Reddit's Diverse Platform: Transforming the Social Media Landscape Through Its Communities

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In ninth grade, I had just begun to relearn the piano. I grew up taking lessons with a piano teacher, but never fully went through with it. Teaching myself how to play without a teacher was not an easy process, so I resorted to Googling most of the questions I had about fingering techniques and what many of the musical symbols meant. One of the first links that appeared in response to my question about playing by ear versus by reading sheet music was a link to a Reddit thread in the subreddit /r/piano. In that thread, another person had asked the same question I had, and other users offered their answers and advice. The most popular answer stated that reading sheet music is vital to becoming an accomplished pianist, whereas playing by ear will not help once one begins to practice very difficult pieces. Before this, I never used Reddit and disliked whenever my older brother would spend time on it instead of playing video games. Now, however, I no longer see Reddit as something very boring, but instead see it as a useful resource. The unique users' responses and the community-like atmosphere made me feel something I never felt before from other social media. From there, I created an account and browsed for subreddits that I enjoyed viewing so I could subscribe to them. I was absolutely hooked, and all of my free time was spent on Reddit posting and replying to discussion threads.

In recent literacy studies, there has been an overwhelming push to research how social media plays a role in people's lives. The fact that it is, in a sense, "new" compared to so much of the literate activity done in the past has made it very attractive to scholars all across the board. In "Our Semi-Literate Youth? Not So Fast," Lunsford lists some reasons why students are using social media to write outside of the classroom, including the ability to develop a "range of different writing styles, tones, and formats." As a field, social media literacy research has focused on how social media affects users in a wide range of applications. For one, researchers have considered how social media helps form and shape users' online communities where they can interact with one another (Dadurka and Pigg; Gallagher; Miller). Dadurka and Pigg argue that online forums can serve as locations where "meaningful community literacies develop and can be observed" and that they work as places where members can create and maintain personal relationships with each other and support one another when needed (10). Miller demonstrates this in his study of the social media activities of 25 LGBTQ students with disabilities by stating how social media can serve as a "vehicle for coming out as queer and/or disabled," creating support systems for these users to find their voice (517).

In addition, scholars have extensively discussed how social media helps form and shape users' online personal identities (Buck; Williams; Vella; Lunsford; Brandt; Cruz et al.). In "MySpace, Facebook, and Multimodal Literacy in the Writing Classroom," Swartz asserts that users will often portray a different identity online than the one they have in real life, altering the boundaries between public and private discourse. Similarly, Cruz et al. explain the concept of trolling as "discrete outbursts of disruption" (21) and how some people purposely put on a destructive identity while participating in online communities. These people may not act this way in real life; however, they choose to play a completely different character online to elicit reactions from the community.

Lastly, there has been social media research in the form of pedagogical studies, something not often thought about by most (Swartz; Coad; Churcher et al.). These scholars tested using social media in the classroom and how it impacted students' abilities to work on and submit assignments. In "Developing Critical Literacy And Critical Thinking Through Facebook," Coad notes the gap in existing research on students' lack of critical literacy in social media usage and designs his composition class so that students think about the "designs and grand narratives of social networking technologies." He finds that most students think course management systems involve more unnatural writing practices compared to sites such as Facebook. Moreover, he tested how students interact with tools such as the "like" button on Facebook, showing that social media does not just have a recreational use.

Although past studies have focused on different social media structures and users, relatively few studies have examined Reddit, and, more specifically, Reddit's communities and why people choose to use Reddit over other platforms. In "Five Strategies Internet Writers Use to 'Continue the Conversation,' Gallagher uses Reddit as one of his subjects of research to explain how users word their comments to incite more participation from the community and to gain more "upvotes." Other than his research, studies have mostly focused on more recognized platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Swartz; Williams; Coad; Miller; Churcher et al.). Even then, researchers have not paid much attention to the specific tools each platform has in place that make each of them unique to one another. Without discussing why different platforms attract users to their specific community, we are limiting ourselves from seeing why people lean to a certain platform to express themselves versus using another platform. Each social media website has its own unique design that shapes the writing style users use and how they communicate with one another.

