

Upvoting extremism: Exploring a far-right ‘virtual community’ on Reddit

by

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Abstract

Since the advent of the internet, right-wing extremists have been exploiting online platforms to build ‘virtual communities’ among like-minded peers. Research in this area has tended to focus on extremists’ use of internet platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. Overlooked in these discussions, however, has been an exploration of the social news aggregation site: Reddit. In response to this gap, the current study explores the nature of right-wing extremism in user-submitted comments posted to r/The_Donald, a notorious subreddit community, through the lens of social movement theory. The results of the thematic analysis highlight that, on r/The_Donald, right-wing extremists use Reddit’s unique voting algorithm as a tool to mobilize like-minded members by promoting the community’s most extreme othering discourses against two prominent out-groups: Muslims and the Left. In particular, r/The_Donald’s ‘sense of community’ facilitates identity work among its members by creating an environment wherein members’ extreme views are continuously validated.

Keywords: Right-wing extremism; Social news aggregators; Alt-right; Social Movement Theory

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Right-wing extremism poses a growing threat to the safety of nations across the globe. In the Canadian context, for instance, hate crimes against Jews, Blacks, and Muslims increased by an unprecedented 47% between 2016 and 2017 as revealed by Statistic Canada's (2017) report on police-reported hate crime. Additionally, right-wing extremists' use of the virtual realm also contributes to this threat where, according to Public Safety Canada's *Public Report on the Terrorism Threat to Canada* (2019), they maintain an active presence and attempt to legitimize their belief system by promoting an online "culture of fear, hatred, and mistrust" (p. 7). Indeed, the Internet has enabled right-wing extremist movements to carry their messages to virtual platforms and as a result the threat from the far-right has increasingly transcended national borders. To illustrate, interactive websites and online discussion forums assume a significant role in this process by enabling right-wing extremist movements to attract new members, connect with like-minded individuals, and disseminate information to a 'transnational' audience (Caini & Kröll, 2014; De Koster and Houtman, 2008). Further, right-wing extremists and those who hold radical beliefs are increasingly exploiting the Internet's algorithms to "amplify and accelerate" their violent messages to an even wider audience across a wide variety of Internet platforms (Daniels, 2018).

To say, however, that the Internet is merely a tool for the dissemination of radical content by right-wing extremists would be to ignore how online discussion forums are an important site of 'identity work' among right-wing extremists (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). In other words, the Internet has provided a transnational 'locale' where right-wing extremists can assemble to exchange radical ideas and as a result, members negotiate a common sense of 'we': a collective identity (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Perry & Scrivens, 2016). Although the Internet is a significant factor that facilitates right-wing extremist movements' transnational scope and identity work, research in this area is still largely underdeveloped. For instance, right-wing extremists' use of the Internet's 'fringe' platforms – and their characteristic laissez-faire content policies and unique features – in particular has gone mostly unexplored by researchers. Developing a fuller understanding of how right-wing extremists use not only mainstream social media

sites but also the Internet's fringe platforms to widen their reach and even construct a collective identity, then, is an important endeavor. The current study's exploration of right-wing extremists' use of fringe platforms, however, required defining the attributes of what exactly constitutes "right-wing extremism."

Defining Right-Wing Extremism

To begin, due to a wide variety of right-wing movements, groups, and individuals providing a precise definition of what exactly encompasses "right-wing extremism" can be a challenge. Generally, there are no universally agreed-upon definitions of right-wing extremism. The following provides a definition of right-wing extremism that was relied upon throughout the current study and refers to a number of sources on this topic.

Broadly, extremism may be understood as "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group" (Berger, 2018a, p. 170). Right-wing extremism more specifically can be understood in reactionary terms and emerges when an "in-group" perceives a threat to their values, status, or even sense of specialness by a particular "out-group" (Martin, 2013). Compared to left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism tends to have racist and nationalist underpinnings (Hoffman, 1982) which often leads to the promotion of a "racial or ethnic in-group and call for hostile acts targeting one or more racial or ethnic out-groups" (Berger, 2018a, p. 30). For instance, right-wing extremists often define their in-group by members' shared attribute "whiteness" (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). As a result, right-wing extremists are known to promote white supremacy, white nationalism, racial separation, as well as anti-Semitic and Islamophobic beliefs (Public Safety Canada, 2019). The enemy 'out-groups' that are excluded from right-wing extremist in-groups generally include racial and religious minorities and immigrants (Public Safety Canada, 2019).

Right-wing extremists' calls for hostile acts against their racial and religious out-groups have manifested in a number of deadly incidents worldwide. There are a number of examples in recent years that illustrate how right-wing extremists have been motivated to violence in reaction to their perceived threats by an enemy out-group. For example, in 2015 white supremacist Dylann Roof killed nine church-goers in Charleston, South Carolina. He admitted to racist beliefs against blacks, the out-group who he

believed were a threat to white women and desired to take over the world, as being a central motivator for committing the murders (Potok, 2015). A similar example emerged out of Canada in 2017, when white supremacist Alexandre Bissonnette entered a Quebec mosque and open-fired, killing six worshippers and injuring nineteen others. He later claimed his hatred for the out-group, Muslims, was a primary motivator for committing the murders (Hankes & Amend, 2018). These examples very clearly demonstrate the length that some right-wing extremists are willing to go to protect their in-group against the perceived threats of the out-groups.

These attacks in Charleston and Quebec City reflect the threat that right-wing extremism poses to the safety and security of nations across the globe. Despite this threat, governments and policy makers have historically not extended as many resources to understanding and combatting right-wing extremism as they have for other forms of politically and ideologically motivated violence (Koehler, 2019; Stevenson, 2019). There is a need to deepen our understanding of Roof and Bissonnette's use of the Internet among many other right-wing extremists from across the globe to connect with their like-minded peers in 'virtual communities' of the radical right (Hankes & Amend, 2018). Internet platforms offer a variety of widely-accessible resources to their users. How then do right-wing extremists navigate these spaces and take advantage of all that the Internet has to offer?

Aim of the Current Study

The ultimate aim of the current study is to deepen our understanding of how right-wing extremists use one lesser-known platform on the Internet, Reddit, and its unique features in the context of identity-building. To accomplish this, the current study explores a notorious subreddit community that has amassed over 700 000 members since its inception in 2015: r/The_Donald. Online sources have named r/The_Donald the "most controversial subreddit" for its right-wing discussions relating to Donald Trump's presidency and broader political matters (Romano, 2017). For instance, user-submitted 'memes' on r/The_Donald often feature a variety of far-right ideologies relating to white nationalism, white genocide, and white supremacy, lending evidence to r/The_Donald members' far-right leanings (Ward, 2018). Even further, r/The_Donald shares members with some of Reddit's most toxic right-wing communities. To illustrate, r/The_Donald members not only participate in other, relatively benign right-wing political subreddits but

also Reddit's most toxic extreme-right communities like r/coontown and r/kiketown (Martin, 2017). In sum, research that has been conducted on content and users originating from r/The_Donald would suggest that the subreddit has far-right leanings.

To explore the nature of this right-wing community's identity and its members' use of Reddit's unique voting features, then, the current study conducts a qualitative thematic analysis of 1000 of r/The_Donald's members' comments relating to their most widely-held right-wing extremist attitudes and beliefs. To illustrate the difference between a 'post' and a 'comment', a user (often referred to as the 'original poster' or the 'OP') can create a 'post' by, for example, uploading an image to r/The_Donald subreddit. Once this post has been created, other r/The_Donald members can comment (synonymous with reply or respond) underneath the post to express their thoughts about the image and discuss their thoughts with other users. In sum, Reddit 'comments' contain text and are essentially responses to 'posts', which can contain text, images, or links. Thus, sampling only these text-based comments allows researchers to analyze the nature of the textual content being conveyed by r/The_Donald members, rather than images or links that may require interpretation. The thematic analysis of r/The_Donald comments involves an inductive approach using the social movement framework as a theoretical lens, which provides a meaningful lens to understand right-wing identity work. The underlying premise of social movement theory is that social actors actively produce a collective identity among likeminded peers through interacting and clearly defining the borders between 'us' versus 'them'. A shared sense of 'we', then, encourages activists to mobilize around a given cause.

The deadly 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia lends evidence to the dangers of far-right mobilization to violence under a 'collective identity'. In early August 2017, members of a variety of extreme-right groups from across the United States came together to protest the removal of a Confederate statue ("The people, groups, and symbols," 2017). As tensions mounted between far-right protesters and counter-protesters, a car driven by white nationalist James Alex Fields Jr. deliberately plowed through a group of people, which resulted in the death of a counter-protester. Notably, but coming as little surprise to some researchers who study right-wing extremists, the Unite the Right rally was largely organized online through Discord chat servers and far-right websites (Flynn, 2018). But members of r/The_Donald community, too, participated in the rally by openly advertising the far-right event in the subreddit and by encouraging

each other to attend the event, as well ('Unite the Right,' 2017). r/The_Donald subreddit, then, must be investigated as it could pose as an ideal environment for right-wing extremists to connect, recruit, and eventually mobilize to violence aided through the development of a far-right collective identity.

This thesis is laid out as follows. The first section of the thesis explores the literature surrounding right-wing extremists' use of a number of online platforms and compares dedicated hate sites, like Stormfront, to mainstream social networking sites. Next, the literature review explores the lesser-known social news aggregation site, Reddit, and discusses what is known about right-wing extremism on Reddit. The last section of the literature review includes an overview of the theoretical framework and the role of 'othering' in the production of a collective identity. From there, the methods section outlines the thesis' qualitative approach. As will be revealed through the thematic analysis, members of r/The_Donald have largely exploited the subreddit's 'sense of community' where they feel emboldened to air their grievances against Muslims (the external threat) and the Left (the internal threat). The discussion situates these results within the broader literature on extremists' use of the internet and provides some context for social movement theory.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The following chapter begins by exploring right-wing extremists' use of Internet platforms and, more specifically, it illustrates how right-wing extremist movements use these platforms to actively participate in the construction of their identity. Next, the 'social news aggregation' site, Reddit, is considered, along with its 'laissez-faire' content policy and unique voting algorithm. From there, the following section explores what little work has been done to understand the climate of hate and right-wing extremism on Reddit. One 'fringe' subreddit community in particular, r/The_Donald, is introduced as the setting of the current study. Finally, the chapter concludes by briefly overviewing the gaps in the literature, providing some context for the current study's theoretical framework, and stating the study's research question.

Right-Wing Extremists' Use of the Internet

Right-wing extremist movements are increasingly expanding beyond national borders and the Internet is a fundamental medium that has facilitated the increasingly transnational nature of these movements. To illustrate, the wide variety of interactive websites and discussion forum sites assume a significant role in this process by enabling right-wing extremist movements to attract new members, connect with like-minded individuals, and disseminate information to a 'transnational' audience (Caini & Kröll, 2014). However, the internet is more than just a tool used by extremists; it also functions as a space of important 'identity work' (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). The Internet's interactive nature allows for the exchange of ideas and enables the active construction of collective identities (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). In the context of right-wing extremist movements, a collective identity between members is constructed as they venture beyond national borders to bond with like-minded extremists and air their grievances against their common enemies in 'virtual communities' (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). Further, right-wing extremists are expanding beyond dedicated hate forums like Stormfront to mainstream social media platforms and even to 'fringe' platforms to exploit their functionalities and spread their ideology among a wider audience.

In the pages that follow, this section will examine what is known about right-wing extremist movements' use of Internet platforms and the unique features provided by these platforms in the context of identity building. The following section takes a chronological approach to understand the evolution of right-wing extremists' use of the Internet. First, it considers the oldest dedicated hate community on the web, Stormfront; next, it explores the popular mainstream social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; and finally it unearths what little is known about the somewhat more recent and 'fringe' platforms to which little academic attention has been given. Although the features of dedicated sites, social media platforms, and fringe sites are wide and varied a common thread between them is that they encourage the exchange of ideas. As such, right-wing extremists' use of each of these platforms is compared and contrasted throughout the following section.

Dedicated Hate Sites: Stormfront

The Internet was first introduced to right-wing extremism in 1995, when former Klu Klux Klan wizard Don Black, created the first major hate site: Stormfront¹ (Levin, 2002; Burris, Smith, & Strahm, 2000). Upon entering the site, Stormfront's logo, which consists of the phrase 'White Pride Worldwide' inscribed around a Celtic cross, draws one's immediate attention ("Stormfront," ADL). For the first time, members of right-wing movements from across the globe could interact with one another, free from the geographical constraints that were once imposed on their movements (Bowman-Grieve, 2009). The dedicated hate site, Stormfront, is characterized by a variety of topic- and region- based discussion forums, where members of the right-wing movement can assemble to discuss a variety of cultural, ideological, and personal topics among like-minded peers. Indeed, Stormfront is quick to describe itself as a 'White Nationalist community' (Stormfront.org, forum) and encourages an environment wherein members support one another, wish each other a happy birthday, and even award scholarships to white children ("Stormfront," n.d.). However, the Southern Poverty Law Center (2014) labelled Stormfront a "magnet and breeding ground for the deadly and the deranged" after attributing close to one hundred bias-related murders, since 2009, to registered users of the site ("White Homicide WorldWide").

¹ (www.stormfront.org/forum/)

Much of the research on right-wing extremists' use of Stormfront has described the forum as a 'virtual community' for white supremacists, Neo-Nazis, and a variety of other right-wing movements to connect, recruit, and spread their ideology among their like-minded peers (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Caini & Kröll, 2014; De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Meddaugh & Kay, 2009). An important result of internet-facilitated networking is the peer-to-peer bonding within the 'virtual communities' that form on dedicated far-right sites (Bowman-Grieve 2009). Networking on dedicated sites, with supportive peers, tends to legitimize and validate members' extremist ideologies (Bowman-Grieve 2009). For instance, networking with members' likeminded peers on Stormfront gives far-right extremists a feeling of belonging, solidarity, and comradeship, particularly within those who have felt offline stigmatization for their beliefs (De Koster & Houtman 2008). Additionally, Stormfront's 'sense of community' strengthens the ties between members of the right-wing in-group through facilitating important identity work, by enabling right-wing extremists to promote hateful sentiment against their enemy out-groups (Adams & Roscigno, 2005; De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Futrell & Simi, 2004; Perry & Scrivens, 2016; Meddaugh & Kay, 2009).

