
The Disinhibition of Reddit Users

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Introduction

There has been much research on the effects of anonymity in online communities and the disinhibition of its users. People experiencing online disinhibition act differently online than they would in offline settings (Chester and O'Hara 195, 197, 200-01; Lee 3; Suler "The Online" 321-24). Benign online disinhibition is characterized by the revealing of personal thoughts and showing unusual kindness (Suler "The Online" 321). Toxic online disinhibition describes disinhibited, harmful behavior that likely would not occur offline life (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 434; Suler "The Online" 321). Disinhibited users are unlikely to "maintain accountability of identity"; however, it should be noted that disinhibition "does not necessarily lead to deceptive, dishonest, and fraudulent behavior" (Lee 3).

Researchers recognize dissociative anonymity (a resistance to attach to offline identity) as the foundation of online disinhibition. It results in decreased feelings of vulnerability and increased self-disclosure and acting out (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 435; Suler "The Online" 322). Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak define anonymity as an "unidentifiability aspect. . . rather than namelessness," encompassing the concepts of pseudonymity and the withholding of identifying information (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 435, 440-42). On another note, users that were surveyed in anonymous online communities feel that anonymity contributes to negativity found in the forums, but a majority of users still support anonymity because they feel that it leads to more lively discussion (Rosenberry 12-13).

Invisibility is the inability to see physical responses from others while online that would ordinarily affect what people were to express in face-to-face settings (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 435-36; Suler "The Online" 322-23). Asynchronicity also plays a role. When conversations are easily left and returned to, people do not have to deal with other's immediate responses (Suler "The Online" 322-23).

Rhetorical awareness is comprehension of one's purpose, motivations, audience, and the constraints on presenting discourse (Gee 489-90; Grant-Davie 106-11). The motivation is known as exigence; the rhetors are responsible for the discourse; the audience is who the discourse is intended for; and constraints are factors that hinder or help the discourse (Grant Davie 106-11). People recognize places of open online communication and may reveal private information even though they are aware of its public nature (Lee 3). James Paul Gee discusses metaknowledge in a rhetorical situation, "the ability to manipulate, analyze, [and] to resist while advancing" in the community, indicating rhetorical awareness and an understanding of a community's functions in order to advance within it (Gee 489-90).

People take on an identity in an environment usually by showing favorable parts of their personality (Suler "Identity" 457-58; Wardle 524-25). They can make the choice of who they are and may use this power towards self-actualization by practicing positive personality characteristics, while others may take on a harmful identity (Suler "Identity" 457-58). There are also users who want to "receive and not show too much" by engaging in lurking behaviors by simply observing the community (Suler "Identity" 456, 459). Elizabeth Wardle argues that users construct their identities through their rhetorical choices, writing in ways that are appropriate in the community to help establish a positive social identity (Wardle 525).

Suler and Grant-Davie have done excellent jobs at explaining online disinhibition and rhetorical situation, respectively, and there have been many studies conducted to explain the disinhibition in different communities. However, I would like to build on these studies with my own on the disinhibition of users within a popular social media website: Reddit. My research focuses on the evidence of online disinhibition displayed in posted content resulting from the anonymity of Reddit users.

Methodology

As a Reddit visitor for two years, I am quite familiar with the site and believed that this environment could be valuable to the discussion on online disinhibition. To observe Reddit for the presence of this effect, I developed the following research question:

How do Reddit's users embrace and take advantage of their anonymity within the site?

From there, my research took on the role of digital discourse community ethnography, and comprehending the basic workings of Reddit is crucial to understanding how users can interact on the site.

This social media site is coined "the front page of the Internet." Current news and entertainment found on the web quickly end up on Reddit. The site functions through its registered users who submit content while others vote to rank how high it appears on the page. Registered users can also leave comments on posts. Anyone can access Reddit, but only the registered users may submit, comment, and vote. They can also create and subscribe to subreddits—sub-communities—of Reddit that discuss a specific topic. Registration does not require any information about offline identity.

I observed popular subreddits as well as the discussion surrounding controversial topics involving Reddit. I used notecards to record my observations and bookmarked links back to my observed content's original source. Data was collected over a two-week period from topics on Reddit and comment threads. Several comments from users were recorded; however, usernames were not recorded for the sake of privacy.

