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NEW MEDIA INCENTIVES
A Cross Platform Analysis of Social Media Discourse on 4Chan, Twitter and YouTube

ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the differences across three different social media platforms in how they host public discourse. Relying on a wide theoretical background in cultural sociology and semiotics, it examines the encounter of online communities with new media technology. Focus has been given especially to the role social media platforms have in shaping the way their users use language. The research is done through a comparison of plant-based diets discussion on three social media platforms 4Chan, Twitter and YouTube. Three research questions are answered in this thesis which are 1) Do social media platforms contain aspects of public discourse? 2) What differences are there in the discourse culture of these three social media platforms? And 3) What design choices in social media platforms incentivize discussion to become distinct from offline discussion?

This thesis uses a theoretical perspective combining semiotic research of dialogue with cultural sociology research to formulate a coherent empirical framework to study how material incentives in the changing media landscape are affecting social phenomenon. I will use Peircean semiotics to approach the question of how individuals construct their identities while being shaped by their environment and groups expectations. I will also examine internet culture through the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and how different social media platforms recreate his concepts of fields and forms of capital. Semiotics and cultural sociology are thus combined in an attempt of creating both a theoretical and empirical framework to study issues currently prevalent in media studies.

Category analysis, a qualitative research method akin to discourse analysis was conducted to study 450 comments from nine different conversations across the three platforms. Social media platforms host productive public discourse to some extent but do host forms of antagonistic hate speech and supportive community feedback as well. Comparison of site differences and previous research led to the conclusion that anonymity and the possibility to reply to multiple comments such as in 4Chan, encourage user-to-user communication and incentivizes the expression of both marginalized voices and hate speech. Social media metrics associated with user profiles, such as follower and like counts incentivize the recreation of social inequality online but does decrease disinhibited behavior. The possibility to sharing messages on other conversations on the platform, such as in Twitter, contribute to conversation becoming more relatable but also makes online shaming more prevalent. Finally, the possibility to share user created content, such as in YouTube, incentivizes more focused discussion that shares a point of reference which might contribute to the existence of either narrow media repertoires or facts-based discussion.

This thesis contributes to previous social media research by outlining an approach of using semiotic concepts to explore the nature of cultural transmission in sociology. It also proposes an empirical framework for a comparative form of discourse analysis to study multiple social media platforms which has been lacking in previous research. The results of the study indicate that platform design contributes to the nature of social media discourse and hierarchies. Platform incentives are thus a central aspect to consider in understanding public discourse and social media. Incentives emerging from platform design should thus be recognized as a contributing factor to challenges in public discourse and social media moderation.

Keywords: Social media, public discourse, cultural sociology, category analysis, semiotics

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms actively incentivise their users to act a certain way by intermediating the way we construct shared truths and social relationships (Harris 2020). It is then no surprise that in everyday thinking it is already prevalent to associate certain assumptions about people's personalities, motivations and values to specific social media platforms and the different kinds of cultures these sites are known for. This thesis broadly seeks to examine online cultures present in differing social media platforms and how platforms themselves might be playing an active role in shaping these cultures to develop what David Beer (2013, 167) calls a conceptual understanding between the encounter of popular culture and new media. I will explore how commenting and replying serve to define the social rules of inclusion in different social media platforms and the communities that use them. My research question is how different social media environments curate discussion they host and more specifically whether these platforms promote productive discourse. I will be specifically studying online discussion across three different social media platforms, 4Chan, Twitter and YouTube. These discussions concern the 2018 documentary film The Game Changers, which depicts experiences of successful athletes following plant-based diets. The film generated a lot of polarized discussion online which provided an excellent opportunity to examine diverse forms of online discourse.

Technological development throughout the 20th century was associated with the advancement of personal freedom evident for example in the cultural importance of car ownership (Sloop & Gunn 2011). Internet has been often similarly described as continuation of freedom eliminating friction caused by physical distances a well as political power relations (Žižek 2009, 121). The notion of free exchange of information is in many ways also a core premise of sciences in general (Keipi 2017, 129). This ideology of cyberevolutionism was predominant in the early 2000s as culture, economics and nature came to be increasingly intertwined as similar gigantic organisms that are in constant process of self-correction (Žižek 2009, 122). Internet culture in the early 2010s was indeed characterized by an optimism reflected in online based political movements and events such as the Arab Spring, Occupy, Wikileaks and Anonymous which used social media as a rational tool of liberation from traditional social barriers of status. The election of Donald Trump has however signalled the rise of an opposite kind of transgressive internet culture which portrays itself as opposing both the conservative establishment as well as many liberal values such as multiculturalism. (Nagle 2017, 10–12.) Internet is seen

increasingly more ambiguously as both a tool of empowerment as well as a source of political extremism and hate.

Optimism is still echoed by social media companies who indeed see themselves as instrumental in enacting positive social change through their role in enabling voices and connectivity (Beer, 2018). Social media companies are taking a more proactive approach by moderating and banning problematic content from their platforms and the fantasy of heroic hackers and the free flow of information toppling tyranny has shifted to the exact opposite situation. Platforms increasingly seek to define universal norms for engagement on a larger scale than ever before. The questions of how to build a functioning democracy is now being increasingly decided on a worldwide scale on the platforms of large privately own social media companies.

Recent events concerning the January 6. Riots at US Capitol Hill protesting the discredited notion of US 2020 presidential election fraud have highlighted this question of social media's role in inciting violence. In a recent Congressional hearing Twitter's CEO Jack Dorsey admitted the platforms partial responsibility to the events while Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg shifted blame to individual people involved in the "Stop the Steal" campaign. As a result, former president Donald Trump's social media accounts have been deleted from multiple platforms which further has demonstrated the power of social media companies over public discourse. The riots along with concerns over social media's effects on the mental health of children as well as the spread of misinformation regarding the Covid-19 virus have increased the pressure for lawmakers to regulate online content. The head of Google Sundar Pichai has expressed concern over this on the ground of free speech as well as user protection and has advocated for the industry's right to self-regulate. Platform owners have however expressed support for legislative measures to increase transparency of company practices. (Bloomberg 2021.)

Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins who coined the term "meme" far before any potential for its current ubiquitous use to describe pieces of internet content has also seen a lot of attention in media research recently (e.g. Nissenbaum & Shifman 2015; Sparby 2017; Tuters & Hagen 2019). Terms coming from an association of culture to genetics such as virality and memetics used in online culture have been called vague and inaccurate by semioticians continuing the work of Charles Peirce, who has received new attention also in social science research (e.g. Bergman 2008; Cannizzaro 2016; Crick & Bodie 2016; Halton 2008; Heiskala 2014). These questions strike a nerve regarding some fundamental questions of public

sociology and how publicity is defined in media studies (e.g. Burawoy 2004, Pietilä et al. 2010, Nibbert-Eng 2010). Online hate (e.g. Kaakinen et al. 2017 & 2020) and the effects of anonymity for online communities (e.g. Keipi et al. 2015 & 2017) have been key questions in social psychology research as well. Cultural sociologists continuing the work of Pierre Bourdieu have on the other hand called to question how rapid digitalization itself is creating deeper digital divides between people of different socio-economic backgrounds (e.g. Heikkilä et al. 2020; Mihelj et al., 2019; Skeggs 2016). Interest towards online media culture in media research and social sciences has indeed been broad and my theoretical approach also reflects this.

As these issues have increasingly become a topic also in public discourse (e.g. Nagle 2017; Vihma 2018), my goal is to incorporate multidisciplinary approaches to think about these issues. My thesis thus mirrors very much Renee Barnes' (2018, 114) approach of combining media and cultural studies with sociology and psychology to form a comprehensive model for understanding the different factors that influence online culture. This kind of a wide theoretical perspective is justifiable as my research questions fundamentally deal with how human behavior is shaped by new kinds of material and social incentives.

My thesis will start in chapter two with an examination of the literature concerning public discourse and how humans use publicity to shape their identity. On chapter three I will then go over the essential cultural sociology literature to establish an understanding of how communities and cultures are being shaped in the age of internet communication. Chapter four consists of an overview of the research methodology category analysis and how it is used in this study. In chapter five I have then conducted a cross-platform analysis of internet discussions across the three platform and compared their differences among each other to answer my research question which is how different social media platforms incentivize public discourse. In the last sixth chapter I will conclude the thesis and relate its significance to previous and future research.

2. PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND ONLINE IDENTITY

In this chapter I will explore the theoretical underpinnings of public discourse which should explain why public discourse constitutes a central question for sociology research. I will first use Peircean semiotics to describe how individuals shape their identity according to their environment and groups expectations. After that I will explore the question of anonymity and publicity as essential tools individuals use to adjust their position in relationship to these outside expectations. Public discourse is where all of this comes together and its alarming challenges in the online space are discussed in the final part of this chapter.

2.1 Imagined social identity

The pragmatic semiotics of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) fundamentally seeks to explain ways how stimuli and perceptions shape human activities and to formulate a practical model for the functioning of logical reasoning (Peirce 2001, 131). Peirce (1967, 34) says all human observations and even thoughts are interpretations of original objects. He calls these interpretations signs which can be described as individual images and perceptions that emerge as objects are interpreted through the interpreter (Peirce 1967, 390). Smoke for example is often the sign that represents the object of fire.

Peirce argued that identity itself is a logical extension of these kinds of constantly recurring interpretations of a person's environment, where identity is constantly evolving as the individual approves or disapproves observed behaviour. Identity is thus a body-based transaction with the environment where the body acts as a membrane of the self, enabling the self to structure and understand the environment. (Halton 2008, 124-126.) This notion of identity as social interaction parallels very much Risto Heiskala's (2000) view of the fundamental nature of social sciences as the synthesis between the classical dichotomies of natural boundaries and the socially constructed interpretation of human reality. Natural sciences create certain boundaries and laws of reality, but we inevitably look at reality through

different meanings, and we cannot move into a completely objective and rational reality (Jokinen et al. 2016, 26).

Peoples' relationship to food can be arguably seen as one of the most paramount examples of this dynamic where identity provides the means to survive in the given environment. Traditional cultures have been known to thrive on a wide variety of diets from almost exclusively carnivorous Inuits to almost exclusively plant-based East Asian cultures. This illustrates how humans choose to include and exclude foods and thus build a wide variety of different kinds of lifestyles in different environments. Fischler has called this the *omnivore's paradox* as the wide range of edible foods create an eternal struggle for humans to choose what food to eat. Fischler has thus described food research as a cross-cutting field where food is shaped from biological to cultural and from nutritional to symbolic. He describes the inseparability of these two factors by perceiving eating as the process of transferring food from the outside world towards the inner self. In this way eating does not only integrate the nutrients provided by their environment into the body, but also integrates the identity of the person eating into a culinary system and an outlook on life. Humans are built by food in a very concrete way by providing the building materials of the body, but in the same way food functions as a constructor of human identity. (Fischler 1988, 275-281.)

Imitation is a key factor in building one's own identity and has been described as a sum of the people a person met and imitated during their life (Potolsky 2006, 122). Jacques Lacan noted that in addition to identifying with other people by imitating them, a yet undeveloped ego is developing itself as it realizes itself as one in contrast to its environment. An example of this is when a baby for the first time recognizes their own mirror image thus creating the ego out of a set of previously fragmented emotions and observations. (Lacan 2001, 4-5.) However, this also is sign of how identity is at its roots an internal dialogue as the individual always seeks to identify itself by alienating itself from the external and thus the external always guides the imaginary self (Stavrakakis 1999, 18).

Potolsky (2006, 53) argues that this process of identification also has a notion of human agency in it because imitation of the environment also interprets the old in a new way and brings the old into relevancy through a dialogue with the original. The salutogenesis approach emphasizes the sense of coherence as the major factor in how individuals respond to their environment. To feel a sense of coherence an individual needs to explain and understand the world, trust their abilities to influence it and see the issue as worthwhile their attention. Conflicts are situations

where this feeling is not reached by the participants as communication requires a certain degree of understanding shared between the parties. (Attias & Kangasoja 2020, 150.) Stavrakakis (1999, 33-35) sees language as the way how people constitute agency and meaning to the world as by symbolically identifying the real, a need becomes a demand, and an instinct becomes a desire.

Diet exemplifies the very concrete implications sharing and interpretation have for human life. Concerns about contamination for example work mutually in a similar way when considering the cultural and medical consequences of food. Eating the meat of an animal that is culturally unacceptable can cause intense physical reactions. This is because a culture's disgust for an unfamiliar food works just like disgust for spoiled food. (Fischler 1988, 282-283.) While disgust in some situations justifiably works to combat contaminated food, in others it is only justified by cultural factors, even though people justify it with an image of health (Monaco & Bonetto 2018, 2). As a result, the same food tastes, disgusts and causes bodily reactions in very different ways, depending on what the taster thinks the food in question is. Disgust is a socially constructed biological security mechanism that has both a cultural and biological purpose. (Fischler 1988, 277.)

The British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined in his 1976 book Selfish Gene the term *meme* to define units of cultural transmission. Before its more contemporary use to refer to pieces of internet culture, he included cultural artifacts like architecture, melodies, fashion, and beliefs as examples of memes. Like genes, which propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body, memes do the same in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain in what is called imitation. Memes can procreate, in a sense that if they parasitize the brain, they can turn the brain into a vehicle for the meme propagate like a virus. It is therefore no surprise that memes are often described as viral in contemporary internet culture. Just like genes, not all memes replicate successfully, and some memes achieve short-term success spreading rapidly but do not last long in the meme pool. The human brain pays the most attention to the most dominant memes and these memes must be dominant at the expense of rival memes. (Dawkins 1989, 210-217.)

Cannizzaro (2016, 568-689) has criticised Dawkins' approach as an adventurous attempt to explore the natural constraints and affordances of culture but very much lacking the long background of semiotics in doing so. One reason for the terms popularity in popular culture and the short-lived field of memetics might have been the terms vague nature and thus it's

potential to be adapted in a variety of different approaches. Cannizzaro (2016, 574 & 582) argues that the notion of how memes are simply imitated is especially inaccurate to which semiotics can provide answers and more precise terminology. Instead of viral memes spreading through copying and imitation, a semiotic framework indicates culture is instead remixed and translated from previous cultural signs and is thus essentially characterised by constant morphing and growth.

Similarity in ways of engaging with the environment, is regardless a significant predictor of how social ties are formed between people as individuals tend to search the company of like-minded people and be intolerant towards people with dissimilar ideologies (Kaakinen et al. 2020, 2). Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined community defines communities as forming through imagined commonality with other members of the community. What is distinct about this notion is that while communities can be geographical, they can also be formed foremost through shared language, values, and ideas. Media for example can provide the basis for sharing of which an identity based on the readership of a specific newspaper is one of the more traditional examples. (Barnes 2018, 11; Isotalus et al. 2018, 9.)