The extent to which right-wing extremists rely on virtual communities like Stormfront cannot be overstated. Here, Bowman-Grieve (2009) does not doubt that Stormfront's "virtual community" still maintains some connection to the offline realm, and although "some may consider the cyberworld to be limited and without connection to what might be called the "real" world, this is apparently not the case for those community members who contribute regularly and with purpose within the online communities they have helped to create and forge within cyberspace" (p. 1005).

Mainstream Social Media Platforms: Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook

Over time, right-wing extremists' online activity evolved from dedicated sites like Stormfront to an even wider network of popular social media sites, with a growing presence on Twitter (Berger & Strathearn, 2013; Berger, 2016; Burnap & Williams, 2015; Graham, 2016; O'Callaghan et al., 2013b), YouTube (Ekman, 2014; O'Callaghan et al., 2013a), and Facebook (Burke & Goodman, 2012; Nadeau & Helly, 2016; Ekman, 2018; Stier et al., 2017). Unlike Stormfront, these social media platforms have enacted specific content policies to prevent the spread of hate on their platforms. To illustrate, Facebook's 'Community Standards' ("Objectionable Content," n.d.), YouTube's

'Community Guidelines' ("Hate Speech Policy," n.d.), and Twitter's 'Rules and Policies' ("Hateful conduct policy," n.d.) each disavow the hateful speech that characterizes the 'othering' discourses of right-wing extremist ideologies. Despite efforts by these mainstream social media platforms to prevent the spread of hatred on their sites, however, members of right-wing extremist movements exploit their resources to connect, recruit, and spread their ideology amongst likeminded peers.

First, cyberspace and its social media platforms have offered to far-right extremists the ability to network amongst likeminded peers, free from the geographical constraints that once complicated inter- and intra-group communications (Back, 2002; Caini & Kröll, 2014). For networking purposes, the internet allowed extremists to "communicate quickly and coordinate effectively at low cost" (Conway, 2006b, p. 287). More specifically, right-wing extremist networking, for instance, has progressed to popular social media sites. In the context of identity formation, the discussions between members of social media platforms characterize the interactive nature of collective identity formation (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). For instance, researchers have identified extremist networks on popular social media sites. On Twitter, for example, right-wing extremists use the platform's retweet feature to communicate their ideology, particularly that which features anti-immigrant content, to others on a global scale (Froio & Ganesh, 2018).

Second, the transnational reach afforded by the internet provides ideal recruitment grounds for members of right-wing extremist movements. Broadly, the goal of recruiting is to "mobilize supporters to play a more active role in support of terrorist activities or causes" (Weimann, 2004, p. 8). Conway (2006b) outlines the various ways in which extremists use the internet to recruit:

The Web. . .makes information gathering easier for potential recruits by offering more information, more quickly and in multimedia format; the global reach of the Web allows groups to publicise events to more people and by increasing the possibilities for interactive communication, new opportunities for assisting groups are offered along with more chances for contacting the group directly. Finally, through the use of discussion forums, it is also possible for members of the public, whether supporters or detractors of a group, to engage in debate with one another (p. 289).

Mainstream social media platforms provide an ideal setting for right-wing extremist groups to recruit. To illustrate, white nationalist groups exploit Twitter to recruit new members and, through ‘awakening’, try to “replace potential recruits’ mainstream worldview with an alternative worldview” (Berger, 2016, p. 20). In addition, on Facebook the Soldiers of Odin right-wing group recruits by using the platform to facilitate direct contact between organizers of street patrols, and those who are interested in participating (Ekman, 2018).

Third, another core way that terrorists and extremists use the internet is by information provision (Conway, 2006a; Conway, 2006b; Weimann, 2004). Information provision is defined by Conway (2006b) as “efforts by terrorists to engage in publicity, propaganda and, ultimately, psychological warfare” (p. 283). Further research into this area has uncovered how right-wing extremists exploit mainstream social media sites’ features to spread their messages and promote their ideology. On social media site Twitter, extremists will strategically mix trending hashtags to exploit the site’s hashtag function to promote right-wing extremist ideology in mainstream discussions, according to Graham (2016). Similarly, white nationalists on Twitter will tweet about a topic in unison, in high volumes, to promote their message and encourage it to trend (Berger, 2016). On Facebook, members of the Soldiers of Odin use an ‘open’ page to promote a sanitized version of their ideologies and activities (Ekman, 2018). As another example, not only does the streaming platform YouTube host a variety of extreme-right content like music and propaganda, but its recommendation system also creates a ‘filter bubble’, where users are relayed to even more extreme-right content through continued use of the site (O’Callaghan et al., 2013a). Not only is an extremist granted access to more materials that may reinforce their views and reaffirm their right-wing identity, but they are also less likely to come across content that contradicts their beliefs (O’Callaghan et al., 2013a).

Right-Wing Extremists' Use of 'Fringe' Platforms

Alongside mainstream social media platforms, right-wing extremists have also assembled on a number of 'uncensored' fringe platforms, including 4chan, 8chan, and Gab, to name just a few (Finkelstein, Zannettou, Bradlyn, & Blackburn, 2018; Zannettou et al., 2018; Topinka, 2018; Ward, 2018). Some of these platforms have been festering on the Internet, relatively unregulated, since as far back as 2003. For instance, the fringe platform, 4chan, was launched in 2003 and is organized in bulletin board style forums, where anonymous users can discuss a variety of topics in a relatively uncensored environment. Its signature format, according to its frequently asked questions, "was inspired by one of the most popular forums in Japan, Futaba Channel ("Frequently Asked Questions," n.d.). Other fringe platforms were conceived much more recently. For instance, 8chan, also called 'infinity chan', was launched in 2013 as an even more free speech-friendly off-shoot of 4chan (Stewart, 2019). Another fringe platform, Gab, was launched in 2016 as a "Twitter alternative" that attempted to fill the need for more uncensored internet platforms (Coaston, 2018). To illustrate, Gab's founder created the platform because he "wanted to offer an alternative to mainstream social networks, which he and others feel are biased against conservatives", according to one online source (Lorenz, 2018).

In recent years, researchers who explore right-wing extremists' use of the Internet have begun to consider expressions of right-wing extremism on the Internet's fringe platforms. One way that fringe platforms distinguish themselves from their mainstream social media counterparts is that, typically, they boast "anything goes" content policies and, as a result, studies have shown that they tend to attract users who promote alternative, and even extremist, ideas (Dewey, 2014; McDonald-Parry, 2018). For instance, the 'free-speech' Twitter clone, Gab, was found to be "crowded by extremist users" who promote right-wing ideologies, according to one study (Lima et al., 2018, p. 4). Further, the man accused of killing eleven people in a Pittsburgh synagogue was a prolific user of Gab and used the uncensored platform to spread his right-wing, anti-Semitic views (Coaston, 2018). Similarly, hate speech is commonly promoted by members of the 4chan board /pol/, (Hine et al., 2017). The Christchurch shooter, as well, allegedly posted the plans for his massacre in 8chan's /pol/ board, according to one online source (Stewart, 2019). Fringe platforms, like 4chan and subreddit, r/The_Donald, are infested with racist memes, which are often spread to more mainstream sites,

according to one study that demonstrated how right-wing extremists spread their controversial messages across platforms (Zannettou et al., 2018). However, this is the extent of our knowledge of the nature of right-wing extremism on fringe platforms.

In short, the advent of the internet has allowed right-wing extremists to exploit a wide variety of platforms to interact with likeminded users to promote their beliefs on a globalized scale. Researchers who explore right-wing extremists' use of Internet platforms have focused their attention on dedicated hate sites Stormfront and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Researchers have largely neglected how right-wing extremists use the popular social news aggregation site, Reddit. Scholars who have recognized this lacuna have called for further exploration of extremists' use of relatively lesser-known platforms, since "different social media platforms have different functionalities; how are these different functions exploited by violent extremists?" (Conway, 2017, p. 85). The popular 'social news aggregation' site, Reddit, is one such platform that has received relatively little attention in this regard.

The 'Front Page of the Internet': Characterizing the social news aggregation platform, Reddit

Reddit was created in 2005 and has since become the sixth-most popular website in the United States, and the 17th-most popular website in the world ("Reddit Traffic Statistics," n.d.). As a 'social news aggregation' site, Reddit describes itself as "a platform for communities to discuss, connect, and share in an open environment, home to some of the most authentic content anywhere online" ("Reddit Content Policy," n.d.). Enabled by a relatively laissez-faire content policy, users may participate in, contribute to, and even develop one of these like-minded communities whose members share a common interest. Although subreddit communities vary widely, they often reflect a "geek sensibility" (Massanari, 2015, p. 330). For example, subreddit communities exist for movie-goers (Reddit, r/flicks), gamers (Reddit, r/gaming), dog lovers (Reddit, r/rarepuppers), and even 'preppers' who wish to share tips and tricks to survive an "economic, political and social collapse" (Reddit, r/preppers). Joining a subreddit community impacts a user's Reddit experience because the community's posts are included in the users' aggregated home feed, and some communities even require membership to enable voting on the content therein. Within these subreddits, Reddit's

‘anything goes’ content policy and unique voting algorithm are integral to the community’s functionality.

Reddit’s Content Policy and Voting Features

Reddit’s ‘laissez-faire’ content policy targets users’ behaviors rather than their ideas (Reddit Announcements 2016). To illustrate, its content policy defines ‘unwelcome content’ as that which incites violence or that threatens, harasses, or bullies other users (“Reddit Content Policy,” n.d.). On the other hand, the policy admits that it “provides a lot of leeway in what content is acceptable” (“Reddit Content Policy,” n.d.) and, as a result, it technically stops short of preventing users from posting controversial ideas to its site. For instance, the policy notes that the content featured on the site “might be funny, serious, offensive, or anywhere in between” (“Reddit Content Policy,” n.d.). This hands-off approach is largely meant to facilitate an open dialogue among members of Reddit’s numerous communities wherein they feel free to air their views on even the most controversial of topics without fear of being banned from the site or harassed by those with opposing views (Statt, 2018).

Next, Reddit’s unique voting algorithm provides its users with the means to promote and spread content within a particular subreddit or even to millions of users on Reddit’s front page. Reddit users, as ‘consumers and curators’ (Glenski, Pennycuff, & Weninger, 2017), retrieve content from across the internet and those who share similar views (or not) can convey their interest – or disinterest – by giving an ‘upvote’ or ‘downvote’. ‘Upvoting’ a post will increase its visibility and engagement within a subreddit and the most popular posts are featured on Reddit’s front page. To illustrate, even a single upvote given to a thread increased the thread’s final score by an average of 11.02% (Weninger, Johnston, & Glenski, 2015). Upvotes also increase user engagement: Reddit threads that were treated with artificial upvotes ended up with 48% more comments during their final observation, compared to control threads which did not receive upvotes (Carman, Li, & Ashman, 2018). Put simply, through upvoting (increasing visibility) and downvoting (decreasing visibility) users themselves hold the power to shape the discourse within their subreddit community.

Although the basic effects of upvoting and downvoting on visibility and engagement within a subreddit community are fairly easy to understand, it is less clear

what actually motivates users to vote. At the most basic level, users are motivated to ‘upvote’ the “content they find interesting, they agree with, or they feel will add to the discussion” (Aniche et al., 2018, p. 503; see also Priestley, Mesoudi, & Amblard, 2015). This suggests, then, that the most highly-upvoted content within a subreddit is a general reflection of the community’s most widely-held attitudes and beliefs. In addition to this, however, research from the computer sciences has been among the first to explore users’ voting behavior, finding that user biases, content readability, and even pro-sociality and norm-following have some impact.

First, Reddit users’ voting habits are affected by a ‘content bias’ where they are more likely to upvote content they consider to be particularly unique (Priestley, Mesoudi, & Amblard, 2015). Another common bias is the ‘position bias’, or simply that, because highly-upvoted Reddit content is more visible to users, it is more likely to be interacted with; for instance, one study found that a post in the 1st position produced four times the amount of interaction than the post in the 10th position (Glenski & Weninger, 2017; Glenski, Pennycuff, & Weninger, 2017). Second, users are more likely to engage with ‘readable’ content; for instance, comments that are longer and more complex are more likely to be successful than shorter comments (Finlay, 2014; Weninger, 2014). Third, the pro-social nature of voting contributes to the ‘sense of community’ within subreddits; to illustrate, users tend to upvote content that reflects pro-social values, follows the norms and rules of subreddits, and that which “refers to shared experiences” or “elicits sympathy or support” (Priestley, Mesoudi, & Amblard, 2015, p. 12).

‘America First!’: r/The_Donald

The social news aggregation site, Reddit, is designed to foster a sense of community amongst like-minded users by encouraging them to retrieve, discuss, and vote on topics around shared interests. However, its laissez-faire content policy that is more characteristic of fringe platforms than mainstream platforms fails to prevent them from posting and spreading hate speech on the platform. To illustrate, Reddit *condones* racism and hate speech on its platform according to a recent statement by the site’s CEO, Steve Huffman (Gibbs, 2018). It comes as little surprise, then, that Reddit has witnessed an influx of extremist communities that have in many cases been unopposed by Reddit administration (Feinberg, 2018). In response, Reddit decided to launch a ‘quarantine’ feature in 2015 that would hide a number of communities that regularly put

out offensive content, to which users must explicitly opt-in, to prevent users from inadvertently coming across extremely offensive content (“Quarantined Subreddits,” n.d.). Here, we turn our attention to one recently quarantined fringe subreddit community that is receiving criticism for its extreme right-wing content: r/The_Donald.

r/The_Donald is a subreddit community wherein Reddit users may assemble to discuss a variety of matters relating to Trump’s presidency including his press briefings, political platform, and larger political events. Members of r/The_Donald represent a variety of right-wing groups, including the ‘manosphere’, the ‘alt-right’, and racists more broadly, but are united in their unwavering support for the President (Squirrel, 2017; Martin, 2017). Donald Trump himself has ties to the controversial platform, too; he once fielded questions on the r/The_Donald during an ‘Ask Me Anything’ session during his presidential run in 2016 and he even retweeted a video of himself wrestling the CNN logo that originated from r/The_Donald (Romano, 2017). Since r/The_Donald’s inception in 2015, Trump’s most fervent supporters have assembled within this popular space in numbers surpassing 700,000 (Romano, 2017a). r/The_Donald’s members, in June 2019, were accused of breaking Reddit’s sitewide rules against inciting violence and the subreddit was subsequently quarantined (Stewart, 2019). As a result of the quarantine, new members must explicitly opt-in to view the community and content originating from r/The_Donald no longer appears in Reddit’s search results. However, while simple observation clearly reveals that hateful sentiment continues to be a common occurrence on r/The_Donald, very little academic attention has been paid to the specific nature of the hateful content featured within this community.

