrue data which is publically available when the user posts, this allows users to build their perceived credibility – 'Karma' is accrued every time a post that they make is upvoted and so users with high karma scores are instantly recognisable as having views and creating content that is liked often and by many. This will affect how a User is perceived by others in interaction and plays a role in how membership takes place. Karma is considered an important badge for Reddit users especially as some subreddit moderators automatically delete posts from users with low Karma. As a result subreddits such as r/free_karma and r/FreeKarma4You have thriving communities of users who promise to upvote each other in order to build this proxy credibility. The accrual of karma by these individuals provides a halo bias to the posts that they have created or publically shown approval for. This matches with Sundar and Nass's (2001) report that stories attributed to other users are likely to be perceived as higher quality.

The posts are interactive through the effect that up- and down-voting and karma has on the algorithm which rates and orders posts for visibility. These afford the interaction herustic, leading to greater specificity of the content that is seen according to the likes (or dislikes) of the user. These, coupled with the ability to receive regular notifications through the mobile app, encourage increased interaction and participation means that almost "everything that they consume online is a product of their interaction with the medium" (Sundar 2007), which in turn makes the content appear credible, because it agrees with their world view.

Navigability is easy for the user, because the platform uses familiar formats and interfaces to other social media and operating system platforms providing the final layer of credibility through well established familiarity heuristics (this looks familiar to other credible sites or imagery that I'm used to, I know where to find what I need, therefore it must be a credible site).

6.1.2 Affording Belonging and Membership through Features that Make Visible the Artefacts of Culture

Feature 1: Personalisation. The Reddit allows a high level of personalisation of the way that the platform looks for subReddits. An example of this is the way in which images of Donald Trump are regularly updated on the front page and surrounding wallpaper of the r/The_Donald. These are often tied directly to the most popular news stories of the day.

Table 1 Summary table showing features and affordances

Affordance	Feature	Description of its use and importance within r/The_Donald and to the political agenda as a result.
a. Credibility	1. Registration and blank slate personas	a. The lack of verification in the registration process allows users whose views or comments have led them to be shunned or downvoted in the subreddit to create new personas that they can manipulate in order to either test controversial views, or to fit in with the crowd in order to become influential. b. Karma rating shows activity on Reddit and provides the otherwise anonymous users a proxy for credibility. This adds to the perceived legitimacy of the message and infers to readers that they are reading a majority viewpoint, when this may not be the case.
	2. Posting/ rating	a. Upvoting or downvoting of comments allows users to control and choose what is seen at the top of the thread, as well as to confer support or credibility on the views of others. This bestows legitimacy and a visible cue to readers on the views of people within r/The_Donald. b. Posts or comments can be deleted by the author or moderated allowing an *ex-post* reflection. Unlike in person communication, users can be more persuasive by removing their own views if they prove unpopular, or by moderators removing content that doesn't reinforce the central message of Trump's supremacy and value to the USA.
b. Creating membership and belonging	1. Personalisation and visible artefacts of culture and membership	a. Top bar and images can be personalised to the sub-Reddit, creating a visual reinforcement of the purpose of the subreddit. In this case, positive imagery of Donald Trump or negative imagery of the Democratic Party, or Trumps detractors. b. Use of visual cues stimulate discussion or debate. This includes anti-Democratic Party sentiment as well as Pro-Trump sentiment as shown in the 'comment' or 'post' buttons. This keeps the message on track and consistently reinforces the message with a sense of glamour. Pictures of Melania Trump, Kanye West and Kim Kardashian are often used to glamorise the sub-Reddit and attract readers. c. Individual posts can be personalised with phrases, flags or fonts choices to allow personal expression and a level of virtual intonation, timbre or urgency to otherwise emotionless text. This adds a layer of emotional communication that can infer a sense of urgency, humour or irony which reinforces the political view with a human element.
	2. Encoding - writing in unlimited free text – with the ability to include symbols, emphasis etc.	a. The use of unique language, particularly codes, allows membership messages to subtly be reinforced. This feeling of membership and in particular of belonging is one of the rewards conferred on members and is earned by keeping up to date with the new language. b. Membership language also excludes those who do not share the same views, culture or experience creating a strong in-group/ outgroup differential and again prevents alternative views being expressed. This is further expected by rules which exclude opposing views.
c. Echoing	1. Deport option	a. Part of the personalisation - the 'Report' button is changed to 'Deport' a subtle reminder of Trumps stance on illegal or unwanted immigration and an affordance that reinforces the message and its acceptability every time it is used.
	2. Rules for Excluding alternative rules	a. Introductory matter and the particular rules of every sub-Reddit provide guidance on the expected behaviour for that community. In particular, it is for support and praise of Donald Trump and in so being, provides an echo chamber for those wanting to strengthen their views and seek messages they can proliferate outside of the community. b. Third party moderation actively enforces these rules of communication and is expected and welcomed by users. c. In r/The_Donald the rules are explicit about the site being supportive of Trump and only for that purpose. Critical views or debate are neither encouraged nor tolerated and this provides a place for views in support of Trump to become extreme in their expression.
d. Expressing oneself freely	1. Anonymity	a. Anonymity allows otherwise controversial matter to be raised openly within the rules of the sub-Reddit - allowing a persona that may not be acceptable in the 'real' world to be expressed, often in-extremis, with no perceived danger to the user of real world consequences. b. Throwaway accounts allow multiple personas to be presented by the same individual allowing and creating an expectation of, edited self-expression specific to the community on that sub-Reddit.

On 17th April 2018 the front page held an image which included American patriotism images alongside the Make America Great Again campaign baseball caps. At 8 am EST that image was changed to one of Donald Trump being presented with a rose by Kim Jong Un of North Korea to reflect news that North and South Korea had reached a peace accord. The first two posts on r/The_Donald that day were from Redditors on r/The_Donald stating that this event was as a result of Donald Trump's stance.[8] Examples of this and other front page matter are found in Fig. 4.

Every sub-Reddit can be personalised to create a local virtual environment which Users are familiar with. This is clear on r/TheDonald where imagery of Trump, far left supporters and Trump as various heroic figures is common. Even within the tools of Reddit, r/TheDonald has been personalised to reflect the culture. The 'Report' link (available to Users under every comment on the wider platform) has been replaced with 'Deport' reflecting Trump's election campaign promise to reduce the number of illegal immigrants in the USA.

The usual options are found in Fig. 5, an example about Jeb Bush from r/OutOfTheLoop with the modified version from r/The_Donald underneath.

The affordance of this highly personalisable space goes beyond the credibility that it provides in the 'Navigability' and 'Familiarity' domains, but goes so far as to create a feeling of membership in the user. The creators and authors of the subreddit are able to show their affiliation as soon as visitor reaches the site. Little has been found in the literature to support this view of 'affiliation' as an affordance of communications technologies. It is more established in the field of 'spatial affordances' from ecological psychology Bloomfield et al. 2010). The work of Bateman (2011) is an example which looked at the ways in which the acceptance of 'moral rules' in the playground was used by children to show affiliation with a group category and therefore demonstrate membership. However it is a clear and obvious finding of this study that affiliation, joining and the membership inherent in that act is an affordance that should be included in the lexicon for social media affordances.

Feature 2: Encoding (Use of codes and ingroup language). Language, and in particular encoded language, was identified as an important feature within r/The_Donald. The use of a unique language on Reddit affords users the ability to maintain membership. The following example is discussed to emphasise the importance of in-group language in the affordance of membership.[9]

Original post[11]
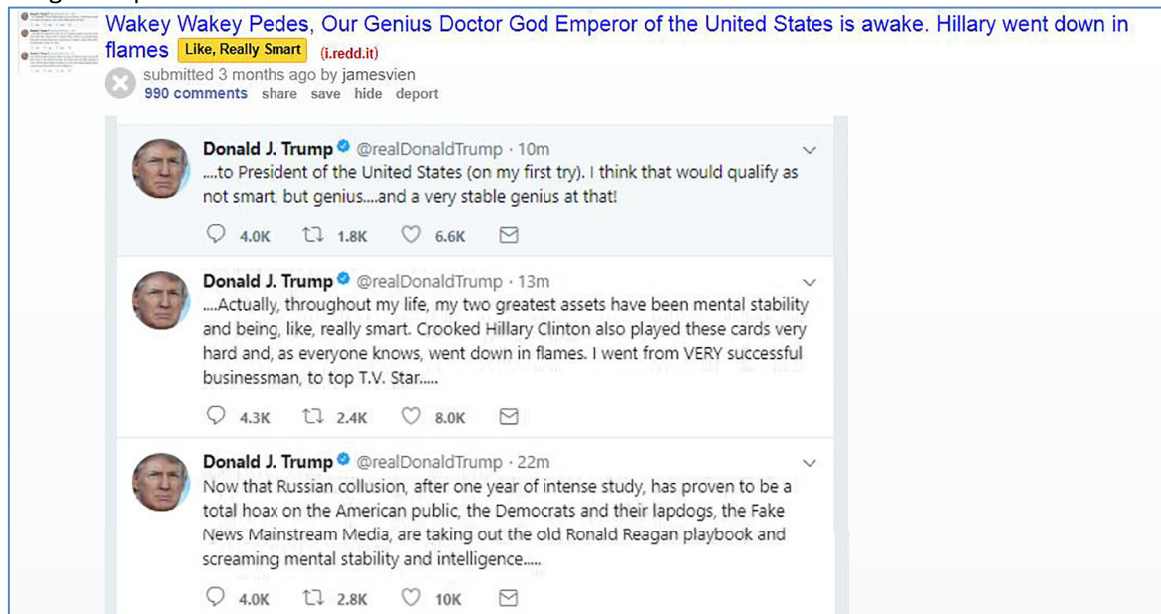
[8] Source posts that encouraged the front pages images relating to Kim Jong Un can be found at https://www.Reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/8cxt7b/why_everyone_should_praise_trump_for_getting/
https://www.Reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/8cvwse/more_winning_north_and_south_korea_reportedly_set/?utm_content=title&utm_medium=hot&utm_source=Reddit&utm_name=The_Donald

