The Most Popular Thing You've Probably Never Heard of

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What's wrong with the following statement? Justin Bieber's tour is headed to North Korea. In spite of the fact that most North Koreans do not have Internet access and earn less than a dollar a month, it is dead accurate. After an online poll, North Korea was selected as the country that Bieber would visit with a whopping 659,141 votes. The popular web community known as 4chan stacked the votes to send the singing phenomenon to the impoverished North Korea. Even though you may have never heard of 4chan as a community, its actions have made nationwide impacts. Events such as falsifying Steve Job's death—leading to decreased value of Apple Stock—hacking Sarah Palin's e-mail, and threats of violence can all be tied to the 4chan community in one way or another (Linkins; Carlson).

According to John Swales' definition, a discourse community must have a common public goal or goals, means of intercommunication, participation to provide information and feedback, one or more genres, specific lexis, and the distinction between new members and old members (Swales 576-9). 4chan fits within these six characteristics. To garner more information, I observed certain threads and posts on 4chan and conducted an interview with an existing member.

I interviewed Oli, who has been a member of 4chan for the past 5 years. I've known her in real life for over 3 years; I get most of my awareness of new trends or events from her, which she, in turn, gets from 4chan. According to her, 4chan's goal is "to be annoying on the Internet." Even though this is quite an odd common goal, actions such as sending Justin Bieber to North Korea or hacking a governor's e-mail has proven its accuracy. If you search for "4chan" on Google, it proudly totes the slogan of the "largest English imageboard on the web." Even though 4chan is considered an "imageboard," it is actually one of the biggest forum sites in the world. What separates imageboards such as 4chan from normal forums is that they revolve around the posting of images instead of being text heavy.

On the 4chan homepage, there are 50 boards to choose from, each one tailored to a specific audience or genre of interests. Whether you are interested in Anime (/a/), paranormal activities (/x/), or just random posts (/b/, which accounts for 30% of the site's overall traffic), there is a board for you. When you enter any of the boards, there is a strong distinction between the new members and the old members of the community. Most of the members of the community are addressed as "fags." Not surprisingly, the new members get most of the verbal abuse from the old members because they do not understand the style of dark humor and history of the boards. From the oldest members of the boards, "Originalfags," the rankings go from "Oldfag," "Newfag," to the newest members, "Cancer."

One of the most interesting things about 4chan is the push for anonymous posting on the Internet. In a world that is infatuated with the idea of self-fame, 4chan is driving for the opposite by allowing people to post anonymously and express themselves fully without being judged. In a way, it is almost a polar opposite of the popular social networking site, Facebook. On networking sites

such as Facebook, people care about their popularity, reputation, and moderate certain actions and speech accordingly. 4chan, conversely, promotes freedom of speech and the side of people that does not always appear in the general public. The imageboard averages roughly 10.2 million unique visitors per month, which means there are almost instant responses to all posts and discussions ("Advertise"). According to Oli, there is almost "no such thing as moderation" on 4chan. The moderators are heavily outnumbered by the number of posts on each board at any given time. But throughout the 4chan community, the most intriguing aspect related to Swales' six characteristics would have to be the unique lexis of the discourse community.

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In terms of grammar and content, 4chan is the English teacher's worst nightmare. If 4chan was a country, the dialect of English utilized in the community could be considered a different language. Oli describes the lexis of 4chan as "the most fucked up form of English people use." On first examination, the language seems so foreign due to the many grammatical errors and inside jokes. But after reading enough posts and understanding the community, the lexis can be broken down into three simple categories. The first part of the unique lexis of 4chan is attributed to typing out words phonetically. The second element of understanding is to know the inside jokes or reasoning behind the humor of the language. Lastly, the "memes" that 4chan is infamous for are crucial for the total 4chan lexis experience.

"Doing it for the lulz." This quote from Oli perfectly sums up why members of 4chan communicate in this manner. To a teenager, that sentence can be easily translated. But to an older audience, it may as well be in a foreign language. To break it down further, "Doing it for the lulz" translates into "Doing it for the lols." In Internet jargon, the acronym, "LOL" means "laugh out loud." So essentially, the people of 4chan are "doing the action(s) for the humor and laughs." The key trait in 4chan speak is to *purposely* spell out the word incorrectly and as phonetically as possible. Words such as source, please, and more become twisted into "sauce," "pl0x," and "moar," respectively. The ability to understand and type words spelled incorrectly shows the knowledge one has about the 4chan community. If you can decipher, "Awwz I wuv teh cyoot kittehs cuz tehir wrasslin," then you are on your way to understanding the lexis of 4chan.

If the general public sees words spelled incorrectly, the general consensus is that the community or members of the community are illiterate. Tony Mirabelli examined the idea of literacy in the food service industry and how people regularly consider waiters and waitresses "dumb" because they do not have a rewarding job. He presents the idea of multiliteracies when arguing that the workers are not only classically literate, but literate in the language used in the food service industry as well. In the community of 4chan, the same idea holds true. Members are all literate because they have to know English well enough in the first place to poke fun at it and spell words out as phonetically as possible. Also, the members are literate in the type of English typed and spoken on 4chan, a form of English which the general public may not understand.

To truly become a member of a community, one must understand basic jokes that the community constantly makes. A distinction between 4chan and other forums is the ability to post a picture right next to the text written. Usually this picture is completely unrelated and is used as an attention grabber to lure viewers into reading the text. More than half of the time, it's usually something humorous or raunchy to attract the dark sense of humor that all people on 4chan possess. Typically, other posters will call out such a person for being a "troll." "Trolls" are posters who purposely stir up attention just for the sake of doing so.