For instance, quickly looking over the “rules” of the far-right subreddit makes it clear that “racism and Anti-Semitism will not be tolerated”, although, on the other hand, the rules specify “Muslim and illegal immigrant [sic] are not races” (“Wiki,” n.d.). These rules suggest, then, that moderators will most likely not remove discussions related to anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant out-groups within the community. Despite r/The_Donald’s anti-racism rules, however, the Southern Poverty Law Center identified an influx of extreme right-wing content throughout the community including discussions surrounding “white genocide”, anti-Muslim sentiment, and anti-Black discourse (Ward, 2018). In addition, racist memes appear to be increasing in popularity on r/The_Donald and other social media sites, according to one study (Zannettou et al., 2018). Yet, this is the extent

of our understanding of right-wing content posted on hateful subreddits, like r/The_Donald.

Not only is little known about right-wing extremism on r/The_Donald, so too is little known about the nature of right-wing extremism on other subreddits. Of the little work that has been done here, one study found that one subreddit, called r/Imgoingtohellforthis, has witnessed a considerable rise in what the author coins “racist nationalist” sentiment that members attempt to cloak with humour (Topinka, 2017). As well, Massanari’s (2015) research on two anti-feminist subreddits found that not only is misogynistic content a common occurrence but that members will intentionally “re-post” such content to benefit from the extra karma points that are rewarded to them by upvotes. This, however, is the extent to what is known about right-wing extremism on Reddit generally, and the nature of Reddit’s structure in proliferating such content.

Theoretical Framework

The current study draws upon social movement theory as a theoretical framework. Broadly, social movement theory explores activist groups’ political or social mobilization on the basis of a common interest (Diani, 1992). At the heart of social movement theory lies the notion of “collective identity”. According to social movement theory, a collective identity is actively produced between activists as a result of their “interaction, negotiation, and the orientation of different orientations” (Melucci, 1995, p. 43). In particular, the social constructionist paradigm emphasizes that collective identities are “invented, created, reconstituted, or cobbled together rather than being biologically preordained” (Snow, 2001, p. 5). In short, through interactions with a wide audience of social actors activists construct a shared set of real or imagined attributes and mobilize around this collective sense of ‘we’ (Snow, 2001; Hunt & Bedford, 2004).

The social movement framework provides a meaningful lens to understand right-wing extremism. First, a central aspect to both social movement theory and right-wing extremism is identity. Broadly, the ‘identity’ of a social movement or a right-wing extremist in-group can be understood as the “set of qualities that are understood to make a person or group distinct from other persons or groups” (Berger, 2018a, p. 171). As members of the right-wing in-group share and exchange ideas among other members of their in-group this actively produces a shared sense of ‘we’: a collective

identity (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Snow, 2001; Melluci, 1995; Futrell & Simi, 2004). The interactions between members of the in-group can further delineate the borders between the in-group and the enemy out-group by identifying and targeting the groups' perceived enemies (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). As a result, those who are perceived to not share the attributes of the right-wing extremist in-group are not only considered to be excluded, but they are actively challenging the in-group's survival (Berger, 2018a). The current study, then, characterizes right-wing extremism as comments which, generally, perpetuate this in-group/out-group dynamic.

Further, Internet discussion forums have facilitated right-wing identity work and even movement mobilization (Perry & Scrivens, 2016). For instance, the same processes of collective identity formation occur within and are even facilitated by the virtual realm. Just as the "face-to-face" interactions in the real-world form collective identities, so, too, do the "many-to-many" interactions in cyberspace (Perry and Scrivens, 2016; Crisafi, 2005). The social movement framework has lent insight into how the internet enhances the process of collective identity formation in social movements. As noted by Perry and Scrivens (2016): "A collective identity provides an alternative frame for understanding and expressing grievances; it shapes the discursive "other" along with the borders that separate "us" from "them"; it affirms and reaffirms identity formation and maintenance; and it provides the basis for strategic action" (p. 4). For members of the far-right, then, the internet enables a transnational venue for the "active construction of collective white identity" (Perry & Scrivens, 2016, p. 1). In addition, virtual communities of the radical right bring together "otherwise unconnected local networks into much broader webs of white power culture and identity and, importantly, convey to members a sense of participating in a much larger movement culture, which helps reinforce solidarity and commitment to the cause" (Futrell and Simi, 2004, p. 37).

Gaps in the Literature

In sum, research in this area has largely focused on right-wing extremism on popular social network platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, and has largely neglected the social news aggregation site, Reddit. Reddit's decision to condone hate speech on its platform, contrary to the policies of similar social media platforms, has consequences – r/The_Donald being a notable example. It would appear, then – on the surface at least – that Reddit has given members of right-wing extremist movements a

powerful platform to bond with their in-group, and unique voting features to promote and spread their hateful ideology. However, very little is known about the nature of right-wing extremist identity work on Reddit.

More specifically, little is known about the nature of the right-wing community, r/The_Donald or the potential role of the site's unique voting features in facilitating the production of members' white collective identity, more specifically. Here, previous literature would suggest that the most highly-upvoted comments in a subreddit not only reflect members' use of the site, but also shed light on members' most widely-held attitudes and beliefs. Guided by this premise, then, the current study bridges these gaps in our understandings of right-wing extremists' use of Reddit by exploring the most highly-upvoted discussions on r/The_Donald, Reddit's "most controversial" right-wing subreddit (Romano, 2017).

RQ1: What themes and ideas characterize the most highly upvoted comments on r/The_Donald?

Chapter 3. Data and Methods

The following chapter illustrates the methodological approach used in the current study. In particular, the following chapter discusses how qualitative methodology guided the exploration of the current study's research question, including (1) the methods used to collect the data from r/The_Donald, a subreddit community on the popular social news aggregation website, Reddit; and (2) the methods used to analyze the data using thematic analysis, a technique that guides researchers in unearthing patterns and themes in a given dataset. Finally, this chapter considers what gives quality to qualitative research, and concludes with a discussion on the ethical considerations to the current study.

Data Collection Method

To begin, online discussion forums like r/The_Donald provide interesting data for qualitative researchers. Holtz, Kronberger, and Wagner (2012) argue that online forums are a prime source of authentic, natural data wherein “members of a community discuss topics without a researcher interfering and possibly influencing the expression of thoughts” (p. 56). In addition, studying discussion forums lends additional transparency to the final qualitative report, since “public accessibility of the analysis material makes it comparatively easy for other researchers to retrace the analysis process, from the sampling of the analysis material to the final analysis, and to reappraise the original researchers’ conclusions” (Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012, p. 56).

A qualitative analysis of user-submitted comments to r/The_Donald began with collecting the data from a website that has made Reddit data publicly available for research and analysis (“Directory Contents,” n.d.). Through this site, each comment posted to r/The_Donald, since its creation in June 2015 to the last available comment in March 2018, was gathered. On Reddit, a ‘comment’ is a user-submitted piece of text that is created in response to a particular ‘post’; it is in this sense that comments and posts may be distinguished. For instance, when a r/The_Donald member finds an interesting link to a news article they may create a ‘post’ which links this content to r/The_Donald to which other members may comment. The current study focuses exclusively on

comments. Here, the initial r/The_Donald comment dataset was verging on 28 million comments and, resultantly, would be impossible to analyze manually using qualitative methods to address the current study's exploratory research question. The data needed to be narrowed substantially to suit the current study's scope, to gather the deeper understanding of the community allowed by qualitative methods. Therefore, the following will describe, in detail, the process of narrowing the '28 Million' comment dataset.

First, the dataset to be used in the current study was created by narrowing the initial "28 million" dataset. Here, the study includes only the comments posted to r/The_Donald in the year 2017 to mark the first year of Trump's presidency; gathering only these comments resulted in the "2017" dataset. Next, the "2017" dataset was narrowed further by purposively sampling only the top-upvoted comments from the "2017" dataset. The top-upvoted comments have a high 'vote score', which refers to the number of upvotes a comment received minus the downvotes. As will be discussed in the coding section, a total of 1000 comments was determined to be a sufficient amount to reach 'theoretical' or 'data' saturation (Glaser, 1965; Fusch & Ness, 2015). This final "Top 1000 comment" dataset was used in the current study, as the most accurate reflection of the community's most agreed-upon attitudes and values during the year 2017.

Additionally, a second dataset comprised of 1000 comments was randomly sampled from the '2017' comments to act as a comparison for the first dataset. The objective of this 'Random Sample' dataset was to explore what makes top-upvoted content unique in comparison with a random sample of non-highly upvoted comments. The random sampling was also conducted through Excel, where the 2017 dataset (prior to sorting by highest upvoted content) was randomly sampled from, to generate the 1000 randomly sampled comments. Including the Random Sample dataset in the current study added rigor by allowing the findings to convey the nature of the top-upvoted comments. The Random Sample dataset was stored in a separate NVivo file than the Top 1000 Comment dataset.

Although the "Top 1000 Comment" dataset's "comment body" variable was the focus of the current study, the dataset also included a number of key variables that aided the overall analysis. For instance, the "username" variable identified not only the users whose comments appeared multiple times in the top-upvoted sample, but also the

comments from highly influential alt-right figures. The “UserID” variable was created to randomly assign each user a number between 1 and 1000. This “UserID” variable was also created for each user in the Random Sample dataset but the UserID numbers varied between 1001 and 2000 to reflect the Random Sample dataset. As well, the “date and time” variable helped to determine how soon after the initial text, image, or link post was created to which the user replied with their comment. Finally, each comment’s unique six-character string of letters and numbers helped to identify, on r/The_Donald’s website, the original post to which the comment was in response to. In some cases where context wasn’t immediately evident, or where the nature of the comment was uncertain, it was helpful to see the member’s comment in the context of its parent thread, or the post to which the comment was replying. All data analysis was conducted in NVivo.

Once the datasets were gathered, basic descriptive statistics were gathered on both the ‘Top 1000 Comment’ dataset and the ‘Random Sample’. This was conducted through Excel’s pivot tables function. The purpose of this was to compare the vote scores and unique authors between samples to determine if any immediate insight could be gained. Here, the ‘vote score’ simply refers to the number of upvotes a particular comment received minus any downvotes. For instance, a higher vote score means that the comment received a large proportion of upvotes to downvotes. Table 1 depicts the two datasets:

Table 1: r/The_Donald 2017 Datasets

	Top 1000 Comment	Random Sample
Vote Score		
Mean(<i>SD</i>)	1915(646)	10(31)
Mode	1413	1
Min/Max	1320 – 7328	-12 – 487
# Unique Authors	852	929

When comparing the two datasets, it is apparent that the mean, mode, and minimum and maximum vote scores differ substantially between the two samples. This is to be expected because the Top 1000 Comment sought to gather the comments that received the most upvotes from members of r/The_Donald. More specific to the Random

Sample dataset, a unique finding was that the most common score was ‘1’. Since any time a user posts a comment it starts off with a vote score of 1 (it assumes that the user will upvote their own post, but this can be undone by the user at any time), this suggests that many of the comments in the Random Sample were not voted on at all by other users, either by upvoting or downvoting. The following paragraph considers this finding in light of the literature on Reddit’s position and content biases.

There are at least two potential explanations for why the Random Sample’s most common vote score was ‘1’. On one hand, due to Reddit’s ‘position bias’, users are much less likely to see and interact with comments that are not as visible. For instance, if a user is late to post a comment to an already well-established thread, their ‘new’ comment is immediately shot down to the bottom of the comment list. There, it is much less likely to be seen and interacted with than the ‘early’ comments that have been upvoted and are, as a result, much more visible. On the other hand, due to Reddit’s ‘content bias’, a comment may simply be ignored if it expresses similar sentiment to other, more visible comments. To illustrate, since Reddit users gravitate toward unique content, they may be willing to upvote the first comment they see that says, ‘Make America Great Again!’, but may ignore the other thirty comments that express similar sentiment, in search of more unique comments. Further, a cursory glance of r/The_Donald reveals that some highly-upvoted posts garner thousands of comments; it is expected that not every comment will offer something unique to the overall discussion, in which case they may, simply, be ignored. Regardless, an explanation for why so many comments in the Random Sample are not voted on cannot be gleaned from the current study but this finding provides an interesting avenue for future research.

Data Analysis Method

For the current study, the method of analysis relies on inductive thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guide. Conducting a thematic analysis has several phases, from familiarization, to coding, and then defining themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These phases are meant to guide researchers in “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns” in a given dataset (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 6). Further, the inductive, data-driven approach in the current study allowed the themes to emerge from the data, rather than from rigid theoretical assumptions and ‘*a priori*’ expectations (Braun and Clarke 2006; see also Thomas, 2006). Thematic analysis was a particularly

advantageous method in the current study, because it is relatively accessible and easy to understand, even for novice qualitative researchers. Additionally, thematic analysis is a flexible method in that it can be applied to a wide range of datasets and can incorporate a wide range of theories across different epistemologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further, thematic analysis is well-suited to guide systematic analyses of vast amounts of textual data, like that in the Top 1000 Comment and Random Sample datasets. The final written report, too, can incorporate the data itself to lend evidence to the themes that emerge through thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011).

As well, qualitative inquiry may be understood as a process, rather than an ‘event’ (Hesse-Beiber & Leavy, 2011). With this holistic approach in mind, the research decisions associated with the current study are considered to be largely inter-related. Although the following section explains the thematic analysis steps in a linear format, the analysis itself proceeded in a reflexive and iterative manner. For instance, the analytic process began with some pre-existing knowledge of Reddit’s structure and voting algorithm, as well as an understanding of the research setting, r/The_Donald, based on knowledge gathered from previous research on other research projects. From there, the analysis proceeded in an iterative manner and relied on cycling back and forth between the thematic steps (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005, p. 41). Below, how the current study proceeded through each of the six phases of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis will be described, while illustrating how an inductive thematic analysis was the most appropriate method to explore the right-wing community’s use of Reddit’s unique voting algorithm.

Phase One: Familiarization with the Data

The first step to conducting thematic analysis is to become familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). ‘Familiarization’ means to generate a strong understanding of the data’s “depth and breadth,” and is most often acquired by repeatedly reading through the data (Braun & Clark 2006, p. 16). The familiarization process began by, firstly, narrowing the ‘Top 1000 Comment’ dataset. Through systematically gathering the top-upvoted comments into a separate dataset, a ‘passive’ familiarity into the nature of the comments was gained. Once the ‘Top 1000 Comment’ dataset had been gathered, two thorough readings of the entire dataset were conducted, which proceeded by carefully reading through each comment and noting in a reflexive journal any personal thoughts.