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In this article, I present an in-depth analysis of how Reddit's unique layout allows users to participate in highly involved communities in ways that other social media platforms do not. I argue, with Reddit, one can create a persona that is not attached to real life and can therefor hide behind an anonymous username. Unlike Facebook, no real name is needed. In addition, I explain that Reddit's content revolves around originality, and most posts are not shared everywhere. Reposting content is looked down upon as evidenced by large amounts of downvotes received when this happens. On larger subreddits, discussions tend to have comments in the thousands, while on smaller subreddits there are far fewer and users recognize each other much more easily. Moreover, I use my own experiences with Reddit as an example as to why Reddit should be researched more by other literacy scholars. By describing my interactions with Reddit, I contribute to existing scholarship by providing insight on a platform little discussed in the social media field and offer potential questions to be researched. Additionally, I show how writing on Reddit is

multimodal, transmodal, and intertextual by nature, and that it is very responsive compared to other websites.

For this article, I wrote in an autoethnography style to represent my personal experience with Reddit. I chose to write in this format because my analysis is much more detailed with my own writing as the subject of the study. Unlike other types of research methods, autoethnography allows me to "theorize ground up, developing the relevant constructs from [my] observations, without imposing etic (outsider) constructs from [my] field" (Canagrajah 114). In addition, I am part of the community I am researching, allowing me to provide personal insight. Using a narrative also allows my readers to experience my story without filtering out key aspects that explicit analysis does.

To give details about the subject of the research, myself, I am an eighteen-year-old college student. The majority of my writing done outside of school is either through texting or social media. I very frequently use Reddit and occasionally browse other social media. These social media include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and several others. For this research, I went through my Reddit history and picked out three sample texts that I had written, ranging from two years to one year ago. These texts included my own posts and comments. The reason why I chose these texts is that they show why I use Reddit to write in the communities with people similar to me instead of other platforms. To analyze these texts, I looked for how I was able to talk with other users about a variety of topics through a discussion board layout. I also looked for examples of multimodality, transmodality, and intertextuality among the texts and unique clichés that occur in the comment sections, such as common comment chains and sayings.

Social Media Use Before Reddit

When I was in the sixth grade, I recall creating my first social media account on the widely popular website "Facebook.com." All of my friends at the time were using Facebook to chat with one another about homework assignments and events that occurred during the day, arrange times to hang out at each other's houses, and play games such as *Farmville*. At the time, Facebook seemed like a godsend to me—my parents did not allow me to have a phone and I had no other way to communicate with my friends. However, I was able to go on my home computer and talk with my friends through Facebook.

When I graduated from middle school and started high school, social media platforms began to spring up exponentially. Instagram, Vine, and YouTube were just some of hundreds to spread like wildfire among kids my age. The one platform that caught my eye, however, was Reddit. The only experience I had with Reddit, before asking a piano question, was when I was eleven years old, and it was not a particularly positive one. I remember watching my older brother browsing the front page and asking him to get off so that I could play video games on his computer. Seeing him click on various discussion threads to read and comment on bored me to death. My thought processes at the time focused on entertainment through video games, not reading. Once he moved back to college miles away after his break, I seemingly forgot about Reddit as a whole. It wasn't until I started playing piano again that I really understood why he loved using it so much.

Community Engagement

In Figure 1 below, a user posts a meme describing his struggles with a precalculus class. Memes are very prevalent on Reddit since they are often relatable and therefore spark many comments with users writing about their personal experiences based off the meme. My comment, noted in red, represents my thoughts that, if the user thinks precalculus is hard, they will find calculus much harder. My comment initiated more comments from other users detailing their experiences with calculus. Starting off with just the levels of the calculus class, the comments

devolve into specific concepts within calculus. This shows how multiple users in a community can interact with one another within each comment chain and promotes outside discussion.