The notion of echo chambers refers to the idea that our daily space is increasingly being made up of ideological bubbles that are constantly opening and closing (Beer 2013, 161-163). This notion of ideological bubbles is rooted in the main premise of the internet as a tool to connect both like-minded people and information on an immense scale without the need for physical proximity (Keipi et al. 2017, 13). While there is evidence that these bubbles serve to reaffirm identities and become enclosed to outside influence it has also been shown that in many cases people are also exposed to completely new identities online (Vihma et al. 2018, 28). It is also by no means evident which traits at a specific time are significant in the judgement of similarity and dissimilarity for groups (Attias & Kangasoja 2020, 238). Dubois et al. (2018, 740) argue that social media bubbles exist only as a very minor phenomenon which only affects people with both a low level of media diversity and a low interest in politics. They argue that social media in general is trusted less as a source and people rarely rely on it exclusively for information. Heikkilä et al. (2020, 18) demonstrate that in Finland echo chambers defined by a narrow repertoire of media use can indeed be found. According to the study a narrow consumption of media channels is especially associated with people of lower education, lower income, less urban backgrounds, and conservative political beliefs whereas for a majority of people, media consumption has widened in the 2010s.

Dawkins (1989, 217) argues that cultural environments are made of a variety of meme-complexes which are large numbers of memes with a stable set of characteristics making it hard for new memes to enter it. The selection processes of co-adapted meme-complexes therefore favour memes that exploit the existing cultural environment to their own advantage. It is therefore the premises and environment in which imitation is made that greatly influences the emergence of perceptions of normality and difference in identity. The norms of colonialist racial division have for example defined oppressed groups according to the norms of the ruling group. Minorities often thus appear to be an inferior representative of the general population. (Potolky 2006, 132-133.)

Dawkins claims that an individual's genes are inevitably going to disperse to be unrecognisable in a few generations whereas their ideas can continue existence much longer. Historical figures are usually remembered for their effect on the meme pool, rather than their effect on the gene pool. (Dawkins 1989, 217-218.) Halton reformulates by saying that the self is made up of three different forms of self, which he categorizes according to the degree to which these selves engage in dialogue with the environment. *The personal self* refers to an individual's own concept of self, which is constructed both of personal beliefs and related objects of the physical world by which the self is constructed. *The social self*, in turn, exists in other people and can continue to exist after the death of the body. As the third form of the self, *the cosmic self* represents the useful information we produce and share and affects the world whether someone is remembered as a person or not. The social self is created when an individual internalizes the community and is thus strongly intertwined with groups, as part of which the individuals themselves may be quite invisible. (Halton 2008, 130-131.)

Halton (2008, 131-132) stresses the fact that identity emerges as the individual engages in dialogue with their environment and social conventions. In turn the community acts through the individuals within it. The relationship of institutions, conventions and culture to the human individual is in many ways reminiscent of the relationship of humans to domesticated animals, which are guided, on the one hand, by external goals but, on the other, by their natural instincts. Humans are thus not absolutely directed by social conventions but are instead in a way domesticated by them. While Halton thus supports the concept of the individual as somewhat capable of independent action, he nevertheless sees the necessity of expanding the self beyond the personal self. (Halton 2008, 131-132.)

People thus build their identity in dialogue with their environment and therefore the environment itself becomes an important aspect to understand human behaviour. Barnes (2018, 12) phrases this in a way that people alter their behaviour based on the online environments, they are commenting in. Studying online environments requires both recognising human agency and the agency of technology in shaping human discourse. In the next chapter I will examine more thoroughly how this human-technology interaction is negotiated by both individuals and communities especially in the context of the internet.

2.2 Self-disclosure and anonymity

American Sociologist Christena Nibbert-Eng (2010, 8-7) has described the boundary between privacy and publicity as a negotiable process in which the individual can choose their place and level of exposure. Privacy is a multisensory demarcation that offers freedom from the wishes and demands of others which is maintained by a certain kind of behaviour and by marking it materially. Nibbert-Eng uses the concept of the bubble to describe the way people take over public space into momentary private spaces. Parking spaces or seats on the beach surrounded by towels and parasols are examples of this as they are spaces of temporary privacy in an otherwise public space. Challenges to privacy are made by a playful experimentation of boundaries and social skills. It is precisely the perpetual flexibility of privacy and public boundaries that enables new social relations. (Nibbert-Eng 2010, 9-10, 166, 244.)

The differentiation of private and public identities has its roots prior to the internet. According to Nibbert-Eng, public identity is built by disclosing information others find desirable. The loss of privacy in certain matters means the loss of control of one's own identity and this flexible tension between the public and private puts people in the process of developing socio-technical systems such as office hours for one's availability or qualitatively prioritize contacts to manage the attention they receive. The proper handling of secrets in relation to one's own goals requires deep personal and interpersonal knowledge and social skill which makes it essential part of everyday life. For example, people typically carry a wallet, as its contents serve as a tool for human interaction in a public space. However, the contents of the wallet have different intended audiences. Photos and souvenirs are personal whereas money and identity cards are intended to communicate with financial strangers. Privacy does not remain unchanged in individual

objects either as a letter might have very different forms of privacy depending on if it's in the mailbox, kitchen table or trashcan (Nibbert-Eng 2010, 35, 127, 146, 181, 244, 249).

It is no wonder that online connectivity is often described as invading people's privacy (Keipi 2017, 130). Žižek argues that the dichotomy between privacy and the public takes an even deeper aspect to it on the internet, which differentiates the messenger's subjectivity and the subjectivity of the message. The internet provides a possibility to tailor one's self-expression by expressing or hiding certain aspects of one's personality. Experimenting with multiple identities is thus central to building an online identity. This is a key distinction and feature of online communication as the fact that communication is mediated by the very least a display as a third party, there is no way to communicate with anyone head-to-head online. Internet communication is founded on this acceptance that everyone communicates online through a symbolic public identity mediated by technology. This differentiation means people will not be able to trust these peoples' identities as the real person behind this symbolic identity always remains different from one's online avatar. (Žižek 2009, 129-130.)

Balancing between personal and professional identities, or what Erwin Goffman called the boundary between the backstage and frontstage, is indeed increasingly central to gaining and losing influence, visibility, and employment for any professional working in the public space (Haastrup 2018, 101 & 113). The self as a personal brand has become a tool in social media and as a result, journalists for example, contend with four clear dilemmas between communication and interaction; facts and opinion; professional and private as well as openness and self-expression in an implicit and explicit sense (Brems et al. 2016, 13).

Žižek (2020, 763) argues that as publicity intrudes upon previously private spaces, humans seek to retain their subjectivity through divisions within their personality. Instead of division between the subject and others, the subject is moving towards a division within itself to maintain distance from collective thought. To illustrate this Žižek explains how vulgar jokes evoke both horror of tragedy as well as black humour which illustrates the possibility of an inner dialogue within the subject which easily goes unnoticed. Satire and irony are inevitably then also a common way to disguise hateful commentary online (Matamoros Fernandez 2017, 13). Anonymity can provide thus a flexible tool in mediating attention from the public and thus a central question in understanding online identity as people always embody it to some extent online. Anonymity is indeed used in the same way as other socio-technical systems mentioned by Nibbert-Eng (2010, 181) as it can provide a sense of security for some users afraid of being

judged by their social surrounding and thus increase participation (Barnes 2018, 17). This is echoed also by Mancosu & Vegetti (2020, 2) who recognise anonymity as a key aspect in how social science researchers should protect the subjectivity of social media users they study.

A study conducted by Keipi et al. suggests that the preference for anonymity online correlates with lower self-esteem, younger age, and a lower frequency of meeting friends offline. Furthermore, the flexibility of anonymity is demonstrated by Keipi's division of anonymity into three categories. *Visual anonymity* is the most prevalent one and nearly universal in online communities even in the case where participants already know each other. The next level is *pseudonymity* which is defined by the existence of usernames and the final level as *full anonymity* where even usernames, avatars or any other identification cannot be associated with users. (Keipi et al. 2015.)

However, anonymity as form of reduced self-awareness leading to the lack of accountability has been extensively studied as central in explaining various kinds of disinhibited behaviour as well (Sparby 2017, 86). Emotional expression through facial features serves as a fast and essential form of reaction and feedback in conversation. In most platforms non-verbal cues are not available making it harder to feel empathy towards other people. (Keipi et al. 2017, 31.) Social identity theory proposes that as an individual interacts anonymously, the lack of interpersonal cues causes individuals to give up their notion of self. This is done to strengthen group identity and distinction through deliberate self-stereotyping. (Keipi et al. 2017, 32).

Seeing both oneself and others exclusively through their group membership is one of the key features in aggressive online behaviour. Anonymity enhances this tendency as constructing or expressing any kind of individual identity becomes harder and less reliable in anonymous interaction. The research of Keipi et al. (2017, 55, 70) indicates that as the layers of anonymity encourage people to increasingly identify with their group identities, hate expressed online also takes a broader form of hate towards a persons' race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or any other kind of group characteristic rather than an individual characteristic. For this reason, Foxman (2013, 114-116) for example argues that the benefits of anonymity might not outweigh its problems although on the other hand people are also more and more comfortable engaging in aggressive and hateful behaviour in social media publicly with their own name as well.

Kaakinen et al. (2020, 10) research does not suggest that identification to online groups directly leads to hateful behaviour online. Instead, aggressive online behaviour is especially prevalent

among impulsive people with less affective control and lower psychological wellbeing. Stereotypes are one of the most prevalent tools online hate is expressed through however which seems to lend merit to the notion of online communities promoting intolerance (Kaakinen et al. 2020, 11). Social norms are less prominent online as damaging behaviour is ultimately seen as having less consequences and is subjected to less control (Keipi et al. 2017, 130).

As internet communication has a permanent aspect to it, people use anonymity as the other inseparable aspect of the internet to retain subjectivity of their identity. Layers of anonymity are used to build self-esteem and seek help in unsecure circumstances and are sometimes just unwanted side effects of technology mediated communication. However, as anonymity requires the social reconstruction of personal identity as well as the identity of others it is group identities that take precedence in online communication. The internet to varying degree disguises a person's individuality and disinhibits their behaviour as narrowly a member of the group they are a part of. In the next chapter I will explore the implications this has on public discourse.

2.3 Public dialogue and hate speech

Peirce's (1984, 53-54) concept of dialogue as a form of logical growth is framed through his conception of interpretation as a mediator or translator when an interpreter interprets objects. Peirce coined the term *interpretant* to signify a single unit of interpretation or a connotation. Interpretants can be immediate, dynamical, or final. An immediate interpretation of a sign, as for example emerging from the structural meanings of a text, is an immediate interpretant. As the role of the interpreter increases the interpretant becomes dynamic, like when an audience forms a more momentary and personalised interpretation of a text. The interpretant might also reach the form of a final interpretant which means that the interpretation becomes part of the accepted social truth. The final interpretant is thus a practical and performative action or approach which is the final stage of the process of interpretation. All interpretants are also signs in themselves as they can be interpreted further and facilitate the formation of new interpretants. (Bergman 2008, 138, 142, 155.)

Peirce defined dialogue as a joint effort to evaluate something and reach a conclusion from doubt. Peirce characterized the relationship between the individual and their environment through dialogue rather than by the notion of a governor or a subordinate. Interaction with the environment is the external factor that can demonstrate the ineffectiveness of a habits and thus creates a state of doubt. This, in turn, creates the need for dialogue to release suspicion and to re-enter a stable state of belief. Peirce defined the self as a combination of habits that reflect both a summary of the past and an orientation toward the future. A combination of habits determines how we behave in certain situations. Doubtful self-crisis and dissatisfaction with one's own present situation can lead to an honest desire for learning. (Crick & Bodie 2016, 276.) Heiskala (2014, 43) sees this as an implication towards neostructuralism in Peirce as semiosis can be used to explain how social structures constantly articulate and rearticulate themselves. Dialogue thus arises in the quest for self-repair and growth. According to Peirce, growth is not the result of open rational discussion, a demand for authority, or perseverance, but a recognition of one's own ignorance of the desire to know the truth and to do the dialogical work required for it. (Crick & Bodie 2016, 276.) Heiskala (2014, 44) argues that this growth also always contains an element of interpretation of the whole meaning-structure and a rearticulation of it. Culture thus constantly rearticulates itself through the flow of interpretants.

Peirce (1984, 331-332) describes how understanding is essentially a process of moving from object to sign and then from interpretant to interpretation. Objects are in other words understood through attaching them to signs, which are understood by attaching them to interpretants. Emotions are thus the first essential part of Peirce's three step process in which phenomena shape our models of reality through dialogue. Aesthetics is thus an essential ability used to understand possible emotions, which makes it a central skill for understanding dialogue and reality. Its mission is to understand deeds, people and phenomena, no matter how pleasant or truthful they are. (Crick & Bodie, 283-284.)

People are easily influenced by emotions and basic reactions rather than by logic and reason. Social media uses negative emotions as a fuel for engagement and anger. (Keipi et al. 2017, 70.) Human wellbeing does not work according to the logic of cathartic aggression of venting out one's anger, but online discussion however is often described as highly emotional which is also commonly seen as a major hinderance to having productive discussion (Keipi et al. 2017, 31, 70).

In semiotics, this would be described as the depth of semiosis stopping in emotional interpretant, which could also be desirable at a concert for example. To proceed to a change in habits however, it must reach the last interpretant in the chain of interpretation, which is the logical interpretant (Bergman 2008, 143). After this a new understanding of rules is formed as a model of action that combines both emotions and reactions. However, this model of action alone does not lead to ethical action because reality consists of unique situations that require unique actions. This leads to the central idea of how this process of reasoning is eternally continuous and step by step completing itself. (Crick & Bodie. 2016, 283-284.)

According to Bergman, (2008, 150-151) successful communication arises when the interlocutor and interpreter, from their shared experience, succeed in anchoring the message to a common environment. However, it is also possible that the same context can lead to very different interpretations due to individual backgrounds. The normative purpose of communication is not only consensus, but a common mode of action (Bergman 2008, 155). Dialogue is both a sensitivity to aesthetic sensibilities and a commitment to solving the problem. It tests positions, compares materials, identifies feelings in a shared frame of values and comes to a new conclusion or even a mode of action. Dialogue is a process that seeks to make the world more understandable. (Crick & Bodie. 2016, 286)

The interpretant model might provide a new and abstract tool to define hate speech as an immediate failure to move past the first stage of reasoning, which is the emotional interpretant. The lack of emotional empathy explains why online discussion fails to reach compromises and solutions. In this case specific focus should be paid towards understanding what encourages and discourages emotional empathy online. This would create the basis for encouraging more participation and for a more productive public discourse.

Social media is increasingly a distributor of hate speech as it can provide a way to bypass national laws and ultimately facilitates spaces where people can live in a constant environment of violent fantasies (Keipi et al. 2017, 56-58). It is not however easy to draw a line on what is or is not hate speech and the definition of hate speech at an international level is especially hard because of the very different histories different groups of people have experienced. Facebook for example defines hate speech as content that attacks any people based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or disease (Pohjonen & Udupa 2017, 1175). Cohen-Almagor (2015, 148) defines hate speech as hostile speech driven by prejudice which is directed at an individual or group based on their

actual or perceived innate characteristics. Keipi et al. (2017, 58-59) however argue that on top of minorities, online hate is often directed at for example politicians and celebrities as well and can be based in people's lifestyles, political beliefs, or appearance, which is especially prevalent among youth online bullying.

