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The rhetorical constitution of online community: Identification and constitutive rhetoric in the community of reddit

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The Rhetorical Constitution of Online Community: Identification and Constitutive Rhetoric in the
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For the degree of Master of Arts

Is approved by the final examining committee:

Josh Boyd (chair) _____

Sorin Matei _____

Patrice Buzzanell _____

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THE RHETORICAL CONSTITUTION OF ONLINE COMMUNITY:
IDENTIFICATION AND CONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC IN THE COMMUNITY OF
REDDIT

A Thesis

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of

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Bradley Stephen Ludwig

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To my family and friends, who always offer support, encouragement, and stress relief.

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ABSTRACT

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The concepts of online identity and online community within the context of social media have been major research interests in the field of communication in recent years. Questions of interest include how the Internet and social media contribute to the construction of identity both online and offline, and what factors encourage participation in and contribution to online communities. This thesis will address these questions related to online identity and community from a rhetorical perspective to examine the role rhetoric plays in these processes and build on the application of rhetorical approaches to online contexts. Specifically, this project proposes a rhetorical analysis of the online community of Reddit, which encourages its users to submit and vote on content that is valued by the overall community. The analysis will focus on the use of identification and constitutive rhetoric in both the communication Reddit provides about itself and the everyday communication of its members. Overall, this thesis argues that identification and constitutive rhetoric create a strong collective identity within the community that contributes to the loyalty and commitment of its members, but also constrains its members' behavior within the community in ways that are consistent with this identity,

which ultimately may create challenges to the community's continued success. However, this thesis also finds evidence of dissent from some of Reddit's established guidelines, which creates tension between those who adhere to Reddit's unified, constituted identity and those who choose to ignore or deviate from it.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Starting in the second half of the past decade, much of the world has experienced what might be called a social media revolution. After the introduction of blogging in the late 1990s and the modest success of social networking sites in the early 2000s (e.g., Friendster, MySpace), social media has exploded in popularity with the introduction of Facebook in 2004 and Twitter in 2006. According to Alexa.com, a website that provides web traffic data, Facebook is the second most visited website globally, and Twitter is the tenth most visited as of October 12, 2013. The rest of the top 25 includes other social media sites like YouTube, LinkedIn, and Blogspot, to name only a few. These sites have become so pervasive and so much a part of everyday life that it is difficult to imagine society functioning without them.

Scholars in communication and related fields seem to have recognized the importance of social media in the last few years. Articles regarding various social media issues abound in journals like *Continuum Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, and *Mass Communication & Society*. The journal *New Media & Society*, created in 1999, even has social media research as its main focus. This has certainly been a burgeoning

area of research as media scholars attempt to understand how these new media function in society and influence communication.

However, social media have been much less of a focus for rhetorical scholars. Articles in major rhetoric journals (e.g., *Quarterly Journal of Speech, Rhetoric and Public Affairs, Philosophy and Rhetoric*) very rarely have an Internet or social media focus, and even the online *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* tends to focus on more traditional, offline rhetoric.¹ The reasons for this dearth of scholarship on Internet and social media rhetoric are unclear, although it could have something to do with the rapidly changing nature of these technologies or the sheer amount of communication and rhetoric that is now exchanged in online settings, which can make it difficult to determine which of the many examples of online rhetoric are important and worthy of study. Nevertheless, it is clear that social media have the potential to influence attitudes and behaviors, and possibly even help shape thought processes. Rhetorical approaches to the study of online contexts can make unique contributions to the growing body of scholarship related to the Internet and social media by examining the strategic use of specific language and symbols in these processes of influence and identity shaping.

¹ I examined the abstracts of all articles (excluding book reviews and forum contributions) published in the last five years (2009-2013) in *Quarterly Journal of Speech, Rhetoric and Public Affairs, Philosophy and Rhetoric*, and *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, looking for the number of articles that focused on or mentioned online rhetoric. Out of a total of 259 articles between the four journals, only eight articles (3 percent) made any mention of online rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* included two articles with an online rhetoric focus out of a total 71, *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* included three articles with an online rhetoric focus out of a total 77, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* included zero articles with an online rhetoric focus out of a total 92, and *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* included three articles with an online rhetoric focus out of a total 19.

In this thesis I conduct a rhetorical analysis of a social media website called Reddit (usually written as “reddit” with a lowercase “r” by its members), which has rapidly grown in popularity in the early 2010s and has established a distinctive online community. Regular users of Reddit tend to have a well-developed idea of what it means to be a member of this community, and their communication within the website often reflects this member identity. Through my project I seek to understand how rhetorical strategies, specifically identification (Burke, 1950) and constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987) have contributed and continue to contribute to the collective Reddit identity, as well as how they influence the everyday communication that occurs within the website. I argue that it is in large part because of these rhetorical strategies that Reddit has been successful in building a strong community identity, attracting new members, and keeping current members committed to the site. However, these strategies can also significantly constrain expression and behavior within Reddit as members attempt to act out the identity that has been created for them. These enabling and constraining effects of identification and constitutive rhetoric reveal some of the successes and challenges that many online communities may face in an unpredictable online environment. I also examine evidence of dissent from Reddit’s constituted identity and ways that this dissent might be destructive or constructive with respect to the community’s success.

1.2 Rhetoric Online

Some rhetorical scholars have begun to establish a foundation for the use of rhetorical approaches to study online contexts. Warnick and Heineman (2012) in their book *Rhetoric Online* laid out several ways in which rhetorical theory can be applied in different online contexts, using specific examples from recent years for each. In

particular, they discussed the idea of the Internet as a public sphere, online interactivity, rhetorical uptake and circulation of online content, online intertextuality, identification and constitutive rhetoric online, and the use of online tools for anti-institutional politics.

The authors summarized their goal for this book with the following statement:

Our hope is that this book will provide a useful resource for enabling increased understanding of the roles played by online interactivity in shaping public knowledge and awareness of the forces engendered by debate, discussion, and deliberation in enriching public understanding of major cultural and political issues. The role of the Internet in this process is significant, and continued study of persuasive online communication by rhetorical critics and analysts is vital to its effective development and the public's potential to benefit from its use. (p. ix)

This statement is certainly a strong endorsement for the continued rhetorical study of online communication, and it sets the stage for studies similar to the one presented in this thesis project.

The discussion of identification and constitutive rhetoric in the Warnick and Heineman (2012) book is of particular importance to this project. The authors devoted an entire chapter to these concepts to “explore the possible ways in which social media might facilitate in the construction of certain audiences and identities” (p. ix). They suggested that even seemingly nonpolitical social media websites seek to identify with their audience, as well as shape and construct individual identities. Thus, Burke's (1950) theory of identification and Charland's (1987) theory of constitutive rhetoric are both highly relevant in online contexts, and using these theories as lenses through which to study these contexts offers unique advantages when seeking, as this study does, to

understand the relationship between individual and community identity online and the strategies used to build this relationship. These two theories will be introduced briefly below.

1.3 Identification

Burke's (1950) rhetorical theory of identification first appeared in his book *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Whereas past scholarship had focused on rhetoric as "persuasion," Burke introduced the term "identification" to explain how rhetoric functions in situations in which persuasion is not overt or immediately obvious. In describing the nature of identification, Burke explained, "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (p. 20). Thus, the root of Burke's concept of identification is the assumption of shared interests between two or more individuals (for example, a speaker and his or her audience). Burke also described this hypothetical relationship between A and B as "consubstantial," meaning that it allows for an "acting-together" and the sharing of "common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes" (p. 21).

While identification is a different concept from persuasion, Burke argued that identification is a necessary condition for persuasion and plays an important role in persuasion processes. He clarified the relationship between the two concepts in saying:

We might well keep it in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests; and the speaker draws

on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. (p. 46)

Burke later added that “the simplest case of persuasion” is that “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (p. 55). Thus, according to Burke, in some cases persuasion can occur simply due to the feeling of identification and consubstantiality. This is a strategy that speakers and other rhetorical actors have used countless times to bring about a desired response from the audience. In the context of online communities like Reddit, rhetorical identification can play a very important role in making members and potential members feel that they share common characteristics, interests, and values with each other and the community as a whole. These perceived commonalities may attract people to join a community in the first place, and they can foster ongoing commitment to the community once members have joined. This study is interested in the specific strategies and tactics of identification used to achieve this attraction and commitment to the community.

1.4 Constitutive Rhetoric

Burke’s theory of identification has been further extended by many subsequent scholars, one of whom is Charland, through his theory of constitutive rhetoric (1987). His central argument is that rhetoric not only brings people to identify with each other, it also creates or constitutes the very identities and subjectivities with which it is possible to identify in the first place. Charland explained that constitutive rhetoric “calls its audience into being” (p. 134), and noted that “a rhetoric to Athenians in praise of Athens would be relatively insignificant compared to a rhetoric that constitutes Athenians as such” (p.

134), calling back to a classic example from Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*. Rather than Athenians, Charland focused on the case of the *Peuple Quebecois*, an identity constituted for the people of Quebec as part of the quest for Quebec's independence from Canada.

Charland explained that there are three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric that are central to its purpose. The first ideological effect is the "process of constituting a collective subject" (p. 139). This involves an identification that transcends individual differences and interests and replaces them with collective interests. The second ideological effect is the "positing of a transhistorical subject" (p. 140), leading subjects to identify with those who came before them and suggesting that the collective identity exists now just as it has in the past. Finally, the third ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric is the "illusion of freedom" (p. 141) in which subjects believe they are free to act of their own accord, when in actuality they are constrained to actions consistent with the collective identity that has been constituted for them.

Based on these three ideological effects, Charland concluded that constitutive rhetoric necessitates action. It is not enough for subjects to identify with a collectivity, they must "act freely in the social world to affirm their subject position" (p. 141). This action can be political, social, or economic in nature, and this gives constitutive rhetoric its power. Charland claimed, "constitutive rhetorics leave the task of narrative closure to their constituted subjects" (p. 143), and only through acting in accordance with the collective identity can this closure be achieved. The constituted subjects are thus compelled to act, or else remain incomplete and unfulfilled.

Constitutive rhetoric is certainly important in online communities like Reddit, especially when these communities are not based around established offline identities.

Approaching this study from a theoretical perspective incorporating both constitutive rhetoric and identification provides the advantage of understanding how an online community like Reddit first establishes a collective identity for its members, and then convinces its members that they share in this identity. If successful, constitutive rhetoric can convince online subjects to transcend individual differences and act in accordance with their established identity as community members. However, the action that Charland claimed as the result of constitutive rhetoric may not always be as overtly political in online contexts. Rather, the goal of online constitutive rhetoric may simply be the perpetuation and continued success of the online community itself.

In the past, identification and constitutive rhetoric have both been studied mostly through the analysis of offline texts, and often using traditional forms of oratory. These concepts likely function differently in online contexts in which the identities of the actors, as well as the boundaries between speaker and audience, are often much less clear. However, it is certainly clear, as Warnick and Heineman (2012) have argued, that online communication can have a significant impact on individual identity, and it is important to understand how these two rhetorical strategies both enable and constrain the success of online communities. This project will seek this understanding using the particular case of the online community of Reddit.

1.5 The Case of Reddit

The website called Reddit is an interesting example of social media for several reasons, one of which is its current popularity. According to Alexa.com, Reddit is the 55th most visited website globally and the 21st most visited website in the United States as of May 24, 2014. In addition, the Pew Research Center has reported that 6 percent of

online American adults have used Reddit as of July 2013 (Duggan & Smith, 2013). While this number does not come close to the 67 percent of online American adults who use Facebook, it is not far behind the 16 percent who use Twitter (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Reddit is especially popular among men aged 18 to 29, as 15 percent of those surveyed from this category had used the website. Before concluding this introductory chapter, I will provide an overview of the Reddit website and its important features. (Note: The content of Reddit is constantly being updated and added to by many different users, which creates challenges for citation. For cases within Reddit in which authorship and date of content are unclear, this thesis will use the citation format: (“page title”, date most recently accessed). For example: (“FAQ,” 2013, Oct. 31). When authorship and date of submission are known, the following format will be used: (username, “subreddit or page title,” date submitted).)

Reddit was founded in 2006 by University of Virginia graduates Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, and calls itself “the front page of the Internet.” At its core, Reddit is based around the sharing and filtering of content submitted by its users. The name “Reddit” comes from a play on words, based on the phrase “I read it on reddit,” suggesting that the content is sufficiently interesting that users will tell others that they have read it (“FAQ,” 2014, May 24). The site provides a definition of the word “reddit,” explaining that it can be used as a noun meaning “a type of online community where users vote on content” or a verb meaning “to take part in a reddit community” (“About Reddit,” 2014, May 24). The site experienced relatively slow growth in its user population for the first few years of its existence, but between May 2010 and September 2011 the site’s number of unique monthly visitors tripled from 7 million to 21.5 million,

and the page views quadrupled to 1.6 billion per month (chromakode, “Blog,” 2011, Sept. 2). As of May 2014, Reddit boasts over 109 million unique monthly visitors from 201 different countries, with 5.3 billion unique page views, demonstrating the large continued growth that Reddit has experienced in becoming one of the most popular websites in the world (“About Reddit,” 2014, May 24).

Almost all of the content on Reddit is viewable by anyone who visits the website (see Figure 1.1 for an example of the basic layout and interface one would see when visiting Reddit in early 2014). However, in order to submit content and actively participate, a user must create a personalized account identified by a username, usually a pseudonym that allows the user to maintain a substantial amount of anonymity. Once a user creates an account, he or she can start to perform several different actions within the Reddit community. Perhaps the simplest action is to customize the content the user sees by subscribing to different “subreddits.” A subreddit is defined as “a distinct community with its own purpose, standards, and readership” (chromakode, “Blog,” 2011, Sept. 2), and subreddits often focus on content of a certain kind or related to a certain topic. For example, the subreddit “Pics” includes content in the form of photographs, and the subreddit “Funny” includes content meant to be humorous. New users are automatically subscribed to a set of 50 subreddits called the “defaults,” but registered users can unsubscribe to any of these defaults and seek out additional subreddits that fit their personal interests. Users can view each of their subreddits separately, or they can view the “front page,” which aggregates content from all of their subreddits in one place.

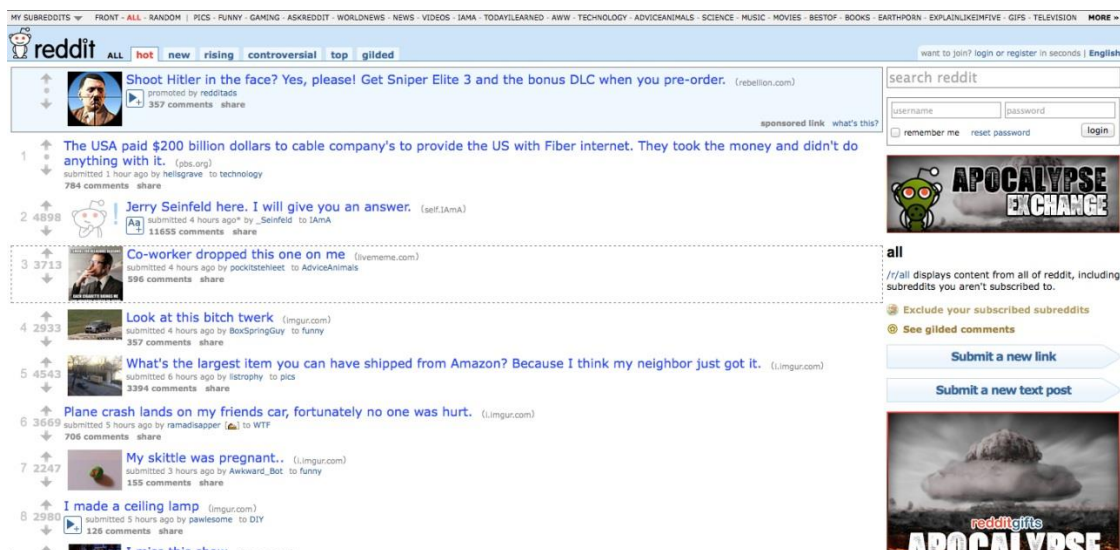


Figure 1.1 Reddit's Layout/Interface

The next level of action within the Reddit community involves voting on the shared content. Within each subreddit, the content is ranked and filtered using a voting system in which registered users can give a post either an “upvote” for an interesting and positive contribution to the subreddit, or a “downvote” for a post that is uninteresting or does not contribute to the subreddit. A score for each post is determined by subtracting the total downvotes from the total upvotes, and the highest ranked posts appear at the top of the subreddit’s page. Thus, Reddit’s users have complete control over what content is most visible. There are a few different ways to view a subreddit, with the default being “hot,” which takes into account ranking as well as newness of the post. Another option called “top” allows users to simply view the highest ranked posts of all time. The “front page,” as an aggregate of all of a user’s subreddits, is also organized based on this voting system.

In addition to voting, registered users can also submit and share content in a few different ways. According to a page from the Reddit wiki (“Submitting Links,” 2014,

May 24), users can contribute to subreddits through either links or text posts. Links are any type of content that is linked from an outside source, including pictures, videos, articles, and other websites. Text posts, also known as self-posts, are simply statements or questions posted in text form directly to a subreddit. Users can also submit comments on each post to create a discussion among the Reddit community. Upon submission, each link, text post, and comment is subjected to the voting system to determine its rank and visibility within the subreddit and the website as a whole.