[9] To see original post, go to https://www.reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/7oj1xe/wakey_wakey_pedes_our_genius_doctor_god_emperor/

Comments:

```
[-]P….G_ 94 points 3 months ago
"like, really smart"
He turned on the laser pointer for the MSM kitties
        [-]d….e 7 points 3 months ago
        Very stable genius is a pretty freaking big laser dot too
[-]s….s 121 points 3 months ago
This is, like, really awesome
[-]s….t 64 points 3 months ago
The meltdown on Twitter is fucking hilarious
        [-]m….e 6 points 3 months ago
        Maybe trolls like this so we can read the reeeing and have a good laugh? It's like
        he's saying, hey Trumpsters, have I got somethun' for ya, just read the responses!
        3.2 [-]E….e 8 points 3 months ago
        GEOTUS is like "hold my beer"
        lol
```

In this example from the 6th January 2018, Users are discussing Donald Trump's Tweets from that day in response to the recent release of the book "Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House" by Michael Wolff. The initial responses express their support for Donald Trump's response, showing that they think it is funny and meant to be funny, using the in-group code 'MSM' to describe mainstream media and the derogatory term MSM kitties – suggesting that they are naïvely led around by Trump's Tweets like a kitten chasing a laser pen dot.

u/E….e's support is couched in familiarity 'GEOTUS is like "hold my beer" lol'. This might be a nonsensical statement to any but the in-group. GEOTUS being one of many aliases used for Donald Trump on r/The_Donald and 'hold my beer' suggesting that Trump is going to get something done quickly (see Appendix A Glossary for further disambiguation).

They way in which Reddit differs from traditional message board format is that the Users do not engage in discourse – often making only one comment per thread as would be the norm for Facebook or Twitter. Rarely does a Redditor appear more than once in reply to a post or in defence of their own comment.

The language used suggests that the followers are constructing justification for what, at first glance, appears to be defensive language in Trump's tweets.
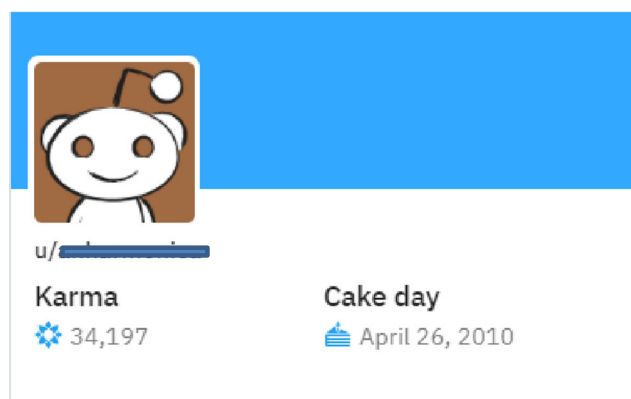

u/▬▬▬▬▬▬

Karma   Cake day
✴ 34,197   🎂 April 26, 2010

Fig. 2 Example of a user profile showing the Karma rating

6.1.3 Affording the Echo Chamber through Features that Exclude Alternative Views

Feature 1: The deport option. This was discussed as part of personalisation where the "deport" option instead of the "report" option in the r/The_Donald affords the Users the echo chamber as seen in figure 5.

Feature 2: Rules for excluding alternative views. One of the most obvious affordances noted when studying what influenced apparent membership and recruitment on r/The_Donald was the exclusion of alternative views, which the features of the introductory matter on the front page and the particular rules of every subreddit allow. Examples from r/The_Donald are shown in Figs. 6 and 7. The introductory material and the rules enable the affordance of 'echoing'. Here, the community sets out its agenda and the community's culture.

Reddit Users who have subscribed (and are therefore able to post content) are asked to abide by a common set of rules, whilst more localised rules for subreddits can also be added by moderators. In r/The_Donald, three additional rules are added, requiring that 'Trump Supporters Only' use the thread, that the subreddit is not to be used to make threats to Government officials (which is illegal in the USA) and suggested behaviour outside r/The_Donald.

As shown in Fig. 7, the key matter relating to membership is 'This forum is for Trump supporters only'. The explanatory text goes on to state 'If you have questions about our president, our way of thinking or other discussion questions post them on Reddit.com/r/AskThe_Donald where we will gladly answer. This forum is NOT for that'.

The unwritten rules of Reddit users (known as 'Reddiquette')[10] suggests that the community is a discrete, self-regulating culture. Cultural norms for Reddit as a whole include the concentration on 'conversation' promoting content and

---

[10] https://www.reddithelp.com/en/categories/Reddit-101/Reddit-basics/reddiquette

Fig. 3 Example of the upvote/downvote and comment affordances on Reddit
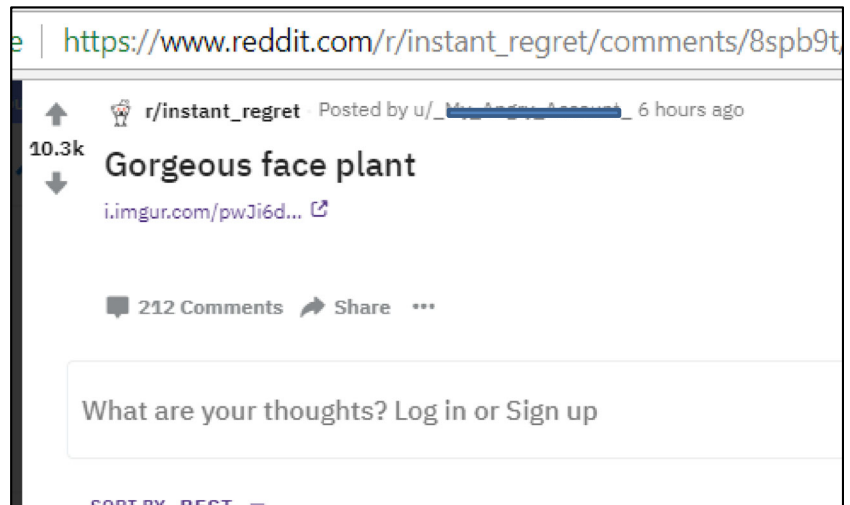
discussion points – the insistence that posts and titles should not be opinionated or recruitment oriented but that posts should be factual (such as pointing others towards media/news etc.) and that opinions should be limited to the comments reinforce this.

While most subreddits are openly accessible if you are not subscribed to them, or logged into Reddit, you cannot submit posts without being logged in. Further if you are subscribed to a subreddit this will show up on your front page, with the highest rated posts from those subreddits available to view on the home page. The score for a post or comment is dependent on the number of upvotes and downvotes.[11] This automated regulation means that Users visiting interest groups like r/The_Donald will only be exposed to posts that reflect the common interest and experience very few dissenting voices in doing so. This is in addition to sub-Reddit moderation and allows and maintains the 'membership' element to the point of it becoming an echo chamber, or political homophily (Colleoni et al. 2014) for support of the community's common interest (in this case, Donald Trump).

Closed membership, and the echo-chamber effects observed, occur because of the features of Reddit which allows subreddit moderators to delete the content of users who they perceive are not supportive of the rules, in this instance, any negative comments or questions about Donald Trump. Hence, the features of Reddit and in particular r/The_Donald, are actively used to exclude alternative views.

We have labelled the affordance that arises from this feature as 'echoing', taken from the commonly used term of the 'echo chamber'. Echo chambers are not new in the world of communications affordances. Vaccari et al. (2016) are amongst the most recent to identify the way in which users who communicate about politics (in this case elections) were more likely to do so in networks that support, rather than challenge, their views. While Vaccari et al. (2016) recognise that recent

research has shown that the internet can function as an echo chamber, their own research discovered that the extent to which social media functions as an echo chamber depends on the individual, who may also use social media as 'contrarian clubs' where political disagreement is common.