At this stage, it was noted that many of the comments were quite short, with most being a sentence or less. Moreover, because of the research decision to gather the most highly-upvoted comments, any understanding of the relationships between members of r/The_Donald could, generally, not be gathered because the comments were not responding to, or even related to one another. Further, Braun and Clark (2006) note that an important aspect to familiarization by repeated readings is to *actively* search for patterns and themes while reading the data line by line (p. 16). Throughout the repeated readings, an ‘active’ mindset was kept by remaining focused on the task of reading each line thoroughly and intentionally to become increasingly familiar with the data.

Becoming ‘immersed’ in the data did not end at this phase; rather, the process of conducting the thematic analysis involved reading and re-reading the comments and, as a result, familiarity with the data increased over the course of the study. As well, during this process of familiarization, a reflexive journal was kept where any patterns or content that were deemed to be important were immediately noted. Writing these thoughts in the journal was helpful not only during the familiarization phase, where a number of patterns and themes began to emerge, but also throughout the entire analytic process. For instance, the notes that were written in the reflexive journal proved to be helpful throughout the entire process of analysis and writing; if it felt like it was impossible to pinpoint where a particular datum should go, or whether one theme should be collapsed into subthemes, referring back to the initial notes made in the reflexive journal provided some ‘fresh’ insight into these initial thoughts.

Phase Two: Generating the Initial Codes

In this phase of thematic analysis, the researcher begins to meaningfully organize and analyse data. This is accomplished by assigning ‘codes’, or what Saldana (2009) describes as a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” to a section of data (p. 3). Codes are subjective and, as a result, give “interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection” (Saldana, 2009, p. 3). Here, Braun and Clarke (2006) allow for either a semantic or latent approach to be taken while coding. The current study, then, relies on finding meaning in the data on a latent level during the coding stage, in line with the social constructionist framing. In particular, the goal behind latent analysis is to identify the “underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations”

in the given dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 13). To illustrate, the current study sought to find meaning on the latent level as to the content of the messages themselves, on one hand; and, on the other, why they may have been upvoted, or highly regarded, in the extremist community.

Next, the coding in the current study relied on an inductive approach, which “allow[s] research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). As well, using inductive coding approaches, the findings “arise directly from the analysis of the raw data, not from a priori expectations or models” (Thomas 2006, p. 239). First, the current study uses an exploratory research question to build upon our relatively limited understanding of far-right extremists’ use of Reddit. Additionally, research has not yet addressed identity work on Reddit, generally, or on r/The_Donald, more specifically.

An inductive coding approach, then, is the most appropriate way to answer this research question by allowing the patterns and themes to emerge from the data itself to best address the research question stated. Additionally, the current study categorized the data using descriptive coding. To accomplish this, each comment’s text was read on the screen and, following this, codes were assigned to the sections of text that related to the research question. This coding technique proceeded in a sequential, line-by-line manner (see Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings, & de Eyto, 2018). Descriptive coding was an ideal choice because it offered the ability to organize the vast amount of textual data into manageable word/topic-based clusters. Once the descriptive coding was complete, over twenty different nodes in NVivo contained textual data that were related by topic.

Phase Three: Searching for Themes

The third phase to doing thematic analysis is searching for themes. Here, there are no “hard and fast” rules (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017); rather, significant themes emerge as a researcher codes, categorizes, and reflects on the data (Saldana, 2009). More specifically, to develop themes Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend “sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes” (p. 19). Finally, to help recognize a theme, a researcher can also look for repetition in the data (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). During this phase, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines were heavily relied upon to identify

similarities between codes and to merge together those that were related to one another. To draw further connections between the codes, the insights written in the personal reflexive journal were also relied upon, as well as the annotations that were made in NVivo. By the end of this phase, a number of themes were assembled and had something to say about the research question. As an example, during this phase a number of codes were brought together that related to right-wing extremist ideology, including “Islamophobia” and “xenophobia,” to create the overarching theme: “External Threat”.

Phases Four and Five: Reviewing and Defining Themes

Next, during the fourth phase of thematic analysis the themes were reviewed. This phase is meant to weed out themes that may not really be themes, and to further refine the themes that have been created (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At this stage, Aronson (1995) suggests that looking through the literature related to the study’s topic can help build a more valid argument for the reasoning behind choosing certain themes. In fact, weaving together the literature with the themes provides a more coherent story “that stands with merit” (Aronson, 1995, p. 3). To accomplish this, the initial themes that were created were considered to determine whether they were truly in line with the research question and the overall purpose of the thesis. During this phase, some themes and sub-themes required a bit of re-working, therefore these changes were made as necessary.

The final write-up includes the narratives that were the most prominent and most relevant to the research question and the study’s overall purpose. To present the themes and increase the study’s validity, plenty of comments (quotes) were included in the findings section to lend detailed insight into the voices and experiences of r/The_Donald members. In addition, the comments from a variety of members were included in the findings section to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the narratives found in each theme throughout the ‘Top 1000 Comment’ dataset (Creswell, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Maintaining strong ethical standards is an important aspect to conducting research. A widely-held ethical standard when dealing with public internet forums like r/The_Donald is that, generally, informed consent is not required from users to conduct research using their data (Sugiura, Wiles, and Pope, 2017). On the other hand, when determining the need for informed consent from members of online communities, some argue that ‘group accessibility’, or the extent to which the public can view the community without needing an account; and ‘perceived privacy’, or the level of privacy in the community that members expect, should be considered (King, 1996). The following considers the nature of group accessibility and perceived privacy on r/The_Donald subreddit.

First, r/The_Donald subreddit has high levels of accessibility. To illustrate, not only is the subreddit well-known, but at the time the data was collected and analyzed prior to the quarantine no account or registration of any sort was required to have access to, and view without restriction, the posts or comments therein. Second, members have low perceptions of privacy. For example, the data shows plenty of comments from members who expect that their content is being read by outsiders, especially other Reddit users who they often accuse of downvoting members’ content. In addition, members participate in Reddit with the understanding that, if their post/comment becomes popular, it can potentially be upvoted to Reddit’s front page to be viewed by millions of other users.

However, Sugiura (2016) argues that “[i]t is not sufficient simply to rely on whether a site is public or not; privacy and confidentiality are further important considerations for researching online forums” (p. 4). r/The_Donald’s rule 4 states that no personal information is permitted on the subreddit, making it less likely that the current study might contain users’ private information. To further protect members’ privacy, however, the current study anonymized usernames as well. In the final written report, r/The_Donald members’ usernames were replaced with a pseudonym, the ‘UserID’. In the Top 1000 Comment dataset, a number between 1 and 1000 was randomly assigned to each user. Similarly, in the Random Sample dataset, a number between 1001 and 2000 was randomly assigned to each user. In addition, a number of the comments in the top-upvoted dataset were either made from prominent alt-right figureheads or were

made by users replying to the figurehead or asking them questions. To preserve users' anonymity, the names of the alt-right figureheads were anonymized. Any comments that referenced the alt-right figure were not necessarily excluded from the final report, but had any identifiers removed to maintain these users' privacy.

Credibility and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, the terms credibility and trustworthiness are among those used in consideration of a particular study's quality (Golafshani, 2003). The current study relies on two techniques to improve credibility and trustworthiness: negative case analysis and triangulation. To begin, 'negative case analysis' involves the consideration of cases that run contrary to the prominent themes in the data (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). Considering negative cases (which, in the current study, refers to comments) is meant to encourage researchers to mitigate their own biases and, as a result, a more credible result is produced. In the current study, the results section includes the comments which ran against the prominent themes in the data and attempts to discuss them thoroughly. These sections explain, in detail, the comments that ran contrary to the most prominent narratives in the Random Sample dataset. As a result, the thematic analysis' final report provides a more trustworthy end product, than if these comments had not been considered at all in the final write-up.

Next, a qualitative study may improve its credibility and trustworthiness through the use of triangulation. The current study relies on one particular form of triangulation called 'method triangulation', which involves "the use of multiple methods of data collection about the same phenomenon" (Carter et al., 2014). Here, the current study triangulates the thematic analysis results from the 'Top 1000 Comment' dataset with a second dataset to add credibility and rigor to the study. The second dataset, which was randomly sampled from the '2017' comments to act as a comparison for the first dataset, contained 1000 randomly-sampled comments. The random sampling was also conducted through Excel, where the 2017 dataset (prior to sorting by highest upvoted content) was randomly sampled from, to create a final list of 1000 comments. Here, the goal was to explore what makes top-upvoted content from r/The_Donald unique in comparison with a random sample of comments from the same subreddit, which strengthened the study by allowing the results to convey the nature of the top-upvoted

comments. The two datasets were stored in separate NVivo files on the researcher's personal computer.

Presentation of the Findings

The following section outlines the research decisions made in presenting the findings of the current study. First, although much of the comments in the Top 1000 Comment dataset were relatively short in length, they nevertheless lent significant evidence to the nature of the themes and, therefore, were included in the final report. Regardless of their length, each comment from the 'Top 1000 Comment' sample that was included in the final report was searched for on r/The_Donald's website for context, when needed. While writing up the final report, a number of these shorter quotes were presented by weaving them together along with an interpretation of them in the findings section. While some paragraphs contain many of these shorter comments, a balance was struck by weaving them into the larger story of the themes and providing a qualitative interpretation.

In addition, each comment included in the final product that originated from the Top 1000 Comment dataset or the Random Sample dataset referred to the "UserID" pseudonym as a unique identifier for each user. Besides this, however, another research decision made in presenting the findings was to include the vote score for each comment that was included in the final report, whether it came from the Top 1000 Comment dataset or the Random Sample. Here, the vote score is considered as a reflection of the extent to which the sentiment conveyed in the comment was held by other members of the community. A highly-upvoted comment was deemed to be a particularly worthy or notable contribution to the community and, as a result, received widespread approval from other members of the community through voting. As such, including the vote score in the final report made the findings even more impactful, when considering the extreme right-wing sentiment expressed in some of the most highly-upvoted messages.

Chapter 4. Results

Introduction

This chapter presents the themes that emerged from a thematic analysis of the most highly upvoted comments in r/The_Donald. Here, the themes represent the most prominent narratives in r/The_Donald's top-upvoted comments that relate to the research question. To present the results, this section relies extensively on quotes, as well as rich description, to convey the nature of these findings in a descriptive manner. To begin, a thematic analysis of r/The_Donald's user-submitted comments provides insight into the nature of members' most widely-held attitudes and beliefs, including who they perceive to be enemy out-groups, as well as their attitudes toward (and use of) the social news aggregation platform, Reddit. Here, the thematic analysis revealed three patterns in r/The_Donald's top-upvoted comments, which reflected the most common narratives expressed by right-wing extremists in this virtual community.

More specifically, the most highly upvoted comments suggest that, according to members of r/The_Donald, the physical safety of Americans – and Western culture more generally – is under attack by two powerful forces. First, Muslims are considered to be an 'external' out-group that is threatening America. Second, the 'Left', comprised of 'Leftists' and left-wing news media, seek to weaken the country from the inside. Additionally, r/The_Donald's 'sense of community' encourages the proliferation of right-wing extremist ideology – like that which 'others' Muslims and the Left – and facilitates an environment wherein members' extremist views are continuously validated and supported by their like-minded peers.

Theme One: The External Threat

First, Islamophobic and xenophobic sentiments are a predominant form of right-wing extremism throughout r/The_Donald's most highly-upvoted comments. In particular, r/The_Donald's most highly-upvoted comments situate the external threat, Muslims and to a lesser extent, illegal immigrants, as two dangerous and violent out-groups. To

illustrate, the patterns in the top-upvoted comments reveal that members of r/The_Donald actively promote Muslim immigrants, who they believe to be violent and likely to commit terrorism, as the external, racialized enemies of the West. As a result of characterizing Muslims as the “out-group”, members of the right-wing “in-group” on r/The_Donald are emboldened to defend the white population in the West and avenge the white victims of Muslim-perpetrated terror attacks. Put simply, the most widely-held views by members of r/The_Donald suggest that Reddit’s voting algorithm provides right-wing extremists with a powerful means not only to promote and spread Islamophobic and xenophobic sentiment, but to mobilize against this perceived external threat through producing a collective identity among like-minded, right-wing extremist members of r/The_Donald.

The Myth of the Moderate Muslim

Across the most highly-upvoted messages in the ‘Top 1000 Comment’ sample, by far the most highly-upvoted discussions on r/The_Donald claim that Muslim immigration is a pressing danger to Western nations – particularly to the United States. According to members of r/The_Donald, Muslim-perpetrated violence is to be expected from the increasing levels of Muslim immigration into the country. To illustrate, members generally agree that with increasing Muslim immigration brings “chaos and oppression and rape and murder” (UserID: 977, 4143²). The top-upvoted comments by users not only suggest that Muslims want to “rape my wife and kill my dogs” (UserID: 272, 1532) but also that “pedos³ are rampant inside this mind fuck ideology, as their 'book' allows this shit to happen” (UserID: 309, 2300). Members were even quick to upvote a link to a video of an “ISLAMIST MOB PUSHING A TEEN OFF A ROOF THEN BEATING HIM TO DEATH” (UserID: 600, 1526). Members, with a high degree of certainty, claim they “know muslims are NOT peaceful and will wreck shit” (UserID: 588, 1388). However, members often sarcastically express frustration that, within a wider “politically correct” culture in the United States, they are “not allowed to report crimes perpetrated by Muslims because it's racist” (UserID: 555, 1548).

² The ‘UserID’ represents the author’s pseudonym; the following number is the comment’s ‘vote score’, or the number of upvotes given to a comment minus downvotes.

³ This word is a shorthand version of the word ‘pedophile’.

Another widely-held belief within r/The_Donald subreddit is that increasing Muslim immigration into the United States, and the West more generally, brings an increased threat of terrorism. For instance, members are quick to upvote comments that suggest “NOT ALL MUSLIMS yeah, but damn near most of them it seems” (UserID: 353, 1565) support terrorist attacks against the West. Similarly, one user wrote they “don’t relish the sight of gay nightclubs being shot up” (UserID: 977, 4143) as a result of Muslim-perpetrated acts of terrorism. Although racism is against the subreddit’s rules, racist remarks against Arabs are generally overlooked in the context of discussions around the Muslim terror threat. For instance, one member’s highly upvoted comment described the terrorist threat as follows: “MY NAME IS JAFAR I COME FROM AFAR THERES A BOMB IN MY CAR ALLAHU AKBAR” (UserID: 689, 1400). Moderators appear to overlook racist remarks such as these if they’re made in an absurd manner, perhaps to veil these “shitposts”⁴ (an Internet slang term that refers to intentionally low-quality content that, often, does not contribute anything unique to the discussion) as less serious forms of racism. To counter the terror threat of the Muslim out-group, then, members argue it is imperative to prevent the external threat from entering the country. As one user put it, “[w]e can stop this if we do the right thing and halt our disastrous immigration policies” (UserID: 612, 1942).