Users who submit links and comments can also begin to accumulate “karma” based on the votes that their content receives. Karma is divided into link karma and comment karma, and it is calculated in the same way rankings of posts and comments are calculated (by subtracting downvotes from upvotes). Karma thus represents the sum of the rankings of a user’s submitted links (for link karma) and comments (for comment karma). Karma measures “how much good the user has done for the reddit community” (“FAQ,” 2014, May 24), and there is no apparent benefit to earning karma outside of competition or the desire to be valued by the community. A user’s karma has no direct impact on the visibility of his or her individual submissions, since each submission is still ranked independently. However, it is possible to view a user’s history of submissions as well as the user’s overall karma score by following the hyperlink within his or her username.

Finally, at perhaps the most advanced level of participation, users can create and moderate new subreddits. According to the website’s “About Reddit” page, there were 7,587 active subreddits on May 24, 2014, and any user can add a new subreddit if he or she is unsatisfied with the current selection. This may be the case if a user has a specific

interest that is unrepresented by one of the established subreddits, is unsatisfied with the current state of one of the established subreddits, or simply wants to create an offshoot of an established subreddit. The user who creates the new subreddit is then considered a moderator for that subreddit. The main duty of a moderator is to define the purpose of the subreddit and the kind of content that is appropriate and acceptable within it. The moderator's rules are generally posted in a sidebar on the right side of a subreddit's page. Moderators can also remove posts from the subreddit that are off topic or inappropriate.

All of these features of Reddit combine to create a distinctive example of social media that is in many ways quite different from the most popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Whereas Facebook and Twitter emphasize personal information and relationships between users, Reddit places much more emphasis on its shared, collective content. While the social media landscape is volatile and difficult to predict, it is undeniable that Reddit has carved out a significant role in recent years, and it will likely be remembered as a major contributor. In this thesis, I argue that an analysis of Reddit provides particularly valuable insight into the functioning of identification and constitutive rhetoric in online social media contexts.

1.6 Summary and Thesis Outline

This overview of Reddit and online rhetoric provides a framework for this project. As I have argued, the use of identification and constitutive rhetoric within online communities like Reddit can contribute to their success by establishing a clear, collective identity and inviting their users to join in this identity. The relative anonymity of Reddit users and the emphasis on the content over the users themselves make Reddit very

different from the most popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, which often favor individual identity and allow for networking and the accumulation of status. Reddit has still experienced much success and popularity with its emphasis on a more collective identity, and I argue that the consistent use of identification and constitutive rhetoric have contributed in large part to this success. However, the use of these strategies has also been constraining, as the fairly narrow identity that Reddit has established is creating challenges to its future growth and success. Both the positive and negative aspects of these rhetorical strategies in online contexts can have important implications for the future of social media and social media research. On the other hand, dissent from this collective identity within Reddit is also important, as it may seem to weaken the community, but may also allow the community to move in new and different directions.

The following chapter will provide a review of existing literature related to online identity, online community, and online rhetoric. This literature review will begin with a section on online identity and online community drawing mostly from communication and media scholars outside the realm of rhetorical approaches, followed by a more detailed review of the relevant rhetorical concepts discussed in the Warnick and Heineman (2012) text, with special emphasis on their discussion of identification and constitutive rhetoric in online contexts. The third chapter will explain the methods for gathering and analyzing data within Reddit's website in order to gain a rich understanding of the use of identification and constitutive rhetoric within the community and uncover examples of dissent within the community. The fourth chapter will explain in detail the results of the analysis, including specific examples of the use of identification and constitutive rhetoric, as well as dissent from the collective identity, on

Reddit. Finally, the last chapter will provide a discussion of these results and draw conclusions about the influence of these rhetorical strategies on Reddit's community identity and continued success.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This project addresses questions related to online identity and online community by examining the use of identification and constitutive rhetoric to construct a distinctive community and a collective identity within the social media website Reddit, which ultimately contributes to member loyalty and commitment. While there are substantial bodies of research and scholarship related to online identity and community as well as identification and constitutive rhetoric, as of yet there has not been a large amount of overlap between these two approaches. Thus, this chapter will begin with a section about literature related to online identity and online community, much of which does not come from a strictly rhetorical perspective. This section provides a background on the study of these topics to establish how it would be possible to apply rhetorical theory to their study within the Reddit community. Next, as a bridge between the first section and the present study, I will include a section reviewing in greater detail some of the rhetorical concepts that apply in online contexts similar to Reddit, according to Warnick and Heineman (2012). Finally, this literature review will include a section devoted to Burke's identification and Charland's constitutive rhetoric to provide a theoretical basis for the study, which will lead into the research questions and method

2.2 Online Identity

The idea that computers and the Internet contribute to the shaping of individual identity can be traced back at least as far as Turkle's (1984) book *The Second Self*. In this text, she argued, "Technology catalyzes changes not only in what we do but in how we think. It changes people's awareness of themselves, of one another, of their relationship with the world" (p. 13). Thus, she asked "not what will the computer be like in the future, but instead, what will *we* be like? What kind of people are we becoming?" (p. 13). At the time Turkle was writing, the Internet was still in its infancy, but even at such an early stage she predicted that "everyone will have the opportunity to interact with [computers] in ways where the machine can act as a projection of part of the self, a mirror of the mind" (p. 15).

To study this phenomenon, Turkle (1984) carried out an ethnography of computer culture among youth. She found that especially in adolescence and beyond, identity becomes a very important part of the relationship between individual and computer, as this relationship begins to reflect who the individuals are. For some adolescents, computers can become "a way of life" leading to their identity as "computer people," while others "integrate their computer experience into their developing identities in ways that have nothing to do with becoming computer experts" (Turkle, 1984, p. 138). If, as Turkle argued, the computer itself has so much influence on identity, it is likely that social interactions made possible by the Internet can have a major impact as well. For members of an online community like Reddit, it is likely that participation in the community can contribute at least in part to the formulation of their identity, especially if they think of themselves as "Reddit people" or something of the sort.

Turkle (1995) continued her line of argument in the book *Life on the Screen*. At this point, online interaction had become more common and widespread, and Turkle argued for the postmodern idea that anonymous online contexts allow for the creation and maintenance of multiple identities. She specifically studied interaction and identity construction in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), text-based fantasy worlds in which users create and act out fictional personae. The people that she studied often used several different characters within these MUDs, usually with very different personalities and even different genders. Turkle found that these characters allowed people to explore and develop aspects of their identities that they were unable to develop in the real world. However, she also found that some of the MUD users experienced negative effects from becoming too involved in their online personae. While MUDs are certainly not representative of all online interaction, Turkle's findings suggest that people can use social media and online communities to develop different identities, especially when, like Reddit, they offer the possibility of anonymity. Thus, a person's identity as a Reddit user may be different from the identities that he or she presents in other online and offline contexts.

Subsequent studies have continued to examine the effects of anonymity on identity online. For example, Donath (1999) discussed the deceptive potential of online identity through the case of Usenet, a message board community similar to Reddit in its use of usernames and its offering of sub-communities based around different topics. She argued that the use of pseudonyms and the relative anonymity on Usenet removes many social cues that make it possible to determine if someone is being deceitful. Thus, deceptive behaviors like trolling (posting purposefully inflammatory content under the

guise of a sincere contribution), category deception (creating the false perception that one belongs to certain social categories), impersonation (assuming another user's identity), and identity concealment (simply withholding identifiable information) are quite common. In anonymous communities like Usenet and Reddit, it can be easier to enact identities that are not as possible in offline contexts, but Donath (1999) argued that this potential can be destructive to the community in many cases. Thus, she suggested the imposition of stronger social costs for deception and the increased visibility of certain social cues (e.g., archives of past posts, users' reading and posting behavior) to reduce identity deception and improve the community as a whole. It is possible that strong feelings of identification with the community could also inhibit members' willingness to engage in destructive behavior toward the community.

In a more recent study, Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) looked at the relationship between bloggers' anonymity and their self-disclosure behavior. Starting with the idea of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004), which suggests that Internet users will be less inhibited in their self-disclosure online due to anonymity and other online conditions, the authors analyzed the circumstances under which bloggers disclosed more personal, intimate information. They found that overall, bloggers shared more personal information when they had more discursive anonymity (meaning that it was difficult to trace the blog to the blogger's offline identity), but surprisingly they also shared more personal information when they had less visual anonymity (meaning that the blogger shared personal photographs or videos revealing his or her appearance). Thus, anonymity plays a role in self-disclosure and the construction of online identity, but the relationship may be more complex than expected. Since members of the Reddit community are mostly

anonymous, they may be willing to share more personal, or perhaps controversial, information and interests that help them identify with other members.

Another recent study further examined how individuals present different online identities by emphasizing different personal information in different online contexts. Schwammelein and Wodzicki (2012) studied users of two simulated online communities: one that emphasized interpersonal attraction and common bonds, and one that emphasized social identification and common identity. They found that users of the first community provided more personal, individualized information, whereas users of the second community provided more information emphasizing their similarities to the group. In addition, they found that users of the common-identity community were not as interested in making personal contact with other members of the community. This study suggests that the features of an online community can play an important role in the way users present their identities, and in Reddit, which tends to be more of a common identity community, users may be more likely to emphasize their similarities to the community as a whole in ways that increase identification and allow them to fit in with the collective identity, rather than pointing out individual characteristics that make them unique or different.

2.3 Online Community

Many of the aforementioned studies have dealt with the construction of identity in online communities. This section will expand on online communities with a review of literature related to the ways online communities have been and continue to be established, and the reasons for individual participation in and contribution to online communities. Online community has been a popular topic in recent communication

research, and scholars have approached it from a variety of perspectives. In the introduction to a special issue in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* focusing on online community, Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2005) defined an online community as “the *people* who come together for a particular *purpose*, and who are guided by *policies* (including norms and rules) and supported by *software*.” This definition can potentially apply to a wide variety of online contexts, and as a result, the authors noted that “community” has become the “in-term” for describing many different online interactions.

Matei (2005) took a historical approach to studying the development of the concept of “virtual community.” He argued that this concept has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s counterculture that valued individual freedom and open, uninhibited communication, and had a positive attitude toward personalized technology (Steve Jobs seems to be the clearest embodiment of this culture). Because of the influence of these origins, the present idea of virtual community exists as a tension between individualism and community, in which individuals desire freedom of expression and choice, but also equality and a sense of connection to something larger. Matei argued that today’s virtual communities also value openness of communication by removing identity cues that might inhibit expression, and they emphasize equality by flattening hierarchies and allowing individuals to both access and produce information. However, he also pointed out that the individual still generally takes precedence over the community. Thus, virtual communities can serve as a “glue” that binds people together, but they can also serve as a “solvent” when individual ideals are stronger than community ideals.

Further examining the tensions within online communities, Kittur & Kraut (2010) studied coordination strategies used in wikis to organize individual contributions and manage conflict. The authors stressed the importance of coordination to the effectiveness of an online community, especially one that collaboratively creates content, but also noted that conflict is inevitable in this kind of community, with so many different people and agendas involved. They admitted that conflict could be productive in some situations (e.g., “if conflict between editors is constructive and helps to clarify arguments and improve the page” (Kittur & Kraut, 2010, p. 222)), but that it was often destructive and detrimental to the community’s success. Thus, the authors sought to understand how strategies like communication between users, group structure, and policy and procedures can potentially mitigate conflict. This thesis project similarly examines how strategies (in this case rhetorical) like identification and constitutive rhetoric are used to manage the tension between individual and community, perhaps in an effort to tip the balance toward community, and what effects these strategies have on managing conflict and promoting the community’s success.

Other scholars have taken a more instrumental approach to online communities by examining how to successfully establish and maintain them. For example, Andrews (2002) argued that attracting users to an online community requires specific design elements in three stages: starting the online community (including building reputation and delivering focused content), encouraging early online interaction (including crafting clear policies, guaranteeing privacy, interweaving content and discussion, and incentivizing participation), and moving to a self-sustaining interactive environment (including providing for information sharing and recognition of contributions). Andrews

argued that in all three steps, the characteristics of the particular audience (e.g., age and attitudes) should be seriously considered, and issues like privacy, reputation, and type of content are often key. Because a community like Reddit is not necessarily based around offline identity, constitutive rhetoric may play an important role in establishing the community's reputation and collective identity early on, whereas identification may play a stronger role in the later steps of encouraging interaction and becoming self-sustaining.

Some researchers have focused on individual motivations within online communities, rather than the communities as a whole. Ridings and Gefen (2004) examined what factors attract users to join online communities. The authors used a definition of virtual community as “groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism” (Ridings et al., 2002, p. 273). The study focused on users of bulletin board communities sorted into different categories based on their topics. They found that the most common motivation for joining a community of any category was information exchange, while social support exchange was the second most common for communities with health and professional topics, and friendship was the second most common for communities with topics based around recreation, hobbies, and pets (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Thus, they argued that successful online communities should pay attention to both content and social relationships. This seems to hold true for the Reddit community, because although a large amount of its communication involves information exchange, the perception of a common identity and common interests can foster social support and friendly interactions, even if they are often short-term and temporary.

Ling et al. (2005) went beyond motivations for joining online communities to study motivations for actively contributing to them. Starting from a social-psychology perspective, they conducted experimental studies on members of a community based around contributing movie ratings to determine in what situations members were more likely to contribute. They found that community members were more likely to contribute ratings when they perceived that they had unique information, that they were dissimilar from others in the community, that there were benefits to both self and others, and that they had been given specific, group goals for contribution. These findings suggest that both individual and group motivations are important to the functioning of online communities.

Chesney (2004) also looked at motivations for sharing information in online communities, specifically within a community based around the sharing of guitar tablature (tabs). His central question asked why users of the community would choose to contribute their own tabs when it was easier to simply lurk and use the contributions of others. He found that reported motivations were fairly evenly split between the categories of “self” and “altruistic.” Self motivations for contributing tabs included personal entertainment and skill development, the expectation of a return on the investment in the form of others contributing, and egotistical motivations related to status and recognition within the community and the Internet in general. Altruistic motivations for contributing included the most commonly reported motivation of the desire to share information with others, feelings of guilt due to using the contributions of others without making contributions themselves, and the desire to defeat the common enemy of publishers selling expensive music books. Users were also more likely to contribute if it required

little effort and if they received positive feedback. These findings further emphasize the idea that online communities must consider both individual and community goals and motivations.

Shirky (2008) discussed the relationship between personal and collaborative motivations through the example of the Wikipedia community. As motivations for contributing to and editing a Wikipedia entry, he listed “a chance to exercise some unused mental capacities” (p. 132), “vanity...pleasure of changing something in the world, just to see my imprint on it” (p. 132), “desire to make a meaningful contribution where we can” (p. 132), and “the desire to do a good thing” (p. 133). The first two of these are similar to some of the “self” motivations that Chesney (2004) found, while the last two reflect ideas similar to the “altruistic” motivations. Shirky argued that the combination of these motivations allows for people acting on their own individual interests to contribute to a resource that is useful for the community as a whole. Overall, he described Wikipedia as an act of love, explaining, “Wikipedia exists because enough people love it and, more important, love one another in its context (p. 141). This idea of love could potentially extend to other forms of online communities as well.

The previous three examples all speak to the motivations for contributing to online communities in different ways, but there are common threads between them. It may seem obvious that members of online communities would participate in and contribute to online communities if they felt it would bring them personal gain in status, resources, and other areas. However, all of these examples reveal that members are often motivated to contribute by a desire to help others or love for the community as a whole. Identification and constitutive rhetoric may play a significant role in creating and

sustaining these positive feelings toward an online community and its members, which likely contributes to the community's success.

However, not all findings about motivations to participate in online communities have been quite so positive. In a more recent study, Woong Yun and Park (2011) studied willingness to speak one's mind in an online community using the framework of the Spiral of Silence theory. SOS theory, first introduced by Noelle-Neumann (1974), suggests that individuals will speak out more when they perceive that their opinion is in line with the majority (within a certain context), and that they will remain silent when they perceive that they are in the minority with their opinion. Thus, the same majority opinions continue to be discussed, while any minority opinions are suppressed and left out of the conversation. According to SOS theory, the most significant reason for remaining silent is the fear of isolation from the larger group, but Woong Yun and Park (2011) argued that the Internet may eliminate some of this fear due to the potential for anonymity and the lack of a physical presence. Through an experimental study, they found that while the perceived offline climate of opinion did not influence willingness to express an opinion in an online forum, individuals were less likely to express an opinion if they perceived that they were in the minority within the forum or on the Internet in general. In addition, they found that the level of anonymity did not have an effect on the willingness to express either majority or minority opinion, although fear of isolation was lower online than offline. Finally, they found that the content of other messages in the forum had a significant effect on the perceived climate of opinion within the forum. Overall, their findings suggested that the spiral of silence can affect online as well as offline communication, and that individuals may engage in "selective posting" in which

they only post congruent messages when their opinion aligns with the perceived climate of opinion within the forum or community (Woong Yun & Park, 2011, p. 218).

Identification and especially constitutive rhetoric also may contribute to a strong perceived climate of opinion within an online community like Reddit, so they may contribute to some of these SOS issues that Woong Yun and Park discussed, in which members are only willing to post certain information and opinions.

While all of these studies have taken different approaches to analyzing online communities, most of them deal with the central tension between the individual and the community. Thus, when an online community wants to encourage people to join, stay with, and contribute to it, it is important to consider motivations at the individual level as well as motivations oriented toward the good of the community. Considered alongside the previous section on online identity, one can ask how individual identity and community identity interact in online contexts and potentially influence the commitment and behavior of members of online communities. This paper examines these issues through the use of identification and constitutive rhetoric to establish individuals as members of the online community of Reddit. In order to make the transition from the approaches to online identity and online community described above to the rhetorical approach used in this project, the following section provides an overview of the relevant ways that rhetorical theory has been and can be applied in online contexts.