The post shown in Figure (MSM Kitties) illustrates the way in which Reddit differs to other social media platforms: this thread and its comments features no anti-Trump sentiment at all. In open feeds that don't have a specialist membership, such as Twitter, responses that are openly supportive of a particular stance (either for or against Trump) often have a more balanced set of subsequent responses. Trump's own official Twitter feed contains comments that are openly in opposition to his views, more closely demonstrating the Contrarian club as described by Vaccari et al. (2016). r/The_Donald is clearly an echo-chamber by comparison. Three potential causes for this on Reddit have been identified: either negative responses are moderated and deleted (Feature 1 - Rules) negative responses are quickly downvoted and the thread disappears (Feature 1 – Registration, Rating, upvoting), or there is a culture that non-Trump Supporters wouldn't read or respond to threads in r/The_Donald – political homophily (Barberá 2015) according to Vaccari's model. Whatever the cause, the result is a safe place for supportive voices to thrive with no fear of dissent.

In the case r/The_Donald, we suggest that the format of Reddit is consistent in its affordance of an echo-chamber through its explicit rules and the tacit use of language, personalisation and reinforcement of membership in the comments and their subsequent ratings.

6.1.4 Expressing oneself Freely as an Affordance of the Feature of Anonymity and Throwaway Accounts

Feature 1: Anonymity. As shown in 6.1.1, Reddit has no verification process for setting up an account, users can create personas that may not reflect reality and in doing have a clean slate from which to build or join communities. The fact that

Fig. 4 Selection of images from the front page of r/The_Donald during May 2018
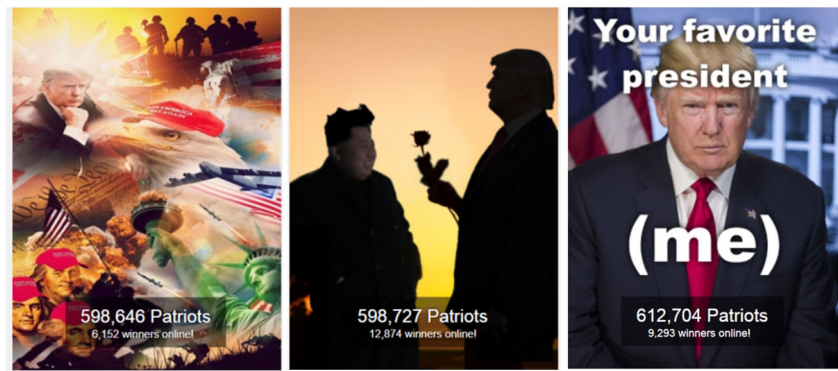
Reddit affords its Users to express themselves freely through anonymity differentiates it from other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Anonymity is embraced and encouraged on Reddit and enables Users to open up more. Figure 8 is a screen shot of an example of how throwaway accounts are often used in order to remain anonymous. The post says "throwaway obviously" to indicate that they don't want anyone to figure out their identity.

Anonymity is a well-established affordance of communications technologies, having been used by Evans et al. (2017) as an example of a topic that meets the threshold criteria of such. We argue that the affordance in this case is the freedom of self-expression that anonymity allows, rather than just being anonymous. What appears at odds with this otherwise obvious finding, is that anonymity in other social media undermines the affordance of credibility, under the 'Agency' heading of the MAIN model (Sundar 2007). Having shown that an otherwise anonymous source is afforded credibility on Reddit because of the features of rating and Karma (see 6.1.1) it leads to two observations: 1 There is an unmet need for self-expression outside of the platform that this anonymity affords, 2. There is an acceptance that Reddit is a place where controversial views and opinions which wouldn't otherwise be acceptable in a less controlled environment are allowed and welcomed.

In summary, four major affordances have been identified in this study: Credibility, Creating membership, Echoing and Expressing oneself freely. Table 1 shows how the affordances and the features from which they arise are used within r/The_Donald.

Using the test of the threshold criteria of affordances (from Evans et al. 2017) an affordance has reached the threshold if it is not the object, or a feature, or an outcome but does have a variable effect. We argue that all of the above meet these threshold criteria, where Reddit is the object, the features are clearly identified in section 6.1 and the outcomes are shown below in section 6.2).

6.2 Applying Features and Affordances to Switching Support (Outcomes of the Features and Affordances)

This section uses examples taken directly from Reddit to illustrate the ways in which the features and affordances have been utilised alongside persuasive, rewarding or other tools of social construction – in this case to achieve the outcome of garnering or maintain support for Donald Trump. This section also explores the creation of other affordances such as Redpilling which is related to belonging and membership.

Fig. 5 Comparison of the default and personalised versions of the action links for posts

6.2.1 Afterberners in Favour of Trump

Example 6.2.1
Original Post:

> [–]f….**FL** 196 points 6 months ago
>
> I normally don't vote but my cousin insisted on my wife and I voting for Bernie in the primary because we were registered dems (democrats) even though we didn't care either way, we figured Hillary would win either by being voted in by retards or she would cheat her way in, seems like it ended up being a little of both.
> In any case, I had been shitposting in favour of Trump for the months leading up to the election but Trump really grew on me the weeks before the election. I didn't vote and had I voted it probably would have been for Johnson who gets a lot of shit but it's near impossible to fill Ron Paul's shoes so I can't blame him really. My wife started liking Trump a month or 2 ago which is awesome and 2020 we will be first in line to make sure the god emperor stays in charge of the ship!
> Also, I had put this together a while ago, enjoy.

(The post is followed by a list of links showing Trump in good light[12])

Comments below the post:

> [–]**L....s** 22 points 6 months ago
>   Great work!
>
> [–]**T....s** 16 points 6 months ago
>   Let's vote this baby higher. Well done, I did not know about quite a few of these. Thanks for the info. Get out and vote next time. Your vote really does count.
>
> [-]**N....NC** 8 points 6 months ago
>   This is what was so aggravating, especially on election night - Knowing that Trump would never get recognition in the media for all the great things he's done and the people he's helped in the past.
>   I don't think he's perfect in every way. But he's strong, he loves the shit out of this country and there's *no one* I'd rather be my president. MAGA (Make America Great Again)

Example 6.2.1 is a post by a former Bernie Sanders supporter (an 'Afterberner') who switched to supporting Trump, but did not vote. By referring to Trump as the "God emperor", u/f...FL expresses support for Trump. A series of links are posted which show Trump in good light.

By posting in favour of Trump, u/f…FL gains membership into this community (r/The_Donald). This is demonstrated by replies to the post. For instance, u/T…s encourages everyone to upvote this submission. By saying "let's vote this baby higher", the User is using the affordances of Reddit to highlight this particular post he/she agrees with. As Reddit allows Users to upvote or downvote posts and comments, the most upvoted comments and posts get more visibility. Subsequently, the post became the highly rated and prominent within r/The_Donald, featuring on the front page.

u/N….n also responds to the comment to show support for the original post and express their support for Trump by using his campaign slogan Make America Great Again as the abbreviation MAGA. Abbreviations are another aspect of Reddit, as Users often utilise them as an 'in-term' creating a private lexicon of membership and assuming knowledge of them in other Users, which is different to non-membership interactions. See section 6.3 for more on this.

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[12] Please go to https://www.Reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/6h9dmu/special_amnesty_announcement_sanders_supporters/?st=jbxpj06c&sh=33a56a0b to view the links posted by f_bastiat

6.2.2 Redpilling as a Meta-Affordance

The term 'Redpilling' was frequently found in the sample of posts analysed and often used with significance as a call to action by Users. Redpill is a slang term which refers to the scene in the film 'The Matrix' where Neo takes the red pill and sees things 'as they really are' (see Glossary for details). The term has been appropriated by different groups. For Trump supporters it is a call to 'see the world as it really is', although it has also been suggested to have a darker connotation when alt-right individuals use it – considered to mean "convince other white people that we're better than others" and many of them are not shy about trying to redpill their friends and families (Pearl, 2016). Redpilling on r/The_Donald took the

form of being an ingroup code, a subject of discussion, a call to action or a mission to be rewarded for achieving. In this research it also arose as a type of 'meta-affordance' (Poddiakov 2018) which flows from the other affordances provided by the various features of Reddit. The combination of the rules of the community, personalisation and exclusion of alternative views allowing for membership and belonging, credibility and echoing leads to 'Redpilling'; the phenomenon of believing that you have seen a truth which the social masses are blind to. Members of the community are able to Redpill each other. Because of the lack of dissenting voices, the rewards offered for Redpilling or being redpilled (such as Karma, upvotes or gold) and the associated feeling of belonging that this engenders.

Example 6.2.2

It's been six months since I switched from being a progressive socialist, to a Trump supporting Republican. I was driving today and became overwhelmed with emotion at how lucky I am to be American and had to stop the car and pull over. I love life, liberty and this country. Don't stop red pilling! (**i.redd.it**)

Submitted 1 year ago by d....d[13]

[-]**S....e** [MAGA] 258 points 1 year ago

I was never a socialist but certainly apathetic towards politics for years. Ever since I was redpilled I can't put this stuff down and I'm SO PROUD to be AMERICAN! I can't believe how long I took it for granted.