Harmful speech can also take a more subtle form in what is called *gaslighting*. Gaslighting is a term used today to describe manipulative strategies of abusive people used both in interpersonal relationships and politics. Sweet (2019, 856) defines it as an attempt to create a surreal social environment by making another person feel crazy often using race-, class- and gender-based stereotypes. Sweet (2019, 870) further elaborates how feminizing as associated with irrationality is used as a strategy to delegitimize and deny women's realities, which is indeed the core mechanism how gaslighting works.

Public life is very much at its core defined by a constant conflict of interest and opinions. The formation of the public is an emerging result of the conflict between the economic and political interests of people (Pietilä et al. 2010, 87-93). Public discourse is thus inherently associated with an acknowledgement of the differences in the views of individuals and discourse is therefore inherently associated with the desire to act as a modifier for those views. The public domain is also a form of discourse emerging from disagreement. The public is therefore essentially a place where people who disagree come together, try to determine a common way of dealing with an issue, and finally find a solution (Pietilä et al. 2010, 205). It could be said that people's differences in opinion will inevitably lead to the need to modify others to act as they wish. The public makes this possible and therefore shouldn't allow the suppression of marginalized voices.

The United Nation Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression distinguishes the right of free speech from harmful speech which ultimately seeks to infringe upon the human rights of the victim. According to the report expression can be problematic in three ways by either being a criminal offence according to international law, by resulting in civil suits or by raising issues relating to respect and tolerance. (Alkiviadou 2019, 35). Cohen Almagor points out that hate speech often creates what he calls double victimization, which is the notion that those accused of hate speech are misunderstood and marginalized themselves. Hate speech is harmful for people victimized by it but also to the notion of publicity itself as hate speech damages the values of tolerance and openness in society and can ultimately even lead to suicides. (Cohen-Almagor 2015, 205.) Kaakinen (2017, 33) has found that less socially connected people are

more likely to express hate online while more connected people are less likely to do so. Foxman (2013, 175) also points out that exposure to hate speech further normalizes it. Cohen-Almagor (2015, 206-207) argues that hate speech might further lead to hate crimes which he defines as damage inflicted upon a victim based on their actual or perceived race, religion, ethnicity, gender, physical condition, or sexual identity.

Reacting to this, Nagle (2017, 38) has argued that *transgressiveness*, which traditionally was the core value of Western social liberalism ever since the 60s, has come to characterize instead an online culture of anti-feminism and misogyny. As well as to reject traditional conservativism, transgressive sensibility is used as an excuse to rationalize the dehumanization of women and racial minorities that has been held as cultural taboos ever since the Second World War (Nagle 2017, 39). Nagle (2017, 67) argues that the presidency of Donald Trump therefore was not a sign of the return of conservativism but instead a new hegemony of the internet culture of non-conformism and nihilism.

Sociologist Michael Burawoy (2004, 8) saw the emergence of a common sociological voice as the central challenge to sociology as he thought that the pursuit of dialogue was the only fundamental norm sociology has. Barnes (2018, 123) argues similarly that instead of accepting the internet as by design a wild west of offensive behaviour, we should demand the same behavioural norms from our online world as we do from our offline world since so much of our lives is increasingly moving online. Social media platforms are in a peculiar place in this matter. Free speech is not only foundational for internet culture but also foundational to their business models based on user engagement and user created content. (Van Dijck 2013, 162.) Burawoy argued that just as economics seek to expand markets, the main interest for sociology is the expansion of democracy by defending the interests of humanity (Burawoy 2004, 24-25). It is thus a moral imperative for sociology to engage with public discussion and thus the question of how public discussion is moderated by social media guidelines and cultures is indeed a defining question for sociology. Thus arises the question of content moderation and curation which I will evaluate in the next section.

3. PLATFORMS AND ONLINE DISTINCTION

In this chapter I will discuss the socio-cultural implications of social media platforms. I will start by describing how website's host, curate and moderate the social environments they foster. Relying on the work of Pierre Bourdieu I will talk about how users within these communities use the websites to create hierarchies among themselves. Finally, I will go over recent media research regarding the role of specific platforms and their social impact.

3.1 Field of social media algorithms

British sociologist Beverley Skeggs (2016, 383) has described social media as a form of imperative self-affirmation used to gain public acceptance. Prior research does indicate that the reason people share knowledge in online communities is indeed to gain reputation. This is commonly done through feedback from other members of online communities in the form of commenting. (Fang 2018.) People also use social networking sites to interact and connect with people, to share information and to satisfy their entertainment needs (Lai & Yang 2015, 1466). The online environment does create certain distinct differences compared to offline environments as well. First, online content is less relied on temporal convergence and is more accessible even by accident (Keipi et al. 2017, 48). Online content is in other words not relied on a shared time and space between participants and thus content is often created without knowing who will be affected by it. Secondly the online environment provides a larger scale of access between people making communication potentially more impactful (Keipi et al. 2017, 49). For example, easier access can mean that more people might participate in the bullying of an individual regardless of how that person themselves might behave.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985b, 105-107) used the concept of a field to describe environments underlying human interaction. Fields according to Bourdieu are structures built by competing positions which can be analysed independently from the individuals holding those positions. For a field to function, it must contain people whose habits reflect understanding of the inherent rules of the field. These inherent rules of the field assume the

role of an unquestioned and often unrecognized truth which are held in place even during times of disagreement as the existence of a conflict assumes the mutual recognition that an issue is worth having a conflict over. People in the same field have many common fundamental advantages that are associated with the very existence of the field. As an entry fee, new participants must recognize the value of this game as well as its borders and goals manifested by knowledge of the principles of its operation.

Bourdieu & Wacquant (1995, 126-129) see fields as indeed games where individuals possessing certain skills and qualities are judged based on how significant and useful, they are as players. By their active participation, the players enforce the common opinion and therefore its existence. In other words, being involved in a game means approving and agreeing on its rules, which vary by field. Agents are given the right to enter the field when they possess a certain combination of intended qualities. The quantity and structure of capital that an agent possesses determines its potency, position, and strategic orientation in the game. The presence of capital makes it possible to influence those rules in which the field is accustomed to function. An agent may be given the opportunity to change the previous rules of the field, which may lead to more favourable rules for the combination of capital that agent owns.

Media channels inevitably not only structure communities but also engineer them (Van Dijck 2013. 78). When thus analysing online communication through Bourdieu's notion of the field, the paramount question is what cultural forces shaped personal computers and the internet and what kind of dispositions different groups of people have had in accessing these technologies. Matamoros Fernandez (2017, 8) has argued that the underlying ethos of computer culture has been masculine and based on notions of free market. To emphasise the cultural assumptions embodied in platforms, Matamoros Fernandez (2017, 9 & 14) points out for example how when Facebook blocks pictures of bear breasted aboriginal women based on nudity, Facebook shows clearly how it operates under very specific cultural assumptions.

Instead of a variety of editorial policies of traditional media companies, the digitalized media landscape is more and more structured by the terms of service of social media platforms. Matamoros Fernandez (2017, 12-13) points out the problematic notion of this kind of constitutive power as platform rules of addressing hate speech for example are very unclear. As the main source of revue of platforms is marketing, actions that they do take in policing controversial content is likely done foremost to protect their business model.

As social media companies allow and exclude content on their platforms, the decision to do so is always political to some extent (Gillespie 2014). These decisions come to define the standards of how rules in public discourse as well as more broadly social hierarchies are determined. Moderation has been shown to decrease uncivil behaviour and make readers more comfortable to participate in discussion, but it has also been shown to elicit resistance and accusations of censoring challenging viewpoints (Barnes 2018, 17). As moderation is inevitably linked to the subjectivity of the moderator, it is inevitable that these tools are frequently used inconsistently, mistakeably, or even maliciously. This can be done for example by false flagging or by hiding controversial content. (Matamoros Fernandez 2017, 14.) With their very limited accountability for user behaviour but simultaneously the ability to moderate content, it is thus very unclear if social media companies resemble more of a public square or a private newspaper.

Cohen-Almagor (2015, 216-217) argues that social media companies are in the role of *gatekeepers* in the question of hate speech and thus responsible in preventing violence and illegal actions on their platforms and specifically sees algorithms as an effective tool to detect such content. Foxman (2013, 106) however thinks social media companies are unlikely to succeed at this due to the vast amount of content on their platforms. Moderation in social media is indeed rarely done consciously by the platform itself and is instead delegated to algorithms and users, who are offered different kinds of mechanism, such as flagging, reporting, filtering and blacklisting words, posts, and users. Algorithms are more discretely used for curation of content through downgrading and promoting certain kind of content on platform feeds. These kinds of moderation mechanisms leave little room for transparent and public discussion about how and by whom these mechanisms are used and who ultimately has the final word on a verdict. (Matamoros Fernandez 2017, 14; Gillespie 2014)

The core function of *algorithms* is typically to focus attention on certain things by excluding and hiding other things (Beer 2013, 86). Algorithms create a combination of time and space where existing commands and orders are preserved and redefined. They are increasingly giving us suggestions and even making decisions for us as they make each internet search and social media feed unique depending on the location and individual history of the person who is doing the searching (Keipi et al. 2017, 7). Algorithms create the realities upon which decisions are made by modifying norms and expectations. Curation on the other hand highlights and directs content to specific users effectively reducing diversity of opinion by fundamentally replacing

the notion of network with network-to-person communication (Barnes 2018, 18). Van Dijck (2014, 75) specifically refers to cases in the Arab Spring where the social connectivity of protesters and journalists to global organizations and international media significantly defined how much influence on Twitter they received.

Finn (2017, 34-35) has described algorithms as cultural machines that have aspects of both mathematical programming and socio-cultural symbols. This becomes evident when considering how websites hide their underlying code behind a user interface. Because of this the interaction between users and platforms is very secretive as the users do not understand the basic functioning logic of the platform. This kind of mysticism is evident in how technology companies not only hold the code running their products as key trade secrets but also in that companies like Google do not themselves always understand the actions of their algorithms. For example, as people start to type questions to Google's search engine, the algorithm offers suggestions to what it thinks might be the complete question. These suggestions have been frequently discovered to be overtly racist presumably unbeknown to Google. This is especially important to note considering Keipi's (2017, 63) findings on how most people are exposed to hate content online by accident rather than directly having it shared by someone or deliberately seeking it out. As algorithms define who gets found and funded Pasquale (2015, 216-217) expresses a great concern over how the black box modelled algorithms might inaccurately brand individuals as security threats or bad employment prospects without any possibility for the individual to contest or even know about the reason for it. Matamoros Fernandez (2017, 11) also argues that making platforms publicly more accountable for the performativity of their algorithms is at the centre of social media research.

Twitter's following function works in a way that the more people follow someone, and the more people retweet their tweets, the more impact it has and thus exponentially more followers the person will get. Similarly, the more engagement a YouTube video among other mechanics gets the more visibility it will receive in the algorithm driven recommendation system. (Van Dijck 2013, 158.) This is how social media, and their algorithms most effectively commercializes people who brand themselves most strongly on public platforms. Lai & Yang (2015, 1465) have indeed demonstrated that in social media the extent of this self-disclosure is amplified by a person's popularity in the social network. The platforms motive for generating advertising revenue therefore directly influences how, when, and with whom a user interacts, thus building their network under Facebook tracking. The user can thus never be sure when

their network will be built under the control of Facebook and to whom Facebook will release their information. (Skeggs 2016, 391-392.)

Algorithms shape the cultural landscape making culture visible and accessible, but do not decide the extent that people find algorithm recommendations relevant and useful. Social media users passively access data in a variety of ways, for example, by looking at a trending-lists compiled by the page. Application programming interfaces or APIs also make it possible for users to actively create new visualizations of data. In practice this means that platform like Twitter and YouTube already have alternative sites which at the core still have the same functions and access to the same exact content but having different kinds of user interfaces and recommendation algorithms. The access to the data enabling such sites itself also makes it possible to create new data when it is reused in what is called data play. Data play creates cultural products such as new visualizations of data that circulate in popular culture as entertainment, communication, and information. Spotify for example allows the inspection of one's music listening habits with visualisations it makes from the data it collects from the use of their services. (Beer 2013, 96-97, 110-111, 120.)

No matter the nature of content moderation and curation, it is also important to examine how users engage with digital gatekeepers. For example, in what Jia Tan (Ng 2020, 624) calls *digital masquerading,* Chinese feminists are known of circulating images inscribed with feminist text to circumvent the censorship of text posts by the government. Subtext is also a common tactic of masquerading. For example, homosexual relationships are often described in China through words such as comrade or socialist brotherhood. These same tactics are also employed to masquerade racist discourse in the English language internet (Tuters & Hagen 2020, 2). This is a clear example of what Žižek (2020, 763) describes as an unconscious counterfactual emerging from the cracks of dividing subjectivity. Determining the real intent of a person is purposefully made harder due to the constant development of language and language use, and it is embraced especially by subcultures not accepted in the mainstream.

An important thing to note is that the frameworks of interpretation are being constantly renegotiated through public discussion which is the foundational activity how online communities themselves are formed. This discursive nature can be seen in the common notion of emphasizing the right to free expression and inclusion as core values in Internet discussion culture. (Arpo 2005, 295-296.) Public discussion and the media have however always functioned within certain frameworks and only as a limited state of democracy in which certain

people have more say, while others take more of a listener role. The press traditionally for example has been guided by how much the press itself benefits from publishing information and certain editorial policies have been enforced to secure desired circulation (Pietilä et al. 2010, 367). The tension between high status and other site users is thus essential in understanding the cultural dynamics of platforms and the question I will be discussing in the next chapter.

3.2 Social media distinction

Hierarchies are not based only on inequality in people's economic wealth but also on cultural aspects and more specifically values and norms. Hierarchies are not only defined by material wealth but also on how, where and to whom this wealth is expressed. The logic of wealth, or what Bourdieu calls capital, can be expanded to broader notions of *cultural, social* and *symbolic* forms of capital, which similar to wealth in the traditional sense, act as an unconscious mechanism to advance social division. These four forms of capital are either material property or more often embodied states which represent power over the field in which the forms of capital are valued. The position of an individual in the social space can be defined by the positions they occupy in the four different fields. The manner and attitude in which an agent navigates and competes for position through the accumulation of various forms of capital is often unconscious and it is this hidden system Bourdieu identifies as habitus. (Bourdieu 1985a, 724.)

Capital plays an integral role in the field and the diverse strategies of its participants. The four different forms of capital Bourdieu & Wacquant (1995, 148-149) identify are economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, which are foundational in the process of forming the agent's position in the field. Cultural capital refers to cultural consciousness as a form of value like economic capital, which includes adherence to informal behavioural and language standards as well as capital gained through institutionalized recognition for example in the form of an academic degree. Legitimate cultural attitude, behaviour and preferences are the immaterial filters through which Bourdieu's cultural capital in its material form, such as books and art are consumed. Social capital on the other hand is the underlying factor explaining received recognition and assistance as it is the sum of actual and potential resources, which an individual

or group has based on their institutionalized social networks. This happens as increased connectivity enables brokering and bridging social capital leading ultimately to closure and bonding as communities are fundamentally formed to share information and emotional support (Barnes 2018, 14). The sum of these forms is symbolic capital, which is recognition and power received through the everyday conflict social classes engage in, which Bourdieu calls distinction. (Skeggs 2014, 51-53.)