2.4 Rhetoric Online

Up to this point, there has been a relatively small body of scholarship applying rhetorical theory to the study of online communication. However, there is nothing to suggest that rhetorical theory does not apply in online contexts. In fact, the Internet and

social media are now so widespread and so much a part of everyday life that their influence on identity, attitudes, and behaviors are almost undeniable. The strategic use of communication, language, and symbols may look different online than it does offline, but it has certainly not disappeared. As this project takes a rhetorical approach to the study of an online context, it is important to review how other rhetorical scholars are making use of similar approaches. Warnick and Heineman (2012) have provided an overview of how this body of scholarship can and should continue to grow. The first chapter provided a brief preview of the rhetorical concepts they discussed in relation to online contexts, and this section will review the relevant concepts in greater detail.

2.4.1 The Public Sphere

Warnick and Heineman (2012) began their argument with a discussion of the Internet as a public sphere. The public sphere as the arena for expression, discussion, and debate has in the past been located entirely offline, but in recent years these public activities have increasingly shifted to online contexts. In many ways, the Internet challenges classical notions of the public sphere and brings new meaning to the term. Habermas's (1962/1989) original conception of the public sphere included "rational-critical debate, equality and association among persons of unequal status, freedom from censorship of free expression, and the opportunity to reach consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all persons" (Warnick & Heineman, 2012, p. 2). However, more recently these ideas have been criticized as idealistic and not indicative of the whole story. For example, Hauser (1999) introduced the idea of a networked plurality of publics, and Warner (2002) introduced the concept of counterpublics that form out of discourse in response and opposition to dominant publics. Thus, the Internet offers the

possibility of a multiplicity of publics that work with and against each other, and online communities like Reddit can serve as arenas for discussion and interaction that previously could only take place offline.

2.4.2 Interactivity

Warnick and Heineman (2012) also discussed the interactive aspect of online communication. The authors acknowledged that researchers have discussed online interactivity from several perspectives, but noted that few had made the connection between interactivity and rhetoric. In order to make this connection, the authors called upon Burke's (1950) theory of rhetoric as identification between people who share common interests, which exists alongside division and separation from those who have opposing interests. As support for the connection between interactivity and rhetoric, Warnick and Heineman (2012) cited the following quotes from Burke (1950):

But we are clearly in the region of rhetoric when considering the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class. "Belonging" in this sense is rhetorical. (p. 27-28)

Here is the purest rhetorical pattern: speaker and hearer as partners in partisan jokes made at the expense of another. (p. 38)

And often we must think of rhetoric not in terms of some one particular address, but as a general *body of identifications* that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill. (p. 26)

All of these arguments suggest that rhetorical identification is a process that occurs not only between a community and its members, but also between the members themselves in their everyday communication and interaction within an online community.

Warnick and Heineman identified three different types of online interactivity that function rhetorically. The first two, user-to-user and user-to-document, come from a typology created by McMillan (2006). User-to-user interactivity refers to communication between two or more human individuals in an online context, whereas user-to-document interactivity refers to the ability for users to submit content to a website in the form of votes, questions, comments, photos, etc. The third type, text-based interactivity (Endres & Warnick, 2004), refers to rhetorical strategies like personal photographs and first-person pronouns that a website uses to “communicate a sense of engaging presence to site visitors” (Warnick & Heineman, 2012, p. 55). All three of these types of interactivity are present on Reddit, which strongly encourages its members to submit content in many forms and interact with each other around this content. Warnick and Heineman (2012) came to the rather optimistic conclusion that “informed and reciprocal interactivity among knowledgeable people can deepen understanding, provide information, extend corporate thought processes, and clarify the issues at stake” (p. 60). In part, the proposed project seeks to understand how identification through interaction within a community like Reddit potentially leads to positive as well as negative consequences.

2.4.3 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is another important feature of online communication that Warnick and Heineman (2012) discussed from a rhetorical perspective. This phenomenon has been defined as “the fact of one text including various references from another text or texts”

(Hitchon & Jura, 1997, p. 145), but Warnick and Heineman (2012) argued that “Intertextuality is not just cross-reference and allusion between written texts. It also includes responses to the larger cultural context and elements within that context with which readers are likely to be already familiar” (p. 77). Thus, drawing from Hitchon and Jura (1997) and adding some of their own, they identified four forms of intertextuality commonly used online. These forms include archetypal allegory, in which characters, symbols, and events in a text are meant to represent larger political, moral, religious, or cultural motifs; cross-reference to a specific work outside of the text at hand; parody, in which one text humorously copies or exaggerates another; and intertextual satire, which “plays upon the larger social text” (p. 83) to ridicule or criticize someone or something.

Because the Internet includes so much content that can be easily accessed in any order, intertextuality is perhaps even more important online than it is offline. Allegories, parodies, and satires abound, referencing online, offline, and societal texts. However, online texts can also be accessed by quite different audiences, and as Warnick and Heineman (2012) noted, “different audiences may interpret the content variably, depending on their prior knowledge and experience” (p. 93). Therefore, not all audience members will fully understand all of the intertextual references. However, for those who do, “Intertextuality’s major rhetorical benefit comes from its use of resources in the larger intertext to involve the user in construction of the text’s meaning” (Warnick & Heineman, 2012, p. 93). Within the community of Reddit, intertextuality is quite common as members refer to other texts both within and outside of Reddit. Over time, members of the community may begin to understand more of the intertextual references

commonly used within the site and be able to participate in the construction of meaning, thus contributing to stronger feelings of identification with the community.

2.5 Identification and Constitutive Rhetoric

Of greatest relevance to this study is the relationship between online communication and the rhetorical concepts of identification and constitutive rhetoric. The first chapter of this thesis introduced the most important aspects of Burke's (1950) theory of identification. For example, it involves the perception of shared interests or goals in a state of consubstantiality, it exists in response to the inherent divisions between people, and it serves as the most important component for persuasion when a rhetor shows that he or she is similar to the audience or has similar interests. Warnick and Heineman (2012) discussed these features of identification in more detail by applying them to several online contexts.

Warnick and Heineman (2012) listed as one of their major considerations in writing *Rhetoric Online* "the rhetorical construction of identity" (p. 43). The Internet and social media certainly have a significant influence on identity both online and offline, but this influence can be very difficult to predict due to the context and nature of communication. The authors illustrated this point, noting that "digitality affords the possibility of abrupt change, erasure, and creation of identities new and old as situations and events necessitate" (p. 44). This idea of online identities as fluid and plural is important to consider in any study of identification on the Internet and social media.

While Burke's concept of identification tends to be abstract and theoretical, rhetorical scholars have attempted to operationalize the concept by looking for specific types of strategies that individuals and organizations use to identify with their audiences.

For example, in a study of organizational rhetoric Cheney (1983) focused on four major identification strategies that he called the *common ground technique* (the emphasis on shared interests, goals, and values); *identification by antithesis* (the emphasis on shared enemies); *the assumed or transcendent “we”* (the use of said pronoun to suggest that the user speaks for the rest of the organization); and *unifying symbols* (things like logos and company names that have strong meaning within an organization or community). While Cheney’s (1983) study examined offline rhetoric in the form of corporate periodicals, these strategies can be used in online organizations and communities as well, and they will serve as an operationalization of Burke’s theory of identification for the purposes of this study.

Warnick and Heineman (2012) provided examples of the use of identification strategies in online contexts both political (e.g., TeaPartyNation.com, Facebook pages of presidential candidates) and corporate (e.g., social media use of the pizza restaurants Domino’s and Papa John’s). In all of these examples, the online content creators attempted to emphasize commonalities with the audience in order to achieve clear goals like political support in an upcoming election or continued customer loyalty and purchasing behavior. However, in a community like Reddit, while identification strategies are often present, the effects and goals of these strategies are less clear. Reddit’s main use is not necessarily to encourage political action, and the fact that the site is accessible free of charge suggests that customer loyalty is not a major issue either. However, identification strategies may be used for different reasons within an online community like Reddit, perhaps simply to encourage continued interaction among members and allow for the community’s continued success.

In addition to Burke's (1950) theory of identification, Warnick and Heineman (2012) also argued that Charland's (1987) theory of constitutive rhetoric is an important consideration for studying rhetoric online. The first chapter of this thesis discussed the features of Charland's theory based around the idea that rhetoric can create a collective identity or subjectivity with which individuals then identify. However, Charland's analysis focused on traditional constitutive rhetoric coming from one major source (the White Paper) and obviously directed toward political action in the form of Quebec's independence. Online, it can be much more difficult to determine how constitutive rhetoric functions, since individuals experience communication and rhetoric from a multitude of sources, many of which are not overtly political, and they can even construct multiple identities in different contexts. Thus, Warnick and Heineman (2012) suggested thinking of constitutive rhetoric online from a slightly different perspective. They argued:

Instead of focusing on the ways in which users can create certain kinds of identities for themselves by using the tools of the medium...we can instead consider how users' identity *as* social media users is determined in specific ways by the "text"...that enables and constrains the ways in which they think of their identity. A constitutive theory of identity goes beyond an analysis of those categories of identification provided on the site...but instead considers the ways in which participation in the site itself is a significant marker of cultural identity. (p. 104)

This perspective on constitutive rhetoric reveals that the theory can still apply in online settings despite major changes in the communication environment.

The online community of Reddit is not necessarily based around shared offline identities, so constitutive rhetoric likely plays an important role in creating a Reddit identity that attracts members to the community and establishes how they should act within the community once they have joined. As previously noted, Charland (1987) explained three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric, all of which are relevant to this study's analysis of constitutive rhetoric within Reddit. The first effect, the constitution of a collective subject, is important in that it allows members of Reddit to identify and interact with each other as people with a common interest, and also potentially encourages behavior that is beneficial for the community as a whole. The second effect, the positing of a transhistorical subject, allows new members of Reddit to identify with older members and older content, especially since users can access content from any point in the history of Reddit's existence. The third ideological effect, the illusion of freedom, creates the perception within members of the Reddit community that they are acting of their own accord when in fact they are limited by the behaviors that the Reddit community finds agreeable. Reddit's voting system may play a major role in this illusion of freedom, since community members may feel pressured to submit content of which the community will approve. As is the case with identification, the goals or results of constitutive rhetoric in an online community like Reddit are difficult to determine, but this study seeks to develop a greater understanding of this issue.

2.6 Summary and Research Questions

While approaches to the study of online identity and online community have differed, the consensus seems to be that the Internet and social media do have a strong impact on identity (or identities), and that there is often a tension between the individual

and the larger community that must be addressed for an online community to be successful. Rhetorical approaches have been underused in studying these issues, but some (e.g., Warnick & Heineman, 2012) have begun to argue for increased attention on the Internet and social media by rhetorical scholars. The particular focus of this thesis is the use of identification and constitutive rhetoric to establish and maintain a common identity within the online community of Reddit. Reddit's growing popularity has cemented its place in the history of social media, and its central features such as member anonymity, interactivity, and communities of interest (subreddits) make it an ideal case for the study of identification and constitutive rhetoric in an online setting. This study will address two major questions.

RQ1: How are strategies of identification and constitutive rhetoric used to create the perception of a collective identity within the online community of Reddit?

RQ2: How do identification and constitutive rhetoric influence the everyday communication of members of the Reddit community in ways that both sustain and limit the community?

CHAPTER 3. METHOD

This study analyzes examples of identification and constitutive rhetoric within the Reddit community. Thus, it is important to delineate how these examples were defined and identified. This study focuses on the four major categories of strategies that have been identified by Cheney (1983): *the common ground technique*, *identification by antithesis*, *the assumed or transcendent “we,”* and *unifying symbols*. Reddit differs significantly from traditional offline organizations, but the information that the site provides in attempting to describe itself is in some ways similar to examples of organizational communication that attempts to do the same.

In his study, Cheney (1983) looked for specific “tactics” that organizations used to enact all four of these larger categories of strategies. He also broke down the tactics associated with the common ground technique into six categories, including *expression of concern for the individual*, *recognition of individual contributions*, *espousal of shared values*, *advocacy of benefits and activities*, *praise by outsiders*, and *testimonials by employees*. His analysis was mostly qualitative, as he looked at the actual words and phrases used within organizational discourse, but he also brought in a quantitative element to count which tactics were used most frequently. I took a similar approach in looking for tactics that represent each of the four major identification strategies, as well as the subcategories of the common ground technique, within the information Reddit

provides about itself and within the everyday interaction of its members. I identified the specific use of words and phrasing to achieve each of these strategies, and also looked for which tactics were most commonly used within Reddit. As a nontraditional organization it is possible that the Reddit community makes use of identification strategies and tactics not included in Cheney's (1983) analysis, so I also looked for any other major categories that emerged.

In terms of constitutive rhetoric, I identified examples that call the Reddit community into being and contribute to each of the three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric identified by Charland (1987). Again, these three effects are the *constituting of a collective subject* (replacing individual interests with collective interests), the *positing of a transhistorical subject* (creating the perception that the collective identity exists now as it did in the past), and the *illusion of freedom* (creating the belief that subjects can act of their own will when they are in fact constrained by the identity constituted for them). Just as I examined specific tactics used in identification, I also qualitatively examined the tactics used on Reddit through language and symbols to create a constitutive rhetoric that reflects each of these three ideological effects. Additionally, I looked for any other strategies that could contribute to a constitutive rhetoric that do not neatly fit into one of the three ideological effects.

My analysis proceeded in two major directions in order to address each of the two research questions stated above. The first research question asks how strategies of identification and constitutive rhetoric are used within the Reddit community, and to answer this question I looked at the sources within Reddit that seem to come from the community itself rather than from any particular author. These sources are most similar to

those that Cheney (1983) used in his study of organizational rhetoric, and they represent the way that the community as an entity attempts to establish a collective identity. In part, I analyzed the major elements and features that control the way the site operates, including Reddit's unique vocabulary (e.g., "upvote," "karma," "subreddit"), its organization (e.g., voting and commenting system, subreddits), its way of presenting user information (e.g., usernames, karma scores), and its visual layout (e.g., text and images, headings, sidebars). While these features do not necessarily involve the use of language, they do operate symbolically to play a major role in the actions and behavior of community members, and analyzing the ways they work together is an important part of understanding the community and how its identity is established. Thus, I considered all of these features along with my analysis of Reddit's more verbal communication.

Second, I analyzed the central communication Reddit uses to define itself as a more direct method of understanding the specific verbal tactics of identification and constitutive rhetoric used by the community. The main source I used for this communication was the Reddit wiki, which can be accessed through a link labeled "wiki" near the top of any user's "front" page. Many subreddits have their own individualized wikis, but the wiki accessed from the "front" page is the same for all users, and is therefore an accessible resource for all members of the community to learn more about Reddit. The wiki is divided into several sections that provide different kinds of information about Reddit and the way the community works. The sections I focused on most in my analysis were a set of four pages labeled "The essentials." This label clearly shows that this information is supposed to be the most important for the Reddit community, and thus it was an excellent starting point for examining the tactics used for

identification and constitutive rhetoric within the community. The four pages in this “essentials” section are the Reddit FAQ, a page explaining proper “Reddiquette,” the “about reddit” page, and a post on the Reddit blog from September 2011 titled “How reddit works.” I read and analyzed all four of these pages in their entirety, looking specifically for tactics of identification and constitutive rhetoric within the language of each page. While the Reddit wiki is sometimes revised for regular upkeep, its content remains fairly constant over time, so I only examined these pages once within the period of study.

My second research question asks how identification and constitutive rhetoric influences the everyday communication of members of the Reddit community. Thus, the main source I analyzed to address this question was the content submitted by Reddit’s users. This content, including links, text posts, and comments, makes up the vast majority of the communication within Reddit. Because Reddit is a social media website that relies on user-created content, this is perhaps the most important source of information to analyze to determine the positive and negative effects of identification and constitutive rhetoric within the site. Examining this content also provided insight as to whether or not community members are enacting the identity constituted through Reddit’s central communication, as well as the tactics individual members use to identify with each other that either reinforce or challenge the centrally constituted identity.

Rather than examine the content in a particular subreddit, which could limit my analysis to an unrepresentative sector of the Reddit community, or the content on the “front” page, which varies depending on the user, I examined the content found when choosing to view “all subreddits,” an option available through a link labeled “all” at the

top of any user's "front" page. The "all subreddits" option shows the content with the highest rankings from all of the subreddits combined. This content changes substantially from day to day, and even throughout the course of one day, but at any given moment it is the same for all users of Reddit. Thus, it provides the most comprehensive, universal overview of the user-submitted content and communication within the community.

Because the content visible on the "all subreddits" page does change so often, it would be extremely unfeasible to analyze all of the content that appears on this page even within the period of a week or less. Therefore, my analysis of the content on this page necessarily consisted of snapshots from different moments throughout the period of study. The "all subreddits" page automatically shows the top 25 posts at the time of viewing, with the option to view more at the bottom of the page. However, for the purposes of this study, I only examined these top 25 posts along with the top 10 comments responding directly to each post. My rationale for choosing these posts and comments is that these are the posts and comments that have been upvoted the most within the community, so they provide an indication of the kinds of content and communication that are most valued by the community. Additionally, for the top comment on each post, I examined the thread of comments responding to that comment to understand the ways in which community members converse and interact with each other's comments. I qualitatively analyzed each of the posts and comments included in my study, looking specifically for identification tactics used in the everyday communication of members of the Reddit community that contribute to each of the four major categories of identification strategies noted by Cheney (1983), as well as the kinds of intertextuality described by Warnick and Heineman (2012) that could contribute to

identification by inviting other members into the construction of meaning. I also looked for examples of users' communication and behavior that reflects their perceptions of identification with the Reddit community and the presence of the three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric.