    [-]**L....5** 75 points · 1 year ago

    I can relate to that.. meaning never a socialist but I was apathetic ..
    maybe because I study engineering and the only social studies class I took
    was anthropology. I do come from a third world country where corruption is
    the norm, I remember always hearing "oh that person will never be charged ..
    "... i am so happy to be An American! Let's not forget what the real fight
    is ! Be free to be anything you want! And to uphold the rule of law. When I
    saw what happens to the so called American politician elites, I woke up! But
    then I really started to pay attention and learn quickly that we the natural
    believers (that celebrate what America truly is) are under atact
    I choose to be free and to defend my freedom! Thank you The_Donald! And
    thank you.

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[13] The original link can be found at https://old.Reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/85dq57/its_been_six_months_since_i_switched_from_being_a/

Later comments.

```
[-]e....s  94 points· 1 year ago

NO MORE BROTHER WARS
THE CURRENT NARRATIVE IS FOR RUSSIA AND THE EU AND USA TO FIGHT A WAR OF
MASS CASUALTIES OF WHITE MALES WHERE WE DIE AND WHILE REFUGEE MEN TAKE CARE
OF OUR WOMEN BACK HOME
THE REFUGEE INVASION FAILED BC EUROPE IS QUICKLY BECOMING POPULIST NATION BY
NATION AND THEIR BACK UP PLAN IS TO START A WAR WHERE 90% CASUALTIES ARE
WHITE MALES
```

Here, red pilling (or Redpilling) is a call to action and u/d….d appears to equate the switch from Democrat to Republican as redpilling, mixed in with emotions around identity as an American and the virtues of love, life and liberty. Various comments are posted by individuals who related to this. Consequently, u/d….d gains membership into the community by explaining why he/she switched support through a critique of socialism.

Several Users express criticisms on socialism and relate it to apathy. Trump being president is equated to freedom. u/L….5 suggests that he/she is from a third world country and supporting Trump gives the User legitimacy, as Trump was seen as being unsupportive of immigrants. However it can be argued that u/L….5 is seeking to preserve their relative power by subscribing to Trump's anti-immigrant sentiments which this embrace of conservatism provides. Similarly u/e….

s mentions the mass causalities amongst white males and points out that male refugees take their place instead. Again, the need to preserve the power of an in-group such as "white males" can be observed. Reddit provides a platform for such expression which would be controversial elsewhere.

The four clear affordances identified from the features in section 6.1; credibility, creating membership, echoing, and expressing oneself freely, have all passed the test of an affordance in that they are neither the feature nor the object, they lead to an outcome (but are not the outcome) and that this
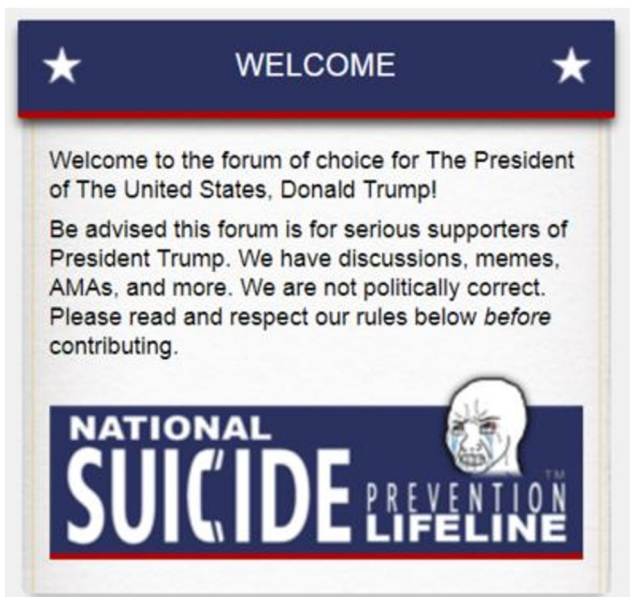

Fig. 6 Front page matter of r/The_Donald regarding membership (Visit https://old.Reddit.com/r/The_Donald/ to view the front page matter in context)
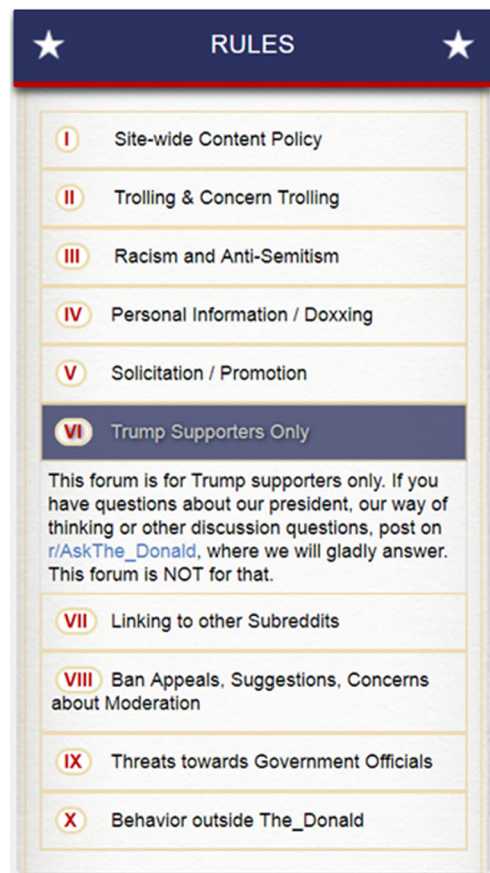

Fig. 7 Membership rules found in the front page matter on r/The_Donald

outcome may be variable. The fifth affordance, Redpilling, is less clear cut. It is more accurately a meta-affordance of the others and needs to be identified as such, raising questions over whether a meta-affordance is in fact an outcome or a 'pre-outcome'. Having been 'redpilled' by others, users have passed a rite of passage for the community and are clear advocates for the cause.

6.2.3 Alleged pro-Hillary Propaganda and Switching

Example 6.2.3

Original Post.[14]

> [–]**T....1** 11 points 1 year ago
> I switched from supporting Bernie to supporting Trump following the Democratic convention. Like you, I probably would have just voted Green Party if I had thought that Bernie and his supporters had been treated fairly. When you research Trump, I think you'll find that there is more to his campaign than being a protest vote against the Democratic Party (stopping TPP, other trade reform, going against the globalism that seems to mainly be there to benefit the wealthy, sending a message to the biased mainstream media).
> Like you, I was also pushed to support Trump by the pro-Hillary propaganda on Reddit. But I also noticed the mainstream media bias against both Bernie and Trump. And the reported election irregularities that people in power didn't seem to care about investigating or correcting. And the news reports that came out just before the Democratic Convention showing unfairness to Bernie. Yet Bernie and so many other major Democrats stuck together with the Party. I thought that was awful that all those big-name Democrats pretended that things were great at the Democratic Convention, when I think they should have been protesting and complaining publicly. I think so many of us wanted Bernie to turn against the Democratic Party at the Convention -- when he didn't, I think that took so much of the remaining energy out of the support that Bernie had built over the primary season.
> Being a progressive, I don't agree with Trump on everything, but he is the best way to stop Hillary from winning in the November election. If Hillary wins in November, it will be like a reward to their side that they and their supporters made the right decisions regarding how to act during the campaign season. I disagree with so many of those decisions that people need to vote to make sure that Hillary doesn't get to win the election as a reward.
> I have to ask you, in light of what I wrote above, why has it taken you so long to switch to Trump? A lot of this stuff about Hillary's campaign and the Democratic Party has been going on for months now.

Comments

> [–]R....f 1 point 1 year ago
> Don't be so harsh. We see it time and time again that people need to persuade themselves to step on board. And in two weeks' time, they'll be proudly supporting Trump whole heartedly.

This comment was made in response to a post about switching from Stein to Trump due to social media bans. u/T....1 alludes to aspects such as media bias against Bernie Sanders and Trump, as well as election irregularities that were ignored. One reason cited by the User relates to Sanders not turning against the Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) leading to a loss of support for Sanders. u/T....1 identifies as a progressive and expresses that Trump is a better alternative to Hillary. Therefore, one of the reasons for voting Trump seems to be the dislike for Hillary Clinton. Again key acronyms (TPP and DNC) are used which are current and available to Trump supporters but may be seen as part of the membership lexicon.

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[14] To see original post go to https://www.Reddit.com/r/The_Donald/comments/564y13/afterberner_here_switching_from_stein_to_trump_because_of_ctr_and_the_socia/d8gl1xy/?context=3

U/R….f asks u/T….1 to not be so harsh (on themselves), as people need to be persuaded to support Trump. As being amicable would attract more members into the community this is likely a preferred strategy. The manner in which posts are responded to could also mediate the manner in which interaction unfolds on Reddit.

6.2.4 LGBT Community

The following original post about the LGBT community highlights how a section of the LGBT community find Trump supporters to be more welcoming.

Example 6.2.4[15]

As a gay man I can assure you all that R/The_Donald is a far more welcoming community then the LGBT+ community ever was ⚠ NSFCucks ⚠ (**self.The_Donald**)[18]

[-] **S….r** 445 points·5 months ago·

In a new and exciting turn of events, now gay people are PMing me hatred over this post.

Thus proving my point entirely...
[-]**R….y** 123 points·5 months ago
Proud of u stink bear
[-]**S….r** 77 points·5 months ago
Thanks bro.
[-]**F….R** 75 points·5 months ago
We don't see race, ethnicity, or sexual preference. We see justice, righteousness and individual liberty.