Omar Lizardo (2006, 800) has demonstrated how taste for different kinds of culture helps in creating and maintaining social networks meaning in other words that the consumption of cultural goods is the primary way in which individuals become connected to social structures. Cultural capital is thus integrally linked to the formation of social capital. Therborn (2014, 46) has similarly described Bourdieu's four forms of capital as not separate categories, but instead as embodiments of one another. In this aspect capital as a resource is first embodied and then used to build power to move in societal space changing its form as it progresses from economic to symbolic through culture and social hierarchies. All forms of capital end up being symbolic as the forms of capital are realized. Economic capital needs a cultural, social, and symbolic context to be expended. Lizardo (2006, 800-801) furthermore demonstrates that it is the appeal and ease of incorporation of the certain form of cultural knowledge, which determines the likelihood it will serve as either a fence or a bridge between individuals to gain social capital. Acquired and niche tastes with steep learning curves are likely to be used by small groups of people to exclude others from a tightly linked group. Popular culture forms are then more likely to connect individuals to more distant segments of a larger social structure on a more minimal level of integration.

Peterson & Kern (1996, 903-904) argue that instead of pursuing a high-class status through highbrow cultural consumption such as classical music as observed by Bourdieu, consumers today are increasingly seeking to consume products through a wide variety of cultural genres of both highbrow and lowbrow kind making cultural omnivorousness a key characteristic of high-status individuals. Lizardo (2006, 801-802) argues that through both artistic and pop culture consumption, high-status individuals indeed acquire both small and tight as well as large and loose social networks demonstrating what can be described as structural autonomy. Low status individuals lacking such autonomy are in turn more likely to remain in small and restrictive networks composed of few strong ties. Thus, it could be argued that connectivity through popular culture plays a very significant role in determining social hierarchies as well.

The values of *cosmopolitanism* do not thus express themselves only in abstract ideas such as democracy or human rights but are also an important part of people's everyday lived experience through cosmopolitan consumption and cultural habitus of globalisation (Peterson & Kern 1996, 906). This way of consumption is characterised by a preference for authenticity and exoticism while distrusting mass-production (Cappeliez & Johnston 2013, 437). Skeggs (2014, 199-200) describes this through less favourable terms as a way in which the middle class appropriates working class culture by stripping it from details it deems immoral and wasteful. The middle class is thus seeking authenticity while avoiding being too authentic.

Cappeliez & Johnston (2013, 451-452) point out that there are also differences in how and why people come to share certain preferences. People sharing a similar preference might have acquired it through either actively seeking it as an exotic source of distinction, through receiving it from personal connections or through ambivalently reaffirming their familiar taste. The preference to a specific food does not thus necessarily indicate whether the individual has an authentic connection to the food culture or whether they are in general curious towards new food cultures. Skeggs (2014, 215-216) also recognises this and argues that while working class is subjected to the supposedly universal moral and cultural expectations of the middle class, the working class is constantly pointing out the hypocrisy in how and why the middle class builds its supposedly authentic cultural identity.

Alice Sullivan (2011, 203) argues indeed that food is an increasingly important way in which cultural expression and distinction is expressed through as cooking skills and eating home has transformed from a necessity into a leisurely activity. As a domestic skill, cooking also highlights an important aspect of Bourdieu's distinction in that knowledge, skills and thus different forms of capital are transmitted and inherited based on inherited social class. Sullivan (2011, 204) further points out though that as meals are also increasingly consumed outside home and time spent cooking is declining, the nature of this transmission is changing from a domestic skill inherited by the mother's cultural background to an expression of knowledge of wide ethnic cultural capital inherited by the father's social class.

The study of stratification in the online context is challenging as it does not clearly follow the notion of inherited social positions as the high use of the internet among the young makes intergenerational comparison difficult (Sullivan 2011, 202). Bourdieu's different forms of capital can however be seen in highly visible metrics of followers and subscribers on social media. These metrics enable a new level of comparison of the size and composition of an

individual's identity, social networks, and scope of influence. (Keipi et al. 2017, 24.) Van Dijck (2013, 76) points out that sites such as Klout express this very concretely by automatically calculating an individual's influence on the Web based mostly on the extent of their social network in form of friends and followers on different platforms. This kind of influence has indeed a monetary value which advertisers use to determine partnerships with online influencers. Social media thus transforms the forms of value that we possess into entrepreneurship much in the same way as AirBnb transforms private housing into lodging (Skeggs 2016, 392).

Van Dijck (2013, 157) argues that algorithms and code constitute in fact the new universal language of online sociality. Notions of liking and sharing are shared in very similar ways across platforms and increasingly constitute a universal currency through which social, cultural, political, and economic discourses are expressed. This kind of capital can be used both to foster large scale social organization and engagement but also to foster conflict distinction and exclusion between individuals and groups. Social media networks have aspects of both as they have become a popular tool to maintain contact with various offline communities such as neighbourhoods, former classmates, and colleagues for example, but have also become known for antagonistic behaviour such as trolling (Kaakinen et al. 2017, 27-28). These factors are echoed by Mihelj et al. (2019, 1481) who indicate that inequalities of cultural participation are indeed larger in online cultural participation than in offline participation. Mihelj thus suggests that digital media might be in fact enhancing inequalities in cultural participation rather than decreasing them.

What is distinct about internet communication, is arguably how it blurs the line between what Bourdieu calls legitimate cultural attitudes and their material signifiers such as in the case of user created content, which is central to platforms like YouTube. Sparby (2017, 86) argues that collective identities as well as technological interfaces influence the creation of behavioural memes very much the same way as memes in the more contemporary understanding as pieces of content that achieve popularity through word of mouth. Behaviour in online communities is inherently recognized as also material cultural capital as behaviour online has a material and permanent aspect to it.

Cancel culture is arguably a direct response to this permanent and material aspect of online behaviour. Cancel culture refers to the withdraw of any kind of support, such as viewership, social media following or product purchases, for those who are assessed as having said or done

something unacceptable or problematic on the internet (Ng 2020, 623). Many aspects of cancel culture have deep cultural roots beyond the internet. Mark Fisher (2013) has argued that defining proper language has always been the key tool for class distinction and the way politics concentrate on political correctness is very much defined by a bourgeois mode of subjectivity and an omnipresent sense of guilt, fear, and moralism. The term hashtag activism is often used to describe this kind of a dubious and ineffective form of engagement with social issues (Van Dick 2013, 87). Skeggs notes similarly that even nonconformism itself has aspects of a class-dependent privilege that is central to the market rhetoric of the consumer society and the middle-class compulsion of a free self-directing individual (Skeggs 2014, 119). As a strategy for personal branding, social media activism links itself with the notion of disruptive technology which reflects social media companies' attempts to disrupt the market with new forms of revenue. (Skeggs 2016, 393.)

Cancel culture has been cited as a reasonable response to racism, sexism, and other kinds of toxic behaviour online but it has also come under criticism as vigilante justice with a zeal of ideological purity lacking reasonable scale of transgression within itself (Ng 2020, 623). One previous emotion analysis indeed suggested that lower income and education levels as well as less diverse social contact correlated with more expression of negative emotions on Twitter whereas those with higher income and education levels tend to post messages of a more positive tone (Mittos et al, 2020, 5). Skeggs argues that it is historically very typical for the middle class to perceive themselves as fighters for development while the working class is represented as unreasonable, racist, wasteful, and undisciplined. (Skeggs 2014, 178, 198).

However, despite the class implications of cancel culture it is undeniable it is at its core a response to the oppression of marginalized groups and cancel culture demonstrates how platforms facilitate fast and large-scale responses to behaviour deemed problematic (Ng 2020, 625). Keipi's (2017, 64-65) research for example has argued that there are significant cultural differences between platforms in terms of the prevalence of hate speech. Social media platforms offer users both the possibility to express themselves and be subjected to the reactions of a massive audience. An important question still rises however which is whether online and offline social environments are equivalently neutral settings for this self-expression (Keipi et al. 2017, 19). This question is indeed the core question this thesis as well. In the next chapter I will examine how specific social media platforms have been studied in this regard.

3.3 Platform agency

Žižek (2009, 125-126) points out that through humanity's reliance on digital interfaces to express essential information for example in how we understand atoms, weather forecasts or what space looks like, our sense of reality is increasingly a simulation in sense how reality manifests itself to us. In other words, as we engage with our shared global reality primarily through digital illusions, we are in many ways unaware how this global reality would manifest to us. This echoes very much Jean Baudrillard's notion of how in the postmodern era, imagined simulations overlap with reality at the cost of authentic experiences (Potolsky 2006, 154). Potolsky (2006, 139-140) describes this relationship as a return to premodern superstition and magic as the boundary between an image and the object is blurred and the image can command the object like a voodoo doll. Zizek (2009, 132-134) further exemplifies this by describing conspiracy theories as political attempts to achieve at least some kind of a map to navigate in the world. They are the paradoxical result of on the other hand cynically opposing traditional authorities while at the same time falling quite uncritically to a paranoid fantasy.

User interfaces not only have the possibility to hide code and its implications from users as they also have the potential to actively encourage certain kind of behaviour. Finn (2017, 114) has used the term *gamification* to describe how services like Uber and AirBnb use graphics and meters to create workers a sense as if they are playing a video game on their app while becoming a more reliable worker. Even generic programs like PowerPoint, Google Scholar, and Photoshop in a similar way create a framework through which academic work as well as the world more broadly is structured as they guide us in consuming and creating cultural products (Beer 2013, 89). The specifics of the human-computer interface thus enhance and inhibit sociability as well as affect how community members communicate and how they react to one another (Barnes 2018, 17). Barnes (2018, 116-117) argues that understanding online platforms facilitating online communities is an important way to understand why interaction within those groups hold certain norms that dictate how individuals behave in those groups.

Van Dijck (2013, 6) defines social media as websites which specifically focus on networking and sharing content between users. Social media platforms exist without clear boundaries between various platform categories. Twitter would be an example of a platform where social networking takes precedence whereas YouTube focuses more on sharing of user created

content. Van Dijck also classifies trading and marketing sites like Amazon and online game sites as social media platforms. The boundaries of a platform are very hard to define and exist in a continuum. YouTube for example has tried consistently to turn itself more towards a social networking site while social networking sites like Facebook have tried to integrate commercial and gaming services to their platforms. (Van Dijck 2013, 8-9.)

Lai & Yang (2015, 1466) argue, that a primary difference between micro-blogging and online forums as different kinds of social media platforms are that micro-blogging is done primarily for social interaction whereas forums are more geared towards information sharing. Both kinds of networks significantly overlap with each other in this regard. Online forums are typically theme-oriented many-to many interactions contrasted to the one-to-many interactions of micro-blogging. A key aspect to this is that forums typically have an assumption of reciprocity in that many users contribute information to the forum expecting to receive such information from others in the future. Micro-blogging is much more one-sided in this regard demonstrated by the fact that 68 percent of Twitter users are not followed by any of the people they follow and 90 percent of the content on Twitter is generated by 10 percent of the users (Lai & Yang 2015, 1466-1467). Van Dijck (2013, 74) argues that this is a sign how Twitter's architecture steers attention exponentially to the most influential users. Van Dijck claims that this position of an influential user on Twitter is not reached so much through active use of the site in general but rather through concentrating intensely on a single topic thus exerting major visibility and influence on users interested in that topic.

Twitter and YouTube are micro-blogging social networking services where users post short messages or videos on personal pages which resemble a more simplified and accessible version of the more traditional blog (Lai & Yang 2015, 1455). On Twitter, posts have character limit of 280 and users can decide if these posts are public or visible only to specific users. Isotalus et al. (2018, 10) argue that the character restriction on Twitter have encouraged interaction on the platform to become more focused on rhetoric and the fast spread of information rather than informative content. A clear example of this is the use of hashtags already synonymous with online culture which are used to describe a piece of content and attach it to a wider ongoing public discussion. The @-sign is also used innovatively in Twitter to direct the public message to a specific user. These are clear examples of how a simple decision in platform design has shaped the adaptation of new ways to use language specific to a platform. (Isotalus et al. 2018, 10-11.) Twitter's mechanics of publicly tagging and re-tweeting content contribute to the rapid

spread of both discussion around a trending topic, as well as hatred towards a specific person (Healy 2017, 776-777).

Twitter is used mainly as an interactive tool for creating social networks via @-messages. Personal messages are still used less and are mainly used to address colleagues (Brems et al. 2016, 9). Brems et al. (2016, 10) say that Twitter is more likely to encourage subjectivity rather than objectivity in people using it. Kristensen & From (2018, 78) recognize this as well and argues that as Twitter has become indispensable and central in the day-to-day work of journalists, this has thus significant implications on the objectivity of journalism (Kristensen & From 2018, 78).

YouTube's original focus on micro-blogging as an alternative to television has shifted to being the central gateway to a vast entertainment universe and industry. As the corporate entertainment industry has embraced YouTube, Van Dijck (2013, 127) argues that it has become a paramount example of how audio-visual content is able to flow fluidly between television and computers. The shift from a purely micro-blogging site to a key player in the corporate entertainment industry signals how media platforms have the power to shape creativity and sociality (Van Dijck 2013, 129).

Online forums are known for their lacking moderation and thus of having a reputation of offensive language, but research also suggests that these aspects are used to form community spaces for sexual minorities for example (Ng 2020, 624). 4Chan is an image-based internet forum (also referred to as *image board*) which does not require registration of a user id. Thus, more than 90% of posts in the site are completely anonymous. The site is dedicated to the discussion of a variety of specific topics ranging from video games and anime to politics and literature. These topics divide the website into separate boards which is where all conversations or threads take place in. Threads get deleted after too much or too little user engagement, which makes the site very ephemeral in nature as most threads expire in less than 5 minutes. (Mittos et al. 2020, 6.) Tuters & Hagen (2019, 2) have argued that these factors constitute a highly effective selection mechanism to produce attention-grabbing memes, subcultural innovation, and constant challenging of community boundaries. Others describe 4Chan as the underbelly of the Internet with few rules and minimal moderation (Sparby 2017, 87). Online aggression and the lack of social conscience is especially associated with the /b/ -board signified in the platform for the discussion of "random" topics.