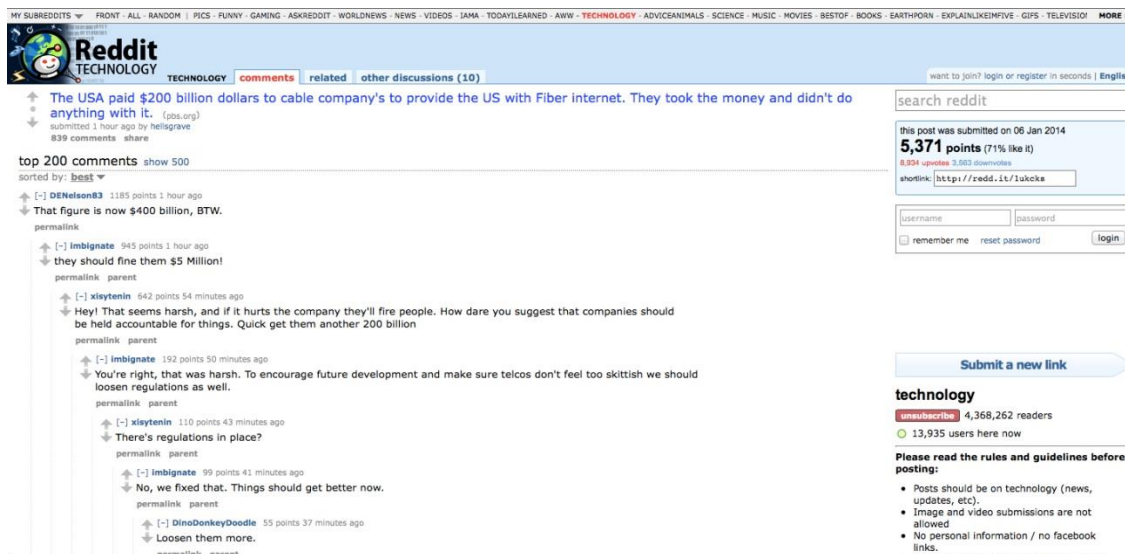


Figure 3.1 Example Post and Comment Thread

The period of study for the “all subreddits” page was from Monday, January 6, 2014, to Monday, February 3, 2014. During this period, I examined the “all subreddits” page on five separate occasions consisting of each Monday at 5 p.m. EST. Leaving one week between these occasions allowed for more variety in content, as the most popular content within the Reddit community changed substantially within that amount of time. On each of these occasions I saved as Web archives the main “all subreddits” page showing the top 25 posts at the time of viewing, as well as the comment page for each of these 25 posts. Saving this content allowed me to review and analyze it at a later time, even after the content on the “all subreddits” page had changed substantially. With five

separate occasions of 25 posts and 10 comments per post, I recorded and analyzed a total of 125 posts and 1,250 comments, as well as one full comment thread for each of the 125 posts (see Figure 3.1 for an example of a post and comment thread included in the study).

Through the examination and analysis of the major features of Reddit, the centralized communication it provides its members, and the everyday communication and posting behavior of Reddit's members, I looked for answers to my two research questions and sought a thorough understanding of how strategies of identification and constitutive rhetoric are used within the Reddit community and how these strategies influence the behavior of its members to the benefit or the detriment of the community as a whole. Understanding the role of these rhetorical strategies within the community of Reddit contributes to greater understanding of their possible role within the context of other online communities and further contributes to the growing body of research related to online communities and their relationship to individual identity.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

Upon analysis of both Reddit's central communication and day-to-day communication of its members, it is evident that several identification strategies are at work within the community. There is also evidence of the three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric, particularly within the four pages examined as Reddit's central communication. This section will present these findings starting with the evidence of identification and constitutive rhetoric in the central communication. Next, it will present the findings from the regular members of the Reddit community related to the identification strategies they use with each other and the evidence for a constituted Reddit identity.

4.2 Identification Strategies in Reddit's Central Communication

The four pages labeled "The essentials" on the Reddit wiki are the texts included in this study that are most similar to the kinds of organizational texts studied by Cheney (1983), and it is perhaps not surprising that the content of these pages includes many examples of identification strategies and tactics similar to those Cheney found in organizational house organs. Within these pages, the Reddit admins provide information that they feel is important for all Reddit users to know, as well as try to welcome and socialize these users into the community. These pages make heavy use of the common ground technique and

identification through antithesis, and to a lesser extent the transcendent “we” and unifying symbols.

Of the six categories of strategies Cheney (1983) identified as falling under the common ground technique, one that appears most commonly in Reddit’s central communication is the *expression of concern for the individual*. The Reddit FAQ, the Reddiquette page, and the “How reddit works” blog post each demonstrated tactics that fall under this category. The most obvious way these pages use these tactics is with statements professing the desire for Reddit to be an enjoyable place for anyone to use. For example, the FAQ (2014, May 24) states that “reddit provides its basic service to all users without charge.” It also states that “The reason there are separate subreddits is to allow niche communities to form, instead of having one monolithic overall community,” and that “you’ll get a lot more enjoyment out of the site if you take the time to subscribe to ones that appeal to you.”

Statements on the Reddiquette page (2014, May 24) suggest that in addition to enjoyment for all users, Reddit is also concerned with respect for all users. For example, this page advises users to “Remember the human” when responding to posts or comments and to “Consider posting constructive criticism/an explanation when you down vote something, and do so carefully and tactfully.” This page also urges users to “Use an ‘Innocent until proven guilty’ mentality” when it comes to suspected dishonesty when posting, and explains that failure to adopt this mentality “ruins the experience for not only you, but the millions of people that browse reddit every day.” Finally, this page expresses the importance of submitting links to the original source of content, saying

“Dig through those references and submit a link to the creator, who actually deserves the traffic.”

The “How reddit works” blog post (chromakode, 2011, Sept. 2) also expresses concern for individual users, in particular the moderators who manage each of the subreddits. Within this post, the writer explains, “We’re keen on building the features communities need,” and “as admins, our calling is supporting reddit’s communities to do awesome things. In the majority of cases the best way to accomplish this is by granting subreddits as much autonomy as possible.” These statements all suggest that the admins consider the best interests of the individual users of the community, and that in fact, their main role is to provide for these individuals.

Another category of the common ground technique that Reddit’s central communication uses frequently is the *recognition of individual contributions*. The FAQ (2014, May 2014) uses this tactic when it says, “Users like you provide all of the content and decide, through voting, what’s good and what’s junk.” Additionally, the “About reddit” page (2014, May 24) acknowledges that “community members are constantly tinkering and contributing features, bug fixes, and translations back to the site.” This page also features the tagline “we power awesome communities.” in the top center, as well as statistics about the large number of users, unique communities, and votes. Providing this information certainly suggests that Reddit is proud of its communities and their members.

However, the page that makes the most use of this tactic is the “How reddit works” blog post (chromakode, 2011, Sept. 2). This is perhaps best summed up with the statement “Your ideas and thoughts will inform where reddit goes next,” with embedded links to specific subreddits that encourage users to submit suggestions. This blog post

also expresses great appreciation for Reddit's moderators, those users who have taken on the responsibility of managing subreddits. The writer of the post states, "Moderators have built the finest communities on reddit and work hard to keep them vital," and "Moderators are constantly pushing the boundaries and inventing new ways to use reddit," and then goes on to list several specific moderator contributions that have shaped Reddit's development over time. The blog post ends with an extended thanks that reads:

I'd like to take a moment to celebrate the communities we've built together.

Thank you, moderators, for your persistence and creativity in building incredible communities on the site. As reddit continues to grow, we are committed to building our systems and policies to support you. Thank you all for making reddit awesome every day. reddit is proof that everyone's contributions, from creating a community to simply clicking a vote button, can have a massive effect.

This section continues the recognition for the moderators that is present throughout the post, but also extends recognition to individual members who simply participate in Reddit's communities.

Reddit's central communication also makes use of tactics related to the *espousal of shared values*. Near the top of the FAQ page (2014, May 24) is a statement starting with "Users like you..." While this does not explicitly provide any information about what the users are like, it assumes a significant amount of similarity between all of Reddit's users. The FAQ also emphasizes the similarities between moderators and other users, stating, "A moderator is just a regular redditor like you except they [sic] volunteer to perform a few humble duties within a particular community." As far as the actual values that Reddit's users share, Reddit's central communication is at times vague and

nondescript. For example, when explaining the concept of karma the FAQ states, “Just set out to be a good person, and let your karma simply be a reminder of your legacy.” The Reddiquette page (2014, May 24) also states that “Your submission should get points for being good.” Neither of these examples clearly explains what it means to be “good,” but they both suggest some shared idea of “good” among users of Reddit.

There are, however, a few instances that suggest more specific values that Reddit users share. The FAQ (2014, May 24) provides one example of this when it explains, “The best way to deal with incorrect information on the Internet is to post the correct information next to it. The reddit community is usually very supportive of such a response, and will likely vote to give the correction greater prominence than the original post. Redditors love a good counterpoint.” This statement suggests that in general, the Reddit community values both accuracy and intelligent debate. Additionally, the Reddiquette page (2014, May 24) overall professes to be “an **informal** expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves.” Most of this page reads as a code of a conduct, but there are a few indications of specific values that the users share in statements like “**Moderate based on quality, not opinion.** Well written and interesting content can be worthwhile, even if you disagree with it,” and “**Use proper grammar and spelling.** Intelligent discourse requires a standard system of communication. Be open for gentle corrections.” These statements both reinforce the shared value of intelligent debate, along with the value of openness to criticism and opposing ideas.

The “How reddit works” blog post (chromakode, 2011, Sept. 2) uses a similar strategy for a slightly different purpose, espousing the shared values between admins,

moderators, and regular Reddit users that allow the Reddit community to function smoothly. The writer states, “On a moderator level, and a meta reddit level, the best way that we can resolve community issues is through good communication and transparency,” and later “the best solution [to some problems] is to create features that allow for transparent self-correction.” This expressed goal of communication and transparency at all levels may appear to flatten Reddit’s hierarchy and emphasize the importance of all of its users.

While the three aforementioned categories of the common ground technique (*expression of concern for the individual, recognition of individual contributions, and espousal of shared values*) are the most common in Reddit’s central communication, the “About reddit” page (2014, May 24) incorporates the use of two other categories: *advocacy of benefits and activities, and praise by outsiders*. (Note: there are no clear examples of the sixth category of *testimonials by employees*, most likely because Reddit is not a traditional organization, and the vast majority of its users are not employees.) The advocacy of benefits and activities is seen through a slide show of pictures of people participating in Reddit “Meetups” (events organized online for Reddit users to meet in person, offline) throughout the United States and other parts of the world. The praise by outsiders is seen in a series of quotes near the top of the page from members of the media, with embedded links to the original source of the quotes. For example, a quote from a June 8, 2012 article from *Time* magazine written by Aylin Zafar states, “reddit is quickly challenging Twitter’s turf as a place for real-time updates and citizen journalism.” A more humorous example comes from a November 18, 2013 episode of *The Colbert Report*, in which Colbert states, “On reddit, everyone gets to post and vote.

Everyone gets to say, yay! You know what I say to that? Boo.” These quotes from respected media outlets and popular celebrities demonstrate that outsiders also appreciate, or at least acknowledge, Reddit’s success as a community.

In addition to the common ground technique, a significant amount of the information included in “The essentials” pages involves the use of *identification through antithesis*. In most cases these tactics are enacted by mentioning things that Reddit tries to prevent or that Reddit users should avoid doing, and explaining that the community is a better place without these things. The two pages that make the most use of these tactics are the FAQ page and the Reddiquette page.

The statement near the top of the FAQ page (2014, May 24) that “Users like you provide all of the content and decide, through voting, what’s good and what’s junk” has been mentioned above as an example of the common ground technique, but it also serves as an example of identification through antithesis with its reference to “junk.” Within this sentence, the concept of “junk” is just as vague as the concept of “good,” but it still suggests that users of Reddit are able to collectively decide on material that is unwanted, and essentially eliminate this material from the community through their votes. This statement does not offer room for disagreement with what falls into these two categories, but assumes that the community is able to reach a consensus in favor of “good” material and against “junk.”

However, the FAQ (2014, May 24) does also offer several more specific issues for Reddit and its users to unite against. The most important of these issues appears to be spamming, or submitting a large amount of undesired content in a short time. The FAQ mentions a few measures built into Reddit’s programming specifically designed to

eliminate this behavior. For example, “there is a cap on the posting rate to prevent spamming,” “the vote numbers...have been fuzzed to prevent spam bots,” and “reddit has a spam filter designed to detect spam posts and automatically remove them.” The FAQ also explains things that the users themselves should do to prevent and avoid spam. This is best summed up with the statement, “Reporting spam is the single most important thing a user can do to help keep reddit clean.” The FAQ also warns against a certain kind of post that may be considered spam, stating, “It’s not strictly forbidden to submit a link to a site that you own or otherwise benefit from in some way, but you should sort of consider yourself on thin ice.” By following these suggestions, the users can participate in this prevention that the Reddit infrastructure has put into place.

Another issue that the FAQ (2014, May 24) seeks to prevent is manipulation of the voting process, explaining that “Besides spam, the other big no-no is to try to manipulate voting by any means: manual, mechanical, or otherwise.” The page goes into more detail telling users, “Don’t use shell or multiple accounts, voting services, or any other software to increase votes for submissions,” and “Don’t be part of a ‘voting clique’ or ‘vote ring.’” The FAQ also makes it clear that the consequences for this behavior are severe, stating that “Cheating or attempting to manipulate voting will result in your account being banned. Don’t do it.” It is clear from these statements that Reddit wants its users to see this behavior as detrimental to the overall community. In fact, it is clear that even just asking for more votes is frowned upon, as the FAQ explains that “Phrases like, ‘Vote this up to spread the word’ or ‘AMAZING!’ tend to annoy most redditors, who will make sure your post doesn’t see the light of day.”

A third major issue identified in the FAQ (2014, May 24) is demonstrated by the statement, “reddit is a pretty open and free speech place, but it is not ok to post someone’s personal information, or post links to personal information.” This behavior is forbidden in all forms, and “will get you banned,” but the FAQ suggests that posting personal information is especially detrimental when it is meant as a personal attack on someone. This is clear based on the explanation that “witch hunts and vigilantism hurt innocent people and certain individual information, including personal info found online is often false...don’t post anything inviting harassment, don’t harass, and don’t cheer on or upvote obvious vigilantism.” Along with the prevention of spam and vote manipulation, the FAQ suggests that the prevention of these kinds of personal attacks will help keep the Reddit community a safe and enjoyable place for all of its users.

The Reddiquette page (2014, May 24) also makes use of tactics related to identification through antithesis by providing lists of rules or suggestions titled “Please do” and “Please don’t,” both of which mention behaviors that Reddit users should avoid. Many of these rules reinforce the information provided on the FAQ page (e.g., “Report any spam you find,” “[Don’t] create mass upvote or downvote campaigns,” “[Don’t] post someone’s personal information, or post links to personal information”), but many rules also provide more specific examples of behavior to avoid in order to maintain meaningful discussion. One set of behaviors that the Reddiquette page advises against are attention-grabbing ploys in the title of posts. Rules related to this include “[Don’t] editorialize or sensationalize your submission title,” “[Don’t] use the word ‘BREAKING’ or other time sensitive words in your submissions,” and “[Don’t] write titles in ALL CAPS.” The idea

seems to be that the posts should speak for themselves, and that this behavior only creates an annoyance.

Another set of behavior that the Reddiquette page advises against is any comment that is dishonest or hurtful. In some cases, this behavior may be relatively harmless, as seen in the rule “[Don’t] post hoaxes. If snopes.com has already declared something false, you probably shouldn’t be submitting it to reddit.” Other rules refer to more harmful behaviors, including “[Don’t] Troll. Trolling does not contribute to the conversation,” “[Don’t] ask people to Troll others on reddit,” and “[Don’t] conduct personal attacks on other commenters. Ad hominem and other distracting attacks do not add to the conversation.” In this case, “trolling” refers to posting with the sole intent to provoke other users and start arguments. The explanations for these rules make it clear that this behavior is unwanted not just because it can be offensive, but also because it distracts from the actual conversation at hand.

The Reddiquette page also advises against too many comments and posts that point out redundancy posts, or “reposts” as they are often called. Rules related to this behavior include “[Don’t] complain about other users reposting/rehosting stories, images, videos, or any other content. Users should give credit where credit should be given, but if someone fails to do so, and is not causing harm whatsoever, please either don’t point it out, or point it out politely and leave it at that,” “[Don’t] complain about reposts. Just because you have seen it before doesn't mean everyone has,” and “[Don’t] complain about cross posts. Just because you saw it in one place, doesn’t mean everyone has seen it. Just vote and move on.” With three rules essentially saying the same thing, it is clear that this behavior is unwanted. Even though other sections of the Reddit wiki explain that

redundancy posts are also unwanted, the rules suggest that it is not necessarily the job of other users to police this behavior, and focusing too much on pointing this behavior out means there is less room for meaningful discussion.

Finally, the Reddiquette page points out certain kinds of posts that are unwanted simply because they contribute nothing new. This includes a statement simply explaining that “Redundancy posts add nothing new to previous conversations,” as well as specific examples of common comments that add no value. These comments include “Phrases such as ‘this’, ‘lol’, and ‘I came here to say this’ [which] are not witty, original, or funny, and do not add anything to the discussion,” and “‘Upvote’ and ‘Downvote’ [which] aren’t terribly interesting comments and only increase the noise to signal ratio.” These rules suggest that users should only post comments when they have some kind of meaningful content to contribute, and if not, then simply voting will suffice.