The threat of Muslim-perpetrated violence and terrorism, according to r/The_Donald, is happening within the broader context of an Islamic ‘invasion’ into Western countries. To illustrate, right-wing members of r/The_Donald generally react to Muslim immigration into Western nations as a sign that Muslims “want to rule the earth” (UserID: 309, 2300). In discussing the Muslim threat, members’ comments typically consider all Muslims to form a monolithic entity, who collectively possess a goal to destroy the West. In the following, one member of r/The_Donald illustrates the Muslim ‘end game’, namely, destroying other nations to further their own goals:

Muslims have been trying to conquer us since the beginning of time. They used to steal our children and then train them to kill their own people. Didn't work then, and will not work now. There's not a single romanian out there in this whole world who doesn't know what the Muslim end game is. (UserID: 761, 1465)

⁴ See citation “What does the term ‘shitpost’ actually mean?” (2016) for a more in-depth discussion by Reddit users on defining this term.

Alongside members' discussions around Muslims' desire to conquer other nations, r/The_Donald actively characterizes the tyrannical Muslim other as an oppressor that seeks to subjugate the white population in Western nations. Here, one user's top-upvoted comment claimed that "in the future they will be the majority" (UserID: 460, 1653). When Muslims are the majority, according to members of r/The_Donald, those that are left will be powerless to do anything other than "behave and act as they desire" (UserID: 703, 3709), since "anyone who criticizes Islam shall be punished" (UserID: 803, 3116). These messages lend evidence to the nature of anti-Muslim right-wing extremism on r/The_Donald, which positions this out-group not only as violent and dangerous but also a tyrannical entity.

r/The_Donald's white nationalist sentiments tend to emerge during discussions around this external threat. For instance, as Muslims continue to invade the West, according to r/The_Donald, this increasingly threatens the white population within the Western countries. For instance, the top-upvoted reply to a post titled "*Muslim population in Europe to triple by 2050*", one user expressed their grievances toward the rising number of Muslims in Europe. Ultimately, the Muslim threat to the white population therein appears to be this member's biggest concern:

In 2050 your gonna have a lot of younger Europeans who completely resent their elders for giving away there future for a false sense of moral superiority. I almost already feel it with my parents. My family is white and both of my white liberal parents talk as if whites are the worst people on the planet. I love them but holy shit they have no self preservation instincts. It's embarrassing. (UserID: 114, 1604)

In this comment, the member lends evidence to the common right-wing extremist belief on r/The_Donald that members of the white nationalist in-group must 'preserve' their heritage against the external threat of Muslim immigration, or risk losing it entirely. The top-upvoted comments suggest, too, that members are feeling a creeping sense of desperation that the survival of their in-group is being threatened by the out-groups. As one user put it: "Come on? We're getting slaughtered here, the previous car that ploughed though [sic] people on the bridge, Ariana Grande concert and now this? Our country has been infiltrated, we're fucked" (UserID: 355, 2189).

Illegal Immigrants

Another external threat that faces America, according to members of r/The_Donald, is illegal immigration. It is clear that members see illegal immigration as a distinct threat to the safety of Americans, and therefore, members of r/The_Donald discuss creating a hostile environment in America for illegal immigrants to get them to leave the country or, even better, never try to come in the first place. Throughout the top-upvoted discussions on r/The_Donald, then, members wondered if “Democrats honestly think Americans care more about illegals than they care about themselves?” (UserID: 569, 1623). Members despise illegal immigrants because, according to r/The_Donald, they take

ZERO PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY. If you decide to immigrate to ANY country and do it illegally.. eventually, you are going to face consequences.. if you decide to start a family in your new illegal home - you are a selfish asshole. (UserID: 274, 1332)

As a result of this common narrative, a widely-held belief on r/The_Donald is that “IF YOU'RE ILLEGAL, GO BACK HOME!” (UserID: 106, 2440). In addition, the most highly-upvoted comments suggest that racialized minorities who infiltrate America from ‘shithole’ countries are barbaric and present a threat to the white population in America. r/The_Donald’s most highly-upvoted comments argue that “[j]ust because someone comes from a barbaric shithole doesn’t mean they get a pass on ignoring the laws of the land in which they currently live” (UserID: 464, 2207), members also generally agree that “you can kill a white girl if you have the right ethnicity” (UserID: 173, 1404).

‘We need to defend and avenge’

As a result of these external threats, members feel a strong need to defend themselves, and the other members of their in-group. Most often, the external threat is framed as imminent, and one that members need to prepare themselves for if they do not want to be ‘taken over’. To this point, a top-upvoted comment spoke to this imminence, writing that they “hope America is ready, because this shit is coming”

(UserID: 799, 4229). In addition, members naturally feel inspired to defend the West against the monolithic, authoritarian Muslim threat in particular, since, as one user put it, “[w]hy should we give up our lifestyle for their tyranny?” (UserID: 460, 1653). As well, it is by demonstrating the real threat of the Muslim out-group, for instance, that invokes more general discussions on why a defensive response from members is required.

In particular, evidence of the external threat, such as gruesome images of recent terror attack victims, invokes a particularly emotional response from members of r/The_Donald. Terrorism, it would seem, represents one of the most reprehensible acts that a Muslim could commit against members of the in-group. As such, when Muslim-perpetrated terrorist attacks occur, the fear and anger that members of r/The_Donald feel toward the external threat is reflected in their most highly-upvoted comments. For example, the top-upvoted comment to one such image of a terror attack victim wrote “[i]t's heartbreaking and bloodily gruesome but this corpse was once a person. How dare we deny their pain? We need to defend and avenge” (UserID: 989, 1468). Each member that upvoted this comment, then, agrees with its basic underlying assumptions: that the in-group's very survival depends on some form of defensive action against the out-groups.

Notably, the most highly upvoted comments simply argue that the Muslim threat is imminent and that, as a result, a general ‘defensive stance’ is necessary. These top-upvoted comments, however, fail to specify *how* members should respond to this threat. For instance, while members are quick to agree that the threat may, in part, be alleviated by striking down the ‘disastrous’ immigration policies which allow Muslims to flock to the United States, the top-upvoted comments offer members no guidelines, for example, on how to defend themselves against Muslims who already reside within the country. It would appear, then, that members’ top-upvoted discussions around defending themselves from Muslims are meant to be generalized and, as such, are careful not to overtly incite violence against a particular person or group.

Random Sample

The anti-Muslim comments discussed above remain unchallenged in the community, because any comments that run counter to r/The_Donald's most highly-upvoted narrative are typically hidden by other members of the community. For instance, one user who suggested that "the basic ideals of Islam" (UserID: 1928, 1) are "faith, generosity, self-restraint, upright conduct" (UserID: 1928, 1) did not have their comment upvoted. Moreover, comments which argued that those promoting the more prominent anti-Muslim narratives were "coming off as kind of a racist. Terrorist [sic] come in all colors. So do Americans" was far from among the most highly upvoted comments in the community. Similarly, in an environment where the most visible narratives claim that Muslims present an external threat, comments that argue "there are a lot of good muslim people, but theyre [sic] bad muslims" (UserID: 1733, 4) are not as popular within the community. As well, one comment went un-upvoted for suggesting that brown Muslims who commit violent acts have "psychological problems so it's not a terror related attack" (UserID: 1860, 1).

These comments, it would appear, likely did not get upvoted because they argued in favour of the United States as a multicultural country. This runs counter to r/The_Donald's top-upvoted narratives that argue multiculturalism is bad and, further, that 'diversity' will actually weaken the United States. Not only that, but the claim that "terrorist[s] come in all colors" (UserID: 1680, 2) is clearly an unpopular one on r/The_Donald, whose members largely believe that terrorists are not only identifiable by their religious faith but also by their skin colour.

While there were a small number of particularly anti-Muslim comments in the random sample, they were less frequent and, for the most part, less extreme than those in the Top 1000 Comment sample. To illustrate, one member wondered "why do countries like Sweden let Muslim war criminals into their country with no repercussion?" (UserID: 1788, 2). Another user argued "if they make Europe more Muslim then the West will stop bombing the Middle East." (UserID: 1609, 30). However, there were a number of comments in the random sample that reflected the more extreme anti-Muslim content that characterized the Top 100 Comment sample. Not only that, but although both of these anti-Muslim comments expressed anti-Muslim sentiment, they had significantly different vote scores from one another. In this first comment, which received

40 upvotes, the user expresses some concern about one ‘Muslim guy’ who allegedly assaulted a girl:

Foreign muslim guy wants to come to US to take part in athletic event - decide to use it as a chance to take a jab at Trump so they expedite his visa - Guy participates in event, then gets all rapey with a 12 year old girl - Schumer deletes his arrogant tweets/posts because it blew up in his face, making him look like the ass he is (UserID: 1560, 40)

However, yet another comment with similarly anti-Muslim sentiment, in the random sample, failed to receive a single upvote. To illustrate, this user suggested that “Apostasy gets you burned alive. Not converting to Islam gets you beheaded” (UserID: 1632, 1). It is unclear why these comments’ vote scores differed so substantially, especially in light of the anti-Muslim sentiment present in the comments, alongside the Random Sample’s average vote score. Altogether, however, references to Muslims as an external threat were relatively rare among the comments in the Random Sample dataset.

Theme Two: The Internal Threat

Not only do right-wing extremists on r/The_Donald promote the external threat that was previously described, the most highly-upvoted comments also feature an ‘internal’ threat: ‘Leftists’ and left-leaning news media. This commonly-held, right-wing extremist belief broadly situates the Leftist out-group as violent and a threat to members’ white nationalist ideals. More specifically, the most upvoted messages clearly define the common attributes of the Leftist other as violent, regressive, and authoritarian. Meanwhile, members widely consider that the Left-wing media, in particular, distorts the Muslim threat in order to instead frame white nationalism as the ‘true’ threat to the nation’s wellbeing. Not only do the most highly upvoted comments clearly define this internal threat, but members of the in-group are encouraged to mobilize due to the amplified threat of the Left’s censorship and regressive policies. As a result, a collective identity is actively produced among members of r/The_Donald through the algorithmic amplification of these radical anti-Left ideas.

The Threat from the Left

The ‘Left’, according to the most highly-upvoted discussion on r/The_Donald, is an out-group comprised of left-leaning individuals, institutions, and media who, generally, oppose Donald Trump and members’ white nationalist beliefs. The Left are unshakeable in their opposition toward Trump, according to r/The_Donald, and largely fail to listen to reason. As one member put it, “Liberals would rather see their country fail, than to see Donald Trump succeed” (UserID: 43, 1481). To r/The_Donald, while the Left certainly includes individual Democrats and those who generally hold left-leaning political views, it also includes establishment conservatives and the ‘fake news’ left-leaning media. According to r/The_Donald, the members and institutions that comprise the Left “live in a bubble. They have no concept of the damage that the policies they parrot have on the average American” (UserID: 533, 2191). As such, r/The_Donald members consider the Left and left-leaning media to be an out-group that presents a significant threat to the wellbeing of their nation.

The most highly-upvoted messages on r/The_Donald suggest that the Leftist out-group is violent, particularly against the right-wing in-group. A widely-held belief is that “the Left are not as peaceful as they pretend to be,” (UserID: 392, 1982) and they are “growing increasingly unhinged every passing day” (UserID: 880, 2065) according to r/The_Donald. Members even argue that the Left are willing to go so far as murder their political opponents. Due to their violent and potentially deadly tendencies, then, members of r/The_Donald believe the Left will not hesitate to “smash a Trump supporter over the head with a bike lock because of his intolerance to non-liberal viewpoints” (UserID: 619, 1640). Even further, members believe that the Left is sending “death threats to people who have different political views than [them]” (UserID: 880, 2065). Similarly, since “the left have no morals,” (UserID: 468, 1327) members even believe that, to the Left, “[m]urder is a means to and [sic] end. Don’t forget that” (UserID: 364, 1362). However, despite depicting the Left as violent and murderous, members of r/The_Donald encourage each other not to react to this internal threat with violence, since “[v]iolent backlash from the right is exactly what they’re looking for so they can start point fingers and calling us the violent ones” (UserID: 1000, 2173).

Not only is the Left violent, but they also support increased immigration of dangerous Muslim immigrants, according to r/The_Donald. This is because members

largely believe that the Left is either ignorant, or even willfully blind to the threat of the nature of the external threat, or, Muslim immigrants. To illustrate, The Left “want Islam here” (UserID: 977, 4143), because “they don’t view ISIS or terrorism as a threat to this country at all” (UserID: 720, 1361). Rather, the Left is “more scared of Trump’s policies than ISIS” (UserID: 720, 1361). Members of r/The_Donald believe that, according to the Left, “Islam is the future” (UserID: 460, 1653) so “[i]f you displease them [Muslims], then you should let your head be cut off and allow yourself to be bombed and run over” (UserID: 460, 1653). Not only that, when dangerous Muslim immigrants inevitably commit violent acts, members believe that “Liberals will defend these sick fucks because they come from a differnt [sic] culture and don’t understand western society” (UserID: 799, 4229). Put simply, a common sentiment on r/The_Donald is that “the left’s love affair with islam is so cringey and infuriating” (UserID: 687, 1653).

To members of r/The_Donald, then, the subreddit is a space where members can spread their right-wing ideology, free from Leftist influence or dissent. For instance, members encourage one another to not take the Muslim threat lightly, as the Left would like to have the country believe:

Every. Fucking. Week. To any younger people in here, let me tell you something that the MSM and leftists won’t tell you: This is not normal. This is NOT just part of living in a big city. In the 80s and 90s, sure, you had incidents involving the IRA or the 93 WTC bombing, but it wasn’t every fucking week like it is now. You do not have to get used to this. (UserID: 612, 1942)

In particular, the left-wing media, according to the highly upvoted comments, plays a major role in distorting how the public sees the “Muslim threat”. To illustrate, one highly upvoted comment formed an anti-Muslim acronym, based on the media’s distortion of Muslim-perpetrated terrorism: “**J**ust another random incident. **I**mpossible to discern a motive. **H**as nothing to do with religion. **A**lways believe the media. **D**on’t jump to any conclusions.” (UserID: 486, 1461; emphasis in original). This highly-upvoted comment perfectly illustrates members’ distrust of the left-leaning media and how members believe it is shifting the public’s view away from Muslims after a terrorist attack. Here, while the text in the comment is shying away from blaming Muslims, members believe that because they are awakened to recognizing the external threat for what it is, they are

capable of reading between the lines. r/The_Donald's most highly-upvoted comments are full of ways to engage its members with right-wing ideology in clever ways such as this.