One of the most famous examples of "trolling" on 4chan was by the user, Boxxy. At first glance, Boxxy appears to be just another teenager that wears an excessive amount of eyeliner and has Attention Deficit Disorder. But, to everyone's surprise, this girl that had only three videos in existence would cause more than just a shockwave in the community. Dedicated members of the

community quickly took sides against the teenager or aligned themselves with the newly proclaimed "queen of the /b/." The amount of fighting grew to record numbers when people would argue for hours creating the new genre of "rage"-thread dedicated to hating on certain things. In an attempt to stop the epidemic of "Boxxymania," users decided to attack and crash the 4chan server to put an end to the constant bickering. After the crash of the 4chan server, administrators and moderators decided that either posting the word Boxxy or any picture of her on 4chan would warrant a ban from the community. The Boxxy pandemonium hit a peak when people decided to go to her actual residence to visit her. Unfortunately, the people were unsuccessful in their attempt to meet her and the mystique of Boxxy still lingers around 4chan. Sometimes, only to purposely troll other users, individuals would post different pieces of a picture of Boxxy to poke fun of 4chan's turbulent history.

Perhaps the most lasting legacy that 4chan has had on the Internet, society, and language is in the form of the "memes" that were popularized by the community. If you have ever seen a picture of a cute cat with misspelled bold white text on the picture, it is probably a "lolcat." This was one of the original memes popularized by 4chan that introduced the phonetically misspelled words of the community into the public's eyes. 4chan popularized the Internet phenomenon known as Tay Zonday by plastering his music video, "Chocolate Rain," on all the boards on 4chan. The video soon garnered enough views to become a viral video after being broadcast on the news and on talk shows. 4chan also appreciates the classics. Rick Astley's 1987 single, "Never Gonna Give You Up," became one of the most commonly seen Internet memes in 4chan history. The idea behind "Rickrolling" is to disguise and hyperlink the video of "Never Gonna Give You Up" and trick the other person into clicking the link, thus producing a "Rickroll." The first instance of a "Rickroll" was in 2007 when the trailer of the popular video game *Grand Theft Auto IV* leaked. Due to heavy traffic, the trailer was unavailable for streaming or downloading on many sites. On the video games board on 4chan, somebody hyperlinked the supposed trailer of *GTAIV* to the video of "Never Gonna Give You Up." A new Internet sensation was created. By May 2008, it was estimated that over 18 million American adults were "Rickrolled" ("You Wouldn't"). Youtube soon received a flood of complaints that said the video "lowered work efficiency" due to the amount of "Rickrolling" through e-mails and instant messaging. As a result, Youtube disabled the hyperlinking option for all "Never Gonna Give You Up" videos. These memes have contributed to the overall lexis of posts not only in the community, but also the lexis of the modern English language.

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There are times when 4chan goes beyond changing the English language. Impacts on popular culture can also be credited to the community as well. In 2002, Rick Astley attempted a comeback that saw little success, and, prior to 2007, Astley was relatively unknown to the younger demographic. Once "Rickrolling" started to expand out of 4chan, people started wondering, "Who is this Rick Astley guy?" News sites started covering this latest trend, and Google searches for "Rick Astley" increased along with the view count for "Never Gonna Give You Up" on Youtube. Before the inception of "Rickrolling," the searches for "Rick Astley" on Google were almost nonexistent. In 2007, the number of searches for "Rick Astley" doubled. By 2008, the words "Rick Astley" were searched eleven times more than any other previous years, and "Rickroll" became a Google "Hot Search." During the most popular time of "Rickrolling," it was estimated that one in every twenty Google search was either for "Rick Astley" or "Rick roll." With all this newfound press coverage, Rick Astley was able to launch his comeback into the music world. To ride this new wave of fame, Sony BMG released a compilation of Astley's most famous works and the album reached #17 on the UK Top 40 Albums Chart. Another of Astley's crowning achievements occurred in 2008 when the

MTV Europe Awards named Rick Astley as the "Best Act Ever." To solidify his position in pop culture history, Astley "Rickrolled" a live audience at the 2008 Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. The broadcast reached tens of millions of viewers and finally brought Astley back into the limelight.

Nobody really knows how certain memes transpire beyond the 4chan portal into the general public. But in the case of "Rickrolling," all the stars had to line up correctly. An image or person usually becomes a "meme" after the constant recycling of the proposed meme. More members knowing about the meme leads to a higher rate of exchange between the 4chan community and nonmembers. Once the meme disperses to enough people, news stations pick up on the trend and broadcast it to the general public. The trend then becomes viral and it is up to the general public to decide how large it will grow. This ripple effect would not have occurred if the meme was not used constantly or if news stations decided not to cover this growing trend. Therefore, it is hard to predict the next trend due to the number of different factors.

4chan is still relatively unknown to the average person. With 10.2 million unique impressions every month, the community already has a large base of dedicated followers. The development of the community of 4chan is solely up to the current members. Creations such as Rickrolling or Lolcats have thrust the community into the general public's eyes. In 2009, the creator of 4chan, Christopher Poole, was voted the World's Most Influential Person in a *TIME* online poll, beating out celebrities and world leaders like Barack Obama or Oprah with over 16 million votes ("The World's Most"). With its raunchy and rude attitude, 4chan is in no rush to expand and openly welcome members into their community. Instead, people look to become a knowledgeable member of the 4chan community so they can belong in something larger than themselves. The power and sway of this web community is often underestimated, considering it's only composed of anonymous posters. But the Latin phrase *firmam consensus facit* (cooperation makes strength) holds true when it comes to 4chan. Whether it's cooperating together to vote Christopher Poole as a distinguished figure in history or cooperating to become as annoying as possible on the internet, 4chan has distinguished itself as a force to be reckoned with. If you don't believe me, just ask Justin Bieber.

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