The common ground technique and identification through antithesis are by far the most common identification strategies used in Reddit’s central communication, but there are also a few examples of the *transcendent* “we.” Often when these pages use the word “we” it refers only to Reddit’s admins rather than the community as a whole. However, the FAQ (2014, May 24) includes a statement that “we all get outraged by the ignorant things people say and do online...” which does include the average users of the community in an attempt to highlight similarities. The Reddiquette page also includes the statement “We aren’t your personal army,” which seeks to protect all Reddit users from attempts to enlist them for other users’ personal causes or vendettas. The “How reddit works” blog post (chromakode, 2011, Sept. 2) uses the transcendent “we” to acknowledge Reddit’s success and attribute it to all members of the community. For

example, the writer says, “Since last May, we’ve grown from 7 million monthly unique visitors to 21.5 million. Our page views have exploded 4x to a staggering 1.6 *billion* pages served per month.” Finally, as previously mentioned, the “About reddit” page (2014, May 24) includes the tagline “we power awesome communities,” which again seems to attribute Reddit’s success to all community members.

The identification strategy of *unifying symbols* is also demonstrated on these four pages with one clear example: Reddit’s logo/mascot, an alien named Snoo. This mascot appears in the top left corner of almost every single page on Reddit, and individual subreddits often slightly modify the logo to fit that subreddit’s theme. The FAQ (2013, October 31) references this mascot in response to the question “What is that alien/bug thing?” The explanation provided is “That adorable and informative creature is Snoo, the mascot for the reddit community.” There does not seem to be anything inherently informative about the mascot, but attributing this quality to Reddit’s mascot suggests that this is a quality Reddit itself seeks to emulate and that Reddit’s users value. The FAQ page also provides a link to an archive of past versions of the logo and a link to a page explaining the process of licensing the mascot or logo for personal or commercial use. The “How reddit works” blog post (chromakode, 2011, Sept. 2) also makes use of the mascot by showing several personalized versions of Snoo made to represent each admin or contributor to the blog, and by showing a series of images depicting Snoo “evolving” from a single cell to its current appearance to reflect the evolution and growth of Reddit as a community. Finally, Snoo can be seen on signs, t-shirts, and papier-mâché masks in the pictures of Reddit Meetups on the “about reddit” page (2014, May 24), demonstrating

that this is a very recognizable symbol to Reddit users that clearly identifies them as members of the community.

4.3 Constitutive Rhetoric in Reddit's Central Communication

In addition to the four major identification strategies identified by Cheney (1983), the pages on Reddit labeled “the essentials” also provide evidence of constitutive rhetoric used to establish a collective Reddit identity, specifically related to Charland’s (1987) three ideological effects. In particular, these pages appear to be focused on the *constituting of a collective subject* and the *illusion of freedom*, but there is also some evidence for the *positing of a transhistorical subject*.

The ideological effect of *constituting of a collective subject* is partially related to the identification strategies described in detail above, which identify things that the community as a whole values or frowns upon, but this ideological effect is further demonstrated throughout these pages in ways that suggest more directly that Reddit is a community rather than a collection of individuals, and that the interests of the collective are more important than the interests of individuals. The FAQ (2014, May 24), for example, provides responses that suggest that users should behave in the interest of the community. The response to the first question (“What is reddit?”) includes the statement that “links that receive community approval bubble up towards #1,” and the response to a question about karma explains that “it reflects how much good the user has done for the reddit community.” These statements both make it clear that behaviors that benefit the community as a whole are encouraged and will be rewarded.

The FAQ (2014, May 24) and Reddiquette (2014, May 24) pages also both offer suggestions for voting behavior that is beneficial for the community as a whole. For

example, the Reddiquette page recommends that users “browse the new submissions page and vote on it. Regard it, perhaps, as a public service.” The description of this act as “public service” suggests that it may not have obvious benefits for the individual voting, but that it will benefit the overall community. Additionally, the FAQ advises that users “upvote each submission or content for the value of the information in it, a variety of things that you think are interesting and will benefit the community,” while the Reddiquette page urges users to:

Think before you downvote and take a moment to ensure you’re down voting someone because they are not contributing to the community dialogue or discussion. If you simply take a moment to stop, think and examine your reasons for downvoting, rather than doing so out of an emotional reaction, you will ensure that your downvotes are given for good reasons.

Both of these statements suggest that users should not vote for selfish reasons, but that each individual should vote as a member of the community with the good of the community in mind.

The FAQ and Reddiquette pages also mention a couple of other situations in which actions in the interest of individuals can be detrimental to the Reddit collective. One example from the FAQ page (2014, May 24) related to spamming, a behavior that Reddit tries to prevent above all else, states that “if your contribution to reddit consists mostly of submitting links to a site(s) that you own or otherwise benefit from in some way, and additionally if you do not participate in discussion, or reply to peoples [sic] questions, regardless of how many upvotes your submissions get, you are a spammer.” This explanation makes it clear that Reddit should not benefit any one individual over the

community, especially if that individual does not contribute anything to the community in return. The Reddiquette page (2014, May 24) also mentions that “quality of content is more important than who created it,” suggesting that users should not necessarily even be seeking individual recognition for the content they create and submit. Finally, the Reddiquette page states that “by choosing not to be rude, you increase the overall civility of the community and make it better for all of us,” and that “every time a redditor who’s contributed large amounts of effort into assisting the growth of community as a whole is driven away, projects that would benefit the whole easily flounder.” Again, these statements advise users to think about what would “benefit the whole” when making decisions as to their behavior within the community.

The FAQ (2014, May 24) in particular also demonstrates another one of the ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric, namely the *illusion of freedom*. This effect creates the impression that individuals are free to act on their own, while in actuality they are constrained to actions consistent with the community identity. In Reddit’s case, the community ostensibly prides itself on offering something for everyone and accepting a wide variety of content, but several statements in the FAQ hint that this is only conditionally true. One feature of Reddit that constrains the freedom of its users is the system of voting and karma. The FAQ states that “the best way to gain karma is to submit links that other people like and vote for,” and that “if people historically downvote your links or ones similar to yours, and you feel the need to keep submitting them anyway, they’re probably spam.” The underlying idea of these statements is that while users are technically free to submit a variety of content, if they want to accumulate karma, avoid

downvotes and being labeled a spammer, and have their content be visible, then they must submit content that the community as a whole is interested in seeing.

Another feature of Reddit that seems to promote freedom of choice, but may actually constrain it, is the variety of subreddits offered. Reddit's registered users are free to subscribe to or unsubscribe from any available subreddit depending on their interests, but as explained in the FAQ (2014, May 24), "by default, new users are subscribed to a selection of the most popular ones." The list of default subreddits does change every so often, but having new users automatically subscribe to them seems to suggest that some subreddits are more valuable or interesting than others, and certainly contributes to the continued popularity of these subreddits, perhaps at the expense of others. Users are also free to create new subreddits if they are unsatisfied with the current selection or take issue with a particular subreddit. As the "How reddit works" blogpost (chromakode, 2011, Sept. 2) explains, "Subreddits are a free market. Anyone can create a subreddit and decide how it is run...If you are unable to resolve your grievances with the current moderation team of a subreddit, the best response is often to create a competitor and see if the community follows you." However, there is certainly no guarantee that the community would follow, and these new subreddits can easily die out without enough popularity and content submission, especially if there is a more popular subreddit that fulfills a similar purpose.

The rules within each subreddit are another feature that constrains some of the freedom to act in accordance with one's individual decisions and interests. Again, users are not really free to submit what content they choose, as the FAQ (2014, May 24) states that "posts should be consistent with the rules of the community to which they are

posted,” and that “moderators are free to run their subreddits however they so choose so long as it is not breaking reddit’s rules.” Based on these explanations, it is clear that each subreddit is constrained by Reddit’s overarching rules, but also that individuals within each subreddit can be constrained by the whim of the subreddit’s moderators. Reddit encourages this rule making behavior, explaining in the FAQ that “that’s the whole point of letting people create their own reddit communities and define what’s on topic and what’s spam.” As stated above, the ability for any user to create a new subreddit potentially eliminates some of these constraints and keeps individual freedom intact, and the FAQ states that “in a few cases” a new, competing community has succeeded in becoming the dominant subreddit on a topic. However, the FAQ does not provide any specific examples, and its reference to “a few cases” suggests that this is not very common.

The ideological effect of *positing of a transhistorical subject*, or suggesting that the collective has always existed as such, is perhaps not as important in a relatively new online community like Reddit. The website itself has only existed since 2005, and it was not designed as an online tool for any pre-existing, offline community, so the goal of convincing its users that they have always existed as a community is not very realistic. However, there do seem to be a few attempts to integrate new members into the community and perhaps “catch them up” with users who have been members for a longer amount of time. The first is the aforementioned existence of default subreddits, which automatically give new users access to a variety of content from some of the most popular subreddits within the community. This creates some commonality between all of Reddit’s users and gives new users an idea of what the Reddit experience is like, rather

than forcing them to start from nothing. Another way that Reddit attempts to connect users across time is through a timeline on the “about reddit” page (2014, May 24) which outlines several important events in the site’s history, often with links to posts from the Reddit blog explaining these events. These events include major changes to the site, like first going online (with accompanying screenshot), adding the ability to comment, allowing users to create new subreddits, becoming open source, and archiving a separate general reddit page in favor of the front page that aggregates content from a variety of subreddits. While this archived page does not accept new submissions, it is still available for users to view, acting as sort of a relic of what the site used to be. The timeline also includes memorable events that have contributed to Reddit’s culture, including several April Fool’s pranks, the winning of a Greenpeace vote to name a whale Mr. Splashy Pants, a Reddit rally in Washington, D.C., and President Barack Obama’s AMA (“ask me anything,” in which the president personally answered the questions of Reddit users). Overall, this timeline allows new and old users alike to remember what the site and community have experienced in the past, and perhaps feel that they are part of something with a rich history.

As a result of these three ideological effects, Charland (1987) also argued that constitutive rhetoric necessitates action on the part of its subjects in accordance with their collective identity. While there may not be one clear course of action or cause that Reddit seems to be fighting for, “the essentials” pages do provide examples of ways that Reddit’s users have acted collectively, as well as ways that they can continue to act in the interests of the community. One such example is the aforementioned vote for the naming of a whale, which has become a very memorable event in Reddit’s history. In this case,

Greenpeace held a vote online in 2007 to name a whale that the organization planned to track as part of an educational program, and Reddit users spread the word to vote for the name “Mr. Splashy Pants,” with Reddit’s co-founder Alexis Ohanian even creating a logo of the whale. This campaign resulted in the name winning the vote and being used by Greenpeace. In another example from the timeline, Reddit blacked out its website for twelve hours on January 18, 2012, in protest of the Stop Online Piracy Act, which many Reddit users argued would censor the Internet and make websites like Reddit impossible (reddit admins, 2012, Jan. 10). These two very different examples demonstrate the ability of the many members of the Reddit community to organize for a cause if they so choose, and the collective identity constructed through constitutive rhetoric may contribute to their willingness to do so. On a more everyday level, the Reddiquette page also lists many actions that Reddit users should do or avoid doing, many of which have been described in detail above. While these actions do not appear to be directed toward a clear political or social cause, as is the case with many offline examples of constitutive rhetoric, they do claim to be in the interest of maintaining a strong community. If constitutive rhetoric is successful in creating a valued, collective identity, then Reddit’s users may choose to follow the guidelines on this page and take action in this way.

Overall, Reddit’s four pages known as “the essentials” contain many examples of strategies used to identify with community members, construct a collective identity that in some ways privileges the community over the individual, and explain the actions and behaviors that are appropriate for members in order to prolong the community’s success. However, it remains to be seen how effectively this identity and the actions associated with it are enacted by the community members in everyday practice. In order to further

address this question, the analysis now moves away from Reddit's central communication and turns to the everyday communication between Reddit's users.

4.4 Identification in Reddit's Everyday Communication

Examining the everyday communication of Reddit's members through the content and comments that they share with each other can potentially reveal information about the collective Reddit identity and the strength of the community in a couple of different ways. First of all, members of the community use a variety of identification strategies in regular conversation in order to relate to each other and perhaps gain each other's approval, and the way that they use these strategies may provide a more clear idea of the values and characteristics that make up the overall Reddit identity. Second, the posting behavior of Reddit's users can indicate whether they are in fact acting in accordance with the suggestions and rules from Reddit's central communication, as well as how following or deviating from these rules contributes to the quality of communication and discussion between members. As explained above, the member communication examined in this section comes from some of the top posts from all subreddits throughout a five week period from January to February 2014.

Much of the communication occurring in the content and comments examined demonstrated identification strategies similar to those used in Reddit's central communication. Members of the Reddit community made heavy use of the *common ground technique*, especially through the *espousal of shared values* and the *recognition of individual contributions*. The strategy of the espousal of shared values was seen in some form in over half of the posts examined, as the top comments on many of the posts often demonstrated some amount of agreement over the topic at hand. In some cases, this

involved praise for certain aspects of the Reddit community. For example, the comments on a post linking to an image from Imgur, an image hosting website, expressed agreement that Reddit's comments are better than the comments on Imgur. One user who used to frequent Imgur explained, "the comments here are much better. That's the only reason why I switched [to Reddit] to begin with" (Rock2MyBeat, "Funny," 2014, Jan. 6), and another added that "everyone knows that we *are* funnier. We also just happen to be class acts and give credit where credit is due" (fatkidseatcake, "Funny", 2014, Jan. 6). In another post (Relk, "Funny," 2014, Jan. 13), a user linked to a screenshot from the *TMZ* television with a computer monitor displaying a page from Reddit in the background, and another user commented about a talk radio show that also uses Reddit as a source for conversation topics, demonstrating pride in Reddit's recognition outside of the community.

In other cases, users expressed their shared support for causes outside of the Reddit community. For example, on a post linked to an image of a concept for a raised bicycle roadway in London, several users expressed approval for the benefits to cyclists and overall. Comments included "i'm sure it will get a lot more people cycling to work instead of driving or using buses/ tube, as I know I started doing" (DefinitelyNotTerry, "Pics," 2014, Jan. 6), "That is a[n]...amazing idea. First you get the bikers off the roads, and then you promote using less gas via biking to your destination" (WHOWANTSAKOOKIE, "Pics," 2014, Jan. 6), and "We would see a lot more cyclists if there were more routes like this" (foiku, "Pics," 2014, Jan. 6). In another example, comments on a post linked to an article about a proposal to legalize marijuana in Maryland indicated general approval for the legalization of marijuana and its apparent

benefits. One comment stated that “I only hope this present tide becomes a global flood of common sense” (IntellisaurDinoAlien, “News,” 2014, Jan. 20), with another agreeing that “I was SO happy when two states [legalized marijuana] simultaneously” (Morwynd, “News,” 2014, Jan. 20), and another adding, “I love how quickly this is happening” (ace884, “News,” 2014, Jan. 20). Both of these examples suggest that Reddit users are quick to affirm each other’s opinions on social and political situations. In neither case was there necessarily unwavering or unquestioning support, as some users pointed out nuances or even some downsides to the general opinion, but in both cases there was still a general idea that most of the top comments seemed to agree with.

Other instances of the espousal of shared values involved community members simply expressing their shared enjoyment or admiration. For example, one post made reference to an old Star Wars video game, with several users expressing their happiness at finding others who still enjoy the game. One user commented that the game and its sequel were “hands down my favorite games of all time” (Pencilstubs, “Gaming,” 2014, Jan. 13), with another user responding, “Me too. I love you guys. It’s nice to know there are people who still enjoy these things as much as I do, even after so much time has passed” (GOATUNHEIM, “Gaming,” 2014, Jan. 13), and yet another offering an “Internet high five!” (RephaimSheol, “Gaming,” 2014, Jan. 13) in agreement. Another post linked to a picture of Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune, with comments almost unanimously expressing their appreciation for the actor. These comments included “That guy was hilarious in Seven Samurai” (teriyaki_donut, “Movies,” 2014, Feb. 3), “he is still by far my favorite actor. I’ve never seen another actor as magnetizing and powerful as him, ever” (LeCapEtan, “Movies,” 2014, Feb. 3), and “Probably my favorite male actor

of all time. He had such presence, that you don't see anymore. I bet he could walk through a room and melt the panties off most people" (AfghanHokie, "Movies," 2014, Feb. 3). The very similar sentiments in these comments show that Reddit users are interested in finding and affirming common ground when it comes to more lighthearted interests as well.

However, perhaps the most common tactic used in espousing shared values was a user recounting his or her personal experience that was similar to those recounted by other users. In these cases, the community members were not necessarily uniting for a specific cause or interest, they were simply emphasizing their similarities through the fact that they have had similar experiences, and thus can more closely relate to one another on a variety of topics from the serious to the seemingly trivial. This occurred very commonly in the comments on posts linked to photographs of pets, as various users would tell stories about their own pets. In one example that clearly demonstrates this occurrence, the original post linked to a photograph of an older black labrador sleeping with another black labrador puppy named Molly (farceur318, "Aww," 2014, Jan. 13). In response to this post many users shared their similar experiences with either their older dogs that had passed away or their own black labradors named Molly (e.g., "I miss my old man. My house is very, very lonely without him..." (AudioxBlood, "Aww," 2014, Jan. 13), "I lost my buddy last May...and it is so different around the house" (Bemith, "Aww," 2014, Jan. 13), "That's the name of my black lab puppy!" (SkylineDrive, "Aww," 2014, Jan. 13), "I had a black lab named Molly as well!" (Keeronin, "Aww," 2014, Jan. 13), "What a Bittersweet name and memory. My Black lab coincidentally named Molly was a very sweet girl" (Orbitalstorm, "Aww," 2014, Jan. 13)). Other

common experiences shared by community members included having relatives who are smokers (pocketstehleet, "AdviceAnimals," 2014, Jan. 6), dealing with the extreme cold in Canada (Collotto, "AdviceAnimals," 2014, Jan. 6), "lurking" on Reddit rather than posting content (muricanidiot, "AdviceAnimals," 2014, Jan. 6), skipping tutorials in video games (wrigleyirish, "AdviceAnimals," 2014, Jan. 6), growing their own vegetables (fandacious, "Pics," 2014, Jan. 6), using an ex-partner's Netflix account (KushKyle, "AdviceAnimals," 2014, Jan. 13), working at a carwash (Who_Gives_A_Rats_Ass, "Pics," 2014, Jan. 20), being in a locker room with elderly people (FabulousFlavor, "Funny," 2014, Jan. 20), playing various party games (orbo2187, "WTF," 2014, Jan. 27), going on a date to McDonald's (prometheus2808, "Funny," 2014, Feb. 3), and drinking out of bowls with straws (Aweshit, "Funny," 2014, Feb. 3). These are certainly a variety of different experiences, but by emphasizing their similarities in these situations, Reddit's members can connect with each other and potentially build stronger feelings of community.