Next, the Left's threat to members' white nationalist ideals also appears in this theme. Members insist that the Left threatens the white race. Since 'whiteness' is a shared attribute of the identity of r/The_Donald's right-wing extremist in-group, members feel personally threatened by the Left's perceived hatred of whites. First, members conclude that Leftists "hate white people" (UserID: 479, 1582) because they "shit all over white people for what they did in the past" (UserID: 357, 1688). As a result, members strongly believe that white people are made to feel ashamed of their race by the Left, too, as one member describes:

You're a white male kid. You've grown up being told you're the reason for all the world's ills. You want to speak out. You have to go to your high school in the dark, slouched, with your face hidden to simply post a sign that says It's okay to be white. Leave. School hands security footage over to the media. The media broadcasts the picture nationwide and says they are investigating. Just step back and take in how crazy this is. (UserID: 77, 2099)

The Left ignores "the good stuff" (UserID: 357, 1688) that white people have contributed to civilized society, like the "economies that actually work, philosophy as a whole, antibiotics and healthcare in general, printed press, technology in general, etc. Suddenly that part about the past doesn't count" (UserID: 357, 1688). Instead, the Left makes white people "feel guilty for creating whiteness" (UserID: 845, 1571) because, according to r/The_Donald, "[w]e might not be white nationalists, but our enemies sure want whites to be a minority or even dead" (UserID: 197, 1356). Despite assurances that they do not promote in white nationalism, however, members often promote conspiracy theories around the plight of whites across the world, including 'white genocide.' To illustrate, a widely-held belief on r/The_Donald is that the ongoing white genocide in South Africa is "being ignored by the world. If it is mentioned, it's always played off as an attack on farmers and nothing to do with race. . .and the white population continues to drop (UserID: 240, 1607).

As well, the Left-wing media threatens the white race on a number of other fronts. First, members believe Left-wing media fails to report black-on-white crimes as being “politically and racially motivated” (UserID: 349, 1666), even when the perpetrators are “torturing a white person while shouting fuck white people” (UserID: 933, 2332). Rather, “the mainstream media is now selling the idea that only white people are barbarous” (UserID: 44, 1947). Members of r/The_Donald eschew these labels given to them by Leftist media, and instead subtly argue that Western nations should be defined by, and act solely in the interest of whites. Members also, however, possess enough self-awareness to understand that attempts by white nationalists to prevent the loss of ‘their culture’ from increased immigration of racial and religious minorities in their nation would have them labelled as ‘Nazis’ by the media. In the following, one members’ highly-upvoted comment features this dilemma faced by members:

Europe allows millions of Muslims to seek refuge in Europe. *media silent*. Europe gives them free houses, food, money, mobile phones. *media silent*. Europe build mosques so they can practice their religion. *media silent*. Someone suggests Europe should reduce immigration so they won't lose their culture. Media: NAZISM HAS MADE A FULL COMEBACK IN EUROPE!. Refugees: Europeans and whites are *soo* racist! (UserID: 907, 2407)

Finally, members are quick to promote conspiracy theories as to how their white nationalist beliefs are being censored by Leftist media outlets and even online search engines. Members strongly believe that these mainstream sites have an agenda to hide their alt-right rhetoric to prevent the ‘truth’ from being seen by the masses. Not only that, but since Leftists are prevented from seeing the ‘truth’, they instead have their left-leaning views continuously reinforced by consuming mainstream media sources. The larger concern here for members of r/The_Donald is that they feel their beliefs are being invalidated:

This is a serious issue. It's not a laughing matter. Google is now officially pushing leftist yellow journalist rags as 'real' news and that their word is now absolute through 'fact checking' claims. The feature is **ONLY** available to these papers. A lot of unwoke people use Google on a daily basis for their research. Google is now bluepilling people left and right and pushing down any alternative media sites way down the search results before they become obsolete. They already stopped access to 'Google Translate' on alt-right blogs and blogs which report migrant crimes this is

especially prevalent in Sweden, Belgium, Germany and Austria where censorship is now so rampant the government controls what they say and do. Google needs to be taken down a peg and boycotted over their censorship, brainwashing. (UserID: 1; 1498)

As previously illustrated, members of r/The_Donald make clear that they believe mainstream media, and in particular CNN, is a significant threat to traditional white culture and values. Fortunately, their elected President Donald Trump is standing up to the mainstream media. Members adore Trump for challenging the authenticity of left-leaning news networks. A top-upvoted comment made by one user claimed they had “never seen a president stand up to the Mainstream Media like Trump has. It’s incredible” (UserID: 928, 2191). In fact, Trump tweeted a short video clip of himself that originated from r/The_Donald, featuring himself wrestling the CNN logo, which became very popular on the subreddit. Members were thrilled that Trump was so willing to stick up for them and stand up to mainstream media, with a common sentiment being “[t]his is just unbelievable. I am in love with our President” (UserID: 34, 2319).

Members see Trump as the solution to the Leftist threat, as expected in a website catered toward those who possess unwavering support for the President. Indeed, the most highly-upvoted comments praise Trump’s strength. Replying to the ‘Trump Tweet’ post titled “*@realDonaldTrump: If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view - NO FEDERAL FUNDS?*” the top-voted reply read:

After 8 years of the Obama admin, I forgot what it was like to have someone in DC who actually gave a shit about the people and cared about telling the truth. It’s still fresh and a shock every time Trump keeps a promise or stands for the people. I’m a little choked up after reading this tweet. He really does have our back.” (UserID: 959, 1624)

In essence, the user is expressing his/her belief that leftist narratives from individuals and from ‘PC culture’ universities are being threatened by Trump. They feel that Trump is standing up to these internal threats, in this case by threatening to withhold funding from this university, and that he is keeping his campaign promises to his supporters.

Random Sample

Based on the extreme views against the Left among the most highly-upvoted comments, it is surprising how infrequently the Random Sample dataset mentions this supposedly serious Leftist threat. In the Random Sample dataset, for instance, not only is the Left mentioned less often, but in less extreme ways. Instead, the Random Sample attacks against the Left are intended to be more humorous than serious. To illustrate, one user criticized the Left, since, “in addition to being unable to meme, leftists and ANTIFA can't shower either” (UserID: 1891, 17). Similarly, another user admonished the “[t]ypical leftist hypocrites. That's why we can't play fair with them. They never reciprocate the gesture of good faith in anything” (UserID: 1719, 9). Another less popular comment in the Random Sample dataset suggested that the Left seek to “protect free speech by banning it. Leftist logic” (UserID: 1751, 1). This, however, was the extent to which the Left was referred in the Random Sample dataset.

Additionally, on the topic of the mainstream media, members' comments in the Random Sample were a far cry from the most highly-upvoted comments. The comments in the Random Sample are, perhaps, more typical of the Republican/Democrat banter than the extreme views that characterize r/The_Donald's most highly-upvoted comments. To illustrate, one user aired his/her views of the media, claiming that the “Left stream media could give a rat's ass for red state WVA voters. Trump carried it by 50 points Media is owned and run by DNC” (UserID: 1201, 1). One comment in the random sample failed to be upvoted, perhaps in part, for daring to refer to a Leftist news anchor as “a good liberal in the sense he can actually have people from the other side on his panel and have a discussion” (UserID: 1619, 1). This, however, is the extent to which the Left and Left-wing media are represented in the random sample.

Theme Three: The ‘Virtual Community’ of the Alt-Right

Finally, a systematic analysis of r/The_Donald's top-upvoted comments reveals the subreddit can best be described as a virtual community, on a number of different fronts. Here, members see r/The_Donald as a refuge from the criticism that they would receive for their ‘alternative’ views, not just from other Reddit users, but also the offline

realm. Instead, on r/The_Donald the nature of the forum encourages dialogue between likeminded members, who oftentimes give support to each other both in words, but also in ‘upvotes’. For instance, members view upvotes to their comments as a supportive gesture from their like-minded peers, especially when comments express feelings of sadness or vulnerability. As well, members even discuss ways to fight back against the perceived threats from the two out-groups that are most discussed on r/The_Donald, Muslims and the Left. Not only that, but r/The_Donald’s ‘sense of community’ encourages the proliferation of right-wing extremist ideology –like that which ‘others’ Muslims and the Left– and facilitates an environment where members’ extremist views are continuously validated and supported by their like-minded peers. Finally, r/The_Donald community is also a space to discuss methods and means to attract new members; referred to as ‘red-pilling’, members promote the information sources that ‘give evidence’ to their alt-right beliefs.

r/The_Donald: A ‘Virtual Community’

The most highly-upvoted comments suggest that members view r/The_Donald as a virtual refuge. Since, on Reddit at least, “anything in a default sub that is even remotely pro-tump/gop [sic] is instantly downvoted into oblivion” (UserID: 25, 1831), members created r/The_Donald as a virtual locale where they can exchange their radical beliefs among like-minded peers. To illustrate, when they have no one to share their beliefs with members concede it “can be a lonely existence” (UserID: 898, 2044). Members can discuss and even receive praise for their right-wing extremist views on r/The_Donald; to many members, these peer-to-peer interactions were “probably the only reason I didn’t go insane” (UserID: 38, 1599). Through examining the patterns among the most highly upvoted messages, members use upvoting to promote a friendly and welcoming environment on r/The_Donald, to further build the subreddit into a virtual community.

First, the most highly-upvoted comments suggest that the friendly atmosphere on r/The_Donald is meant to enhance the sense of community, by encouraging members to bond with one another. Surrounded by like-minded peers who are “all in this together” (UserID: 38, 1599) facing the internal and external threats, members can’t help but feel that “the friendliness and warmth are insane” (UserID: 431, 1637) on r/The_Donald. Throughout the subreddit, there is a strong sense that members who may have been shunned or isolated because of their right-wing beliefs have found solace on

r/The_Donald. Perhaps, members recognize that this is a shared experience for many who support Donald Trump and/or hold right-wing beliefs. As a result, members are quick to tell each other “I’m your friend and I like you, fam” (UserID: 805, 1717). These comments from their likeminded peers instill a sense of belonging in members.

Second, the term ‘pede’ appears often in the most highly-upvoted comments. These comments suggest that being a ‘pede’ represents belonging to the r/The_Donald community generally, and also possessing a fervent, unwavering support for Donald Trump, more specifically. This identifier is bestowed upon members as they join and participate in the community. Members, referring to each other as ‘pedes’, then, offer positive or supportive remarks to each other to build a sense of belonging in the community. To illustrate, throughout the most highly-upvoted comments, members tell each other that “you’ve got a friend in me, pede” (UserID: 438, 1646). They also tell each other that they’re “a good man and an excellent pede” (UserID: 337, 1683). In addition, insights from the Top 1000 Comment dataset suggest that members more often refer to each other as ‘pede’ instead of their chosen Reddit usernames, perhaps to further entrench their identity within the right-wing community.

Third, a sense of community is established by the efforts of the more experienced members of r/The_Donald to retain new members in the community. To illustrate, a widely held sentiment is that r/The_Donald is “[t]ruly a welcoming environment” (UserID: 434, 1404). As an example, new members are assured that they “[d]on’t have to ask to be a pede” (UserID: 506, 2796). Rather, when new members introduce themselves, more experienced members are quick to welcome them by commenting “[c]ongrats to our new pede!” (UserID: 676, 1631). In addition, upvoting new members’ comments acts as a supportive and validating action to their views. As one user put it, they participated within the community “expecting some support, but never imagined making it to the front page of T_D” (UserID: 434, 1404). Another new member asked “Wow, I did not think I would reach the first page of r/The_Donald with my first post here! Maybe now I can get that coat?” (UserID: 76, 1706). It would seem, then, that new members of r/The_Donald perceive upvotes to represent validation and support for their beliefs, and a feeling of belonging to the community.

Fourth, the top-upvoted comments reinforce a message of solidarity amongst members of r/The_Donald. Although a general consensus on r/The_Donald is that

members are simply “supporting the sitting president of the United States,” (UserID: 701, 2067) their extreme views have been met with opposition on Reddit and beyond. As such, a number of the most highly upvoted comments remind users about existing threats to their controversial community’s solidarity. As one member put it, there are “[a] lot of lies out there about us, don’t believe everything you hear my friend” (UserID: 537, 1395). Similarly, members warn each other to “[b]e incredibly skeptical of any posts that divide us. Now is the time that CTR [Correct The Record] wedges will be coming strong” (UserID: 239, 1601).

Finally, the most highly-upvoted comments discuss ways to protect their community from censorship. Members express considerable frustration against any form of backlash or criticism against their beliefs, to which they usually refer under the umbrella term ‘censorship’. To illustrate, a widely-held belief on r/The_Donald is simply that “censorship is real” (UserID: 962, 1849) and that its general function is to “correct your illegal opinions” (UserID: 173, 1863). Members have even revolted against the ‘free-speech’ platform that they once loved, Reddit, for, in their view, trying to censor their community. Indeed, the resentment that members feel toward Reddit is very much palpable in members’ discussions around censorship and its impact on their community. To illustrate, members strongly believe that “Reddit SUCKS. It's a flaming pile of garbage...You censor our subreddit, manipulate our upvotes, and edit our comments to make it seem like community is turning against itself” (UserID: 558, 1560).