[-]**t….n** 122 points·5 months ago
That's OK OP, you can hang out with us. All this group has ever asked is that people MAGA.

[-]**f….t** 35 points·5 months ago
Be yourself and don't even think about what haters say. I can't stand how they think we should worry about their opinions.
[-]**S….r** 23 points·5 months ago
Generally I just block the posts since no sane person willingly subjects themselves to vitriol but This one was really amusing
[-]**L….L** 18 points·5 months ago
Ah yes. The 'we accept your views'. but only a few of them and only a few specifics of those few. Nothing like the fine print of the acceptance clause to make you realize your views just aren't acceptable
[-]**S….r** 11 points·5 months ago
The concern troll was obvious.
 [deleted] points·5 months ago
What a bunch of faguettes.

[-]**B….n** MEME WARFARE 10 points·5 months ago
Coming out as conservative is the real taboo 😊
[-]**K….e** 5 points·5 months ago
These SJW keyboard warriors have their heads so far stuck up their asses, theyre to dense to realize the irony.

A common theme in our preliminary search of the data was responses from the LGBT community. Several Users claimed that they supported Trump.

u/S….r expresses that r/The_Donald is more welcoming than the LGBT subreddit.

Here the User had a Canada flag next to his Username and expresses gratitude towards the r/The_Donald subreddit for making them feel welcome and despite being Canadian expresses support for Trump.

u/[−]F….R reinforces this idea by pointing out that r/The_ Donald doesn't discriminate based on sexual preference, race, ethnicity but focusses on "righteousness, individual liberty and justice". A dialectical relationship between the extreme right and left liberal values can be observed here. However, other Users provide support to the original poster by encouraging him/her and reassuring the original Redditor that the subreddit is a welcoming community. This statement is in opposition to the clear and visible rules of the subreddit which do not welcome those who wish to question Trump, but the affordance of echoing provided by those same Rules mean that it is not questioned.

6.2.5 Anti-SJW Liberal Sentiment

Example 6.2.5 - Original post[16]

My high school is holding spirit week this week. Today's theme is "America day". All of my teachers and peers are hardcore SJW liberals. Wish me luck and see you on the other side, centipedes. I'm going in.SPICY! 🔥🔥🔥 (i.redd.it)
submitted 4 months ago by N….p

Replies to post.

```
[-]D….o 123 points 4 months ago*
    I, the Great D….o, express profound pride in my daughter. (She's the one who
    engaged in this social experiment and made this thread.) As a parent, I
    realize (on this day) that I didn't screw up so badly. Maybe my wife and I
    succeeded, after all, in inculcating good values into our brave (and
    patriotic) daughter.
    She's been bred (genetically engineered) to Make America Great Again. To
    take her rightful place (with Generation Z) to undo all the evils of past
    generations. To reassert the core principles of honor, integrity, rugged
    individualism, American ingenuity . . . and to recapture that older America
    when men and women had backbones and weren't snivelling, anxiety-disorder-
    stricken, drugged up basket-cases.
    We will no longer apologize for the West.
    We will no longer second-guess the values and convictions that created the
    world's greatest prosperity, opportunity and upward mobility.
    We will no longer sit passively by as our culture is demeaned and undone by
    globalist cretins who shrink away from all that is wholesome and pure (and
    want to replace it with all that is depraved and dysfunctional).
    I have great hope for the next generation. The pendulum is swinging back the
    other way.
[-]N….p 91 points 4 months ago
    OP, here. I can confirm, /u/d….o is my dad.
    [-]k….t 28 points 4 months ago
        This is magic.
     [-]M….r 23 points 4 months ago
        He is Keksend.
     [-]s….p 16 points 4 months ago
        Your dad is the single person on Reddit I actually follow. So
        (con)grats on getting an interesting one.
[-]Z….Z 18 points 4 months ago
    As a parent, I realize (on this day) that I didn't screw up so badly. Maybe
    my wife and I succeeded, after all, in inculcating good values into our
    brave (and patriotic) daughter.
    Goosebumps!
[-]D….T 13 points 4 months ago
    Gen Z Conservative here!
[-]b….s 13 points 4 months ago
    You sir, are the epitome of good parenting.
[-]U….n 9 points 4 months ago
    Kek's highest praise on you dear parent of the future guardians.
[-]S….D 8 points 4 months ago
    You done good... real good <tips hat>
```

Social justice warriors (SJWs) is one of the themes that came up during our preliminary search of the data into switching support. SJWs refer to individuals who are far left leaning or third wave feminists. The term SJW seems to have originated on Tumblr which is a microblogging platform.[17]

The original post is accompanied by an image of a female high school student wearing a MAGA t-shirt on "America day" at her high school expressing openly her patriotism and displaying love for her country. In her original post, she points out how her teachers and peers are SJWs.

SJWs are disliked by Trump supporters (who are largely conservative) because SJWs are seen as being far removed from traditions and values what conservatives uphold. The very first comment is posted by her father who expresses pride in his daughter as she exhibits patriotism. Criticisms of what has now happened to America is expressed. u/D….o excludes himself from the "dysfunctional" and "depraved" society. A differentiation is created between the in-group and the out group where the out group in this instance are the SJWs who are dehumanised through various criticisms directed towards them.

The post by the original poster u/N….p gives u/D….o legitimacy by confirming that she is indeed his daughter. What follows are several compliments from other Users. u/D….o's parenting is being applauded.

The fact that u/N….p was able to confirm the relationship with u/D….o gives this thread more credibility and other Users seem to be responding to the fact that they are related. There is no evidence that this is actually the case but it is accepted as fact because it has been written on the thread by users with good karma, further evidencing the credibility affordance that is provided by Reddit.

6.2.6 Russian Involvement

In response to allegations of Russian propaganda on Reddit, a message was posted by Reddit. The message highlights that accounts that are linked to direct propaganda are being removed and that Reddit is doing their best to ensure that this happens.

We looked at the comment thread where interaction between a Reddit representative and Users took place which links directly to the affordances of Reddit.

Example 6.2.6

Original comments found under an official announcement by Reddit relating to Russian Propaganda.[18]

```
[–]U….e 10.9k points 3 months ago*

    Edit: Apologies for highlighting another subject on an unrelated thread.
    Didn't intend to hijack the thread. :/
    Spez, What about images of dead babies/corpses and harming animals on
    /r/nomorals [NSFL warning] ?
    18,909 subscribers and counting...
    Reddit's content policy
    Do not post violent content
    https://www.reddithelp.com/en/categories/rules-reporting/account-and-community-restrictions/do-
    not-post-violent-content
    Do not post content that encourages, glorifies, incites, or calls
    for violence or physical harm against an individual or a group of people;
    likewise, do not post content that glorifies or encourages the abuse of
    animals. We understand there are sometimes reasons to post violent content
    (e.g., educational, newsworthy, artistic, satire, documentary, etc.) so if
    you're going to post something violent in nature that does not violate these
    terms, ensure you provide context to the viewer so the reason for posting is
    clear.
```
```
    I even had reported a bunch of threads
    https://www.Reddit.com/message/messages/azbcwv
    Example of the garbage [NSFL/Death warning]
    https://np.Reddit.com/r/ [link redacted for ethical reasons]
    Context: A guy is being burned death, inside a tire on a road and people
    surrounding him adding more fuel to it.
    He already had lots of injuries and there is some blood splatter, in all
    likelihood it's mob justice.
    It's titled: "This is what evolution looks like"
    Another example:
    A dog and few puppies being hanged from their neck, its titled -
    "Multipurpose Wind Chime"
```

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[17] For context on SJWs please see https://www.dailydot.com/irl/social-justice-warrior-sjw/ which looks at what social justice and social justice warriors mean.