Sparby (2017, 88-89) argues that the lack of individual identities on 4Chan has created a strong collective identity reflecting the sites user base of 70% male, 47% Americans, mostly 18 to 34 years old, who see themselves as outsiders to the mainstream. This nonconformism is expressed most distinctly through the antagonistic rejection of political correctness through the performance of offensive behaviour towards marginalized groups. Gabriella Coleman (2014, 42) has speculated that the careless use of socially transgressive and pejorative language is not only used as a signal for the disregard of mainstream norms but also as a tool to build a boundary between the sites collective identity and those who are uninitiated to it. Sparby (2017, 93-94) describes the websites identity as a memetic performance which is counterintuitively expressed by a diverse group of individuals. Ylä-Anttila et al. (2020, 3) point out for example how this kind of language use have spread to other image boards such as the Finnish language equivalent site Ylilauta, where common expressions used in 4Chan such as "newfag" and "oldfag" are translated directly to Finnish in a way that does not make sense unless you understand that it is a literal translation of 4Chan behaviour. This is an example how language functions in anonymous image boards to bond together those in "in the know" while excluding so called "normies". Nissenbaum & Shifman (2017, 483) demonstrate how this knowledge of the correct use of memes are weaponized to claim social status in the sites collective culture. Sparby (2017, 94) argues that this monolithic collective identity of 4Chan is not only tied to the unchanging interface of the website but also therefore stuck in a feedback loop of escaping its own memetic reproduction. Nissenbaum & Shifman (2017, 498) describe this phenomenon as contesting of cultural capital as a memes traditional and innovative use are in a constant conflict.

This collective culture of 4Chan is seemingly united by a shared opposition and hate towards feminism and multiculturalism while simultaneously regarding itself as marginalized from the political status quo. Ylä-Anttila et al. (2020, 8-9) demonstrate that a key characteristic of image boards is the use of irony to both create boundaries towards outsiders and to cloak the users' true intentions in these multiple levels of hard to spot layers of irony. As such the ironic rhetoric of image boards is rooted in a spirit of experimenting with political positions and rhetoric one does not necessarily hold or express in public and falling back on the "it's just a joke" justification when seriously confronted. It is important to also note though that this attitude does not discount any intended or unintended interpretations of messages including openly far right ones.

Social media sites as central hubs of the internet also link to each other by the sharing of links in user conversations. Most links shared in 4Chan for example point to YouTube and there is even evidence of organized raids of 4Chan users posting hateful comments directed on specific users on other platforms (see Mittos et al. 2020, 6). Twitter offers the possibility to share and like content which have been argued to encourage the circulation of racist content in a decontextualized fashion (see Matamoros Fernandez 2017, 10). YouTube on top of this also offers a possibility to give a "thumbs down" to a video which arguably offers a possibility to counter problematic content. However, a clear difference with YouTube and Twitter is that the share function on YouTube functions in a more traditional way of sharing a link to content through other platforms. Twitter's retweet function on the other hand is built as a core function to the platform and constructs a large part of how users' personal feeds are constructed (Isotalus et al. 2018, 11). On 4Chan the only way to bring attention to a thread is participation, which delays its deletion and makes it more visible in the front page of the board.

Site structures and functions thus directly define the publicity of posts on and how the user culture is born on a platform. Self-awareness is also expressed in online communities towards the existence of these cultures, and this awareness shapes how people further define the culture. The innate differences in the different structures of these platforms thus have significant implications on the cultures on them and by extension public discourse and human identity.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter I will go over the research methodology used in this thesis. I will first describe the three research question I intend to answer at the end of this paper. I will then describe the research material I have collected for the purpose of this thesis. I will also elaborate on the nature of the chosen research method category analysis as well as how I have used the method in this research. Finally, I will reflect on the ethical implications of this research such as questions of privacy and publicity already central to the nature of this thesis.

4.1 Research question

My research question can be divided into three specific questions which I will attempt to address in the following order. Do online communities have elements of public discourse in them? How does the discussion of the same topic differ across the three social media platforms? And finally, how are specific design choices on these platforms incentivizing productive dialogue?

Laaksonen et al. (2013, 218) argue that online discussions can be used in research for at least three purposes. They can be used to study human activities online, such as the dissemination of information online. Online discussion also provides an opportunity to explore people's perceptions or ways of talking about something. In this case, discussion forums can serve as an alternative or parallel source of information for interview or survey research. Online discussions can be studied as a phenomenon as well, which is the purpose of this paper. The goal of this thesis is to study online discussion as a phenomenon which affects how human interaction becomes polarized, combative, and disinhibited as described by Sparby (2017, 86). The focus is not to specifically examine the perspectives people might hold in online discussion but rather how perspectives were justified and contested. This reflects the notion of Cappeliez & Johnston (2013, 451-452) who argue that cultural sociology should focus on how culture is consumed rather than simply what culture is consumed.

First, I will evaluate specifically how discussion in these online communities succeeds in creating common understanding and empathy as key definitions of productive discourse. I will do this through a close reading of the comments by trying to see to what extent discussion on each platform expresses characteristics of public discourse defined as discussion seeking to overcome mere reaction and moving towards a new understanding (see. Bergman 2008; Crick & Bodie. 2016; Pietilä et al. 2010). I will then describe how discussion of the same topic, plant-based diet documentary film The Game Changers, differs across the three platforms of 4Chan, Twitter and YouTube with the goal to define how cultures and communities differ across these platforms. The obviously significant differences of these platform are the central focus of this study and comprise the third and final research question which is how these platforms shape online cultures on them. I will answer this by reflecting and comparing my results with previous research in media studies and cultural sociology concerning mainly anonymity and social media distinction.

4.2 Research material

In assessing human behaviour, a key consideration is the assessment of the reactivity of the human being described. Naturally occurring spontaneous behaviour is generally considered to be the most reliable source of information in this situation (Pauwels 2010, 555). Staged or acted behaviour may itself be a valid object of study, but in that case, producing the reaction itself is typically the central object of the research itself. In online discussion research participants themselves decide the course of the discussion and highlight issues they consider important unlike in surveys for example (Laaksonen et al. 2013, 223).

The subject of this research is the online conversation surrounding 2018 US documentary film The Game Changers. The film covers the experiences of athletes following plant-based diets and also presents arguments for plant-based diets that can be applied by non-athletes. The film follows the film's producer, former professional fighter James Wilks's research into plant-based diets interviewing many famous celebrities and athletes. The film as directed by Louie Psihoyos and produced by Wilks as well as Joseph Pace and racing driver Lewis Hamilton. The main research focus was not on the topic of the film or even online discussions of plant-based diets. The focus was rather the ways in which people online reacted to cultural products

challenging their identity. Echoing very much Fischler's (1988, 277-278) notion on the importance of diet to build one's identity, the documentary film indeed had created a significant amount of discussion online with both praise and critique for the key arguments presented in the film. It thus provided an excellent opportunity to study the nuances of extreme speech which is often associated with these kinds of viral online phenomenon (e.g. Pohjonen & Udupa 2017).

The research material was collected on 8.12.2019 from posts posted up to one month before the data collection date. The aim was to get an empirical text material which would have a wide representation of different kinds of platforms as well as differing communities on these platforms. Dubois et al. (2018, 730) have argued that social media research often focuses on a single platform and thus fails to assess people's entire media environment which is shaped by and includes multiple social media platforms. Three US based platforms 4Chan, Twitter and YouTube, were chosen to ensure a diverse selection of online communities to be compared with each other.

Table 1: Three platforms studied in this thesis (source: Wikipedia)

Platform	4Chan	Twitter	YouTube
Launched	1.10.2003	15.7.2006	14.2.2005
Registration	None	Required	Optional
Users	20 million monthly	330 million monthly	2 billion total
Revenue		US$3,72 bil. (2020)	US$15 billion (2019)
Owner	Hiroyuki Nishimura	Publicly traded	Alphabet Inc.
Type of site	Imageboard	Social network	Video hosting seervice
Interface language	English	33 language versions	76 language versions

The data consists of 450 comments or replies posted in response to a tweet, YouTube video, or 4Chan thread. Three tweets from Twitter, three videos from YouTube and three threads from

4Chan were chosen based on a combination of their popularity and the search algorithms of these platforms. The search term in each platform was "The game changers" and search results were evaluated based on what the websites interpreted as most relevant results for the search term. Only one search result per poster was chosen to be included in the sample. The goal was to extract 50 comments from three of the search results and therefore search results that contained less than 50 comments were excluded from the data. Search results not implicitly referring to the documentary film were excluded from the data.

As threads get eventually deleted on 4Chan, accessing them was done by searching them on three different 4Chan archive sites. Desuarchive.org, Archived.moe and Archive.plebs.org each had one thread meeting the search criteria from the fitness focused /fit/ -board, cooking and food focused /ck/ -board and the television and film focused /tv/ -board respectively.

The dates 8.11.2019 to 8.12.2019 had no relation to the release or re-release date of the film. They were rather chosen due to technical reasons and to make sure that a common time frame could be established for the data across different platforms. YouTube does not allow searching comments from a specific time frame so the dates chosen were the data collection date and the date one month prior to that day.

Table 2: Research material of nine conversations each consisting of 50 comments.

Community	1	2	3
4Chan board	/ck/ Cooking & Food	/fit/ Fitness	/tv/ Television & Film
Twitter tweet	News anchor	Podcast guest	Podcast host
YouTube video	Doctor's video	Podcast debate	The Game Changers film

While the rerelease date of the documentary precedes the sample of this study by one and a half months conversation about the film remained very active regardless. The film was uploaded to YouTube during this time which constituted one of the YouTube discussions in the research material. The uploader had no professional relationship to the film and the film was indeed deleted from the platform later. Comments left below this video have been marked

with the description *The Game Changers Film*. Another Youtube video included by a doctor where he gives his evaluation of the claims made in the film. Comments left for this video have been marked with a description *Doctor's video.* During this time there were also threads on the /ck/- and /fit/-boards of 4Chan using the film as a premise to talk about the validity of plant-based diets. Individual 4Chan comment quoted in this research have been marked by the name of one of these threads where comments were posted in. A news anchor had also watched the film and brought attention to it on Twitter which constituted one of the discussions marked as *News anchor*. Most notably a popular podcast had organized a debate concerning the validity of the claims presented in the film. The debate featuring the producer of the documentary James Wilks seems to have had a large effect on why people were discussing the film online during this timeframe. Out of the search results four out of nine referenced the podcast debate. On Twitter two discussions referenced the debate one being an announcement about the debate from the other participant challenging the producer and one being a follow up tweet by the host of the debate pointing out further commentary on the scientific claims. Comments left below these tweets have been marked as *Podcast guest* and *Podcast host* respectively. One YouTube discussion was the comment section of the podcast debate itself marked here as *Podcast debate* and the original post for the discussion on /tv/-board of 4chan referenced the debate specifically and only mentioned the film in passing.

4.3 Category analysis

Categories are a general focus point in communication research and especially in social science discourse analysis. Category analysis can also be described as a close relative to discourse analysis and thus they can be used together and interchangeably (Jokinen 2012, 11). Category analysis seeks to understand why people choose certain specific categories to describe someone in a certain situation and how categories chosen by others are noticed (Juhila 2012b, 55-56). Categories are based on the cultural knowledge in human conversation as people use and categorize information and are thus the description and selection of shared information (Juhila et al. 2012, 60-61). Categorization is directly the production of moral order as description and evaluation are intertwined functions, and thus categories always have an assumption of their morality. (Juhila et al. 2012, 87.) One of the foundations of ethnomethodology is that people's

membership in communities makes people assume the habits and routines of the community as the normal which is at the basis of a moral order. Categories are in other words used to describe culturally suitable or unsuitable actions as they entail moral rights and responsibilities (Juhila et al. 2012b 132-134). Although cultural practices may be violated, the dominant moral order requires taking responsibility of the wrongdoings. Identity is thus also negotiated and supplemented (Suoninen 2012, 129). The explanation following the violation of moral order is thus a central subject of research in the study of social problems (Juhila 2012a, 147).

Category analysis focuses on constructing group memberships, which is how we make assumptions about group members' common characteristics, ways of working and how we strengthen the basic division between us and them. Stereotyping categorization is illustrated by bundling people in the same category group and defining them through membership in this category group. Outer group categorization reflects a way of speaking in which categories are specifically used to describe others as a homogeneous group and often in a negative light. Categorization can also be conscious cultural reflection, where categories are viewed in a critical light. This is reflected in the quest for an identity that is distinct from prejudice. However, reflection does not mean that stereotypical categorization is avoided. Homogenizing outgroup categorization serves as the basis for categorizing outgroup differences in general. Anomaly can be examined by paying attention to comparison, for example, by constructing a morally superior self-identity, by making clear boundaries or distinctions, by excluding or categorizing by contrast, and by referring to conflicting group memberships. Deviation from category membership is apparent from the way in which category membership failure is produced or how category positions are referred to. Deviation can also be consciously embraced as a revolutionary or submissive act. Countering abnormality happens by defining oneself as ordinary, by disassociating oneself from abusive memberships and attributes, by resisting membership in a defensive or an accusative way, or by referring to a competing category membership (Juhila 2012b, 184-186, 189-190, 224-226).

The research material was thus examined with the goal to find categories' users described phenomenon or people relating to the film and discussion surrounding it. Specifically, the comments were inspected for descriptive categories to which participants categorized nutrition science, different diets, the film, and people involved in their discussion into. Only the text of comments was analysed and while videos, images and memes play an essential role in some of the platforms, in the context of this paper the possibility to post images is instead seen as one

of the key differences in these sites which might in part curate and encourage different kinds of commenting cultures.

The research material consisting of 450 comments or replies were subcategorised. Comments not containing any categories and thus not relating to the research question were excluded. Various subcategories were identified from the research material described with both nouns like cultist or retard as well as adjectives like idealistic, funded or a combination of both. These kinds of descriptions were recorded on a worksheet containing the text comment, the conversation and platform where the comment was posted, the username or message id of the user as well as the username or message id of the user to whom if any the message was addressed to. (Appendix 1, 2, 3.)

Explanation following the breaking of moral order is usually done based on causes and conditions. It can either be extended to social structures or alternatively to psychological states (Juhila 2012a, 148-149). The explanation can also be done on competing categories, making the issue understandable in the context of situations that are often conflicting or competing. In doing so, attention should be paid to the position of people in relation to the problem. Only some people have the power to define their own position and that of others in relation to the problem and thus act as authorized explanators. In many cases, for example, the experienced category and the expert category are in competition with one another, and their definition is disputed (Juhila 2012a, 156-158). The various causal relationships combine to produce a narrative, which are done by the construction of a story for a specific audience (Juhila 2012a, 165). Situational categorical pairs define narratives and in many cases a kind of guilt-sacrifice setting is central to a narrative (Juhila 2012a, 171).

The analysis was started with examining how users replied to each other on the platforms and what general characteristics could be established on each of the nine communities on the platforms. I intend to answer the first research question of whether online communities show elements of public discourse by examining how the nature and structure of discussion differed across the communities. Specific attention was given to who comment were directed at and what kind of sentiment users expressed to each other. The second research question of platform differences was approached by creating four main categories to which the subcategories were assigned to and compared among the different platforms. This was done through a close reading with attention given to words people chose to describe phenomenon. The final research

question was evaluated by comparing the results of the category analysis with previous research literature in the discussion chapter.