Members of r/The_Donald community are so enraged about perceived censorship to their views by Reddit, that they welcome all those who agree with them:

Bernie supporter here. Signed up to say this: I am absolutely disgusted by the orwellian level of censorship that this sub has been subjected to. I have spent some time here the last couple of days because of the murder of Seth Rich, I also want justice for him, and seeing [sic] threads with thousands of upvotes suddenly have ZERO in the blink of an eye, obviously because of tampering by reddit admins, is shocking. This is completely unacceptable for any thinking, sane person, no matter where you belong in the political spectrum. I may not agree with Trump supporters politically, but I sure as hell will defend your right to speak your minds freely. A society where people are silenced because of their political beliefs is NOT a democracy, it is a FASCIST TYRANNY. Fight for your right to speak up, centipedes. (Hope I got that right..?) This goes beyond political parties, beyond left and right. This is a question about what is WRONG and RIGHT. (UserID: 709, 1364)

In the search for censorship-free platforms, then, members suggest alternative platforms to migrate to “for when we are no longer allowed here either” (UserID: 962, 1849). The top-upvoted comments suggest a number of alternative ‘clone’ sites, that offer ‘uncensored’ versions of the mainstream platforms they’re already familiar with, for members to turn to. As one member put it, “[w]e need to support our alt-tech platforms. Voat and Gab have free speech” (UserID: 255, 2060). These conversations around platform migration suggest that members feel insecure about hosting their community on Reddit, which to their view is trying to censor their beliefs and dismantle the right-wing community. As a result of this, members suggest alternative platforms because they believe that their community could be banned on the whim of Reddit’s administration.

Taking the Red Pill

Next, a common pattern among the most highly-upvoted comments suggests that members, as a community, conspire over ways to combat the internal threat, Leftists. While members generally maintain that the Left is threatening the wellbeing of America, some members of r/The_Donald also believe that the Left is not completely a lost cause. In the following comment, a highly influential ‘alt-right’ figure argued that some members of the Leftist out-group could eventually be ‘awakened’ to alt-right beliefs:

The important thing to remember is that most of the liberals you are arguing with are good people -- they just got taken in by professional race baiters, gender activists, journalists and other rent-seekers. They can be saved, and with them, America. (UserID: 977, 2089).

With this belief in mind, members encourage each other to engage in debate with the Left because “you never know who might have a disconnect from the matrix” (UserID: 511, 1470) and awaken to alt-right beliefs, as a result. Members make references to the movie The Matrix, like taking a ‘red pill’, to convey this process of awakening Leftists to alt-right beliefs. According to members, this ‘red-pilling’ is the best way to combat the Internal threat, by recruiting Leftists.

Members of r/The_Donald do not give a precise definition of ‘red-pilling’. Broadly, the red-pilling of political opponents, according to the top-voted comments on r/The_Donald, is designed to “help them see” (UserID: 934, 1471) far-right ideology in an acceptable light, instead of blindly following the “bullshit being pushed by the left” (UserID: 281, 1490). Although members are quick to point out “we have lots of ways to red pill” (UserID: 323, 1457), discussions in the community generally refer to it as the process of “win[ning] arguments with those who have been brainwashed by the media and culture in general” (UserID: 977, 2089). Since the targets of red-pilling vary, arguments with specific groups need to be tailored to effectively bring about an ‘awakening’ to far-right beliefs, according to r/The_Donald. As an example, when targeting members of the LGBTQ community, an effective red-pill should try to convince them that “the left really doesn’t care about them and is just using them when it’s politically convenient” (UserID: 934, 1471).

To win arguments with Leftists and save the nation from the Internal threat, then, members feel they need to have the best, most persuasive information that their enemies simply cannot argue against. To illustrate, the alt-right influencer claims some of the most valuable material that members use to awaken their opponents are the “government data and studies that comprehensively destroy liberal myths” (UserID: 977, 2089). When members detect and retrieve this valuable information, then, others quickly spread it by upvoting. For instance, upon finding a good document one member posted it and told others:

[y]ou have to all read this. . .From this document, third PDF page (<https://www.archives.gov/files/research/jfk/releases/104-10125-10187.pdf>) Picture of the paragraph <http://i.magaimg.net/img/1rhi.png>.” (UserID: 657, 1515)

Members are quick to jump on ‘verified’ documents such as those that lend (what they perceive to be) evidence to the claims regularly made about, for instance, the internal and external threats. In particular, they seek out what they consider to be the most reputable sources to give evidence to their alt-right beliefs that Leftists cannot argue against.

When ‘government data and studies’ don’t support the claims made by the far-right members of r/The_Donald, they turn to alternative sources. These alternative news sources are, according to the most highly-upvoted comments, most commonly alt-right blogs and Wikipedia, which are selected because they typically contain ‘facts’ that back up claims made by right-wing members of r/The_Donald. Here, white nationalist websites are unquestionably considered by members to be disseminating the truth, in contrast to the untrustworthy mainstream news media outlets. For instance, one user relied on a website called “redpilledworld” to help members understand Reddit’s voting algorithms, and how they were being manipulated by the Left to destroy r/The_Donald:

The_Donald is quite rightly an astute community who question news and verify statistics, so in anticipation of requests for an explanation of the figures, this article confirms the calculation showing the total number of downvotes: <http://redpilledworld.blogspot.com/2017/03/child-exploitation-should-not-be.html> (UserID: 421, 1506).

Aside from alt-right sources, such as these, Wikipedia is commonly cited to ‘confirm’ a variety of far-right conspiracy theories, including that of an alleged child abuse ring in the United Kingdom. To illustrate, one of the most highly-upvoted messages on r/The_Donald was simply a list of Wikipedia URLs that link back to child sex abuse scandals in the United Kingdom:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotherham_child_sexual_exploitation_scandal
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aylesbury_child_sex_abuse_ring
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banbury_child_sex_abuse_ring
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bristol_child_sex_abuse_ring
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derby_child_sex_abuse_ring
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halifax_child_sex_abuse_ring
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keighley_child_sex_abuse_ring
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxford_child_sex_abuse_ring
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peterborough_sex_abuse_case
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rochdale_child_sex_abuse_ring
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telford_child_sex_abuse_ring (UserID: 268, 1639)

In sum, despite members' insistence on using the best material to red-pill their Leftist opponents, they appear willing to wield any source they can get their hands on, so long as it confirms their right-wing biases. Indeed, members are quick to promote their alternative alt-right blogs, as well as Wikipedia, since they are widely considered to be unaffected by the Left's "politically correct" influence. By linking to alternative sites like these, members can distribute information that supports their right-wing beliefs, and that they claim is valid, to their like-minded peers on r/The_Donald.

Random Sample

On the other hand, the least upvoted (and therefore least visible) content in the Random Sample questioned the alternative media sources touted by members of r/The_Donald. To illustrate, one member claimed "I'm not going to upvote or promote something I can't verify. If I'm against unverified sources with MSM, I'm against it with social media too. . .Don't let them make a fool out of us" (UserID: 1892, 1). Similarly, another user called another "a dumb ass for jumping on the first report you heard and for not removing and apologizing for your previous comment" (UserID: 1026, 6). Further, the Random Sample comments criticize users for failing to provide credible sources for their claims, like one user who wrote "And yet...somehow...you failed to provide a link to said video?" (UserID: 1064, 1). Additionally, one user was bold enough to claim that "[n]obody on the right gives a fuck what the media says anymore. White supremacist has ceased to hold any meaning" (UserID: 1106, 2) despite it being a common topic in the most highly-upvoted comments.

It would appear that the random sample comments are not always as friendly as the top-upvoted comments. This suggests that members may decide not to vote on comments which are not friendly and do not promote community-building and pro-sociality in the community. Here, by ignoring unfriendly comments members of r/The_Donald appear to strive to promote a friendly and pro-social environment among their fellow Trump supporters. Friendlier comments, by contrast, appear more often among the highly-upvoted comments which lends evidence to the nature of the community that members of r/The_Donald strive to construct.

In addition, much of the Random Sample comments were snippets of members' casual conversations that did not revolve around the external and internal threats. They

were, overall, much less politically charged. To illustrate, one member wrote: “LOL just giving you shit. My sergeant would give us major beatings if we called our weapons guns” (UserID: 1154, 1). Others discussed their personal hobbies, like video games: “Destiny and Destiny 2 are the only two video games i've played in the past 5 years. (former gamer addict, but real life now)” (UserID: 1165, 2). Other conversations revolved around the best local pizza joints:

I made a few toppings that goes on thier [sic] pizzas and I can say the quality is up there. Anywho, sadly there is no PJs near me so I cant get any. I guess dominoes is the best bet, I hate pizza hut (UserID: 1208, 1).

These comments suggest that community building is also somewhat common in the random sample comments. To illustrate, comments within the Random Sample suggest that, to its members, r/The_Donald functions as more than just a politically-charged environment to discuss the President; rather, these Random Sample comments would suggest that r/The_Donald also encourages ties between its members by allowing them to discuss a variety of relatively apolitical topics among their peers, as well. Although members may be initially attracted to the pro-Trump leanings of the community, they may also choose to engage with the community in a more personal way, through discussing topics that are more in line with their personal lives and interests. However, these relatively mundane discussions are, perhaps, ‘less’ upvoted because they relate more to personal matters than Donald Trump, or larger political events. After all, r/The_Donald is first and foremost a community dedicated to discussing and supporting the President; it follows, then, that topics which veer too far away from the community’s primary purpose are not given as much attention or upvotes.

Chapter 5. Discussion

The following discussion interprets the study findings through the lens of social movement theory, as well as situates the results in the literature surrounding far-right extremists' use of internet platforms.

Research Problem

Since the advent of the Internet, right-wing extremists from across the globe have assembled in 'virtual communities' to connect, bond, and build a collective identity around 'othering' their perceived enemies (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Futrell & Simi, 2014). For instance, far-right extremists from across the globe on Stormfront target their perceived threats to clearly define the borders of 'us' versus 'them' (Scrivens, Davies, and Frank, 2018). The popular social news aggregation site, Reddit, has come under fire for harbouring a number of hateful right-wing communities on its site that have, for the most part, been unopposed as a result of Reddit's 'anything goes' attitude toward hate speech. However, little is known about right-wing extremist communities on Reddit generally, or how members of these communities navigate Reddit's unique voting features to construct a collective identity, more specifically. The current study bridges this gap by exploring one right-wing extremist community on Reddit, r/The_Donald. In particular, the current study explores members' identity work by examining the patterns and themes amongst 1000 of r/The_Donald's top-upvoted comments. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the results of the study's thematic analysis.

Right-Wing Extremists' use of Reddit

To begin, the presence of right-wing extremism on the fringe platform, Reddit, may be a reflection of the increasingly hostile environment on other popular social media platforms to hate and racism. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook, for instance, not only have anti-hate content policies, but have also taken some steps to enforce these policies to prevent the spread of right-wing extremism on their platforms. As an example, Twitter banned the far-right activist Laura Loomer for her anti-Muslim tweets (Givetash, 2018).

Similarly, Facebook removed Faith Goldy, a far-right activist; Kevin Goudreau, a white nationalist; and a number of other far-right groups' pages from its site (Harris, 2019). This is not to say that right-wing extremism has never, or will never, exist on these mainstream platforms; rather, it is just to say that these platforms' policies have made efforts to take a transparent stance against such content and provided the means to remove this content if they choose.

As mainstream sites begin to crack down more on alternative views, Reddit's 'free-speech' platform becomes more attractive to right-wing extremist movements who wish to air their grievances in a relatively 'uncensored' manner. More specifically, Reddit's 'laissez-faire' content policy, unlike that of the aforementioned social media sites, may explain why the site not only attracts far-right extremists but allows them to build transnational extremist communities like r/The_Donald. To illustrate, Reddit's content policy stops short of addressing not only racism and hate speech, but also the 'sanitized' white nationalist discourse developed by members of more contemporary right-wing movements. It is within this environment, then, that right-wing extremists may develop dedicated communities on Reddit under like-minded moderation. Here, as a result of Reddit's unwillingness to take a firm stance against the spread of right-wing ideology on its platform, hate-oriented communities like r/The_Donald thrive.

Further, right-wing extremists on r/The_Donald use Reddit's platform in ways that are comparable to the ways in which extremists are using other social media platforms. Broadly, the results demonstrate that r/The_Donald can best be described as a 'virtual community' for members of the white nationalist movement, where Trump supporters in particular can assemble to discuss their commonly-held views among likeminded peers. In particular, Reddit's voting algorithm distinguishes this site from other community forums, because, as the results highlight, it allows members to easily promote the most extreme views against their enemy out-groups to a wide audience. As such, members likely rely on the site's voting algorithm to spread their extreme ideology outside of their subreddit, rather than actively recruiting within r/The_Donald (perhaps because this forum is specifically for Trump supporters only, but also because there appear to be separate related forums that may encourage recruitment, like r/AskTrumpSupporters). The presence of this right-wing community on Reddit, then, suggests that this 'free-speech' platform, that tolerates the fringe r/The_Donald's community's hateful right-wing

extremist beliefs, provides an enabling environment for right-wing extremist movements to assemble.

The ‘Algorithmic’ Echo Chamber

The results of the current study reveal that r/The_Donald community is, undoubtedly, riddled with hateful sentiment against members’ perceived enemies, Muslims and the Left. The results of the thematic analysis on the Top 1000 Comment dataset indicate that members most often agree with (upvote) the most extreme views toward their common enemies, as a way to mobilize their social movement around these threats. The Random Sample dataset highlights that one can even expect to encounter right-wing extremist ideology in the comments that received relatively little upvotes. However, what is most remarkable about comparing the two datasets is not the presence of hateful – albeit less extremely so – content in the Random Sample. Rather, it is the complete absence of dissenting views among the most visible content, in the Top 1000 Comment dataset, that suggests Reddit’s voting algorithm facilitates an ‘echo chamber’ effect in r/The_Donald.

The remarkable absence of dissenting views among the highly upvoted messages in the ‘Top-1000 Comment’ dataset reflects the ways in which extremists are exploiting Reddit’s unique voting system to build an echo chamber for their widely-held extremist beliefs. Rather than encouraging a variety of views within discussions on r/The_Donald, Reddit’s voting algorithm allows members to shape the discourse within their communities in ways that reflect a specific set of values, norms, and attitudes of the in-group. To illustrate, members of r/The_Donald only support, or upvote, the most extreme views on Muslims and the Left, while ignoring or downvoting any dissenting views. As a result, content that challenges r/The_Donald’s white nationalist belief system is, simply, hidden by other members through downvoting or removed entirely by moderators. Within this ‘algorithmic’ echo chamber, then, members of r/The_Donald are able to normalize otherwise unacceptable views to produce a one-sided narrative that only serves to reinforce their extremist belief system, similar to other online echo chambers (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). Social movement theory provides a particularly salient explanation for why right-wing extremists may be using Reddit’s voting features in this way. The most extreme views against Muslims and the Left are more likely to

produce a stronger reaction from supporters on r/The_Donald and, as a result, members may be more likely to mobilize around these distinct threats.