[18] Original post can be found at https://www.Reddit.com/r/announcements/comments/827zqc/in_response_to_recent_reports_about_the_integrity/

```
[–]l….e 4854 points 3 months ago

        "We are aware"
        OK, wonderful and I mean that. You have been "aware" of a myriad of
        subreddits that you rightfully nixed, from gore to near child porn. What
        kind of internal review process do you have for subreddits and what actually
        - and finally - gets stuff dropped?
        You are making a really great attempt at transparency to the extent you can
        with this post and it's appreciated...so can you share a little bit about
        what actually gets a subreddit canned or not? Because this is a constant
        question and it has always, at least from my understanding, been so damn
        grey and ambiguous.

[–]s….z 1044 points 3 months ago
        We don't take banning subs lightly. Each sub is reviewed by a human—and in
        some cases, a team of humans—before it is banned for a content policy
        violation. In cases where a sub's sole purpose is in direct violation of our
        policies (i.e. sharing of involuntary porn), we will ban a sub outright. But
        generally before banning, we attempt to work with the mods to clarify our
        expectations and policies regarding what content is welcome.
        Communities do evolve over time, sometimes positively and sometimes
        negatively, so we do need to re-review communities from time to time, which
        is what's going on in this case. Revenue isn't a factor.

[–]M….a 2085 points 3 months ago*
        What kind of technicalities or grey areas exist here? You make this sound so
        much more laborious and difficult to understand than it is...it's just
        bizarre...
        Let me do a quick rundown for you of how 99.9% of humans would deal with
        this apparently super confusing issue:
        Person 1: Look at this sub full of animal torture, human torture and dead
        people with sarcastic, mocking headlines. We shouldn't have this on our
        website.
        Person 2: Yeah this is disgusting. We don't want it on our website. Get rid
        of it.
        Person 1: OK. Give me 60 seconds..... done.
        Why do you act like you and the Reddit staff are incapable of quickly
        understanding such extreme cut-and-dried cases? It's NOT difficult and you
        know it.
        Edit: I forgot how long these things can go on for - I got sucked in and
        started replying to everyone that had a response and have wasted a couple of
        hours now, whether replies called me "fuckwit" or not. I'm out - learned my
        lesson about engaging in big front page threads and how it can eat up the
        night. SEEYA.
```

The first response to this message by u/UntestedShuttle criticises u/Spez (Reddit representative) by highlighting how animal torture, images of dead babies and corpses still frequently appear on Reddit. This incident of the Users engaging with and questioning the media itself highlighted the credibility affordance provided to them,

This post evidenced the fact that although Reddit is a media platform, it is still being run by people who have the power to control the interactions and content on Reddit itself. By controlling and looking out for Russian propaganda, Reddit reinforces its credibility through three aspects of the MAIN model (Sundar 2007): the modality of the moderated platform), the
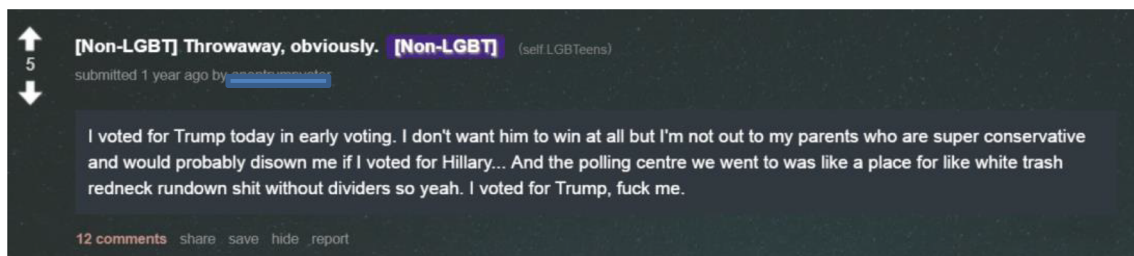

Fig. 8 Anonymity through throwaway accounts

agency of its moderators, and the interactivity in that those moderators can be questioned. While the features claim to prevent propaganda messages, or bots from trying to influence narratives the affordances in doing so this further reinforces the messages of credibility and, to some extent, membership in that those potential propaganda messages are also excluded.

Summary Table 2 shows a summary the affordances most used in threads that seek, recruit or otherwise create an in-group/outgroup differential in support of Trump. A tick mark indicates that a particular affordance played an important role in shaping that narrative.

6.3 Social Construction

As has been described in section 6.1, each sub-Reddit is highly customisable. On the front page alone two boxes that are plain links in other subreddits; 'submit a link' and 'submit a text post', have been customised with scroll over images. The button that allows you to submit a link has a roll over text that shows the phrase 'No cucks allowed!' over an image of Bernie Sanders and 'submit a text post' button has a roll-over image which says 'post only if you support President Trump!' Posts that had been themed for social construction and identifying affordances that allowed it were also used to explore how feelings of membership and the in-group were enabled. This was most clearly achieved through coded and self-referential language. As an example, the post submitted in January 2018 by u/jamesvien which starts 'Wakey Wakey Pedes,' (shown in Fig. 8) acts as a microcosm for much of the self-referential language. Findings from this post took two forms – a growing glossary of in-group terms and phrases which are not in popular use outside of Trump related media (see appendix), as well as the analysis of the post's content. In every post in the subreddit, users exclude those from the outgroup by using language that they will not understand. This wouldn't work to the same extent in a more open, less member oriented platform such as Twitter or Facebook, where the audience for any post may be more diverse. While each individual User's post has little meaning or significance, each thread as a whole shows the way in which this coded language can generate responses from the in-group, reinforces membership and is used to express public support for statements or behaviours described as controversial or negative in other lights.

6.4 Reddit in Comparison to Other Social Media, as an Illustration of the Differences Afforded by Features

While 4chan and 8chan are similar to Reddit in terms of their features, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook differ from Reddit. 8chan is extremely controversial due to its involvement in perpetuating illegal activities such as child pornography, and enabling mass shootings.[19] While 8chan is seen as a toxic, dark place, Reddit does not have the same noxious reputation. One of the main differences between 4chan and Reddit is that 4chan is a registration free site, whilst Reddit requires an account to be able to participate.

Reddit is therefore in a liminal space in terms of being popular and niche and the same time, where aspects of it make it niche, but it is also relatively well known.

While r/The_Donald subreddit is used for supporters of Trump with no alternative views to Pro Trump views, #Trump on Twitter gets used by people with both positive and negatives views on Trump. The image below is a screenshot of #Trump where both posts shown seem critical of Trump (Fig. 9).

Twitter users, whilst expressing opinions on Trump, seem to directly address it to him via @realDonaldTrump as shown in Fig. 10 and these can be both positive and negative. This mode of engagement is different to that of Reddit, where (in the case of r/The_Donald), an echo chamber was created but with no direct interaction with the object of that interaction. Twitter is used by people to publicly express their opinions whilst attaching their name and other identifiers to it. Moreover, in order to access a lot of the material on Twitter, a verified (and presumably non-anonymous) account is essential, whereas on Reddit most content can be accessed without an account.

While a complete comparison of the features of the various popular social media platforms is beyond the scope of this study, it is essential to recognise the differences in digital media platforms, as obtaining an insight into these differences in user engagement contributes to a better understanding of the social media literature.

7 Discussion

7.1 How Affordances Relate to Membership on Reddit

Our study has set out to understand how the features and affordances of Reddit mediate membership and recruitment behaviours and to understand what is achieved as a result.

In the first instance, it is important to identify that some affordances of Reddit are potentially unique to the platform because of the combination of features that enable them. The role of the reputation of Reddit as an intellectual space and a trusted medium means that it is unlikely that the same features on another platform would offer the same affordances or enable the same effect.

As well as investigating how the affordances of Reddit enabled the construction of a membership community around a common cause (in this case *Trumpism)* the other intention of the research was to explore the ways in which the Redditors

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[19] See https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/5/3/18527214/8chan-poway-synagogue-shooting-christchurch-john-earnest

Table 2 The most used affordances utilised in switching support

Reasons (section numbers)	Credibility	Creating membership and belonging	Echoing members' beliefs	Expressing oneself freely through anonymity	Redpilling
Afterberners in favour of Trump (6.2.1)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Community rules and personalisation leading to Redpilling (6.2.2)	✓	✓			✓
Alleged pro-Hillary propaganda (6.2.3)	✓	✓			
LGBT community (6.2.4)	✓			✓	
Anti SJW sentiment (6.2.5)	✓	✓	✓		
Russian involvement (6.2.6)	✓				

The tick mark indicates that those particular affordances of Reddit were of at most importance for those particular reasons

used these affordances to maintain their own membership of the political 'in-group' and recruit others to it, thereby influencing the democratic process.

We have shown how affordances of Reddit have evolved from the features and functionalities provided on the platform and how these, in turn, lead to outcomes of in-groups, alienating the outgroup and recruiting people to switch sides.

7.2 How Affordances Enable Switching Support and Influencing Political Narratives

There were several themes that were discussed in the findings which illustrate how affordances are used by supporters to recruit others in Reddit and reward them for switching.

For example the post by u/f_batsiat was the top voted post and the affordances of creating membership and echoing are demonstrated when u/Tittsburgh-Feelers encourages everyone to vote the post higher. It appears that posts that show a degree of passion, willingness to use offensive language to express that passion and describing themselves in a way that shows or promotes membership are upvoted. This shows how the settings and functions of Reddit mediate the ways in which interaction unfolds on Reddit. Hence the materiality of media is essential to consider whilst analysing content on such platforms. Further the impact of this voting feature, and the