Another strategy of the common ground technique commonly used in Reddit's everyday communication was the recognition of individual contributions. This often took the form of users thanking each other or expressing appreciation for the content or comments they submitted. For example, a user posted in a subreddit for do-it-yourself projects a link to photographs of a ceiling lamp that he built, showing the steps he took along the way (pawlesome, "DIY," 2014, Jan. 6). The first comment on this post said, "Thanks for showing your failures as well as your final success...I think it's far more motivating for people to actually DIY if they see that it's okay to fail a few times before you get it right" (TheTaoOfBill, "DIY," 2014, Jan. 6), and others echoed this sentiment,

including one that said, “Man, that’s awesome that you just saw something you like and took the initiative to build one for yourself. Solid work, it looks great” (auritus, “DIY,” 2014, Jan. 6). In a similar example, a user posted a link to a picture of homegrown vegetables (fandacious, “Pics,” 2014, Jan. 6), with commenters congratulating the user on his/her accomplishment and providing advice, to which the original poster replied, “Awesome! Thanks for the tip. Helps to have someone who knows what they talking about!” In this case, there was a clear mutual recognition of contributions from both the original poster and the commenters. These kinds of interactions were quite common in cases where users shared their own original creations, or when they took the time to write an informative or entertaining comment.

Another way that Reddit users recognized individual contributions was by seeking to identify the original source of content if it was not created by the person who posted it. For example, on a post with a link to a comic strip, one user commented, “Hey everyone, here’s [name of website] if you’d like to see more” (buoybuoy, “Funny,” 2014, Jan. 6) with a link to the website for the comic’s creator. In another example, a user even gave credit to the original creator of the content in the title of his post, stating, “I’m not trying to steal credit, but /u/Shitty_Watercolour drew this and it’s too fantastic not to share” (trobsmonkey, “Dogecoin,” 2014, Jan. 20). Similarly, a user who submitted a link to images of handmade Wild West-themed Star Wars figurines made it clear with an additional comment that “I did not make this...this was made by an artist named Sillof... You can check out his stuff at his site and maybe send him a shoutout at Twitter if you’re into that” (SomeNorCalGuy, “Pics,” 2014, Jan. 27), with links to both the website and the Twitter page. In each of these cases, recognizing the original creators of

content not only expresses appreciation for Reddit's quality content, it also helps to maintain a sense of honesty and openness within the community.

Finally, there were several cases of members of Reddit recognizing the contributions of celebrities and their participation in the community. For example, one common type of post on Reddit is called an "AMA" or "Ask Me Anything," in which one user fields and answers questions from others. In the posts included in this analysis, there were AMAs with comedian Jerry Seinfeld and the creators of the web comic *Cyanide and Happiness*, and along with asking questions, many Reddit users offered praise and thanks in their comments. For example, in the Jerry Seinfeld AMA one user began a question with "Hi Jerry, enormous fan. Seinfeld is my favorite show of all time" (Jay_Riemenschneider, "AMA," 2014, Jan. 6), and another commented, "Hey Jerry, thanks for doing this, love your work" (blade316, "AMA," 2014, Jan. 6). Seinfeld, in turn, was quick to recognize the quality of the questions being asked, often beginning his response with things like "Very good observation and analysis on your part" (_Seinfeld, "AMA," 2014, Jan. 6). This back and forth recognition between the celebrity and the rest of the community further contributes to a positive attitude within the community, and also seems to bring the celebrity into the community as another functioning member. However, this does not only happen with famous actors. In another AMA, the Reddit user Unidan, a biologist and sort of internal Reddit celebrity for his ability to show up to answer biology related questions in seemingly any comment thread, offered to answer questions about his recent work. Comments from Unidan also showed up in several of the other posts included in this analysis, and each time other users would demonstrate their appreciation with comments like "Every time I read your name, I read it with the same

excitement that Forest Gump said ‘LT. DAN’” (kasper12, “GIFs,” 2014, Jan. 13) and “The Mighty One has spoken!” (venb, “WTF,” 2014, Feb. 3). By acknowledging his perceived high quality comments, the other users encourage him to continue, and perhaps encourage comments of similar quality from other users, which would strengthen the community as a whole.

However, not all of the everyday communication between Reddit users is so positive. Throughout the posts included in this analysis were also many examples of identification through antithesis, with users demonstrating agreement over their disapproval for a variety of things both external and internal. In one post, a user linked to an article explaining that American cable companies have failed to provide fiber Internet despite a 200 billion dollar investment from the government (hellsgrave, “Technology,” 2014, Jan. 6). Comments in this post overwhelmingly suggested a shared disapproval for cable companies especially, but also for the government itself. For example, one commenter said, “I look at cable companies...as big ol’ babies that just get fatter and fatter, but never get smarter or prettier. They just become fatter and uglier babies” (VenomB, “Technology,” 2014, Jan. 6), and another added, “So they’re acting exactly as our government rewards them for acting? They’d stop if someone stopped them. They won’t if no one will” (Witty_Redditor, “Technology,” 2014, Jan. 6). Other things that users collectively disapproved of in other posts included political and social issues like unfair smoking bans, (pocketstehleet, “AdviceAnimals,” 2014, Jan. 6), New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and governmental bureaucracy (browneyedguuurl, “Politics,” 2014, Jan. 13), hypocrisy and inaction against the NSA (ionised, “WorldNews,” 2014, Jan. 13), conservative opposition to marijuana legalization (TheSoiledFool, “News,”

2014, Jan. 20), the inefficiency of large organizations (searchaskew, “TodayILearned,” 2014, Jan. 20), the actions of the media blog *Gawker* (pianoyeah, “Movies,” 2014, Jan. 27), as well as cultural issues like the quality of later seasons of the television shows *Scrubs* (TimTim67, “Funny,” 2014, Jan. 6) and *The Simpsons* (Dr_King_Schultz, “Funny,” 2014, Jan. 27), and the *Star Wars* character Jar Jar Binks (Join_You_In_The_Sun, “Movies,” 2014, Feb. 3). In fact, based on the posts analyzed, it seems that Reddit users are more likely to agree and voice stronger opinions about something they dislike than something they like.

Throughout these posts, there was also quite a bit of identification through antithesis against certain actions and behaviors within the Reddit community. For example, on a post submitted to the subreddit called “Funny,” several users complained that the post itself was not actually funny. For example, a user commented, “At least you didn’t put the punchline in the title. Because there isn’t a punchline. Because it’s not funny” (gabemart, “Funny,” 2014, Jan. 13), with another adding, “You just pretty much described all of /r/funny” (Taintedwisp, “Funny,” 2014, Jan. 13), and another pointing out, “But yet it still gets this high up...[in the subreddit]” (lord_of_thunder, “Funny,” 2014, Jan. 13). These comments, which received enough upvotes to be near the top of the post’s comment thread, speak to a shared perception of the detriment of posting something to a subreddit where it does not belong. However, the comments also indicate that posts like this are a fairly common occurrence, and the post these comments were responding to certainly received a large amount of upvotes as well to be included in the top posts from all subreddits combined.

Reddit users also seemed to disapprove of any behavior that was dishonest or misleading. The most common examples of this were the use of Photoshop or other editing software when posting a photograph, and reposting content in hopes of earning karma without giving credit to the original source. On one post linked to a photograph of a cat and young child peering through a crack between boards (robertl433, "Pics," 2014, Jan. 6), nine of the top ten comments were pointing out either that the cat had been edited into the image, that the post was a repost, or both. On another post linked to an edited photograph, a user commented calling it "An unoriginal shitfest of saturation and filters" (tsktac, "Pics," 2014, Feb. 3), with another user sarcastically pointing out that this is "front page material in /r/pics [the subreddit for pictures] right guys?" (splosionp, "Pics," 2014, Feb. 3). Similar to the above example in the "Funny" subreddit, users clearly expressed their disapproval for this kind of post, while at the same time indicating that posts like it are common and often popular enough to be voted to the front page.

Comments on other posts seemed to indicate that reposts are equally hated, but also common and popular. In one comment, a user explained:

But one thing that will not stand (for me, as a redditor) is when I see a repost/oldpost AND they claim it's theirs or their dad's or their girlfriend's or their friend's or their uncle's or their neighbors because that'll "sell" it better to their target audience (you), that's when I'll break out the ol' karma decay or the Google search by image and then let everyone know who the original source is and that the OP is a bundle of sticks for claiming ownership of someone else's work.

(SomeNorCalGuy, "Pics," 2014, Jan. 27)

On another post claiming original content, the actual originator of the content commented, “Hey thanks for stealing my shit asshole! You didn’t even bother to cross-post me or give me credit! Same title same everything, you karma stealing whore” (ARasool, “Funny,” 2014, Feb. 3). Both of these comments demonstrate extreme disapproval of a behavior that remains fairly common to the chagrin of many members of the Reddit community. Examples like this are especially interesting in that the votes at times seem to indicate approval for posts that do not fit their subreddit, pictures using photoshop, reposts, and the like, but the top comments within these posts, which are also determined by the voting system, often seem to indicate disapproval for the same reposts. This suggests that identification may not always be universal throughout the Reddit community, and that conflict over differing opinions is still prevalent in the Reddit community. With the growing number of Reddit users it is perhaps to be expected that large amounts of people will both like and dislike a certain kind of post, but identification can still be an effective strategy to emphasize similarity and facilitate communication within certain comment sections.

In addition to the common ground technique and identification through antithesis, the posts examined as part of Reddit’s everyday communication also included additional examples of the identification strategy of *unifying symbols*. The most common symbol in these posts that members used to identify with each other was the upward-pointing arrow that signifies an upvote. In some cases, in addition to simply voting for a post or comment, a user would also comment with a link to an image or gif (a type of moving image) of a pop culture reference (e.g. *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones*) with the upvote arrow edited in. While this was not a particularly common occurrence in the posts

examined, the few examples show that this is certainly a recognizable symbol within the Reddit community and another way for members to communicate with each other.

Outside of these identification strategies (i.e., the common ground technique, identification through antithesis, and unifying symbols) identified by Cheney (1983), the communication between Reddit users also offered evidence of a couple of other ways that members relate to each other. One such way is closely related to the concept of *intertextuality*, or making reference to other texts. Since Reddit in general is a collection of links from other websites, it makes sense that intertextuality would be a major part of its success, but this intertextuality often goes beyond simply linking to other sites to include more specific references. A kind of reference commonly used on Reddit is a form of Internet meme consisting of an image with text across the top and bottom. Different images are associated with different meanings and different situations, most of which are well known to community members, and the text often provides more explanation of a specific situation related to that image. These memes are commonly seen in a subreddit called “AdviceAnimals,” which is specifically dedicated to this form of meme, but they can also often be seen linked in comments in other subreddits. An example in the posts examined featured a meme called “Insanity Wolf,” which is an image of a growling wolf accompanied by text describing behavior considered to be “insane.” In the example examined, the text read, “BUY MILKSHAKE IN -41 DEGREE WEATHER. DRINK IT ON THE WALK HOME” (Collotto, “AdviceAnimals,” 2014, Jan. 6). Another example is the meme “Bad Luck Brian,” a yearbook photo of an apparently awkward teenager with text explaining a situation in which someone experienced bad luck. The example within the posts examined described the poster’s experience attending a high school reunion

after becoming successful and having a beautiful girlfriend, only to have her cheat on him with a person who used to bully him (JustMyLuck12, "AdviceAnimals," 2014, Jan. 20). While memes like this can be found across the Internet and are not unique to Reddit, they are certainly a common way for members to communicate with each other that potentially reaffirms membership, since users must know the meaning of the image chosen in order to fully understand the post.

Another form of intertextuality commonly used was a comment making a relevant reference to something from popular culture. These references could simply be in the form of text, or they could involve linking to images or gifs of the pop culture item being referenced. For example, on the post described above in which a user showed the process of building his own lamp, one of the top comments was "I love lamp!" (lwbii00, "DIY," 2014, Jan. 6), a reference to a scene in the movie *Anchorman* in which one of the characters says the same thing. In response to this comment, other users shared other quotes from the same scene, as well as links to an image of the character being quoted and even a video of the entire scene from YouTube. This kind of interaction not only shows that community members understand each other's references, potentially emphasizing their similarities, but including the video of the scene also allows users who are unfamiliar with the reference to be in on the joke. Similar pop culture references appeared in the comments for almost every post examined, and in some cases one comment thread contained references to a wide variety of pop culture items even just within the top several comments. For example, one post linked to a Wikipedia article explaining that older civilizations thought kangaroos to be mythical creatures (Animorganimate, "TodayILearned," 2014, Feb. 3), and the comments on the post

included textual references to the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* series, the comic book character Thor, the TV series *Heroes*, *Spongebob Squarepants*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*, the movies *300* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the Black Sabbath song “War Pigs,” and the *Pokemon* video game series, as well as a link to an image from the movie *Dumb and Dumber*. As a group, these items may not appear to have much in common with each other or with the original post, but Reddit users found a way to reference them all within the context of the conversation. It is unlikely that every Reddit user understands or recognizes every reference that he or she comes across within the site, but for those who do, it can certainly lead to feelings of similarity with the user who made the reference. If nothing else, all of these references suggest that Reddit users in general have a strong appreciation for popular culture and enjoy discussing it in each other’s company.

One final way that Reddit users attempted to identify with each other was through “trains” of jokes or puns, in which one user would make a humorous comment, and others would follow suit by responding to the previous comment in a similar way. In many of the posts examined, the top comment was a joke followed by one of these “trains.” Sometimes they consisted of sarcastic comments in which users ridiculed something related to the topic of the posts, but other times they were more lighthearted. For example, a post that linked to a picture of a plane that had landed on top of a car included a train of plane-related puns, starting with “It’s plane as day who’s in the wrong here” (JebusGobson, “WTF,” 2014, Jan. 6), followed by “Tough to see who’s in the wright here” (ShaneDAWSON, “WTF,” 2014, Jan. 6), “Apparently he didn’t know how to land, so he just winged it” (I_cant_english_good, “WTF,” 2014, Jan. 6), and “Couldn’t

understand the gravity of the situation” (seroevo, “WTF,” 2014, Jan. 6), among others. Participating in this shared activity potentially allows Reddit users to show each other that they have similar senses of humor, or possibly indicates that users try to fit in with the mood or theme of the thread when submitting their own comments.

Overall, it is clear that attempts at identification make up a significant portion of the everyday communication between Reddit’s users. Whether they are expressing shared values or experiences, showing appreciation for each other’s contributions, uniting around common enemies within and outside of Reddit, or sharing jokes and pop culture references, members of the Reddit community seem to have many similarities, and they emphasize those similarities in the things that they say and the ways that they act within the community. In some ways, this everyday communication also included instances reflecting the ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric, but since it came from a wide variety of voices rather than a central source, this communication seemed less likely to *constitute* a collective identity, and more likely to *reinforce* this identity or demonstrate this identity in action. Based on the analysis of this everyday communication, as well as the central communication from the four “essentials” pages examined above, the following chapter will discuss whether the everyday communication seems to be in accord with the constituted Reddit identity, what role conflict and dissent plays in relationship to this identity, and some of the implications this may have for the community’s success.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the central communication from Reddit's four pages labeled "the essentials" includes several clear examples of strategies aiming to strengthen identification between members of the community, as well as several attempts to constitute a collective Reddit identity for Reddit's users to enact. Additionally, the users themselves included many identification strategies in their own communication to emphasize commonalities within the community and potentially lead to positive interactions among members. However, there are still questions as to Reddit's success in establishing a collective identity, as well as whether this identity and the way it is enacted promote or constrain the community's success in the long run.

In some ways, it seems clear that Reddit has succeeded in constituting a strong, collective identity for its members, in accordance with the first ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric. Many of the posts and comments examined seemed to demonstrate that users had a clear idea of what it means to be a part of Reddit, and the use of the term "redditor" to identify a member of the community, which is seen throughout Reddit's central communication, could also be seen several times in the users' own communication. Members of the community would use the term when referring to themselves and each other, and a few of them even included the term in their usernames. The fact that users would call themselves redditors suggests that Reddit is more than just

a website that people visit from time to time, it is a significant part of the users' lives and their identities, at least when they are acting within the community.

