1. **Introduction**

This paper is written with the aim of analysing Reddit as a medium of communication, specifically focusing on the notion of tribalism in sport and the ways in which internet anonymity can feed our social instincts to act in specific ways or say specific things. The paper shall refer heavily and frequently to one subreddit in particular, that is, r/reddevils, the largest online community of fans of Manchester United Football Club.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of Reddit as a platform, briefly discussing, too, its mechanics and nuances in a broad strokes approach. Next, I will establish background information for r/reddevils and explain why it represents an ideal touchstone for the purposes of this analysis, with reference to tribalism in sport. The section also involves further discussion of r/reddevils in terms of statistics, with the 2019 subreddit census being of particular interest. Subsequently, I comment on linguistic features which can be observed in comments, posts and threads on the subreddit, and discuss the significance of these features, including analysis which relates to the census statistics. The paper concludes, then, with a segment detailing potential strengths and weaknesses of the study.

2. **A Brief Introduction to Reddit**

Reddit as a platform is, in essence, what appears to be a collection of communities, each of which has its own user moderated forum. Users are able to share content of all sorts, be it in terms of photographs, illustrations, written content, videos, or even simple comments. Each post can then be upvoted or downvoted by other users, which then allows for the posts to rise higher or lower on a page (Widman, 2019). For example, a heavily upvoted post is likely to climb higher on the front page of Reddit (r/all, which encompasses posts from every subreddit). At the time of writing, the highest rated post on r/all is native to r/news, a community specifically for the sharing of news from reputable avenues, and is titled "Dow falls 1,191 points – the most in history", with a link provided to the relevant CNN article. Refer to figure 1 (on the following page) for a screen capture of the front page.
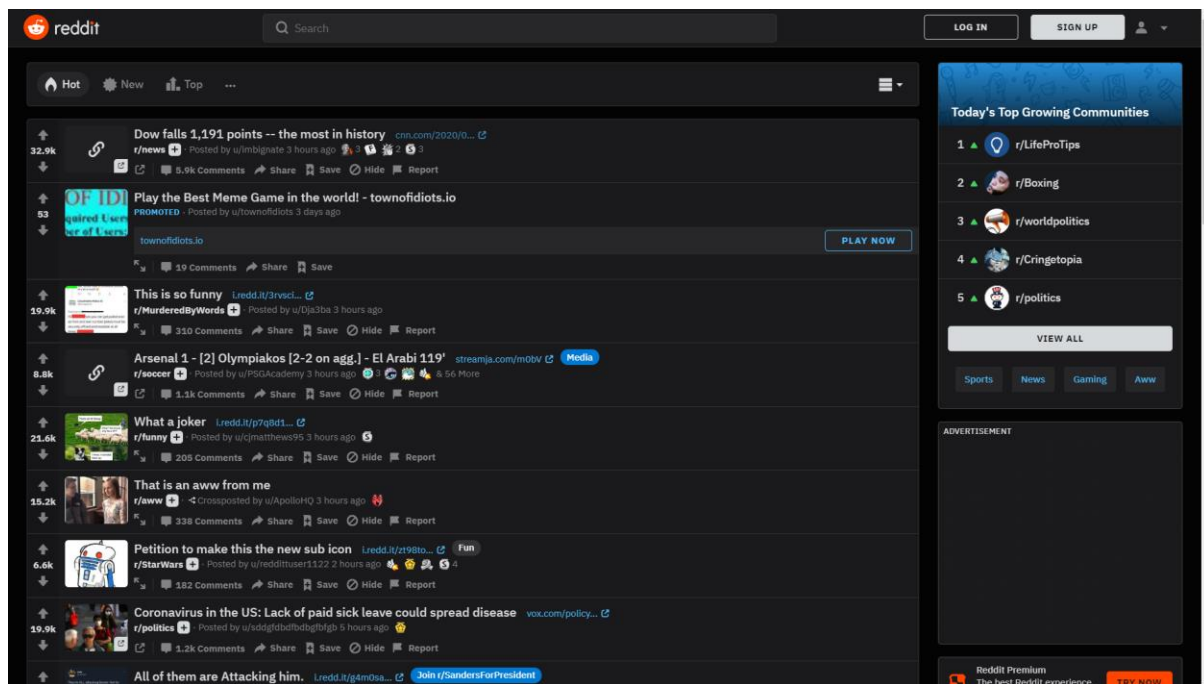
Figure 1: r/all, dated 28 Feb 2020

As you can see in this image, the aforementioned post is at the very top of the page, with the figure "32.9k" indicated on its left – this figure refers to the Reddit score, or 'karma', that is, the net surplus of upvotes over downvotes.