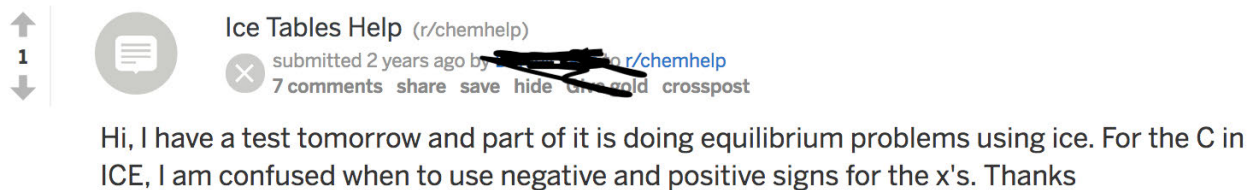**Figure 1:** A screencap of a thread containing a comment of mine regarding a calculus class

Often each comment chain will have a different popular thought where users discuss it within that chain. The majority of users in this subreddit are in high school, meaning most of them post about school (classes or social events). This comment chain shows how users can talk to one another about a mutual topic, even if it is not the same as the initial post. Relatable posts and comments generally obtain large amounts of upvotes, which then pushes them to the top of the page where they become visible to more people. These types of threads often bring the community even more together since users, like me in the sample text, are connecting over a common struggle.

Before I found Reddit, I was part of many different communities in the real world, just not as many online. I was in an orchestra, participated in a church group, and engaged in a community service club at my school. However, when I got back home, I did not talk to my friends much. They did not share the same hobbies as I did, and I felt lonely at times since I had no one else to talk to. By going on Reddit, I was able to find communities that I was interested in and joined them to socialize with others. As Brandt notes the concept of writing to heal in *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy*, I was writing to de-stress myself from all of the schoolwork and extracurricular activities I had. The subreddit in Figure 1 is the community /r/teenagers. With thousands of people similar to me in age, hobbies, and life experiences available to share pictures and stories with on the same forum, I really enjoyed spending time on there. There were posts

constantly uploaded by the minute, so I never got bored. In addition, I related to many of the stories users shared, making me feel more at home. It is not easy to find communities that focus on such specific topics on other social media platforms that are anonymous. I could write what I wanted without the fear that someone I knew in real life would see it.

For example, Facebook focuses on creating a profile with your actual name and sharing content with your real-life friends. Often, "the self we think we are portraying to the world via these pages is often not the one that is being 'read' by an audience," meaning people attempt to show a different image than who they really are (Swartz). Since Facebook users are using a profile associated with their real name and information, they will try to be seen in a more positive light in the eyes of others they know. There is someone I am friends with on Facebook who constantly posts about positive events going on in his life. He will post about his new car or photos of all the fun places he travels to. However, he never posts anything negative that might make him look bad. Similarly, Instagram focuses on the picture being posted and generally does not encourage lengthy, meaningful conversation. Users will take hundreds of pictures to try to find the perfect one to post so that they can get more likes and comments. These comments are usually very brief and do not promote much discussion at all. On Twitter, users have a 280-character limit to their tweets, limiting how much they can write. The majority of users also have their real name and picture attached to their profile. With Reddit, however, usernames are completely anonymous, and there is no need to impress anyone. People can say whatever is on their mind and give honest opinions without trying to impress people they know in real life. In addition, there is a 40,000-character limit for comments, allowing users to share as much as they want. Unlike Facebook, where posts often disappear on the news feed once you view them, Reddit also keeps posts visible, so users are easily able to come back and respond to one another.