Algorithms and Identities

Next, the results highlight how right-wing extremists are not only using Reddit's voting algorithm as a tool to promote anti-Muslim and anti-Left content; but that they are also actively producing a 'collective identity' on r/The_Donald through 'othering' these external and internal threats. To illustrate, by upvoting members promote their understandings of the identity of the out-groups, which frames Muslims and the Left as two imminent threats, and by downvoting they may hide the comments that claim otherwise. Then, members can strengthen the ties between their likeminded peers on r/The_Donald by clearly defining the shared attributes of the in-group.

First, Reddit's voting features give members of r/The_Donald a powerful tool to participate in the formation of their collective identity, by amplifying content that 'others' the external threat, Muslims. The thematic analysis reveals that right-wing extremists are able to promote and spread extreme forms of anti-Muslim hate speech on r/The_Donald. In this community, then, upvoting promotes the comments that situate members as the 'in'-group, who must rally together to defend themselves against the perceived threats of the 'out'-group, Muslims. First, r/The_Donald's rules specifically endorse anti-Muslim content, which may explain why related content is so prevalent among the most highly upvoted messages. However, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant hate speech is increasingly becoming an 'accepted' form of racism that right-wing movements are promoting, to mobilize a global audience of right-wing extremists (Hafez, 2014; Campana & Tanner, 2019; Froio & Ganesh, 2018). Similarly, research on this topic has concluded that the othering of Muslims specifically is commonly used to strengthen in-group ties between far-right extremists against a common enemy (Hafez, 2014). This suggests that, by condoning anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant hate speech on its platform, the fringe platform Reddit provides an attractive transnational 'home base' for members of the right-wing extremist movement to mobilize their social movement around these 'imminent' threats.

Additionally, Donald Trump's own anti-Muslim rhetoric, which has emboldened right-wing extremists to commit hateful acts against Muslims (Müller & Schwarz, 2018),

may explain why his supporters on r/The_Donald are so eager to vilify the external threat. Known as the ‘Trump Effect’ (Perry, Mirrlees, and Scrivens, 2018; Perry & Scrivens, 2018), the results of the current study suggest that Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric emboldens his fervent supporters on r/The_Donald to spread hateful content via Reddit’s upvoting algorithm. Members can ensure that this anti-Muslim content is widely seen by others on r/The_Donald, due to social news aggregators’ position bias (Glenski & Weninger, 2017; Glenski, Pennycuff, & Weninger, 2017). As was demonstrated by the results, then, members of r/The_Donald have been emboldened to ‘defend’ the white population in the West and ‘avenge’ the white victims of Muslim-perpetrated terror attacks. The results here confirmed that Reddit’s voting algorithm provides right-wing extremists with a powerful means not only to amplify anti-Muslim hatred, but to encourage mobilization against this external threat through actively producing a collective identity among members of this movement.

Second, right-wing extremists exploit Reddit’s voting algorithm to ‘other’ the internal threat: the ‘Left’. On the surface, r/The_Donald’s villainization of the Left reflects the increasing political divide in the United States, where the ‘right’ often accuse the ‘left’ of threatening the wellbeing of the nation (Dimock, Doherty, Kiley, & Oates, 2014). However, right-wing extremists on r/The_Donald take this narrative to the extreme. The highly-upvoted anti-Left discourse on r/The_Donald most accurately reflects the alt-right movement’s ‘paradoxical’ identity politics, which accuse the Left of authoritarianist censorship, yet position the far-right as the harbingers of ‘peaceful social change’ (Phillips & Yi, 2018).

However, there are a number of reasons that might explain why the Left is the target of othering discourse by r/The_Donald. As die-hard Donald Trump supporters, members may be emboldened to criticize left-wing media in general, and CNN in particular, in line with Donald Trump’s own claims that mainstream media is ‘fake news’ (Lemire & Colvin, 2018). Again, this highly upvoted anti-Left narrative is widely seen and engaged with due to Reddit’s position bias (Glenski & Weninger, 2017; Glenski, Pennycuff, & Weninger, 2017). As a result, a collective identity is actively produced among members of r/The_Donald through the algorithmic amplification of these radical anti-Left ideas.

In addition, Reddit, it would seem, has enabled this transnational venue for the production of a white collective identity. To illustrate, members of r/The_Donald are promoting hate speech that positions Muslims, illegal immigrants, Leftists, and Left-wing media as a threat. It is through identifying what, and whom, these out-groups are threatening, that members may simultaneously defining the boundaries of their in-group's collective identity, according to social movement theory (Futrell & Simi, 2004; Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Perry & Scrivens, 2016; Melucci, 1995). The most highly-upvoted comments suggest that these out-groups are not only a physical threat to Trump supporters; they are also a threat to whites in Western countries more broadly. Here, the right-wing members of r/The_Donald have constructed the identity of their in-group by a shared set of attributes, namely, support for Trump and white nationalist beliefs. As a result of these most agreed-upon narratives, then, members provide a rationale for hostile acts targeting the out-group.

Third, upvoting is used as a community-building tool on r/The_Donald. In particular, the results demonstrate that r/The_Donald community can be counted among one of many online spaces where members of right-wing extremist movements are assembling to consolidate a global movement (Perry & Olsson, 2009). These findings also support previous research that has cast online forums as 'virtual communities' of the radical right, where like-minded right-wing extremists come together in support of one another (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Wojcieszak, 2009; Wojcieszak, 2010). More specifically to Reddit, however, this finding adds support to previous literature that suggests Reddit users tend to vote in prosocial ways (Priestley, Mesoudi, & Amblard, 2015).

However, this finding may simply be explained by the rules of the subreddit. There is no 'dissenting' content allowed on the community, which generally means that anything anti-Trump is very likely to be removed by moderators. In addition, users who reveal themselves to be non-Trump supporters through posting anti-Trump content are likely to be banned by moderators. As a result of the rules, and actions by moderators to remove dissenting content/members, r/The_Donald members generally get along well in the confines of their own community, then, since they are all united by their unwavering support for the President (Squirrel, 2017; Martin, 2017).

In addition to this, the results show that upvoting is used to welcome new members to r/The_Donald. Upvoting a comment tends to make it more visible and, therefore, more likely to be commented on (Muchnik, Aral, & Taylor, 2013). This encourages the member to engage again (Joyce & Kraut, 2006) and, through repeated interactions with community members, it affirms and reaffirms the members' identity in the community. This supportive environment on r/The_Donald has implications for radicalization that should be the topic of future research, since "it is within these social interactions where a potential recruit's motivation, intentions and behaviours ignite" (Neo, Dillon & Khader, 2016, p. 1124).

Members also actively discuss the best ways to alert others to whites' suffering by 'red-pilling'. Similar to the previous research on white nationalist recruitment on Twitter (Berger 2017), on r/The_Donald it resembles the mobilizing of a social movement rather than the organized recruitment of terrorist groups like the Islamic State. Because r/The_Donald is exclusively a space for right-wing Trump supporters, this may be one reason why it is not in and of itself a recruitment ground unlike other platforms like Twitter (Berger, 2017). Rather, members of r/The_Donald among their own prefer to discuss the proven methods and materials to effectively bring about an 'awakening' in the uninitiated. Since online 'echo chambers' are linked to increasingly polarized views this may be of increasing concern to law enforcement and government officials (Wojcieszak, 2010). In addition, members of the alt-right have been led to violence through participation in online extremist communities, which warrants further attention (Hankes & Amend, 2018).

In sum, it would appear that Reddit has given right-wing extremists a powerful platform to connect with like-minded peers and promote extremist ideology, leading to the development of a shared sense of 'we': a collective identity. On r/The_Donald, the current study found that a particularly effective form of collective identity-building, 'othering', was prevalent throughout the community. This, understandably, leads to concerns about the potential for mobilization and even for members of r/The_Donald to organize far-right events, like the Unite the Right rally, in the future. As a result of the current study's findings, then, there are implications for Reddit administration in responding to extremist communities on their platform. For instance, one tool that Reddit can use to effectively respond to extremists' exploitation of Reddit is to 'ban' the extremist community. 'Banning' a subreddit community removes it completely from the

site and prevents its members (and anyone else) from accessing it. There is even some evidence that banning extremist subreddits can effectively reduce hateful content on Reddit. To illustrate, following Reddit's ban of two extremist communities, r/fatpeoplehate and r/CoonTown, Chandrasekharan et al. (2017) determined that former members of banned communities reduced their hate speech on Reddit by approximately 80%. Without their communities, former members of the banned subreddits appeared to stop posting and spreading hatred on the site (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017). In essence, the ban effectively reduced the amount of hateful sentiment being shared on Reddit (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017). Banning r/The_Donald, then, has the potential to impact the development of a collective identity and later, mobilization among right-wing extremists on Reddit by preventing them from connecting with their like-minded peers and spreading extremist ideology.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study is limited by the research decisions surrounding its sample size. For instance, since the data were only sampled from one year the results potentially fail to detect ways that the nature of the upvoted comments may have evolved over time. The study is limited to the year 2017 because the manual analysis of more than one year of comment data would be too time consuming for the current project. This limitation also exists because the intent of the current study was to explore the first year of Trump's presidency in depth, rather than explore multiple years' messages in less detail. By gathering data from only one year, however, the study is limited to understanding the community only after Trump was elected. For instance, had the 'Top 100 Comment' dataset contained data from the community in the years prior to Trump's election, the study could have uncovered additional insights into the nature of the r/The_Donald's top-upvoted comments during a time when Trump was not President. Future studies, then, should provide a comprehensive look into the nature of right-wing extremism on r/The_Donald in the time before, during, and after Trump's election.

Additionally, the decision to not sample or analyze posts from r/The_Donald limited a comprehensive understanding of r/The_Donald. On Reddit, posts can include not only text, but images and links as well. By not sampling posts, then, the current study was limited to only text comments and could not gather an understanding of the nature

of the images, such as memes, and links, such as those to alt-right and far-right websites featured on r/The_Donald. Although the current study sought to explore textual content only, an analysis of images from r/The_Donald is an interesting avenue of future research that should be considered. For instance, prior research on r/The_Donald has shown that members of the far-right are encapsulating and spreading their extremist ideology in easily-digestible ‘meme’ imagery (Ward, 2018).

Another important limitation of the current study is a lack of triangulation techniques, which is especially problematic given the social constructivist approach (Golafshani, 2003). The current study referred to a Random Sample of comments from r/The_Donald to act as a data triangulation method, however, this strategy was problematic. To illustrate, a thorough analysis of the Random Sample comments was limited, because oftentimes these comments were hidden among hundreds or thousands of comments. As a result, it was not always feasible to seek context for comments that were hidden or downvoted, since too much time would have to be spent searching for these hidden comments in a sea of threads. In addition to the random sample, the current study went into detail to outline methodology, namely the exact steps taken to gather the datasets and the steps taken to analyse the data using thematic analysis, to increase the verification and traceability of the analysis (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Other than these steps, however, the data was not triangulated, which severely limits the study’s trustworthiness. To correct for this, future studies in this area could include multiple researchers to code the data and triangulate their results, as another way to improve the validity of studies of a similar nature and/or methodology.

Finally, the current study is limited by the data collection method. One research decision was to gather the most highly-upvoted comments across the entire community. In theory, this decision made sense; in practice, however, the Top 1000 Comment dataset was incredibly difficult to code and, perhaps, not well-suited to qualitative research. To illustrate, the comments were gathered from conversations that revolved from a wide variety of completely unrelated topics and as a result, none of the comments had any relationship to one another. Because of this, it severely limited the ability to gather an understanding of the interactions between community members. Not only that, but as a result of not being able to see how members interacted with one another in

threads, the study lacked a more thorough understanding of r/The_Donald's community atmosphere.

Future Directions

Future avenues of research could take a variety of different directions. First, future qualitative analyses on Reddit may be better suited to gathering all the comments selected from topic-based posts or threads. Here, one potential approach could sample all the comments in a given post (or posts) to evaluate the most highly-upvoted messages within a post in a given subreddit. This sampling method would allow the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of the 'community' aspect to subreddits, because it would capture the back and forth discussions between members of a particular subreddit. Indeed, voting is only one aspect to building subreddit communities; it would also be interesting for future studies to explore the norms and rules that govern a subreddit through witnessing the actual interactions between members of a given community.

This approach may explore questions such as: how do members in a right-wing extremist community engage, if at all, with top-upvoted content versus downvoted content? Do members within a right-wing extremist subreddit reach a consensus over elements over their ideology through interacting with one another in comment threads? At what point do moderators step in to enforce subreddit rules by removing content, or even users? Gathering all the comments from a particular post, then, could shed even more insight into these interactions and, by extension, the 'community' nature to a given subreddit. For these reasons, this post-based sampling method, for example, may be better suited to some qualitative research questions instead of the current study's strategy of broadly sampling the top 1000 comments from the entire year.

As well, the current study was conducted prior to r/The_Donald being quarantined. As a result of the subreddit's quarantine, future studies exploring r/The_Donald subreddit are faced with new ethical considerations. For instance, the community is no longer as 'accessible' as it once was because those who wish to view or participate within the community are now required to have an account and explicitly opt-in to r/The_Donald. In addition, having a restrictive quarantine placed on r/The_Donald community, against the wishes of its members, could have an impact on

members' level of 'perceived privacy'. To illustrate, due to these barriers which restrict access to r/The_Donald, members may feel as though their discussions are now entitled to a higher level of privacy from outside viewers. Future research not only on r/The_Donald, but other restricted subreddits, then, should account for the effect of Reddit's quarantine function in relation to the ethical considerations of studying online communities.

Finally, future research could incorporate linguistic analyses and temporal analyses to posts and comments on r/The_Donald. These approaches may provide more insight into whether the nature of r/The_Donald's 'algorithmic' echo chamber polarizes members' right-wing extremist views over time against their target out-groups. Similarly, sentiment analysis may also be helpful in determining the impact of offline events, such as Donald Trump's election, on emboldening right-wing extremist views within the community. Sentiment analyses may also be helpful in identifying other out-groups on r/The_Donald on a larger scale, through detecting hateful sentiment within a much larger sample of comments and posts. As well, future studies could explore r/The_Donald members' activity in other subreddit communities to determine if right-wing extremist members are spreading hate outside of the community, and into more mundane subreddits. Similarly, future research could compare right-wing extremism across the number of other right-wing subreddits currently in operation on Reddit, like between r/The_Donald and its Canadian equivalent, r/metacanada. Finally, future studies could consider cross-platform comparisons of right-wing ideology on Reddit to the ideology on other fringe platforms, like Voat, Gab, 4chan, and 8chan.

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