Observing Figure 1, though, it becomes apparent that the page is not ranked in descending order of Reddit score – the post "Arsenal 1 – [2] Olympiakos [2-2 on agg.] – El Arabi 119'" from r/soccer, for instance, is ranked higher on the page, with a score of 8.8k, in relation to the image post "What a joker" from r/funny which has a score of 21.6k. This is due to the Reddit algorithms taking into account specific aspects in terms of ranking which are distinct from the simple formula of subtracting downvotes from upvotes. Crucially, a time parameter is at play – the sustained rate at which karma increases is taken into account for ranking posts on the front page, and within subreddits. So, a post that receives more karma over an extended period of time may never rank as high as a post that receives an extremely high amount of karma within a shorter time period. This allows for posts to gradually fall down the page as time passes and diminishing returns kick in, which then allows for other posts to climb the page, gain more exposure, and experience stronger returns of karma. (Reddit Inc., n.d.)

The above paragraph is true of the default sorting structures of r/all, that is to sort by 'Hot'. Sorting, instead, by 'Top' removes the time parameter from the equation and instead simply ranks posts by karma. Sorting by 'Controversial' is also of particular interest, in that it ranks post

which appear to have low karma, but are in fact appearing as such due to large numbers of both upvotes and downvotes, indicating a major difference of opinion of some sort. (Reddit Inc., n.d.)

Reddit on the whole is moderated and by administrators, known as "admin"s, with their usernames indicated in orange and accompanied by an 'A'. Smaller communities are maintained by volunteer moderators, known as "mod"s, with their usernames indicated in green and accompanied by an 'M'.

Karma scores and the entire system of upvoting and downvoting is of particular relevance to this paper, particularly because they allow for the crowd-based sentiment to continue to feed itself. A comment which is more popular, or more in line with the sentiments of a particular community, will find itself being upvoted more readily, seen by more individuals, and being upvoted further. In a way, this allows the community on the whole to be somewhat self-regulated.

In cases where stricter controls are required, mods may intervene to remove comments or ban users accordingly, making reference to subreddit specific rules.

Reddit, too, has a premium tier of membership which is awarded to individuals who pay a monthly fee. Such individuals receive specific privileges such as access to a dedicated subreddit, r/lounge, as well as the ability to award coins or badges to other users – these include the silver award, the gold award, and the platinum award, each of which can be redeemed with reddit coins or through online transactions (Reddit Inc., n.d.). High karma posts typically receive a fair number of awards themselves.

3. **r/reddevils**

There are very few strong and active fan communities on the internet for football teams – many of these communities are simply populated by a handful of users, or exist on the social media comment sections of players, meme pages, and the teams themselves. This particular subreddit, then, stands out because it has over two hundred thousand users, with hundreds of comments and posts made on a daily basis.

Sport in general is of interest because of the idea that it is possible to follow sport closely from anywhere in the world as a result of the ease of communication and the ease of access that followed from international broadcast deals. Football in particular, and Manchester United especially, were at the forefront of the TV revolution of sport, seeing as United was the flagship team of the English Premier League over the time period in which Sky Sports was expanding aggressively to increase coverage (White, 2009). The upshot of this is that United has established

an extremely large global fanbase, with many individuals hailing from all corners of the world having a vested interest in the team's success (White, 2009).

Teams such as Manchester United are extremely popular within their own cities, with many fans growing up supporting the club and being able to attend games on a regular basis. This sort of background, the generational support, and the geographical relation to the team feed into a strong sense of tribalism – matches, then, such as Manchester United versus Arsenal are, in many ways, seen to be a symbolic expression of Manchester versus London. For United to win would be to bolster Mancunian pride. (White, 2009)

This phenomenon leads to a strong, intense sense of tribalism where individuals can be extremely emotionally invested about things relating to their own football teams. Further, when we account for the fact that such a large portion of the United fanbase is international, this can result, too, in schisms within the fanbase itself.