In category analysis especially, it is essential to highlight the subjects' own way of using language. For this reason, there are quotation extracts in connection of the analysis with the purpose of illustrating examples of presented interpretations and to provide the reader with elaboration of the research material the analysis is based on. The entry (…) means that I've shortened the message. I have separated quotation extracts in the text with indentation and italics as well as following the extracts with the name of the board, twitter user who posted the original post or channel which uploaded the video. A number between 1 and 50 is also included to signify the number it has in the research material. The spelling of the quotes remains as they appeared on the platforms and thus contain typos and spacings. It does not however record the stylistic aspects of quotes such as more notably the colour of text on 4chan.

4.4 Research ethics

Social media platforms great possibility to collect observational data about free human interaction and behaviour is contrasted by the responsibility towards the individuals affected by the study (Mancosu & Vegetti 2020, 2). To avoid exposure to risk of embarrassment, reputational damage or prosecution for example, usernames of users engaged in commenting are not used in this study. The usernames of bloggers have also been blurred from Appendices and direct quotations.

As opposed to private social media groups or personal messaging, this research takes place in public discussion spaces accessible by any user. On YouTube and 4Chan this can be done without even a need for a registered account on the platform while on Twitter registration is required to view discussions to which Twitter can grant access specifically on the grounds of research among other reasons. Research subjects are not thus observed in a private environment where outside observation would be specifically forbidden (Mancosu & Vegetti 2020, 3).

Platform terms of service contain an agreement of being observed and published. This however is more of a reflection of the platforms market interests and not widely the expected preference

of the user. Williams et al. (2017) demonstrates that some users indeed expect to be asked for their consent ahead of their content being published and expected their anonymity of being respected. This provides a concern and challenge for direct quotations in research due to the issue of online search which makes quoted text an easy way to make users identifiable. While this study has not specifically contacted social media users in the data set for the possibility to opt into the study, the platforms studied in this study are either anonymous in the case of 4Chan or offer the possibility to delete one's posts or account in the case of Twitter and Youtube. Indeed, by the time of publication two out of the three YouTube videos used in this study and all their comments have been deleted from the platform. All data saved for the purpose of conducting this study will be deleted at the time of publication.

5. RESULTS

In this chapter I will present the result of my study in the following order. The analysis starts from a broader comparison of the three online communities on each platform with the specific goal to answer my first question of whether social media platforms contain elements of public discourse on them. I will then explain how I have formed the four main categories which I have used as a framework to analyse the data in the second phase. I will use these four main categories to analyse thoroughly the platform wide cultures and compare them with each other. This will form the basis for me to answer my second research question of how conversation differs across these three platforms. In the concluding chapter I will analyse these differences by comparing my results with previous research to answer my final research question of what design choices on social media platform are shaping online discussion culture. This will be done specifically by describing the results separately for each of the three platforms.

5.1 Dialogue comparison

4Chan users mostly addressed their messages to other users and rarely responded directly to the original poster of the threads or did not assign replies to anyone. One post might also receive many replies on 4Chan. Most of the responses to the original poster happened in the cooking and food /ck/-thread where people were explaining why they are not vegan or telling the original poster to go vegan. The discussion on /ck/ concentrated much on veganism as a lifestyle and various reasons of adopting or not adopting it. As a result, the categories used were also very versatile and often competed among each other for relevance. Ethics and healthiness were specifically a common pair of competing categories (e.g. Juhila 2012b, 224-226). Some posts on 4Chan received both many replies and formed a part of a longer chain of replies of multiple posts reacting to one another. The first post on the /ck/-thread for example started a chain of replies consisting of eleven comments of which these are the three last ones.

"You don't even monitor your b12 intake anyway." /ck/ #26, 4Chan

"Don't need to, and neither did any of our ancestors. They ate an appropriate diet for human physiology. They didn't need to know about all these micro-nutrients and chart everything on chronometer to know they were eating a healthy diet." /ck/ #29, 4Chan

" [...] Someone who did care but for some reason could only get b12 from animal sources would only eat enough to prevent that deficiency. Thank you for abandoning any pretense of ethical concern." /ck/ #39, 4Chan

On the fitness themed board /fit/, the discussion of health played a significant role as well as discussion of cultural acceptability and personal resolve. On 4Chan a reply can be assigned to multiple previous posts simultaneously and this was indeed done especially on the discussion at /fit/-board. In this case a user is confronting problematic content simultaneously for two individuals who were arguing each other with what the third user deemed as distasteful and deceitful.

"fuck you. my sister went vegan for just a few months and got pale skin and hair loss. of course you wont die immediately, idiot." /fit/ #37, 4Chan

"my brother went carnivore and died from a heartattack after 1 month, I checked his computer a few days later and he was deep into the carnivore cult with tons of bookmarked Frank Tufano and Shawn Baker videos" /fit/ #38, 4Chan

"I'm calling bullshit on both of you, s.mh killing your family like that just for winning an argument on the internet." /fit/ #41, 4Chan

Disagreement in 4Chan can also take a very subtle ironic form through green texting which is when people reference previous comments in their responses by adding the symbol > to their comment. This turns the preceding text green in the messaging board. People either copy the previous message or reformulate it and sometimes the reformulation itself constitutes the whole message. /tv/-board on 4Chan contained an especially great example of such a conversation where simply quoting a part of a user's message as is or with minimal commentary is used to imply the user has said something not aligning with the sites collective culture. In this case an initially sincere concern for farm animal treatment is questioned by the quotation. Other posts focus on the implication towards cruelty in the post which is confronted again as overly sentimental. This conversation would have also been heavily shaped by the posting of images to accompany the text posts which would have extenuated these implications (see Appendix 1).

"I think anyone who isn't a complete piece of shit is against factoring farming. But im guessing the farming lobby is very powerful and wont allow government to change the regulations" /tv/ #1, 4Chan

">I think anyone who isn't a complete piece of shit is against factoring farming." /tv/ #4, 4Chan

">Inflicting unnecessary pain on an animal" /tv/ #9, 4Chan

">unnecessary pain" /tv/ #13, 4Chan

">Torturing animals" /tv/ #19, 4Chan

">muh animal torture" /tv/ #26, 4Chan

Twitter users in the comments section of the news anchor were overwhelmingly responding directly to the news anchor validating her approval of the film and her curiosity towards plant-based diets. This was done especially by reinforcing the notion that plant-based diets are indeed healthy as the film claimed. Sometimes other users were also tagged to responses to similarly encourage the capability of others who had expressed approval of the film or intentions of trying plant-based diets. The comments section for the news anchors tweet can thus be described as very positive towards the film and supportive to other users with little criticism of people's views. In the following example the first message is directed to the news anchor and the latter is directed at both the news anchor and the user of the first post.

"[...] when people say "u dont get protein" thats so ignorant and false to say. So goodluck and your body and animals will love you more. :D" News anchor #28, Twitter

"Go for it! You'll never go back to eating meat, dairy or eggs. Good luck, it's really not that hard as there's heaps of info on the internet." News anchor #46, Twitter

The comments sections of the podcast host and podcast guest had significantly more dialogue between the users compared to the news anchor, but posts directed at the original poster still held a large significance. The comments section of the podcast guest was supportive of the original poster but also presented some insights relating to the subject. There was especially support on the guest's argument that omnivore diets are healthier than plant-based diets and valid science supported this whereas junk science might come to the opposite conclusion. As

the podcast guest had tagged the podcast host on their original post, users directing their responses to the original poster also tagged the podcast host on their responses. Users talking among each other focused on debating the validity of scientific studies and the debaters presenting them. The podcast guests' comments section was thus mixed with support for the original posters health claims and with debate regarding the scientific studies to reach those claims. The following conversation took place between two users.

> *"Fair enough. That's a worthwhile, substantive criticism. Simply saying that the egg industry funded a study that had positive results is not [...]" Podcast guest #11, Twitter*

> *"A study being directly funded by an egg industry who has hundreds of millions of dollars to lose isn't a substantial criticism?? that's gotta be an actual joke" Podcast guest #12, Twitter*

> *"If they publish their methods and data then it shouldn't matter. Find me a major study done by a completely impartial entity [...]" Podcast guest #13, Twitter*

The comments section of the podcast host on the other hand was mostly critical to the original poster expressing their dissatisfaction on the debate or the performance of either one of the guests. Most of the posts were directed towards other users though concentrating mostly on the validity of scientific claims in the debate while also touching on what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. Users discredited both debate participants credentials and commented on their rhetoric. Healthwise the major point of contention was whether meat itself was healthy or not with a universal recognition that eating a lot of plants was essential for health. The podcast hosts comments section had the most dialogues which also occasionally included three or more people of which the following is one example of four different people reacting to each other's posts.

> *"He tried to answer it but as soon as he'd start naming things that makes it unhealthy they'd chime in with "Yea but it's fine if you eat it with plants" — wilks was focusing on the meat itself which was the actual question but they didn't let him answer." Podcast host #22, Twitter*

> *"I appreciate your reply. When he was asked directly by Joe why meat is bad he evaded a direct answer, not a good look. Agree to disagree miss, I hope you have a happy healthy weekend." Podcast host #23, Twitter*

"[...] Kresser was just proving James's point that you need a mostly plant based diet to offset all the negatives of meat. While meat alone does have those negative effects." Podcast host #24, Twitter

"Are you saying you think he proved a balanced omnivore diet is unheathy?" Podcast host #25, Twitter

Youtube users responding to the doctor's video were concentrating on the discussion of health. Around half of the comments were directed at another user while the other half were not directed at anyone, which might also mean the message was directed at the content creator. Most such comments were indeed compliments directed at the doctor while some were responses to arguments made in the video. The topics and tone of discussion was similar among the users as well with users mostly discussing health claims and complementing the tone of discussion. The following conversation exemplifies how users recognise the collective culture of channel subscribers and how exceptions to community presumptions might be handled.

"I'm vegan but really like your videos, as you say the important thing is having Quality foods and meet all your nutrients. I supplement for b12 and Omega 3 but everything else seems fine. I liked the movie but is good to have opinions in both sides." Doctor's video #21, Youtube

"Thank you for being a respectful vegan and not getting offensive" Doctor's video #22, Youtube

"Yes, rare. Hats off." Doctor's video #23, Youtube

Comments on the film itself were similarly directed equally to other users and left undirected. Similarly to the news anchor's Twitter discussion, users were talking mostly about strategies on adopting a plant based lifestyle but there was also critical discussion on the effects of following that lifestyle. The person who uploaded the film also participated in this discussion and received replies. Some comments not directed at other users argued with the claims presented in the film but mostly these comments were personal stories and assertions on the writers own lifestyle and their experiences on it. People were thus using the comment section to share their experiences on a variety of different diets. This message was posted by the user who uploaded the video and received numerous supportive replies.

"VEGAN for 34 years and never look back. I am 62 years young, weight 185 lbs, full of energy, take no medications of any kind, my total cholesterol is 141, I leg press 700 lbs 5 sets of 10. I feel great! You have to be a fool not to be VEGAN." The Game Changers Film #44, YouTube

"Good for you brother, I'm working on changing my diet atm, went from 1 day vegetarian to at least 3-4 days vegan, per week. […]" The Game Changers Film #45, YouTube

"i hear you; even though is more painful, for addiction-related behavior modification, is still superior if one is to do it cold-turkey (no pun intended:-) […]" The Game Changers Film #46, YouTube

The users responding to the podcast debate were talking mainly among each other. This comments section demonstrated how YouTubes method of promoting replies liked by the video creator or which receive a lot of likes encourages a lot of direct responses to that specific comment. The following comments exemplify thus the very first visible comments under the video and include the comment with most likes as well as several comments directed at this popular comment.

"Take a shot every time James reminds Chris he can't read Forest Plots" Podcast debate #1, Youtube

"lol that balled vegan looks no kinda healthy and is as intelligent as cardboard, what a sad ambassidor for that retarded cause, he seems so grasping for his manipulated "research" what a complete joke he got funding for that propaganda movie" Podcast debate #7, YouTube

"just the vegans wide open eyes shows he's a rabbit caught in headlights, he's in panic mode, the regular guy just have calm relaxed attitude" Podcast debate #8, YouTube

The structure of communication in the different online communities reveal that on microblogging sites, comments are often directed at the influential blogger starting the conversation whereas online forums contain more user-to-user discussion. Furthermore, messages addressed to bloggers were often very supportive while confrontational messages were directed to other users. The role of shared online content was also significant as content

shared by the person starting the conversation was frequently addressed in the conversation. The existence of user-to-user conversation influenced by a shared topic oftentimes through media content, indicates that social media platforms contain public discourse as defined by Pietilä (2010). Long conversation including multiple users were especially prevalent on 4Chan whereas YouTube and Twitter also contained users reaching out or giving feedback to bloggers.

5.2 Main categories

Subcategories were first analysed for broader similarities to establish a vague sense of a moral order shared across all platforms. This served as a basis in forming the main categories to structure the comparison across platforms. Four main categories emerged as very broad evaluations to which all the subcategories were sorted based on how users defended, justified, or accused fulfilment of moral order. Main categories were formed by looking at how users addressed experiences and claims in relationship to moral judgement and truthfulness. This categorization was based on two commonly used dichotomies of psychological states and social conditions as well as expertise and experience as described by Juhila (2012a 148-149, 156-159).

The first main category of healthiness refers to ways of addressing people's subjective experience and psychological state whereas the second main category capability refers to individual's psychological ability to make expert claims. The first main category healthiness includes most predominantly subcategories related to lifestyle and health as well as how they are evaluated like for example dead, hedonist, happy, healed and feeling good. The second main category of capability refers to evaluations of a person's ability to think or act in the world a certain way. These would include assessments such as intelligent, retard, idealistic, unprepared, amateur, or paranoid.

The third main category of appropriateness refers to a person's fulfilment of behavioural expectations in a community. These would include clear expressions of a someone or something acting out or deviating from a moral standard the user deemed as normal such as for example good, strange, extreme, gay, Jewish, boomer or open-minded. Appropriateness refers to ways of evaluating the social conditions of an experience whereas the fourth main category

validity refers to the claims relationship to objective reality as defined by a definition of expertise. This fourth and final main category of validity includes the attempts to evaluate the validity of a claim in objective grounds such as junk science, nutrition expert, "references", (((their lies))), acupuncturist, propaganda, and hypocrite.

These four main categories of healthiness, capability, appropriateness, and validity represent thus the objective and subjective evaluation of both people's own experiences as well as their truth claims. These main categories do overlap with each other in some degree and are by no means completely opposing each other. Many comments were classified in belonging to multiple main categories and thus the main categories act as broad concepts to which each subcategory can be included for easier qualitative comparison. Comments relating to specific main categories were thus analysed to map platform specific assumptions regarding how these categories are defined. The nature of different expectations and norms in user categorization will thus serve as the way I will answer my second research question which is how online cultures differ across the three platforms.

Table 3. Main categories

Valid	Appropriate
Expertise on social conditions	*Experience of social conditions*
Capability	Healthiness
Expertise on psychological causes	*Experience of psychological causes*

5.2.1 Appropriateness

In Twitter the focus of discussion was on sharing personal experiences and talking about the nature of an appropriate lifestyle. Some users described plant-based diets as environmentally friendly and ethical. This was done to commend expressed decisions to try plant-based diets which was the premise of one of the tweets where the news anchor brought attention to the film

and said she was considering giving the diet a try. The appropriateness of plant-based diets was justified through a personal experience of feeling better or alternatively by directly referring to plant-based diets as more ethical.