I did note if a user was clearly using a "throwaway" account, an account created to dissociate a comment from one's usual Reddit username. I determined a throwaway account from a main account by these criteria:

1. The account history contains only the comment related to it.
2. The username contains the word "throwaway" or is directly related to the content of the observed comment.

For a section of my study, I focus on one user in particular: Michael Brutsch, pseudonym *violentacrez*, because of his harmful behavior on Reddit that became known to the offline public. He is not currently an active member of Reddit, as he was banned last year, but he has had a lasting impact on the community.

I examined my data for instances of online disinhibition. I considered the factors that are playing a role in the disinhibition that Reddit users can experience. I recognized the rhetorical situations of individual content by considering what subreddit the content had been posted in, its purpose, and the audience. My presence during discussion was not known; therefore, it was not possible for users to feel a need to adjust their behavior as a result of my observation.

Results and Discussion

Ask Reddit: Spill Your Life to Strangers

The subreddit *Ask Reddit* is a community where users may pose thought-provoking questions to discuss. While observing some of the top discussions, I found this very popular topic:

“Throwaway time! What’s your secret that could literally ruin your life if it came out?” “Throwaway” refers to the “throwaway accounts” I described. The following are responses to this thread written under throwaway accounts:

1. “I once helped out my female friend’s family by taking care of their cat for a week. . . I would snoop around their house. I found my friend’s diary, and read the entire thing. I used this information to get her to like me, and she is currently my wife.”
2. “When I was 13, I was molested by a guy who dragged me into an alley. . . . My friend doesn’t believe me. I’ve never told anyone because I don’t want them to react the way my ‘friend’ did.”
3. “I faked the last two years of college.”
4. “Everyone thinks I have a good job and roommates but I’ve been homeless and a prostitute for over a year.”

These Reddit users are using this confession thread as a place to share secrets that are weighing on them. Throwaway accounts are an example of a Reddit user’s power over their anonymity. They can make the choice to dissociate from their Reddit identity further by simply using an alternate pseudonym and then leaving it behind. This dissociative anonymity allows them to feel more

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willing to self-disclose with the community (Suler “The Online” 322). They can share their secret and walk away from any further discussion, as the conversation is asynchronous. No immediate reactions from others have to be dealt with, and the conversation can be resumed whenever the user decides, if at all (Suler “The Online” 322-23). For instance, in comment 2, the user clearly expresses that (s)he has never told anyone else about the incident, but the comment discloses it to anyone who reads it. Even though the user is discussing the secret publicly, invisibility and asynchronous conversation allow the user to leave the conversation freely. Anyone who posts a secret does not worry about eye contact with the people they are telling, and physical signs of disapproval are not there to inhibit what the user is willing to share (Suler “The Online” 322).

Creation of throwaway accounts demonstrates the rhetorical awareness of the users creating them: they understand the purpose of the thread is not to be able to identify anyone based on their response, but to provide shocking confessions for entertainment. The four users behind comments 1-4 recognize that their usual Reddit pseudonym is not important or relevant. This metaknowledge gives them an advantage with authority over their anonymity (Gee 489-90). Understanding that it is acceptable to create an account to simply ditch it once it serves its purpose allows users to resist single-pseudonym conformity and advance in discussion in the community. The user is aware that they are the rhetor behind the comment, and therefore serve as its authorial voice (Grant-Davie 108). Audience can influence what identity the user—the rhetor—will assume, but when it is possible to remain anonymous, the user may consider the audience’s presence much less than in an identifying situation.

Pseudonyms allow Reddit users to be more honest about themselves in their comments. Andrea Chester and Agi O’Hara also found that the students in their study using pseudonyms claimed to do so to be more honest (Chester and O’Hara 200). Even though Reddit is public, the discussions such as the confessions listed above still appear on the site. Disclosing private information has been found to occur in public online settings when pseudonyms allow for a lack of

accountability (Lee 2-3). Users are unlikely to be worried that their confession comments will affect them in their offline life.

Gone Wild: Show Your Body to Reddit

Gone Wild is a subreddit described as a place for adults to post pictures of their nude bodies. By reviewing account histories, I observed that a majority of the users post their pictures from an account that is not associated with other parts of Reddit. Furthermore, most photos I observed did not contain a face, or faces were at least partially hidden. Titles for posted photos are usually flirty and provocative.