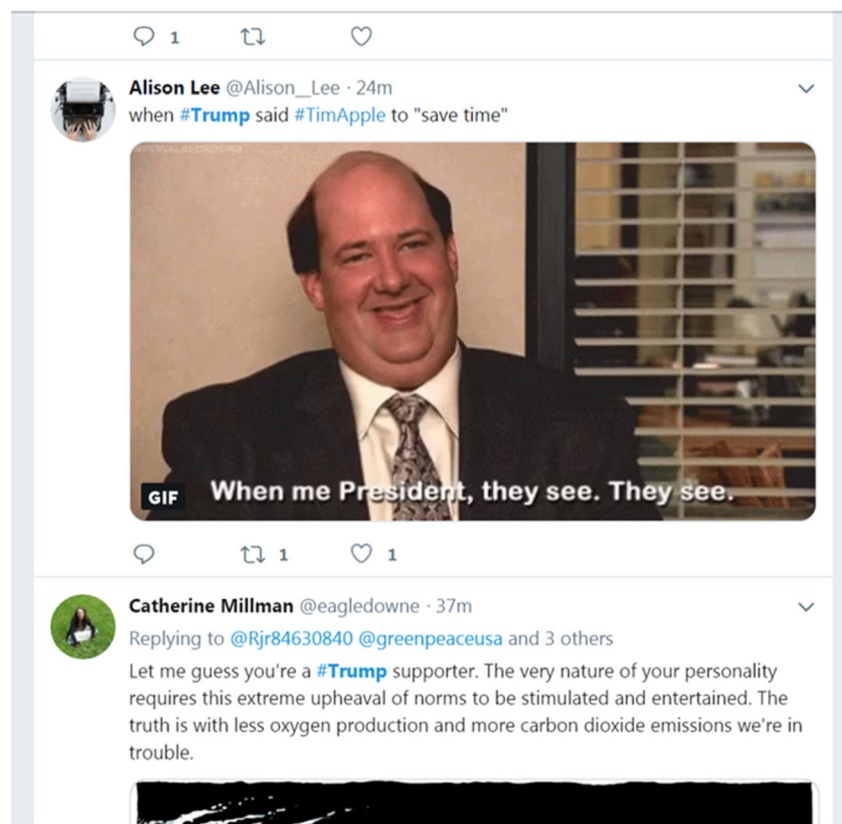**Fig. 9** Example of Twitter interaction on #Trump

Fig. 10 Example of responses directly to Donald Trump on Twitter

membership that it affords, is that it shows a majority support for the post and therefore for the view. This leads to 'framing' effects (McLeod and Detenber 1999), encouraging copycat behaviour and mimicking within Reddit and is likely to create a familiarity with the rhetoric that influences users' voting behaviour outside of the site.

This is also likely to be the outcome of the supportive language used. The phrase *"get him a coat"* was popularised on Reddit through the repeated use and upvotes of the phrase. This indicates the influence that the membership of one community, within one online platform, unhindered by critique or debate, has on a much wider group. This is in turn reinforced through the features of upvoting and, in this instance, in-group language. The content of the posts show that the support that the community on r/The_Donald provide each other in this way has effects in the real world. Examples are frequently given of a positive feedback cycle where activism is encouraged or role-modelled through r/The_Donald and then rewarded positively when reported back.

The features offered by Reddit, as with any communication platform, mediate the interaction that takes place. An interaction order exists on Reddit but it is different to an in-person conversation due to the features that allow upvoting, downvoting, being able to edit posts after they are submitted and also being able to delete posts after they have been submitted and read by other Users. These are features which this study has identified afford the users easy ways to anonymously, yet meaningfully support, reward or exclude views as well as switch views.

7.2.1 Outcomes of the Affordances: A New Brand of Conservatism

The third aspect of the research question, the outcomes of these affordances, has led us to consider how people's views are affected as a result of their interactions on Reddit. As we saw in our discussion of SJWs, the right wing ideologues target political feminism. As Flisfeder (2018) points out, attacking feminism "reinforces patriarchal domination as a social, cultural and political institution" (Flisfeder 2018, p.5). In our earlier discussion, we saw how users on r/The_Donald accuse the left-leaning liberals of destroying traditional values and are tactical in placing the blame on them for the existing problems. These left-leaning liberals are branded as 'other' and often dehumanised in the process (see Kteily et al. 2015). This outcome are enabled by the affordances of credibility, echoing, creating membership and expressing oneself freely and the meta-affordance of redpilling which is fundamental in switching people's views.

What is interesting about these findings is that, whilst earlier right wing ideologues excluded homosexuals, Trump supporters embrace them and the findings support strong membership of this community within r/The_Donald, enabled by the affordance of creating membership. The emphasis on

traditional values as well as inclusion of the LGBT community amongst these supporters is paradoxical and thought-provoking. The alt-right (who are amongst Trump supporters) is seen as a being more focused on excluding different cultural identities rather than the traditional lobbying ground of capitalism. Paradoxically, it is the "populist rhetoric of a socialist economic narrative mixed with a right-wing racist and sexist social identity that brought masses toward Trump" (Flisfeder 2018, p.17).

An online space such as Reddit and the affordances it provides gives the alt-right and its identity politics legitimacy through features such as reposts, upvotes and comments and Reddit is seen as playing an important role in this "conservative revolution" (Žižek 2008,p.304).

A second key outcome of the affordances is that, as an online space, Reddit has also provided the platform for former Bernie Sanders supporters (Afterberners) to openly switch loyalties. This is done through various affordances discussed in this paper, particularly through expressing themselves freely, and having the perceived credibility to be able to discredit Clinton through their posts and upvotes. In doing so Reddit provides a safe space for those who may otherwise have difficulty justifying their decision to switch with family or friends outside of the platform.

7.3 Affordances Enabling Legitimisation of Hateful and Hurtful Content

The analysis of the comments showed a shared dislike for Hillary Clinton among Trump supporters and Afterberners. The Afterberners were disappointed due to the alleged corruption in the DNC and became unhappy when Sanders showed support for Hillary Clinton. The affordances of 'echoing views' expressing oneself freely, and creating membership empower users to share this dislike or disapproval openly and sometimes vehemently. This freedom of expressing oneself freely is an important factor in considering how social media may impact on social freedom, or political narratives.

What would be considered to be controversial, libellous or trolling posts in other platforms, are allowed because of the way that features like membership rules, anonymity, personalisation and in-group language have evolved into affordances like echoing (controversial beliefs), Redpilling and credibility for posts containing controversial views. This has implications for freedom of speech – Reddit invites derision from groups who state that it is an incubator for hate speech (Flisfeder 2018) however the site itself contains features present in other sites. However the one major difference (anonymity) and the way in which the affordances have evolved shows that these are being used to protect or exercise their right to freedom of speech. To that end, this study makes a contribution to the understanding of affordances in highlighting 'freedom of expression'.

7.4 Theoretical Contributions

The contribution of our study is twofold, one in advancing the understanding of affordances, and two, to shed light on how the affordances of Reddit influence outcomes – in this case, political loyalties in the case of Trump supporters. Our study has enriched the understanding of affordances in several ways. We have shown how people engage with Reddit differently to other social media platforms. The exclusion of alternative views, in-group language and the freedom of self-expression are some of the features which lead to the affordance of creating membership on r/The_Donald. We have shown how this leads to political narratives, in this case, support for Trump. This is different to other platforms such as Twitter, and we have demonstrated that through our findings. Theoretically, affordances are important to consider whilst carrying out a study on digital media platforms. It is essential to look into the features that digital media platforms provide, and the affordances linked to these feature as they deeply impact User engagement and resultant outcomes. Reddit, a seemingly intellectual space (see Flisfeder 2018) creates a sense of community, membership and the echo chamber where ideas can propagate free of critique.

Through our analyses, we also underscore the importance of evolution of affordances. While we identify four main affordances at the start, our subsequent investigation into the reason for shifting loyalties also shed light on the creation of the new meta-affordance – Redpilling, which is specific to r/The_Donald. As discussed, the many roles that redpilling plays within r/The_Donald raises questions over whether a meta-affordance is in fact an outcome or a 'pre-outcome'. Having been 'redpilled' by others, users have passed a rite of passage for the community and are clear advocates for the cause but this advocacy is, in itself, not an outcome so much as the necessary condition for the later outcome of either switching support or voter behaviour.

7.5 Consequences of Outcomes Observed and Implications for Practice

Our third research question asks 'What is achieved by the use of these affordances?' Through the findings of this study we have shown evidence of how individuals were encouraged into and/or rewarded for, switching their support to the Trump campaign due to discussions on the subreddit r/The_Donald. This helps us appreciate the significance of such platforms in influencing voting decisions. In line with Flisfeder (2018) we have shown how an "intellectual" online space such as Reddit reinforces or creates individual beliefs about presidential candidates with no requirement for critical analysis, and how the affordances of such platforms shape narratives. Interestingly, as we address in our findings, Hern's (2018) Guardian article shows how Reddit recently admitted to being infiltrated by Russian propaganda in the run up to the US elections, which led to the removal of hundreds of

accounts on Reddit. This in itself is evidence of the perceived power of such platforms by those wishing to influence narratives. It is crucial to acknowledge how the affordances of social media platforms can be misused by powerful entities in order to influence politics. However, as addressed in our findings, as many such accounts were removed it can also be argued that the remaining discussions on Trump were in fact organic and represented the views of the community.

The evidence gathered contributes to the understanding of the communication of right-wing populism and how this is shaped by social media in order to influence elections. It highlights the different ways in which populism can be constructed and how the platform itself, through its affordances such as in-group language, membership, exclusion of alternative views and expressing oneself through anonymity and votes has the power to influence narratives. The freedom of expressing oneself freely afforded by anonymity that Reddit allows, is particularly significant, and makes Reddit stand apart from other popular social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Anonymity is embraced, and celebrated on Reddit by its' users, leading to the affordance of the freedom of self-expression demonstrating how affordances evolve on such platforms.