> *"It'll be the best decision you'll ever make! plus you're helping liberate our animal companions who deserve a right to life :)" News anchor #15, Twitter*

Others reacted to these claims through outright denying them or indicating the existence of an alternative ethical omnivore diet. Users responding to tweets referencing the podcast debate, evaluated discussion surrounding the topic as bullying, annoying and argumentative. There was a notion of a dichotomy between meatless and high meat diets and an omnivorous diet high in vegetables was argued as a compromise everyone could supposedly agree on. Responses to the podcast debate also expressed frustration towards the debate not overcoming their differences and reaching this conclusion. Users thus recognised the notion that public dialogue should lead into an agreement (e.g. Bergman 2008) and worked consciously towards this ideal.

> *"Summary: eat fresh fruit and vegetables, eat quality meat and not McDonalds for every meal. I just saved everyone 3 hours." Podcast host #46, Twitter*

On YouTube emphasis was placed on individual people and their behaviour. Users expressed value on balanced and calm conversation skills while criticising extreme opinions and aggressive discussion practices. This might indicate the role of media content to which people were commenting. Users responding to the doctor's evaluation video expressed positive remarks on how the owner of the channel expressed himself in the discussion indicating a value in calm discussion as well as encouragement towards the vlogger. Calmness of character was also associated with convincingness and the power of the argument.

> *"I agree! What a classy Dr who is non confrontational and just lives by example" Doctor's video #6, Youtube*

In the podcast debates comment section there was an exchange of accusations of debaters and other users with categories such as dick, moron, "boomer" (i.e. baby boomer -generation) and "comer" (i.e. person who masturbates excessively). Some of these insults ultimately disparage the perceived way how a specific person acts in a way that is stereotypical to their age and might thus signal cultural expectation towards nonconformism. Users responding to the film itself accused vegetarians as strange and extreme cultists associating them with fringe beliefs

or specific ways of thinking left wing or liberal. This indicates the recognition of other people's world views but seems to focus on judging them rather than understanding or addressing them.

> *"[…] the ones that failed on a vegan diet are usually piss drinking, fruitarians that like to water fast and dry fast for extended periods of time, while sun gazing for energy..."* The Game Changers Film #9, Youtube

On 4Chan, animal-based products were described as normalized, consequence-free, and natural. Factory farming was somewhat separate from this. People thus had a strong notion of what constitutes normality which contradicts the notion that anonymous discussion facilitates a mentality where everything goes (see Ylä-Anttila et al. 2020). Both animal cruelty and vegetarianism were described as inappropriate extremes while meat eating itself was normalized and acceptable.

> *"I have an issue with Islamic and Jewish people killing livestock by slitting their throat and causing the animals a much greater amount of pain, stress and agony than is necessary. People who don't eat meat because they feel guilty about a creature dying in order for them to enjoy it's flesh are literal children […]"* /tv/ #2, 4Chan

Some users expressed concern over the respectfulness of discussion stating it is not right to force people to change their lifestyle and expressing their annoyance towards people arguing about the subject passionately. Appropriateness was very much defined through rationality and politeness as opposed to being overly sentimental, passionate, or extreme in one's thinking but what this meant in terms of plant-based diets was not agreed upon.

> *"...it's not right to want to force people if they're not ready to let go of meat. I wasn't forced, I didn't watch any films or documentaries; I only became vegan because my body couldn't properly digest meat and dairy."* /ck/ #10, 4Chan

Twitter conversation concentrated mostly on talking about different lifestyles and what constitutes a balanced and appropriate diet. Youtube users concentrated on evaluating people involved in the videos or comment section discussion focusing on what constitutes a successful and appropriate discussion. 4Chan had elements of both lifestyle and discourse assessment by pointing out disagreements in the discussion. 4Chan relied on using negative categories to judge other people whereas Twitter and Youtube users also expressed compliments and positive assessments in their comments.

5.2.2 Capability

On Twitter the adoption of new lifestyles was encouraged as easy but the ability to evaluate information online was described as requiring competence. Twitter users responding to the news anchors tweet expressed how plant-based diets are not hard to maintain. People expressed their doubts that they and other people had about the diet and how they overcame the difficulties.

> *"It's a matter of being more creative and intentional about what you eat. So many books, websites, blogs, YouTube shows, people out there to give you advice and guidance." News anchor #40, Twitter*

Podcast debate responders pointed out that people talking about their diets are not able usually to critically evaluate information and end up believing amateurs. Idealism, ignorance, and stupidity were thus seen as personal traits preventing the correct interpretation of information concerning diets.

> *"5 yrs ago I'd be all in and trying to be more vegetarian (again). Today I'm a little wiser and have a better bs detector." Podcast guest #25, Twitter*

On YouTube, capability was discussed as being essential in overcoming misinformation through critical thinking, open mindedness and education. YouTube users were more focused on judging both podcast debate participants. They were described as badly prepared, not experts and performing badly in the debate for example.

> *'Major plot point on this entire podcast.*
>
> *"You're not an expert."*
>
> *"Neither are you."*
>
> *"So, what are we both doing here?"' Podcast debate #8, Youtube*

Many other critical evaluations of people's personal abilities to digest specific foods like chia seeds and dairy were also done. Other users holding the opposite view in the comment section were described as uneducated or unintelligent. Open mindedness and a balanced perspective,

defined as less meat and more vegetables, was emphasised in contrast to damaging conspiracy thinking and all or nothing mentality.

> *"guess what your heath is better not from a vegan or vegetarian it's cause you eat less meat. less being the whole thing." The Game Changers Film #23, Youtube*

On 4Chan the discussion focused on evaluating the podcast debaters' performance and other users in the discussion. Capability was often described through disparaging terms of mental health conditions such as sperg, which refers to Asperger's syndrome. Mental health conditions were implied to also by implying a person is or should be taking some kind of ma medicine such as the ADHD medicine Adderall. Users also described each other as well as the podcast debate participants as brainwashed, stupid, retard. This made the conversation the most judgemental and implied more of a fundamental permanence to how people hold certain beliefs.

> *"Go sperg in an anime thread, this one is above your pay grade." /tv/ #22, 4Chan*

This comment referring to a separate anime community on the site also highlight how group membership is used to identify and judge a person's motives and argument. This also creates a need to signify one's own group identity in the anonymous space. Users on 4Chan sometimes use the entry *t.* to signify their individual identity in conjunction with their message, which is a custom originating in Finnish language as a short from the word *terveisin* used similarly to *sincerely* in English. Here the user identifies himself as a meat eater and thus seeks to increase the validity of his disapproval for the debate participant arguing for the health benefits of meat.

> *"watching that kresser-wilks debate was extremely uncomfortable. kresser's career has been irrevocably damaged imo [in my opinion]. like watching a slow-mo car crash over and over.*
>
> *t. meateater" /tv/ #3, 4Chan*

On 4Chan capability was an innate psychological state which almost all people in the discussion were accused of lacking whereas Youtube and Twitter emphasised capability as something achieved through education. Youtube however saw this process as unanimously much more challenging recognising the existence of misinformation whereas Twitter users optimistically indicated the availability of trustworthy information on the internet.

5.2.3 Healthiness

Twitter users defined healthiness through a sense of feeling healthy, great, and young. There was also a notion that plant based diets change the way your mind works. Doing the appropriate thing was thus described as a major component of healthiness. Some people however expressed how engaging or following the debate about the subject has negative effects on their wellbeing. Similarly, the work going into adopting a lifestyle was described as a possible obstacle for wellbeing.

> *"I made this decision 8 years ago and have never looked back. It's not nearly as much "work" as it used to be - options are everywhere - and your soul will feel lighter. News anchor #39, Twitter*

Plant-based diet was described healthy for your body as well as makes you feel good and excited. This was mainly reinforced through personal experience and through giving out tips. Eating more vegetables was seen universally as healthy and meat was described as helping weight loss but less healthy than vegetables.

> *"Just because you could eat meat with veg and be ok doesn't mean the meat is healthy — the veg counteracts the negatives as they all agreed" Podcast host #26, Twitter*

On YouTube healthiness was defined through body weight and blood test results or the absence of certain health issues, feeling, and looking vibrant. Evaluations on the causes of several different specific health conditions were also made especially on the comment section of the doctor's video. Plant-based diets specifically were described as healthy but meat was also recognized as healthy in moderation by some.

> *"[…] My family has been in the meat business since 1969 but I have an open mind. And I'm glad I do because I cured my heart disease, high BP, high cholesterol, afib, and sleep apnea with a Whole Foods Plant Based diet. If I listened to people like you, that wouldn't have happened. […]" The Game Changers Film #21, Youtube*

The conversation was focused on the appearance of specific people involved in the videos and how healthy they looked like with descriptions such as dying man, pale anorexic, stumbly

acupuncture guy. Also, other people following a certain diet were talked about as succeeding or failing to live healthy, with words such as addicted, feeling well, symptomless and healed.

"Chris looks like he hasn't eaten in about 20 years" Podcast debate #48, Youtube

On 4Chan meat was described as both vital or non-vital for health. Plant-based diets were also described as optimal for health. Discussion on 4Chan was claiming that vegans and vegetarians are suffering from a lot of health problems claiming vegans are walking corpses and dying because of their diet. Others did support the idea that plant-based diets are healthy, but a large consensus existed in that people thought of eating meat as pleasurable and nutritious.

">Vegans have the highest life expectancy ever recorded

Meanwhile IRL vegan babies are dropping like flies lol. Dead." /fit/ #29, 4chan

Healthiness in general was mostly talked about in the fitness board of 4Chan and was defined through abundant body mass, physical performance, and long life. Health linked closely to cultural acceptance and arguments for health often developed into talks about cultural acceptability of those health choices.

"This is my position as well. Let radical antifa-aligned imbeciles (vegans) sicken and starve themselves all they want, but we have to provide meme warfare defenses against ((((their lies))) to make sure no right winger ever goes vegan. I want my comrades to be as healthy and strong as possible for the upcoming race war." /fit/ #28, 4Chan

Twitter users reinforced or debunked the idea that either plant-based diets or balanced omnivorous diets are healthy. YouTube and 4Chan users focused more in commenting the appearance and health of people involved in the discussion using people's perceived health as an indicator for the validity of their diet. Even though the film focused specifically on sports performance, sports performance was talked about mostly in 4Chan's fitness board, which indicates that people active in sports saw it as a movie about sports performance whereas most people saw it as generally a movie about healthy living.

5.2.4 Validity

Twitter users discussed specifics of conducting studies, mostly about who is qualified conducting them and who usually funds nutrition studies. Nutrition research was described having a variety of different agendas supporting either meat industry or to a lesser extent plant food.

> *"Simply saying that the egg industry funded a study that had positive results is not. AFAIK, there aren't too many studies out there being funded by entirely unbiased sources." Podcast guest #11, Twitter*

People responding to the podcast debate evaluated the performance of the debate participants expressing either reinforcing sentiment toward their expertise or denying it by for example accusing them of evading questions. Validity was thus largely talked about in terms of the positions and influences of people making scientific claims in the video content but also tied closely to respectfulness and specifically the ability to interact with criticism.

> *"When he was asked directly by Joe why meat is bad he evaded a direct answer, not a good look." Podcast host #23, Twitter*

On YouTube users contested between notions of scientific consensus and propaganda. There was a distinction in a few cases between data and scientific consensus which was possibly affected by dishonesty and corruption, but mostly scientific consensus was held as a valid definition for truth.

> *"Not sure what you want reliable information to be like.*
>
> *if good meta-analysis and scientific consensus don't do it, nothing does" Podcast debate, Youtube*

Users also accused the film and its producer of misrepresenting or manipulating science in a harsh tone through expressions like bullshit and laughable. There were thus different views about what scientific consensus is actually saying and implications that while science are reliable ways to seek truth, some people weren't interpretating data correctly.

> *"...this movie is so full of holes and misleading information, that it makes a mockery food science. The experiments shown in this flick are a joke, and anyone with half a brain would call bullshit on it straight away." The Game Changers Film #2, Youtube*

On 4Chan users also questioned the motives of researchers with conspiratorial thinking taking a central stage in the debate. The food industry and medical industry was at the centre of debate with people ascribing nefarious motives behind scientific research. There was especially frequent reference to meat industry research having a Jewish agenda while also a general distrust of nutrition science, supplement industry and experts was expressed frequently. The triple brackets here signify a subtle way to imply someone as Jewish as pointed out by Tuter et al. (2019). It also exemplifies the argument made by Sparby (2017) about how anonymous spaces use memetic language often unrecognisable by outsiders to express being in the know of the sites culture.

> *"I met at least a dozen vegans that lift. They all look healthy and didn't see a doctor in years. All this backlash on vegans is (((their))) work. Why is that so hard to believe? Do you really think people get sick if they don't eat meat lol? [...]" /fit/ #30, 4Chan*

This distrust among discussion participants was also recognized and denied as conspiratorial or paranormal thinking. Validity was thus strongly framed through the lack of bad actors influencing scientific research. Validity was thus defined strongly based on the appropriateness of people making scientific claims.

> *"if you base your morality and actions on whether you're supporting "big pharma" boogyman then I feel sorry for you..." /ck/ #49, 4Chan*

Platform users thus called into question the scientific consensus of nutrition research concerning plant-based diets. Twitter and 4Chan users did this by questioning the motives of individual people asserting claims on the matter whereas Youtube users concentrated more on talking about what exactly the scientific consensus was saying and how it is reached. Youtube seemed to define validity thus as something reached through unbiased and careful research whereas 4Chan and Twitter defined it as research made by right kinds of people. Twitter specifically focused on research funding and behaviour of researchers and debaters whereas 4Chan asserted racialized labels to whom they perceived as bad actors.

On 4chan it seems that a lot of categories implicitly refer quite strongly to appropriateness even when they don't do so explicitly. In other words, notions of scientific fact are clearly and openly contested through cultural belonging. Paradoxically it would seem that the ethos of free expression and anonymity seems to lead to an increased role of cultural signifying for the evaluation of facts. This is in contrast with the idea that free expression leads to rationality through a free exchange of ideas. The disregard of shared facts might thus also explain the cultural innovativeness of anonymous spaces. As Nissenbaum & Shifman (2017) demonstrate, the lack of hierarchical micro-blogging structures does not lead to the lack of status hierarchies but instead reveals them more subtly. Users use instead various innovative ways like language to claim their identity which is often contested through aggression. 4Chan users indeed expressed a strong cultural identity with strict rules and norms underlying all interaction as defined by Bourdieu (1985b).