In general, the posts examined in this study also demonstrated that Reddit users follow many of the rules and suggestions in the FAQ and Reddiquette pages, or at least that the voting system is able to effectively eliminate many posts or comments that do not follow these guidelines (although there are some notable exceptions, to be discussed in more detail below). There were no obvious cases of users spamming by linking to websites that benefit them personally, and if the subject of the post was personal (e.g., a person showing a lamp that they made or vegetables that they grew), it was because the subreddit encouraged posts of that nature. There were also very few obvious examples of personal attacks or "witch hunts" against individual users, and certainly nothing that involved exposing a person's offline identity. There were few posts with titles that seemed to be overly sensational or pleading for attention or votes, and most of the top comments seemed to provide some value, whether for information, entertainment, support, or sparking discussion. Users often also made sure to give credit to the original source of the content they posted, and if they did not do so in the original post, another user would often do so in the comments. All of this suggests that to a certain degree, Reddit has succeeded in encouraging its members to act in ways that "benefit the community," or at least that those who do are rewarded for their actions through the voting system.

In many cases, Reddit's users also seemed to be genuinely enjoying their experiences within the site, especially within posts on more lighthearted topics. Members indicated that they take pride in being part of Reddit (e.g., stating that Reddit has better

comments and classier members than other online communities), exemplifying their positive feelings toward the community. Additionally, posts full of shared inside jokes and references, stories of shared experiences, appreciation and thanks for others contributions, advice, and in some cases genuine emotional support, all suggest a congenial community in which members get along and can easily relate to each other. In these cases, Reddit does seem to be a successful online community to which its users will continue to return.

Beyond simply following the guidelines for action as a member of the Reddit community and interacting in a positive way, the communication between users also suggests that there are some more specific similarities among community members. These include specific ways through which they communicate (e.g., the “trains” of jokes and references, popular memes, and even the language style), but they also seem to include an interest in science and technology, appreciation for pop culture in many different forms, a love for animals, skepticism toward the government and large organizations, support for liberal political and social movements, and a value of honest, open, and thoughtful discussion. While it surely cannot be said that every member of the community shares all of these qualities, they are all qualities that commonly appeared in the top posts and comments examined in this study, and therefore seem to be common and popular qualities shared by many. This suggests that while Reddit may claim to be accepting of diversity, the collective Reddit identity may be a bit more narrow than it seems, and it may be a community that attracts certain kinds of people over others.

However, the posts and comments included in this study also demonstrated that Reddit is not always a place where people with similar qualities can engage in positive

interactions within the guidelines provided in Reddit's central communication, and that conflict is very much a part of the community's interaction. There were several examples of negative or destructive behaviors, or failure to follow some of the guidelines from the FAQ and Reddiquette pages, even among the posts and comments that received a high number of votes. The most clear examples of this were the submissions that were "reposts" of content that had already been submitted to Reddit in the past. At best, the users submitting these reposts could have simply failed to search Reddit to make sure the post was original, as the Reddiquette page suggests they do. At worst, however, the users could have been knowingly submitting unoriginal content and trying to claim it as their own for attention and votes, and the commenters on these posts generally assumed this to be the case. If this is true, then these users were not only failing to follow the Reddiquette page's guideline of giving credit to the original source of content, they were also undermining the honest, open discussion that the Reddit community seems to value.

The users who responded to these reposts often seemed to only be adding to the problem. The Reddiquette page advises users not to complain about reposts in their comments, but simply to let their votes speak for themselves, or at least to point out reposts politely. However, in many of the submissions that were found to be reposts, almost all of the top comments were dedicated to pointing this out, rather than actual discussion about the post. Furthermore, the comments pointing out reposts often failed to be polite, and instead used profanity and harsh language to essentially attack the person who submitted the repost, as seen in some of the examples above. Since both the reposts and the negative comments about them seemed to be receiving plenty of upvotes, this may indicate a breakdown in Reddit's system that creates a divide in the community, or a

way in which Reddit's constitutive rhetoric fails to establish a uniform, collective identity. It seems that some users may actually value reposts or at least are not bothered by them, while others may be putting excessive effort into cutting down these posts and seeking agreement and validation for their negative opinions from others in the community, rather than engaging in positive, productive discussion elsewhere on the site. These reposts and the negative comments about them may be being rewarded with upvotes and karma, but they are not really following the spirit of Reddit as defined on the Reddiquette and FAQ pages. As mentioned above, the comments examined often demonstrated stronger collective negative feelings than positive feelings, so when comments exude negativity they may influence other users to comment in a similar fashion, again detracting from the kind of discussion that Reddit seems to value.

In addition to this overt behavior that may threaten the success of the community, the ideological effect of the illusion of freedom also makes it difficult to tell whether users are truly acting for the good of the community, or if their actions have more individual motivations. Reddit's system of voting and karma certainly leads to individual rewards, despite the fact that karma has no inherent value. Users may submit content because they truly believe the community will find it interesting or valuable, and they may add to a joke train or make a pop culture reference to contribute to the quality of the conversation and affirm their similarity with the community, but they may also do these things because they have noticed the popularity of similar posts in the past and want a piece of that popularity. The FAQ suggests that karma is earned for doing things that benefit the community, and ideally this would be the case so that the individual and the overall community would mutually benefit. However, Reddit users often accuse each

other of “karma whoring,” or doing something for the sole purpose of earning karma, especially if they are submitting a repost or something else not perceived to have value to the community. These attitudes toward karma are indicative of the tension between the individual and the community that are often present in an online community like Reddit. If the balance shifts too much toward the individual and karma becomes the main motivating factor in members’ behavior, then the community as a whole may suffer.

At the same time, however, the community may suffer if the balance shifts too much toward the community at the expense of the individual. If individuals place an emphasis on submitting only content that they know the community will enjoy, then the diversity of content and opinions may suffer. For example, if users only submit posts or comments about current events from a liberal perspective because they know this is the dominant perspective on Reddit, then there could be a lack of actual discussion from opposing viewpoints, and in its place simply a reaffirmation of the current perspective. Additionally, if users become overly focused on fitting in with the community, then their own individual identities may suffer. They may feel pressured to conceal their opinions or interests that would be unpopular within the Reddit community and only share content that emphasizes their similarities, or they may be pressured to lie about or change their perspectives to avoid the community’s disapproval. If users feel forced to conform to the collective identity of the community, this may indicate the success of constitutive rhetoric, but it does not seem to bode well for the satisfaction of individual members or the success of the community in the long run.

On the topic of identity, it is unclear from the communication examined in this study how strong and far reaching Reddit’s constitutive rhetoric actually is. While there is

evidence of a constituted collective identity in terms of similar communication styles, actions, and interests, members of the Reddit community may choose to enact or not to enact different aspects of their identities based on the subreddit to which they are contributing. For example, in the default subreddits which are the most popular and have the most subscribers, a user may conform to the majority opinion or be hesitant to voice an alternative. However, plenty of more specialized subreddits exist that may go unnoticed by dominant portions of the community, allowing users to interact with people who are more like-minded and with whom they may feel more free to express their true opinions or identities. Additionally, while users may profess to be proud redditors in their communication within the community, their identity as redditors may play a very small or even nonexistent role in the identity that they present outside of Reddit or offline entirely (in fact, Reddit's relative anonymity often makes it difficult to connect a user's identity within the community to his or her offline identity with regard to name, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and many other identifying characteristics). As discussed above, online identity is often multiple and can be limited to a certain context, and this seems very likely within Reddit as well. However, while the effect of constitutive rhetoric in creating a collective identity may not be as strong or complete in an online community like Reddit as it is in offline communities, it can still have a strong effect within the online community itself, and likely carries out an important function in allowing the community to interact effectively.

It should be noted that the posts and comments included in this analysis all came from within a five week period, with only the top posts at a certain time on a certain day being chosen each week. Thus, it is difficult to make any long term observations as to

how Reddit's collective identity has changed or may change over time. However, the breadth and variety of the posts and comments even within this small sample certainly served as a good starting point in understanding how the community and its members operate. Also, by looking at this sample of posts and comments along with Reddit's central communication, which stays more constant over time, it was possible to detect communication patterns with regard to identification and constitutive rhetoric that are likely indicative of larger patterns over time.

Additionally, this study purposely chose to include only the most popular posts and comments, partially for feasibility of analysis and partially because these are the posts that seem most likely to speak to a larger Reddit identity. This means that posts and comments that did not receive a large number of votes, or posts that received a large number of downvotes, were not included. Reddit's voting system makes it difficult to even see these unpopular posts, and this study cannot make any claims about what these posts contain. Many of them could contain content that is clearly detrimental to the community, perhaps justifying their low position and affirming Reddit's success as a community in eliminating this negative content. However, others may simply be unpopular or minority opinions that were never allowed to see the light of day. If this is the case, this would be more troubling to the community's continued success in being a place that claims to value open discussion and a diversity of ideas.

Overall, Reddit does seem to have a collective identity that it seeks to promote and constitute throughout its central communication, and there is certainly evidence of users enacting this identity in their everyday communication and attempting to strengthen their identification with other community members. At times, this leads to positive,

productive, and open discussion and interaction, but it can also easily devolve into dishonesty, negativity, and the dominance of a majority opinion. Additionally, the conflict over some of the rules Reddit tries to establish (especially on the topic of reposts) suggests an interesting duality within the community. On one hand, identification and constitutive rhetoric can be used to coordinate communication and interaction between members in ways consistent with espoused goals and values, but on the other hand, conflict within the community suggests that the collective identity and its goals and values can still be challenged. Conflict and deviation from the constituted identity are not inherently detrimental, as they have the potential to bring about change, perhaps for the better, and the popularity of reposts and comments attacking them may suggest that Reddit even enjoys conflict at times. However, this conflict can certainly be destructive if members are unable to agree upon fundamental rules for their behavior, communication, and interaction within the community, especially when this disagreement undermines the central values that define Reddit as a community.

A comment included in the posts analyzed for this study seems to effectively summarize Reddit's goal in stating, "I believe that the purpose of reddit is to spread ideas and enrich the reader's world" (tallyrand, "Pics," 2014, Jan. 27), and the success of the community could perhaps be determined based on its continued ability to fulfill this purpose. A strong collective identity could be a major strength in sustaining this success by creating a bond with the community and encouraging behavior that will benefit this community, but it could also significantly constrain this success by making Reddit into less of a place for the spreading of new ideas and more of a place for reaffirming old ones. Furthermore, conflict over constituted behavioral guidelines could reveal opportunities

for change, but could also make positive, effective communication between members increasingly difficult. Online communities are often unpredictable, and Reddit will almost certainly go through many changes before eventually fading away as new communities take its place, but in the meantime these questions about individual and community identity will continue to influence the community and its members as they navigate the conflicts and tensions that they create.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Reddit FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions

Basics

What is reddit?

reddit is a source for what's new and popular on the web.

Users like you provide all of the content and decide, through voting, what's good and what's junk.

Links that receive community approval bubble up towards #1, so the front page is constantly in motion and (hopefully) filled with fresh, interesting links.

What does the name "reddit" mean?

It's (sort of) a play on words -- i.e., "I read it on reddit." Also, there are some unintentional but interesting Latin meanings to the word "reddit". [Details here.](#)

What is that alien / bug thing?

That adorable and informative creature is Snoo, the mascot for the reddit community. It is also a registered trademark owned by reddit. You can visit redditalien.com for an archive of its past adventures.

Can anyone submit a link?

Yes — all you need is [an account!](#) However, there is a cap on the posting rate to prevent spamming. This restriction is the same for both reddit gold members and non-gold members.

How is a submission's score determined?

A submission's score is simply the number of upvotes minus the number of downvotes. If five users like the submission and three users don't it will have a score of 2. Please note that the vote numbers are not "real" numbers, they have been "fuzzed" to prevent spam bots etc. So taking the above example, if five users upvoted the submission, and three users downvote it, the upvote/downvote numbers may say 23 upvotes and 21 downvotes, or 12 upvotes, and 10 downvotes. The points score is correct, but the vote totals are "fuzzed".

Why does a dot sometimes show up where the score should be?

For the first few hours after a submission is created, the score is not displayed. This is intended to mitigate the bandwagon effect.

I made a mistake in my submission title, how can I edit it?

Submission titles cannot be edited. However, you can simply delete it and resubmit it. The sooner you do this, the less likely you will lose any votes or comments.

What is that number next to usernames? And what is karma?

The number next to a username is called that user's "karma." It reflects how much good the user has done for the reddit community. The best way to gain karma is to submit links that other people like and vote for, though you won't get karma for self posts.

Why should I try to accumulate karma?

Why should you try to score points in a video game? Why should your favorite sports team try to win the championship?

Or, to look at things from a less competitive and more altruistic perspective, read [what philosophers have said about the matter](#) -- namely, don't set out to accumulate karma; just set out to be a good person, and let your karma simply be a reminder of your legacy. Note: reddit makes no guarantees about attaining Nirvana.

Update: A redditor named jumpercable tried to redeem his karma. [See how it went](#)(your mileage may vary).

What can I do to get my submissions noticed?

Remember that adage about not judging a book by its cover? No one actually follows it. So choose your title carefully — make it useful, provide context, and be descriptive. Be careful though, if you're too aggressive it could backfire. Phrases like, "Vote this up to spread the word!" or "AMAZING!" tend to annoy most redditors, who will make sure your post doesn't see the light of day.

Why don't my submissions show up on the New page?

reddit has a spam filter designed to detect spam posts and automatically remove them. However, legitimate posts are often caught by the filter. If a few minutes go by and your post isn't showing up on the new page of the community where you posted, it has probably been caught by the filter. This is most likely to occur if you are posting to a community that you have not participated in before. Each community has an independent filter, for example [/r/help](#)'s filter doesn't talk to [/r/pic](#)'s filter. In order to remove your post

from the filter you need to [message the moderators](#) (this link can be found in the sidebar on the right-hand in that community, you can also manually compose a message to #communityname) and ask them to check the filter for you. Eventually the filter will "learn" that your posts don't need to be removed.

Is reddit available in languages other than English?

Yes! In the upper-right corner of the page, there should be a link that says, "English". Click it and you'll get a popup where you can change to another language.

I want to change my username. Do I have to start a new account?

Yes. Once a user account is created, the username cannot be edited. You can create a new user profile but cannot migrate karma, comment karma or trophies to the new username.

Will you remove something defamatory about me or "my friend" from reddit?

In light of the protections afforded to online hosts of third party content, such as reddit, we rarely remove such material, but we reserve the right to do so for legal or other reasons.

Please note that reddit does not remove posts for containing insults or negative commentary, but leaves such decisions to the moderators of particular communities. Those moderators are not employees of or retained by reddit, they are the persons who initiated the particular community and their appointees. While posts that contain such content can be distasteful, reddit is not in a position to arbitrate disputes. Posts should be consistent with the rules of the community to which they are posted.

The best way to deal with incorrect information on the Internet is to post the correct information next to it. The reddit community is usually very supportive of such a response, and will likely vote to give the correction greater prominence than the original post. Redditors love a good counterpoint.

Is posting personal information ok?

NO. reddit is a pretty open and free speech place, but it is not ok to post someone's personal information, or post links to personal information. This includes links to public Facebook pages and screenshots of Facebook pages with the names still legible. We all get outraged by the ignorant things people say and do online, but witch hunts and vigilantism hurt innocent people and certain individual information, including personal info found online is often false. Posting personal information will get you banned. Posting professional links to contact a congressman or the CEO of some company is probably fine, but don't post anything inviting harassment, don't harass, and don't cheer on or vote up obvious vigilantism.

Is posting political campaign information ok?

Yes. reddit does not discriminate among candidates or differing political viewpoints in any way, nor does it discriminate between political and non-political topics. reddit's terms of service require all users not to violate any law, statute or regulation in the course of their use. reddit provides its basic service to all users without charge and its provision of basic services for free is not a contribution to any candidate, political committee, or political party committee. reddit does not control links to political sites, does not endorse them, and is not responsible for any aspects of those sites.

Which staff member should I write to if I have a problem or question?

[Send a message to /r/reddit.com](#)

I want to make something with the reddit alien on it. Whom do I contact?

We have a [whole page on licensing](#).

What do all of these acronyms mean?

Well there are a lot of acronyms in use on reddit, so this is just a list of some of the main ones you'll see.

- AFAIK means "As far as I know"
- AMA means "Ask me anything"
- CMV means "Change my view"
- DAE means "Does anybody else" or "Does anyone else"
- ELI5 means "Explain like I'm 5 (years old)"
- FTFY means "Fixed that for you"
- IAMA means "I am a"
- IANAD means "I am not a doctor"
- IANAL means "I am not a lawyer"
- IIRC means "If I recall correctly"
- IMO/IMHO means "In my opinion" and "In my humble/honest opinion", respectively
- ITT means "In this thread"
- MRW/MFW means "My reaction when" and "My face when", respectively
- NSFL means "Not safe for life" (gory or gross content)
- NSFW means "Not safe for work" (sexual content)
- OP means "Original poster" (the person who started the thread)
- [Serious] means "Serious responses only" (commonly used in [/r/askreddit](#) and other subreddits now)
- PSA means "Public service announcement"
- TIL means "Today I learned"

- TL;DR means "Too long; Didn't read"
- YSK means "You should know"

Commenting

Is there a reference guide for the reddit comment syntax?

Yes — the [commenting help page](#) explains all the details, pitfalls, and workarounds.

What does it mean when an asterisk appears next to a comment?

This just means that the commenter has edited it. (On reddit, you can go back and edit your comments in order to fix mistakes, add new information, or be annoying.)

How is a comment's score determined?

According to the same principles as a submission's score.

A comment's score is simply the number of upvotes minus the number of downvotes. If five users like the comment and three users don't it will have a score of 2. Please note that the vote numbers are not "real" numbers, they have been "fuzzed" to prevent spam bots etc. So taking the above example, if five users upvoted the comment, and three users downvote it, the upvote/downvote numbers may say 23 upvotes and 21 downvotes, or 12 upvotes, and 10 downvotes. The points score is correct, but the vote totals are "fuzzed".