Reddit revolves around its communities. Each post has to be submitted within some subreddit, meaning every post has to be relevant to some community no matter what. These subreddits have rules set in place so that discussion stays on topic and is relevant to what the community wants to see and write about. From subreddits revolving around college campus news and questions regarding classes (/r/ucf) to subreddits about pianos (/r/piano), there is no limit to what communities people enjoy partaking in. There are even very specific communities such as /r/BirdsWithArms, which solely focuses on posting photoshopped birds with arms, a subreddit I really enjoy browsing through. Unlike other platforms, Reddit hosts a variety of diverse communities that can be very specific in subject matter, yet still have a good amount of discussion.
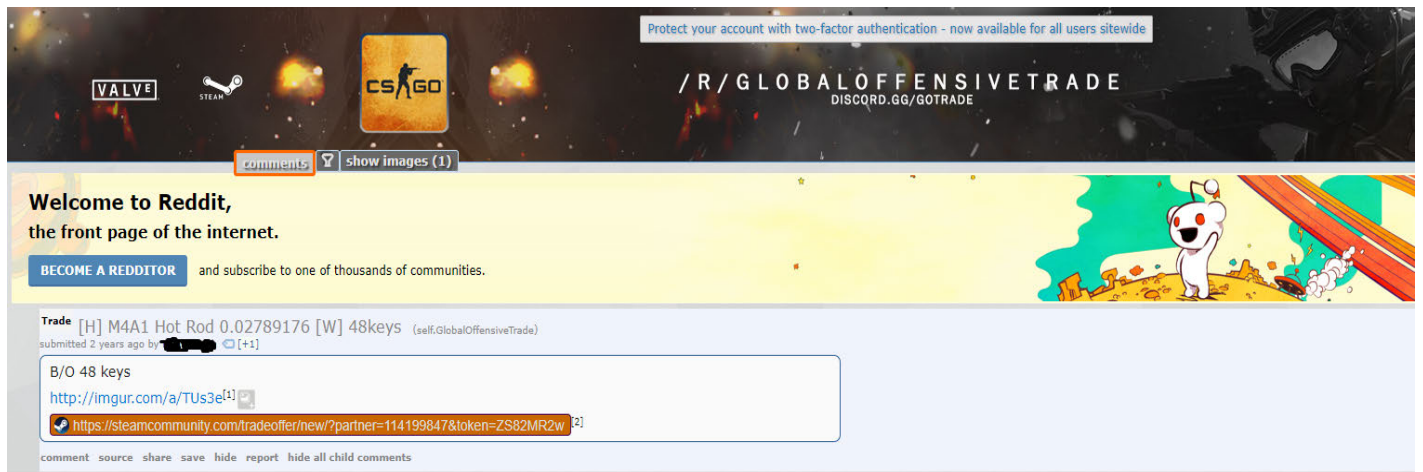

Figure 2: Asking for chemistry help in /r/chemhelp

In this sample text, I posted to the community /r/chemhelp to ask for advice on a concept difficult for me to understand at the time: ice tables. With only 8,598 subscribers, the subreddit is a pretty small and tight-knit community. At the time, I was a very shy person. My AP Chemistry teacher was very intimidating to me because she often seemed angry when students asked her questions, especially ones that were based on topics we covered extensively before. Moreover, I felt

she did not like me because I never participated in practice problems on the board where students volunteered to solve them. I was too afraid to make any mistake in front of everybody, so I always remained in my seat.

Even after all of the examples she did on ice tables, I was still very lost. None of my friends were taking the same class as I was, so I could not ask them. Since I was too nervous to even ask her questions on the topic, I went online to try to look for some help. I watched some videos and read tutorials, but none of them talked about the specific question I had in mind. By posting on a subreddit where people could answer my exact question in a very fast time frame, I was able to get the help I needed to do well on the test the next day. The other users were very friendly in their responses and each of them provided their own unique ideas with examples. For example, one person gave me a step-by-step run through from the beginning to the end of the problem and asked if I had any specific problem in mind to further help me if I needed it. Moreover, what sets Reddit apart from just looking up a question is how responsive the community is. One commenter stated that the reactants in the table should be negative and the products positive. I did not know if the reactants were always negative, so I responded back to this comment with a follow-up question. Not only did that user respond, but another user also offered some input. This goes to show the support system Reddit creates through some of its communities. Not only are there communities about helping others with school concepts, but also some that deal with mental illnesses, addiction, and more. Reddit is an open-minded place that anyone can join to find their niche or community to feel happy in.

Figure 3: Picture of item being sold in /r/globaloffensivetrade

Figure 4: Post selling a *CSGO* item for money

In Figures 3 and 4, I show a community (/r/globaloffensivetrade) I was very involved with during high school. In addition to participating in /r/teenagers, I also enjoyed playing an online video game, *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, in my free time. After completing my homework, I would typically play several competitive *CSGO* matches to try to climb the ranking ladder. When I was done playing, I would then sometimes post offers of virtual items I wanted to sell and search for items to trade for on /r/globaloffensivetrade. This subreddit is centered on discussing in-game item prices, posting trade offers, and asking for advice on how much to sell certain weapons for. The way the *CSGO* market works is that these weapons are sold for "keys," a virtual currency in *CSGO*. These keys can then be sold for US dollars, normally about $2.50 each. As shown in Figure 4, my post's title states that I have a "M4A1 Hot Rod" with a float value of 0.02789176 (how rare it is). I then say I want 48 keys for the item I have. Inside the post itself, I link to an album of the item's photos to show any interested buyers what my item looks like. I ended up receiving multiple offers for the item and made profit. This was just one of many times I "flipped" my items to obtain additional keys and then sold them for real life money.