Gone Wild allows its posters to create an identity driven by sexual attraction, while dissociating from their offline identity as well as their usual Reddit identity if an alternate account is being used. Creating a *Gone Wild* identity can be a person's way of attaining a "new, idealized way of being" (Suler "Identity" 457). They may be fulfilling a self-esteem or self-expression need. Those wishing to successfully create an identity on *Gone Wild* must follow a specific way of writing and presenting themselves in the community. Members of a community must be comfortable with writing and rhetorical conventions of the community (Wardle 524-25). Failing to provide the types of photos that viewers are looking for on *Gone Wild* will cause the user to fail to achieve a positive identity among the community. In addition, failing to produce flirtatious titles and descriptions can minimize the authority of the user among viewers.

Withholding offline identity on *Gone Wild* by hiding identifying features indicates that the user is aware of the context of the community, and the consequences that could be faced in offline life if identity is revealed. It is clear that they wish to remain anonymous when they have hidden their face from camera's view, and some users will black out any obvious identifying features, such as tattoos, as necessary. Attempts at separating their online actions from their offline identity leads to the dissociative anonymity that gives many users the courage to post their photos.

Random Acts of Benign Disinhibition

There are many subreddits that use a variation of the name *Random Acts of* . . . to identify the community as a place for requesting, exchanging, and helping out others in need of something specific. An example is *Random Acts of Christmas*. During the holiday season, users can make requests for and offer holiday gifts for children when parents are faced with difficult financial times. When searching through posts about last holiday season, I found a parent graciously thanking the community for their help:

"So remember all those books y'all sent my little girls?! Well, I'd like to hug you all again and say another big THANK YOU. . . . [M]y daughter's school just called me and said. . . her reading average has improved from a 70 to a 92! I know it's because of all the extra reading she's been doing!"

The kindness and generosity seen in these *Random Act* communities can be described as benign online disinhibition (Suler "The Online" 321). This is not to say that the generous Reddit users are unkind in their offline lives, but to imply that they take advantage of these opportunities to make a difference in someone's life that they may not have been able to otherwise. Moreover, in offline life, people can be shy to offer their help to others. These subreddits allow an anonymous way to affect a stranger's life positively. Expressing generosity online can be an opportunity to practice positive character traits and help in accomplishing self-actualization (Suler "The Online" 457).

Misinterpreting Anonymity: The Applebee's Waitress and the Google Employee

In February 2013, a waitress posted in the subreddit *Atheism* a picture of a check she found both insulting and amusing. For the "tip" section of the check, the customer, whom the waitress

identified as a pastor, wrote, “I give God 10%, why do you get 18%?” and left the waitress without a tip. The photo and story went viral and according to news posted to Reddit, the waitress was soon identified as “Chelsea” and the pastor as “Ms. Bell.” Chelsea reported that she “withheld any identifying information” in her Reddit post and that she “posted the note as a lighthearted joke.” After her exposure, Applebee’s reportedly fired her for exposing the customer’s check and signature.

A similar story involves a Google employee hired as a “Chrome Specialist” who enthusiastically posted a photo of his new work uniform on Reddit. In the thread, he mentioned that he had been trained to promote the Chromebook computer in stores such as Best Buy. His post and mention of his training violated the nondisclosure agreement he had with Google, and Google identified and fired him.

Chelsea did not expect to lose her job by posting the photo of the check on Reddit. She is a victim of misinterpreting her anonymity on Reddit. She failed to remain anonymous or develop the rhetorical awareness necessary to see the possible consequences of her actions. She once had the authority as the rhetor behind the posted photo and description, but her audience that was responsible for her exposure caused her to lose that authorial voice (Grant-Davie 108-10). As result, her post easily backfired on her.

The ex-Google employee also lost his authority as the rhetor. The photo he posted quickly led to an interesting discussion thread, but when it was exposed that he was being fired over the Reddit post and violation of his nondisclosure agreement, opinion of him quickly turned sour. Reddit users commented how ignorant he was to have so easily violated his agreement with Google. He went from having an identity as an interesting new Google employee to being the misinformed man who made a poor decision that cost him his job. In developing an online identity, he did not maintain offline accountability for his actions or take into account how public they were (Lee 3).