Individual subreddits

What are subreddits?

reddit is made up of thousands of sub-communities, each focused on a specific topic. There's a subreddit for [science](#), a subreddit for [music](#), and probably a subreddit for your nearest city. By default, new users are subscribed to a selection of the most popular ones, but you'll get a lot more enjoyment out of the site if you take the time to subscribe to ones that appeal to you. After doing so, the front page will change to show a customized listing tailored to your interests.

How can I find and subscribe to subreddits?

There are several ways. If you already know what you're looking for, or simply want to browse the list in order of popularity, the [reddit search page](#) will be most direct. There are also a number of external, unofficial but authorized sites that provide different interfaces, e.g. [metareddit.com](#), [subredditfinder.com](#), [subreddits.org](#). To see new subreddits as they're created, subscribe to the subreddit [/r/newreddits](#). Finally, to find a random subreddit, visit [/r/random](#).

You can browse a subreddit before subscribing to it, and if you decide to join, there's a "subscribe" link on the right side of every page. If you're already subscribed you can click "unsubscribe" to unsubscribe.

How many subreddits can I subscribe to?

You may subscribe to as many subreddits as you like! However, on any given visit, your frontpage will only select up to 50 subreddits to show you ([100 for gold users](#)). This selection is refreshed every 30 minutes. When you view the 'MY SUBREDDITS' dropdown, you are seeing only the current 50 selected. The only place to see *all* the subreddits you are subscribed to is [here](#).

Do any subreddits have their own FAQs?

Many do. Check out /r/somesubreddit/wiki to see if your favorite has one.

Moderators

What is a moderator?

A moderator is just a regular redditor like you except they volunteer to perform a few humble duties within a particular community:

- They configure parameters for the community, like what its description should be or whether it should be considered "Over 18".
- They set the custom logo and styling, if any.
- They can mark their own links or comments as the community moderator's submission, which just adds an "[M]" and turns their name green.
- They can remove links and comments from their community if they find them objectionable or off topic.
- They can ban a spammer or other abusive user from submitting to their community. (This has no effect elsewhere on the site).
- They can add other users as moderators.

Moderators have no special powers outside of the community they moderate and are not appointed by reddit.

Why does reddit need moderation? Can't you just let the voters decide?

The reason there are separate subreddits is to allow niche communities to form, instead of having one monolithic overall community. These communities distinguish themselves with a unique focus, look and policies: what's on- and off-topic there, whether people are expected to behave civilly or can feel free to be brutal, etc.

One issue that arises is that casual, new, or transient visitors to a particular community don't always know the rules that tie it together.

As an example, imagine a [/r/swimming](#) and a [/r/scuba](#). People can read about one topic or the other (or subscribe to both). But since scuba divers like to swim, a casual user might start submitting swimming links on [/r/scuba](#). And these stories will probably get upvoted, especially by people who see the links on the reddit front page and don't look closely at where they're posted. If left alone, [/r/scuba](#) will just become another [/r/swimming](#) and there won't be a place to go to find an uncluttered listing of scuba news.

The fix is for the [/r/scuba](#) moderators to remove the offtopic links, and ideally to teach the submitters about the more appropriate [/r/swimming](#) subreddit.

What if the moderators are bad?

In a few cases where a moderator has lost touch with their community, another redditor has created a competing community and subscribers have chosen to use the new reddit instead, which led to it becoming the new dominant reddit.

If you have an issue with a moderator or the way a subreddit is being run, please first try contacting that moderator to see if it's just a simple misunderstanding. You may contact all of the moderators in a subreddit by messaging [/r/\[name of subreddit\]](#) to appeal a decision. Please keep in mind, however, that moderators are free to run their subreddits however they so choose so long as it is not breaking reddit's [rules](#). So if it's simply an ideological issue you have or a personal vendetta against a moderator, consider making a new subreddit and shaping it the way you'd like rather than performing a sit-in and/or witch hunt.

How do you get to be a moderator?

If you create a subreddit you will automatically become its moderator. If you'd like to become a moderator of an existing subreddit, ask one of the community's moderators! Many subreddits actively look for volunteers, so feel free to head on over to [/r/needamod](#) and see who needs help. If you find an abandoned subreddit, a final option would be to check out [/r/redditrequest](#) and make a post requesting to be a moderator.

How can I tell who moderates a given subreddit?

While visiting that subreddit's front page, there should be a box on the right with the names of all its moderators. If you can't find it, just go to <http://reddit.com/r/name-of-subreddit/about/moderators> directly.

Where can I find more information about moderation?

[Here.](#)

Spam, Cheating, and the Like

Is it okay to create multiple accounts?

Yes, you can create multiple/throwaway accounts as long as you do not do so to ghost vote your own submissions.

Why isn't my submission / comment showing up?

Submissions can take a few minutes to appear on the New queue. But it's also possible that a moderator deemed your post to be spam -- or the automatic filtering program did. If you feel this was a mistake, try [sending a message to a moderator](#) of the subreddit in question. If they do not respond after a day or so, post a question in [/r/help](#).

What is the "report" button?

The report button, shown on all links and comments, is an anonymous way for the reddit community to send feedback to the moderators that something is spam or otherwise violates the rules -- for example, pornographic content submitted to a non-adult subreddit, or a .PDF posted to [/r/videos](#). If your reason for reporting is time-sensitive or non-obvious, please leave a reply or send a message to a moderator explaining your reasoning.

You can also report spam by submitting the offending user's overview page to the [/r/spam](#) subreddit.

What happens when something gets reported?

It will be reviewed, either by a person or a program. The more people who report it, the more likely some action will be taken. Reporting spam is the single most important thing a user can do to help keep reddit clean.

What constitutes vote cheating and vote manipulation?

Besides spam, the other big no-no is to try to manipulate voting by any means: manual, mechanical, or otherwise. We're not going to post an exhaustive list of forbidden tactics (lest we give people ideas), but some major ones are:

- Don't use shell or multiple accounts, voting services, or any other software to increase votes for submissions
- Don't ask other users to vote on certain posts, either on reddit itself or anywhere else (through Twitter, Facebook, IM programs, IRC, etc.)
- Don't be part of a "voting clique" or "vote ring"

A voting clique is a group of people who send links to their submissions around via message, IM, or any other means, with the expectation of "you guys vote for my stuff and I'll vote for yours." A "vote ring" is a group of people who agree to vote on certain things together, either a specific submission, a user, a domain, or anything like that. Upvote each submission or content for the value of the information in it, a variety of things that you think are interesting and will benefit the community.

Cheating or attempting to manipulate voting will result in your account being banned. Don't do it.

What constitutes spam?

It's a gray area, but some rules of thumb:

- It's not strictly forbidden to submit a link to a site that you own or otherwise benefit from in some way, but you should sort of consider yourself on thin ice. So please pay careful attention to the rest of these bullet points.
- If your contribution to reddit consists mostly of submitting links to a site(s) that you own or otherwise benefit from in some way, and additionally if you do not participate in discussion, or reply to peoples questions, regardless of how many upvotes your submissions get, you are a spammer. If over 10% of your submissions are your own site/content/affiliate links, you're almost certainly a spammer.
- If people historically downvote your links or ones similar to yours, and you feel the need to keep submitting them anyway, they're probably spam.
- If people historically upvote your links or ones like them -- and we're talking about real people here, not sockpuppets or people you asked to go vote for you -- congratulations! It may not be spam! However, you still need to follow the [guidelines for self promotion](#)
- If nobody's submitted a link like yours before, give it a shot. But don't flood the new queue; submit one or two times and see what happens.

To play it safe, write to the moderators of the community you'd like to submit to. They'll probably appreciate the advance notice. They might also set community-specific rules that supersede the ones above. And that's okay -- that's the whole point of letting people create their own reddit communities and define what's on topic and what's spam.

If you're thinking of doing any self-promotion on reddit, you might want to [read this first](#).

Nerd Talk

What is reddit written in?

Python.

Seriously? I heard it was written in Lisp.

It was, but we rewrote it. ([Here's why.](#))

So what Python framework do you use?

[Pylons](#). You can see [our source code](#) if you want.

Anything we didn't cover?

If you have a question that isn't answered here, you can get near-instant assistance by reading the [/r/help FAQ](#) or posting on the [/r/help reddit](#). We also have a list of [press contacts](#) available, and a page for those looking to [advertise on reddit](#). If you're new to reddit and want some more information on interesting subreddits, confusing acronyms and so on, try [this post](#)..

Content retrieved May 24, 2014, from www.reddit.com/wiki/faq

Appendix B Reddiquette

Reddiquette is an **informal** expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves. Please abide by it the best you can.

Please do

- **Remember the human.** When you communicate online, all you see is a computer screen. When talking to someone you might want to ask yourself "Would I say it to the person's face?" or "Would I get jumped if I said this to a buddy?"
- **Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life.**
- **Read the rules of a community before making a submission.** These are usually found in the sidebar.
- **Read the reddiquette.** Read it again every once in a while. Reddiquette is a living, breathing, working document which may change over time as the community faces new problems in its growth.
- **Moderate based on quality, not opinion.** Well written and interesting content can be worthwhile, even if you disagree with it.
- **Use proper grammar and spelling.** [Intelligent discourse requires a standard system of communication.](#) Be open for gentle corrections.
- **Keep your submission titles factual and opinion free.** If it is an outrageous topic, share your crazy outrage in the comment section.
- **Look for the original source of content,** and submit that. Often, a blog will reference another blog, which references another, and so on with everyone displaying ads along the way. Dig through those references and submit a link to the creator, who actually deserves the traffic.
- **Post to the most appropriate community possible.** Also, consider cross posting if the contents fits more communities.
- **Vote.** If you think something contributes to conversation, upvote it. If you think it does not contribute to the subreddit it is posted in or is off-topic in a particular community, downvote it.
- **Search for duplicates before posting.** Redundancy posts add nothing new to previous conversations. That said, sometimes bad timing, a bad title, or just plain bad luck can cause an interesting story to fail to get noticed. Feel free to post something again if you feel that the earlier posting didn't get the attention it deserved and you think you can do better.
- **Link to the direct version of a media file** when the page it was found on doesn't add any value.
- **Link to canonical and [persistent URLs](#) where possible,** not temporary pages that might disappear. In particular, use the "permalink" for blog entries, not the blog's index page.

- **Consider posting constructive criticism / an explanation when you downvote something**, and do so carefully and tactfully.
- **Report** any spam you find.
- **Browse the [new submissions page](#) and vote on it.** Regard it, perhaps, as a public service.
- **Actually read an article before you vote on it** (as opposed to just basing your vote on the title).
- **Feel free to post links to your own content** (within reason). But if that's all you ever post, or it always seems to get voted down, take a good hard look in the mirror — you just might be a spammer. A widely used rule of thumb is the 9:1 ratio, i.e. only 1 out of every 10 of your submissions should be your own content.
- **Posts containing explicit material such as nudity, horrible injury etc**, add [NSFW](#) (Not Safe For Work) for nudity, and tag. However, if something IS safe for work, but has a risqué title, tag as SFW (Safe for Work). Additionally, use your best judgement when adding these tags, in order for everything to go swimmingly.
- **State your reason for any editing of posts.** Edited submissions are marked by an asterisk (*) at the end of the timestamp after three minutes. For example: a simple "Edit: spelling" will help explain. This avoids confusion when a post is edited after a conversation breaks off from it. If you have another thing to add to your original comment, say "Edit: And I also think..." or something along those lines.
- **Use an "Innocent until proven guilty" mentality.** Unless there is obvious proof that a submission is fake, or is whoring karma, please don't say it is. It ruins the experience for not only you, but the millions of people that browse reddit every day.
- **Read over your submission for mistakes before submitting**, especially the title of the submission. Comments and the content of self posts can be edited after being submitted, however, the title of a post can't be. Make sure the facts you provide are accurate to avoid any confusion down the line.

Please don't

- **Engage in illegal activity.**
- **Post someone's personal information**, or post links to personal information. This includes links to public Facebook pages and screenshots of Facebook pages with the names still legible. We all get outraged by the ignorant things people say and do online, but witch hunts and vigilantism [hurt innocent people too often](#), and such posts or comments will be removed. Users posting personal info are subject to an immediate account deletion. If you see a user posting personal info, [please contact the admins](#). Additionally, on pages such as Facebook, where personal information is often displayed, please mask the personal information and personal photographs using a blur function, erase function, or simply block it out with color. When personal information is relevant to the post (i.e. comment wars)

please use color blocking for the personal information to indicate whose comment is whose.

- **Repost deleted/removed information.** Remember that comment someone just deleted because it had personal information in it or was a picture of gore? Resist the urge to repost it. It doesn't matter what the content was. If it was deleted/removed, it should stay deleted/removed.
- **Be (intentionally) rude at all.** By choosing not to be rude, you increase the overall civility of the community and make it better for all of us.
- **Follow those who are [rabble rousing](#) against another redditor without first investigating both sides of the issue that's being presented.** Those who are inciting this type of action often have malicious reasons behind their actions and are, more often than not, a troll. Remember, every time a redditor who's contributed large amounts of effort into assisting the growth of community as a whole is driven away, projects that would benefit the whole easily flounder.
- **Ask people to [Troll](#) others on reddit**, in real life, or on other blogs/sites. We aren't your personal army.
- **Conduct personal attacks on other commenters.** Ad hominem and other distracting attacks do not add anything to the conversation.
- **Start a flame war.** Just report and "walk away". If you really feel you have to confront them, leave a polite message with a quote or link to the rules, and no more.
- **Insult others.** Insults do not contribute to a rational discussion. Constructive Criticism, however, is appropriate and encouraged.
- **Troll.** [Trolling](#) does not contribute to the conversation.
- **Take moderation positions in a community where your profession, employment, or biases could pose a direct conflict of interest to the neutral and user driven nature of reddit.**

In regard to voting

- **Downvote an otherwise acceptable post because you don't personally like it.** Think before you downvote and take a moment to ensure you're downvoting someone because they are not contributing to the community dialogue or discussion. If you simply take a moment to stop, think and examine your reasons for downvoting, rather than doing so out of an emotional reaction, you will ensure that your downvotes are given for good reasons.
- **Mass downvote someone else's posts.** If it really is the content you have a problem with (as opposed to the person), by all means vote it down when you come upon it. But don't go out of your way to seek out an enemy's posts.
- **Moderate a story based on your opinion of its source.** Quality of content is more important than who created it.
- **Upvote or downvote based just on the person that posted it.** Don't upvote or downvote comments and posts just because the poster's username is familiar to you. Make your vote based on the content.

- **Report posts just because you do not like them.** You should only be using the report button if the post breaks the subreddit rules.

In regard to promoting reddit posts

- **Hint at asking for votes.** ("Show me some love!", "Is this front page worthy?", "Vote This Up to Spread the Word!", "If this makes the front page, I'll adopt this stray cat and name it reddit", "If this reaches 500 points, I'll get a tattoo of the Reddit alien!", "Upvote if you do this!", "Why isn't this getting more attention?", etc.)
- **Conduct polls using the title of your submission and/or votes.** These methods are not reliable because of [vote fuzzing](#) and are in that regard just asking for upvotes.
- **Send out IMs, tweets, or any other message asking people to vote for your submission** — or comply when other people ask you. This will result in a ban from the admins. Your submission should get points for being good, not because the submitter is part of a voting clique.
- **Ask for upvotes in exchange for gifts or prizes.** "Upvote me to the top and I'll give away ..."
- **Create mass downvote or upvote campaigns.** This includes attacking a user's profile history when they say something bad and participating in karma party threads.

In regard to new submissions

- **Use the word "BREAKING" or other time sensitive words in your submissions.** By the time your post reaches the front page, it probably won't be 'breaking' anymore.
- **Post hoaxes.** If snopes.com has already declared something false, you probably shouldn't be submitting it to reddit.
- **Flood reddit with a lot of stories in a short span of time.** By doing this you flood the new queue. Be warned, your future submissions may be automatically blocked by the spam filter. Shadow banning (you can see your posts and votes, but no one else can) can, and will, take place in more severe cases.
- **Write titles in ALL CAPS.**
- **Editorialize or sensationalize your submission title.**
- **[Linkjack](#) stories:** linking to stories via blog posts that add nothing extra.
- **Use link shorteners to post your content.** There are few reasons to hide what you're linking to, and most of them are sneaky (if you are, use the "preview" feature that those services offer).

In regard to comments

- **Make comments that lack content.** Phrases such as "this", "lol", and "I came here to say this" are not witty, original, or funny, and do not add anything to the discussion.
- **Announce your vote [\(with rare exceptions\)](#).** "Upvote" and "Downvote" aren't terribly interesting comments and only increase the noise to signal ratio.
- **Complain about other users reposting/rehosting stories, images, videos, or any other content.** Users should give credit where credit should be given, but if someone fails to do so, and is not causing harm whatsoever, please either don't point it out, or point it out politely and leave it at that. They are only earning karma, which has little to no use at all.
- **Complain about the votes you do or do not receive,** especially by making a submission voicing your complaint. You may have just gotten unlucky. Try submitting later or seek out other communities to submit to. Millions of people use reddit; every story and comment gets at least a few up/downvotes. Some up/downvotes are by reddit to fuzz the votes [in order to confuse spammers and cheaters](#). This also includes messaging moderators or admins complaining about the votes you did or did not receive, except when you suspect you've been targeted by vote cheating by being massively up/downvoted.
- **Complain about reposts. Just because you have seen it before doesn't mean everyone has.** Votes indicate the popularity of a post, so just vote. Keep in mind that linking to previous posts is not automatically a complaint; it is information.
- **Complain about cross posts.** Just because you saw it in one place, doesn't mean everyone has seen it. Just vote and move on.

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