There is a strong current of sentiment, observable on r/reddevils and elsewhere on the internet, that international fans are somehow inferior to Mancunian fans, matchgoing fans, or season ticket holders.
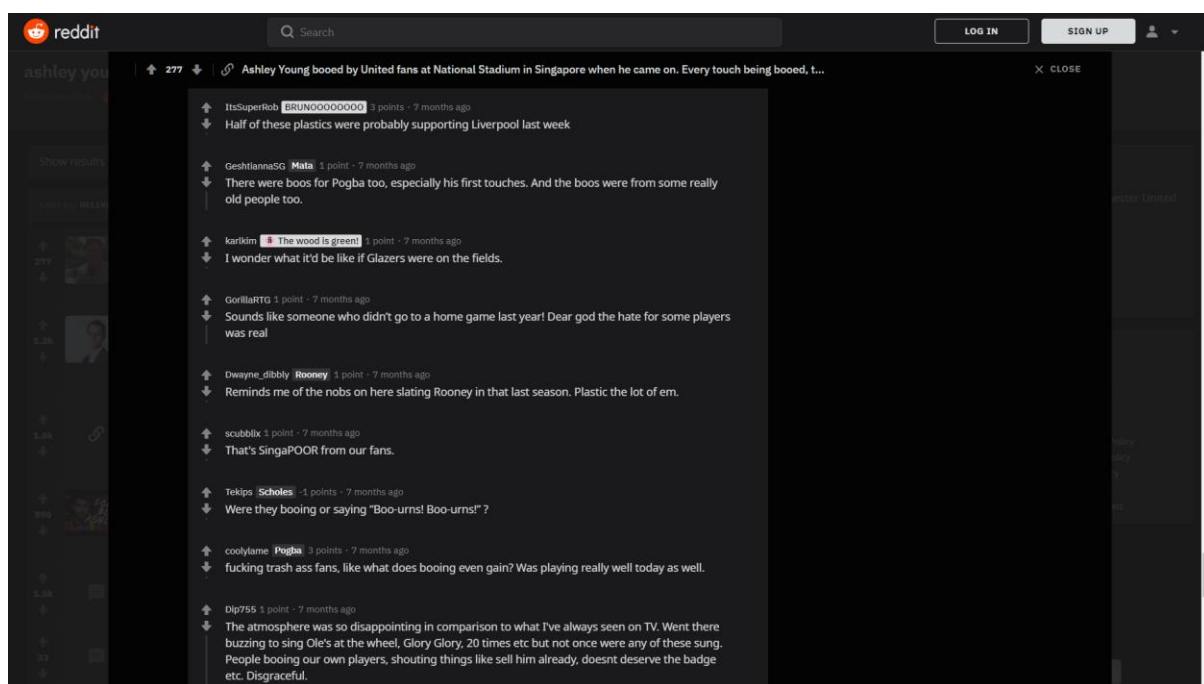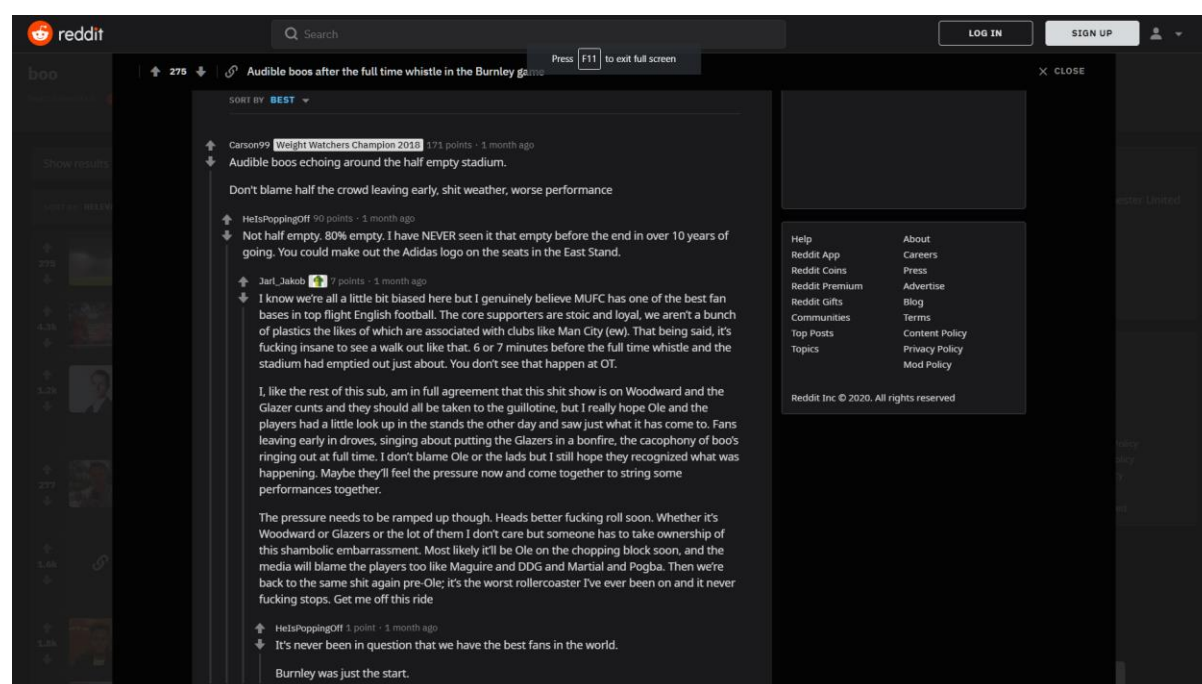