Violentacrez: An Exposed Case of Toxic Disinhibition

Violentacrez is the online pseudonym behind a now-banned Reddit account of 49 year-old Michael Brutsch. On Reddit, Brutsch had created many distasteful subreddits, some which still remain today. He was banned from Reddit in October 2012 and his identity had been revealed by Gawker.com, later followed by his interview with CNN. Brutsch’s employer fired him shortly following his exposure (Roy).

An example of a subreddit created by *violentacrez* is “Jailbait,” a place for photos of eye-catching underage girls. The subreddit is now banned because of obvious controversy that arose, but many of *violentacrez*’s other subreddits remain. *Pics of Dead Kids* is a subreddit that still remains, albeit it is not very active. The title is to the point: users may post pictures found on the Internet—usually very gory—of dead children. It is an unsettling community filled with appalling pictures and comments, but it represents the freedom expressed online and the types of things people may view or post when they are hidden behind a computer screen.

Brutsch admits he “didn’t really think” about what he was doing on Reddit, and he referred to his username in the third-person during his CNN interview. He also expressed regret over the interview in the first place (Roy). This displays his dissociation with his online identity, *violentacrez*, from his offline identity, because he went as far as referring to his username as if it was not himself behind that identity. Brutsch visited dark territory of the internet—and created it—but has not been proven to explore such territory in his offline life. I knew of his existence on Reddit when his account had yet to be banned. He had achieved an identity described as “the creepy uncle of Reddit,” which was almost humorous without looking into his account activity. Reddit did not take action to ban this user until the controversy led to exposure of his offline identity.

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It is likely that Brutsch had been releasing a negative aspect of his psyche into a world—Reddit—in which he did not think it could be associated with his offline identity (Suler “Identity” 457). He catered to a shock-value oriented audience, with an exigence of jolting users of Reddit and creating a famous negative identity for himself.

Lurkers: You Can’t See Me

Lurkers are the users of Reddit who do not participate in discussion and do not make their presence known. They want to “receive and not show too much” (Suler “Identity” 459). I define them as unregistered users, or registered users who participate in discussion rarely or never. Throughout this study and my usual browsing of Reddit, I’ve been a lurker.

I lurk on Reddit to be entertained in times of boredom. It also serves as a place to fuel my procrastination. As much as I take from Reddit and as much as it offers me, I do not give back very much; however, I do not feel much guilt about it. I am invisible on Reddit—no one is judging me personally on my lack of contribution to the community because no one can see me. In a similar situation in offline life, I would feel more compelled to contribute to a cause if I was around people who are. But in an online setting such as Reddit, I can satisfy my need to separate my personal identity from my observation of those around me (Suler “Identity” 459).

Conclusion

Reddit is a community where online disinhibition can be found throughout, but no published study on disinhibition pertaining to Reddit users exists. My findings are a work in progress—to help narrow the gap on what we understand about the disinhibition resulting from the pseudonymous nature of Reddit. They indicate the presence of this behavior in yet another popular online environment, and point to Reddit as a source for further valuable research. The results of this study contribute to the discussion on online communities where disinhibition has been observed.

This study needs to be followed by other discussion of the psychology behind Reddit. As popular a site as Reddit is, more research needs to be done to understand the interactions that occur within it. Other pseudonymous online communities should be studied for disinhibition in comparison to findings about Reddit. It is crucial to understand what factors of pseudonymous communities can affect the disinhibition and behavior of its users.

The Internet and social media play a huge role in many people’s lives today. Understanding the workings behind the socialization and how its users choose to present themselves is vital in order to fully understand why these websites captivate us so much. To understand the behavior of users of these sites is to further understand human nature. Humans act variably in face-to-face situations, but online interaction pushes people into a rhetorical situation unlike any other. Understanding behavior in these contexts can lead to discussion on the “true self” of a person, and if it even exists at all. Online disinhibition is a phenomenon that represents more than a deviation from an offline identity. It illustrates the ability of the human mind to adapt and create fluctuating identities dependent on context and experience.

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Tiffany Gagnon is currently a sophomore at UCF majoring in Health Services Administration with a minor in Psychology. Psychology has been a passion of hers for a while. She has taken an interest in "cyberpsychology"—a concept relevant to the growing interaction in the world of social media and networking—and it has been reflected in some of her writing. She wishes to continue using her writing skills and passion for psychology in her future academics and career.