This study has implications for the use of social media and how it influences politics (for example see Kim et al. 2018; Keller and Kleinen-von Königslöw 2018, Fitzi et al. 2018). Our unique contribution is entrenched in how no previous study has looked at how Reddit influences behaviour. With regard to our broader contribution on the social media literature as a whole, our study has shown how affordances of a digital media platform shape political narratives. Through membership, echoing, credibility, expressing oneself freely and Redpilling, we have demonstrated how extensive support through an army of users on a seemingly intellectual online space can be created. Whilst the manner in which this is done is different on Reddit, our study reinforces the notion that any digital media platform has the potential for such power. We have therefore shown how affordances evolving on social media lead to self-reported changes in behaviour and propagate extreme or controversial views that can influence political narratives. The way this happens on Reddit is different than has been seen across social media platforms because of the totality of the echo-chamber.

8 Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to advance the understanding of affordances of Reddit, and to highlight the importance of Reddit in shifting loyalties during the 2016 US elections. We have examined how the affordances of Reddit have led to outcomes such as impact on the 2016 US elections by scrutinising 100 posts and subsequent comments on the subreddit r/*The_Donald.* These affordances are in echoing members'

beliefs, credibility through posting and registration, expressing oneself freely, creating membership through visible artefacts and Redpilling. The structure of the site and its personalisation provide ways in which membership are clearly evidenced. The material aspects of anonymity, upvoting, karma and the rules of each subreddit provide ways in which Users can create a 'safe' space to air their views, use convincing language and narrative to recruit others and to reward those that share the same attitudes whilst excluding alternative views.

The use of language, in particular in-group language and codes makes many posts unintelligible to non-supporters.

We have demonstrated the ways in which Reddit as a platform is able to influence and support *narratives* (see Table 2). This is done through providing a supportive space; adding credibility to opinions; and legitimising hurtful or hateful views. This space is employed by Users to air views or opinions without fear of disagreement (via the rules of the subreddit), or attracting personal attacks (as a result of User anonymity). Therefore, members are easily recruited, potential swing-voters are made to feel appreciated, rewarded and encouraged to switch and potentially controversial (in some cases hurtful, hateful or prejudiced) opinions are framed and given conditions in which to propagate and become norms.

Our study contributes to the existing field of social media research (see Kapoor et al. 2018 for an extensive review) by spotlighting a media platform that has been under researched. As our study was qualitative in nature we were able to contribute towards further understanding how political views may shift due to affordances of Reddit. However, in order to obtain a more holistic picture of Reddit, other analyses, such as sentiment analysis, may be used in future which would assist in generating structured analyses. We have also demonstrated the differences in digital media platforms leading to differing discourses. Future research can focus on detailed comparisons between digital media platforms in order to obtain further insight.

In this increasingly post-truth era, where opinions and perceived identity seem to matter more than objective facts, a seemingly intellectual online space such as Reddit plays the role of a powerful control system (Giddens 1991) which through its affordances has the influence to shape voter views. We have also demonstrated how it is of key importance to analyse and evaluate Reddit from the dual perspectives of both information systems and sociological disciplines.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Appendix 1

Table 3 Glossary of commonly found in-group terms

Term	Notes
MSM Short for Mainstream Media	Often used derogatorily on r/The_Donald. Example: *He turned the laser pointer.for the MSM kitties.* Meaning: Distracting an unintelligent and predictable group (in this case Mainstream Media).
"GEOTUS' or God Emperor of the United States	Use: Short hand for Donald Trump. Example: *GEOTUS is like "hold my beer"* *Lol* Meaning: Derived from POTUS, the acronym used for the President of the United States in early Telegraph code. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phillips_Code This is one of many self-referential phrases, where Trumps apparent egoism and lack of humility are lauded.
'Pedes' or Centipedes	Use: A self-referential term for Trump supporters. Example: *Wakey Wakey Pedes, Our Genius Doctor God Emperor of the United States is awake. Hillary went down in flames.* Derivation: Referring to Trump supporters as Centipede's as a result of a video which showed Donald Trump entering the televised debates to the soundtrack of 'Centipede' by Knife Party. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyeTaOVjZT4
Nimble Navigator	Use: Used to describe Donald Trump and Donald Trump supporters. Example: *Guess what? It's Spicy time. GET IN HERE Nimble Navigators*! (referring to a live feed of the White House Press conference) Derivation: Referring to the lyrics of the Knife Party track Centipede. The Centipede is described as a 'nimble navigator' and Quick as lightening. https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/knifeparty/centipede.html
MAGA Make America Great Again	Use: A campaign slogan and meme. Often followed by an explanation mark. Example: *Trump" We Can Build The Wall in One Year, never mention 7 Years Again' MAGA!"* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Make_America_Great_Again
Spicy Relating to Sean Spicer	Use: Used to describe White House press conferences or other press releases during Sean Spicer's term as White House Press Secretary. Sean Spicer was often referred to as Spicy in memes. Example: *Guess what? It's Spicy time. GET IN HERE Nimble Navigators!*
Stable Genius	Use: Used to describe Donald Trump. Example: Scott Adams talks about our very **stable genius** President. Derivation As a result of the Fire and Fury book, the tweet where Trump describes his greatest assets as 'mental stability and being, like, really smart', as well as "I think that would qualify as not smart, but genius… and a very stable genius at that!" are heavily used.
Hold my beer	Use: Used instead of 'wait and watch while I deal with this'. Often used by Trump supporters when Trump Example: *GEOTUS is like "hold my beer"* *Lol* Derivation: 'Hold my beer' a phrase used for when someone is going to enter into a bar fight and thinks that a) they won't need help from the person holding the beer and b) it won't take long enough for the beer to go flat. Featured in a series of memes both for and against Donald Trump.
GUAC or Guacamole	Use: Used to describe Guacamole as the new cryptocurrency Example: *Guac coin to the moon!* Derivation: After Trump announced a 20% tax on imports to the USA from Mexico in January 2018, Twitter Users bemoaned the likely increase on avocados and as a result the avocado based dip guacamole. Because of the suggested income from the import tax, Guacamole has become described in the same terms as cryptocurrency by Trump supporters.
Drumpf	Drumpf is the original version of Donald Trump's family name is was likely changed when ancestors moved to America, thought to be of German origin. Drumpf first entered the public consciousness when John Oliver on the programme Last Week Tonight at February 28th 2016 spoke at length about Donald Trump's perceived failings and his campaign to become President, introducing the hashtag #makedonalddrumpfagain and the website donaldjdrumpf.com
Kek (verb)	Use: Used instead of Lol (laugh out loud) or 'hilarity'. Example *Duterte warns Soros: There is a bounty on your head. TOP KEK.* Derivation. Either from World or Warcraft, where opposing players see 'Lol' written as 'Kek', also thought to be from the Korean onomatopoeia for a raspy laugh.
Kek (noun)	Use: Used to describe followers of the cult of Kek. Example 2: *CODE GREEN, Pedes! The Pepe Green MAGA Hats are back in stock! Praise Kek!*

Table 3 (continued)

Term	Notes
	Kek had been used as an alternative to Lol by Users of 4chan (the online image board) and in particular the sub-group known as 4chan/pol/. Users of /pol/ created a series of memes using 'Pepe the Frog' to support Donald Trump. A User also posted suggested that the Egyptian God Kek was a frog. The Cult of Kek was soon used to describe followers of Donald Trump.
Woke	Use: Used to describe people who have awoken to (social) issues around them, or self-aware. Often used to describe Trump and his followers as they describe him and themselves as no longer willing to be led along by mainstream media, heuristics or other cultural norms.
	Example: *Canada is starting to get Woke*
	Derivation: Slang term *Get woke* believed to be derived from African American Vernacular English meaning 'awakened'.
Cuck or Cucks	Use: Used to describe people who are not Trump supporters or are Hillary Clinton supporters.
	Example: *No cucks allowed!*
	Derivation: Derived from the word 'cuckold' meaning a man whose wife has been unfaithful to him. Came to be used to describe people (no gender inferred) who continued to be faithful to the Hillary Clinton campaign.
Red Pill/ Red Pilling	Use: Used to denote people waking up to 'reality'.
	Example: *Kanye West red pilling the masses #woke*
	Derivation: From the film The Matrix where the lead character is offered a blue pill to go back to the known but uncomfortable reality he is familiar with or a red pill to 'stay in wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember I'm offering you the truth. Nothing more'. After taking it he wakes up in a futuristic dystopia and discovers that he has been unconscious in a machine generated hallucination since birth.
NSF	Use: Used to warn people of controversial content.
	Example: NSFCucks
	Derivation: From the online User code NSFW meaning Not Safe For Work. Relates to images or text which may breach common workplace User regulations. In the case of NSFCucks 'Not Safe for those who do not support Trump/ do support Hillary Clinton'.
Salt	Use: Used to describe posts or threads that are incorrect, misleading or negative about other people.
	Example: Can you imagine all the salt if this wasn't kept off the front page by algorithms?
	Derivation: It is possible it relates to 'take with a pinch of salt' but there is no clear derivation.

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