With 115,744 subscribers, just about everybody in the *CSGO* trading community uses this subreddit to trade. The simplicity of posting a trade offer using the default post format and the fact that posts can be "flaired" by the subject of the post makes Reddit an ideal platform for trading. Flairs are tags that users can add, allowing posts to be categorized by their topic. By getting involved in this community, I was able to learn how to market myself to other people so that I could persuade them to buy my items. In addition, I learned how to connect my hobby to something that helps me in real life: earning real money. I could look at market trends through price history graphs and make decisions on whether to sell or buy at certain times. Without this community, I would not have the money I had to be able to save up and build my own gaming computer. Moreover, I learned valuable lessons from making mistakes and learning through experience. For example, one time someone offered me a deal that was too good to be true. He placed a highly prized weapon on the item market for a very cheap price, but the float is never shown on the market; one has to click on the item specifically in game. I was too blinded by the fact he was selling this item for so cheap that I bought it with no hesitation. I ended up buying the weapon, but since the float value was so poor, it ended up being worthless. I lost about 100 dollars in that scam, so I learned to not believe in things that were too good to be true.

Conclusion and Implications

My overall experience with Reddit thus far has transformed me in a way that I never thought would occur. All my life I would associate writing as a very tedious and stressful task; never did I think that writing could be enjoyable and something that I actively wanted to do. English research papers about novels and plays in high school were very boring and time-consuming for me, so I dreaded any time I had to open up my word processor and begin to type. I was brainwashed from all my years of schooling that writing was hard work and not fun. It wasn't until I started using Reddit that I realized writing about something I enjoyed drastically changed how I felt about writing. This does not mean writing on Reddit always comes easy to me; I still take time to think about what I want to say and how I present it. However, I can now appreciate writing in a way I have never seen before. Although this is just my personal experience, many of my friends have expressed the same feelings about writing.

Additionally, I have been able to partake in several tightknit communities that played a big impact in my high school years. Instead of being isolated at home, I was able to meet so many new people and make good friends. A key concept I realized was that every comment I read was written from a unique person behind a phone or computer. Just because I was physically separated from other users did not mean I could not still be very good friends. It was like having real life friends that I never saw in person. It was also not just individualized communication. It felt as if everyone was in a big group chat where anyone could contribute to any ongoing conversation at any time. Reddit's platform with every post contained within a subreddit shows how dedicated Reddit is to creating communities of people who enjoy reading and posting similar content. No social media compares to Reddit in that regard. This does not mean Reddit is the best in every aspect; there are certainly pros and cons of each platform.

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Now that I have realized how much writing in school systems can turn away so many students from actively wanting to write, I hope composition teachers change what their assignments generally focus on. Although I see the importance in assigning papers that make students critically think and analyze novels and plays, it does not help them enjoy writing nearly as much as writing about something they enjoy. Including just as in-depth papers on subjects students actually like can benefit them in the long run. They will be keener to write their assignments and the overall writing could be much better. More teachers should also start implementing social media in the classroom. There have only been a few studies done with social media in the classroom, and a larger scale implementation could display more interesting and representative results.

Although past research has already been done on social media use in the classroom, the use of Reddit could change how students answer discussion posts. In "Developing Critical Literacy And Critical Thinking Through Facebook," Coad uses Facebook to see how his students respond differently. Instead of Facebook, it is possible that creating a private subreddit with just the students of the class and seeing how students answer discussion posts anonymously without judgment from other students could yield different results. Moreover, Swartz discovers that people engage with technology to rhetorically create their identities, and by using Reddit in the classroom, students have the chance to present their true identities under an anonymous name. Additional

studies could also focus on how people choose to join their communities online versus offline. Joining communities on Reddit requires just a click of the "subscribe" button; however, in real life it may be more difficult having to talk in person.

This analysis serves as an example as to why other scholars in the field should invest more interest into Reddit and the impact communities have on people like me. With the rapid expanse of social media's effects in our everyday lives, we must analyze how we interact with one another through the Internet versus in the real world. Instead of focusing on the commonly researched social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, researchers should analyze ones that have to date been less frequently studied. This leaves room for interesting analysis, as each platform is unique in its own way.

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