5.3 Platform comparison

While there were many exceptions as well, Twitter users were distinctly more polite and encouraging in their use of language than 4Chan and YouTube users. This might be due to Twitter's primary use as a social networking site to establish new connections like Isotalus et al. (2018) argues. While YouTube is a micro blogging site like Twitter, it is not used for social networking to the same degree. Specifically, the sharing and tagging functions designed for a platform wide spread of messages combined with the reduced character limit might be contributing to this kind of a pattern where messages are written in a general way so that a wider audience of both bloggers and readers might relate to, react, and share the messages. Indeed, Twitter users occasionally deliberately expressed desire to contact the blogger in their message.

Also the tagging of a reply to multiple users, which does not exist in YouTube, differs in Twitter and 4Chan in that Twitter only allows the tagging multiple users to a message whereas on 4Chan it is the messages themselves that are tagged to a reply. This function on 4Chan might arguably provide an opportunity to combat unwished content more effectively than on Twitter where such pressure is directed mainly towards users themselves (e.g. Haelyn 2017). The incentives to direct the whole platforms attention to content has created the phenomenon where

people are hijacked for public criticism in what has commonly been called cancel culture (Healy 2017, 776-777). Twitters focus on comment sharing thus incentivises people to both make their comments widely relatable and useful or alternatively widely shocking and angering to become viral on the site. The rapid spread of messages in Twitter through sharing functions thus can be said to incentivise relatability but also online shaming.

The discussion of appropriateness played a significant part on 4Chan shown in how discussion of other topics often turned to judgements of appropriateness through insults. This suggests that the site culture is in a constant process of redefining itself. Users monitor appropriate language use to identify other users in an anonymous space as there are no stable identity profiles to judge users by which is also at the core of the site's reputation for subcultural innovation (see Sparby 2017). The rich variety of insults seen on 4Chan can be explained by how 4Chan encourages distinction mostly through cultural capital unlike YouTube and Twitter which have metrics relating to social capital such as likes and followers. The existence of visible metrics measuring a person's influence on these sites also seems to create imagined communities around individuals who are receiving more attention and validation than others. This is strengthened by the existence of algorithms that purposefully seek to guide users towards more content they prefer. (e.g. Barnes 2018). Youtube and Twitter are promoting individual messages to the top of the comments section and thus encouraging a lot of engagement on a few comments. On 4Chan on the other hand the reverse is true as people may reply to many messages to receive more visibility. 4Chan users did express a wider variety of perspectives and user-to-user conversation than the micro blogging users did which was evident for example in how all 4Chan conversations had proponents of a wide range of diets whereas in the other platforms there was usually a clearer assumption about the appropriate diet.

While YouTube and Twitter are attracting more users than 4Chan, this study would suggest that 4Chan's incentives encourage replying more than micro-blogging sites do. Anonymity and the lack of hierarchy reproducing metrics seem to encourage more user-to-user participation on 4Chan. Not completely separated from this ephemerality and the possibility to reply to many posts seem to also encourage more nuanced perspective expression on 4Chan. These design choices might be making 4Chan a place where the user has the most incentives to participate in the discussion. While this might encourage marginalized people to speak with less fear for

real world consequences it also means people expressing hate are encouraged by those same incentives making hate speech indeed the largest challenge for the site (e.g. Ng 2020).

Discussion on YouTube focuses more but by no means exclusively on things found in the videos themselves such as people's appearance or arguments made by content creators rather than other users. For example, in the discussion of scientific validity, users used the YouTube video's claims as a reference point to discuss scientific consensus. Healthiness discussion was also framed largely according to the perspective the video in question was supporting with people either supporting the diet endorsed by the channel owner or specifically explaining why they are breaking an expected norm. The existence of a video as reference point to the discussion might encourage a more focused discussion with a defined set of shared facts to frame the discussion with. An opposite of this can be seen on 4Chan where especially the random topic board /b/ is known for the most chaotic discussion (e.g. Sparby 2017).

There were communities such as the comments section of the Film itself and the doctor's video on YouTube where there was a lot of support and feedback towards the bloggers instead of discussion with other users. As these communities generated the least amount of user-to-user discussion in this study, they could be described as the closest thing to social media bubbles found in this study. These communities differed very much in their perspectives among each other and did still contain critical discussion though. While the notion of social media bubbles is contested (see. Dubois et al. 2018) there are still implications of a lesser likelihood for encountering conflicting points of view on YouTube than other platforms. This might be also because YouTube comments are only visible under the video they were posted in and there is no way to link comments to other discussions. YouTube might be thus especially vulnerable to a lack of perspectives as its core function seeks to have the user spending more time to consume content and entertain the user. As YouTube's collective culture is shaped much more by the content itself it also does however serve a positive role in grounding the discussion into a shared notion of facts even if those facts are not always accurate.

6. DISCUSSION

Ng (2020, 622) has pointed out that social media research tends to overly focus on specifically Euro-American internet and this study is by no means an exception. While this thesis relies inclusively on English language social media discourse it has attempted to address some of the underlying issues regarding platforms that are used in multiple different languages. Online discussions are taking an increasingly central stage in social science research, even in case when the internet itself might not be the focus of research. It is then important to be aware of the particular and significant effects imposed to discussion by the online environment and the platforms in which online discussions are hosted in. In this thesis I have attempted to combine a wide variety of perspectives into a comprehensive approach to examine the multifaceted encounter between discourse culture and social media platforms. Semiotics and cultural sociology as well as recent social media research from a variety of different backgrounds have been examined to understand how platform incentives can affect how individuals use language and build their identity. The cross-platform category analysis conducted in this thesis revealed how social media platforms are used to constitute a wide spectrum of different kinds of subcultures which engage in distinct forms of public discourse among themselves as well as other communities and platforms. It also demonstrated that certain design choices play a large role in how these differences come to define social media platforms and their users. Mechanics such as liking, following, sharing, user profiles and user created content have a very different role depending on the social media platform in question and people's behavior is shaped by these functions.

This study was conducted using category analysis, a qualitative research method sharing many similarities with discourse analysis (Juhila et al. 2012). Specifically, a cross-platform comparison approach relying on the construction of universally shared main categories was developed to broaden the perspective to multiple social media platforms which social media research often lacks (Dubois 2018). This comparison proved especially challenging and would have benefitted from a more structured approach. However, category analysis succeeded as a framework to detect nuanced ways of language use, which are essential in the study of online behaviour due to the various ways people disguise their intentions online (e.g. Ylä-Anttila 2020).

Various steps described in chapter four were taken to ensure the comparability of online discussions which took place in very different environments. However, the choice of basing the research material on the discussion of a documentary film based on same search terms might have been too broad of a subject since the discussions analyzed ended up focusing largely on secondary content which was made in response to the film. Studying how the same piece of content is received in different platforms might have provided a better way to study the nuances of language use. The sharing of user created content over multiple platforms would provide an interesting topic for future research since the way people simultaneously use multiple platforms is also a relatively neglected research subject (Dubois et al. 2018).

My first research question was whether 4Chan, Twitter and YouTube user discussion expresses elements of public discourse. The various ways in which social media users challenge and discuss arguments made by bloggers and original posters as well as further talking about those things among each other demonstrate that social media communities indeed engage in a form of public discussion (e.g. Pietilä 2010). However especially the microblogging sites YouTube and Twitter also showed elements of fan communities where such discourse was less prevalent. The innovative language use on 4Chan might signal a more dynamic discourse culture where users are expressing their agency shaping the future of the community. A large portion of these innovations are done to exclude and challenge the contribution of outsiders though.

My second research question was how these platform communities differed among each other. While user-to-user interaction played a more significant role on 4Chan than the microblogging sites, the category analysis revealed that a large portion of the discussion on 4Chan concentrates on antagonistic reactions to constantly define the norms of appropriate behaviour in the community. While 4Chan users thus expressed more nuanced perspectives in their discussion, those perspectives were often hostile and focused on judgement rather than understanding. Twitter users on the other hand used language in much more of a positive, supportive, and concise way possibly thus directing their messages to a wider audience than just the user they were replying to. The conversation also mentioned frequently influential Twitter users whose stance framed the discussion which does also reflect a formal hierarchy in the site's user base. YouTube users expressed this kind of a hierarchy as well but framed their discussion strongly to the user created content on the site. Videos provide thus a clear reference and a focus point to all discussion taking place on the site. Thus, especially the significant role of influential bloggers and creators at micro blogging sites make them hierarchical and orderly cultures

whereas 4Chan produces a culture of both change and innovation as well as of hate and unpredictability.

The third question was how social media design choice might be affecting the discussion on the platforms. The main conclusions of this thesis are that anonymity and versatile replying functions such as those on 4Chan encourage user participation in the discussion. The versatile sharing functions as well as the message character limit present in Twitter encourage thoughtfulness and receptivity in users sending those messages. Finally, the existence of entertainment content and algorithms that recommend it to the user in platforms like YouTube encourage the formation of more focused communities concentrated on discussing that content and sharing thus a wider set of similarities among each other. All platforms thus have their share of benefits and challenges arising from their design choices. In many ways the best aspects of the internet are also its worst ones. However, it is safe to say that identifying these challenges as I have attempted to do might help in redesigning social media to achieve benefits social media was meant to achieve. Grounding conversation into content exemplifying productive conversation, expanding conversations across communities and platforms as well as reducing platform hierarchies and enabling the expression of marginalized views are all ideals for a more productive public discourse online observed in this thesis.

The notion of social media connecting exclusively like-minded people in echo chambers or filter bubbles has been criticised among others by Dubois et al. (2018) and Vihma et al. (2018) by the fact that people are exposed typically to also conflicting ideas online and very rarely rely on a single social media community for information. Semiotics sheds light on this phenomenon pointing out the complexity in which individuals not only share, but morph online culture by engaging with it (Cannizzaro 2016). This thesis suggests that there are differences between platforms and online communities to what extent common notions of facts are shared and how much diversity people are expressing in their discourse. While the notion of echo chambers seems to be an overestimation of the size and scale of the problem, the underlying concern over them should not be forgotten. The lack of cross community comment sharing on platforms like YouTube makes them especially vulnerable in this regard as the platform can be used to satisfy narrow media repertoires and subscriber communities of specific content creators might indeed reinforce conspiratorial thinking. However, content on sites such as YouTube also offers an effective way to ground conversation into a shared environment which is essential for productive discourse (Bergman 2008).

Mihlej et al. (2019) and Skeggs (2016) have suggested social inequalities might be reproduced on the internet instead of democratising them. Social media metrics such as likes, and followers are indeed measures of what Bourdieu (1995) coined as cultural and social capital and their prevalence on social media platforms is encouraging the accumulation of these forms of capital and thus reproducing inequality. Social media platforms like Twitter is especially challenging in this regard which is indeed reflected in the site's current active user base like Mittos et al. (2020) and Lai & Yang (2015) suggest. However, it is evident that anonymous spaces are by no means exempt from social hierarchies. The existence of formal metrics for social capital in less anonymous spaces though might be legitimising the hierarchies they recreate. Thus, while 4Chan is by no means exempt from hierarchies, those hierarchies are universally recognised less legitimate than the hierarchies of Twitter and YouTube. Attention should thus be paid to hierarchies found both in online language use and formal site metrics. The reliance on language use to distinguish such hierarchies is indeed one of the key aspects shaping internet culture which is often antagonistic (e.g. Sparby 2017 & Tuters & Hagen 2019). The way in which irony and hateful speech is not only used to disguise true intent but also to mark boundaries of privacy in an environment where privacy is constantly challenged, reveals the challenges in studying online communities (e.g. Nibbert-Eng 2010; Matamoros Fernandez 2017; Žižek 2020). The study of hidden intentions in online discourse especially through a qualitative approach would certainly provide one possible direction for further research.

Two clear direction for further research emerge from this thesis. The notion of individuals contributing and morphing publicity by engaging with it through user created content would provide an interesting direction for qualitative research methods. The way in which user created content and memes change as they are shared in different online communities would certainly provide an interesting topic of research for a semiotic approach. Secondly, for cultural sociology and media research the results of this study might be tested further using quantitative methods such as sentiment analysis. Using big data scraping to produce data which is more quantifiable would ensure a more formal approach to the comparison of platforms.

Barnes (2018) argues that communication on the internet cannot be separated from broader questions of values and norms which define communication in general and thus opposes the notion that internet is a place where social norms can be disregarded. This is true and social media companies are indeed in a constant process of improving their moderation rules increasingly with the help of algorithms (see Matamoros Fernandez 2017). However, as Ylä-Anttila et al. (2020) and Ng (2020) point out, the use of multiple layers of irony is playing an

increasingly significant role in disguising true intent in online communication making the task of moderation even more challenging. This thesis points to the fact that platform incentives also play a role in the tone of discussion and thus for internet culture to become more civil, focus should not only be paid to social norms but also to these incentives social media platforms are founded on as Lai & Yang (2015) Skeggs (2016) and Van Dijck (2013) suggest. Recent events surrounding social media platforms' role in inciting violence should thus be approached not only as whether users should be banned for breaking community guidelines but also to what extent are platforms encouraging people to break these guidelines and if platforms are benefitting financially when users do so as. Defining effective social media moderation will remain insufficient if issues of platform design presented in this thesis are ignored.

7. SOURCES

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8. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Sample 4Chan conversation from the research material

Appendix 2: Sample Twitter conversation from the research material

Dec 5

Replying to (

Get 22 days of full free support with challenge22! ❤️ #ThursdayMorning

Challenge 22 | Let's try vegan!
Are you ready for the Challenge? Join thousands of participants for a 22 day vegan experience. FREE!
🔗 challenge22.com

○   ⇄ 2   ♡ 21   ⬆️

Dec 5

Replying to

Go for it! Keep in mind it's also easy to eat vegan junk food. There is a massive difference between a Whole Food Plant Based diet and a Vegan Junk Food diet (still better than meat though!) See Forks over Knives and Plant Pure Nation - two great movies that can help!

○   ⇄   ♡   ⬆️

Dec 5

Replying to @

Something that may interest and help you is going to the library and checking out different cookbooks, especially from different cultures. That way instead of feeling overwhelmed or feeling like you're giving something up, it introduces you to new ideas.

○   ⇄   ♡   ⬆️

Dec 5

Replying to @

I've been vegetarian my whole life and vegan for over 20 years of that. I'm 50. On no meds and have no health conditions. I could even stand to lose some weight! Trust me, you won't regret it. If you want to live a long life, plant based diets will get you there. Good luck!

○   ⇄   ♡   ⬆️

Dec 5

Replying to (

I find loads of fab vegan recipes on Pinterest 😊 👍

○   ⇄   ♡ 4   ⬆️

Appendix 3: Sample YouTube conversation from the research material

13 hours ago
Google is seeing a surge of "forest plot" searches right now hahahah

145   REPLY

Hide replies ^

11 hours ago
😂😂lolol

2   REPLY

10 hours ago
Damn, I knew I did something wrong. I was Googling "Trees."

5   REPLY

8 hours ago
Chris Cole I admit I did 😅

2   REPLY

8 hours ago
got me haha

1   REPLY

6 hours ago
I was thinking there were gonna be a bunch of vegans googling places to start hunting elk and kangaroos.

1   REPLY

13 hours ago
Joe: "I don't want to get too far in the woods here..."
Few mintues later
"FOREST PLOTS!"

202   REPLY