Figure 2: Anti-International Sentiment (u/XxyoloswagmasterxX, 2019)

In this screen capture, the commenters are responding to an incident in the International Champions Cup game between United and Internazionale (an Italian side) which took place in Singapore. Accusations of being "plastic" are being levelled at fans who attended this game – 12

comments on the thread utilize this particular term – where a "plastic" fan is a glory-hunter of sorts who does not understand what it means to support the club. This is a stark contrast to the responses to incidences at Old Trafford, United's own stadium in Greater Manchester, where even if disagreement to the opinions expressed at the games are expressed online, there is no question about the veracity or the loyalty of the support. In fact, booing at Old Trafford is seen, if karma is anything to go by, to be a popular idea of sending messages to players and management regarding the need to improve.

Figure 3: Booing at Old Trafford being well received (u/Raintrooper7, 2020)

In Figure 3, we see that even the top comment in the thread, highly upvoted, is one that is sympathetic toward the negative sentiments. The word "plastics" occurs again, in a comment by user Jarl_Jakob, but this time is used to say United fans are not at all within that category.

This specific idea, the idea that there is a preference for British fans of United, and in particular Mancunian fans, where such fans are respected more, will be of interest later in the paper.

From the r/reddevils 2019 census, conducted by the moderation team with results posted by user zSolaris, one crucial point to note is that only 29.1 per cent of respondents are in fact UK based. Although this is the largest single population that exists on the subreddit, this is not by any stretch an overwhelming majority. (u/zSolaris, 2019)

In addition, 1370 individuals indicated that they do not or cannot attend matches, be it for geographical reasons, financial reasons, or otherwise. Further, of the over 1800 respondents, only 360 were from England, and only 89 were from Manchester. (u/zSolaris, 2019)

Assuming this sample is representative, it appears that only a small fraction of the active users can claim to be from the 'elite' group of supporters.

4. **Noteworthy Observations on r/reddevils**

There are a number of remarkable linguistic features that can be observed on the subreddit, especially when taken into consideration in relation to the census data, against the notion of the backdrop of sport-based tribalism. This section serves to outline some of these observations and comment on their significance.

One such observation would be the fact that profanity is particularly prevalent, especially when matches go badly.

A clear example would be in the Reddit thread "Word Cloud | Everton 4-0 United" by user sauce_murica – this was posted by the user in the aftermath of a heavy defeat to Everton, a team considered by consensus not to be of the same calibre as United. The user observed the match thread, that is, the thread in which the match is discussed in real time, and the post-match thread, that is, the thread where users discuss the match immediately after the final whistle, and produced word clouds as well as textual analysis of the recurrent words.

In the match thread, three of the most frequently used words were 'fucking' (175 occurrences), 'shit' (122 occurrences) and 'fuck' (121 occurrences). (u/sauce_murica, 2019)

In the post-match thread, swear words again appear to be highly popular, this time with 'fucking' appearing 129x, 'shit' appearing 164x and 'fuck' appearing 82x. (u/sauce_murica, 2019)

Contrasting this to another thread by the same user, 'Word Cloud | United appoint Ole Gunnar Solskjaer as permanent manager", which came on the back of a run of good results, is remarkable. None of the aforementioned profanities appear at all on the top 10 words used. In a similarly optimistic thread, again by user sauce_murica, titled "Word Cloud | United 3 – 1 Arsenal (FA Cup)", 'fucking' does feature, but only a relatively paltry 72x. (u/sauce_murica, 2019)

This liberal use of profanity may characterize in some ways the use of the subreddit. While it is not socially acceptable to use profanity openly in normal conversations, it seems to be extremely frequent here. This could be due to, for one, the desire to convey emotion expressly – the

previously described notion of tribalism in sport may exert some measure of pressure on users to be explicit and demonstrative about their anger to evidence their loyalty somehow.

Another remarkable feature would be the frequency with which British slang appears in comments on the subreddit. In the words of one user who I reached out to, meta4_, "it is extremely common to see individuals using words and phrases that appear to be overtly British. Even when I myself swear on the platform, for example, I tend to say things like 'fucks sake', 'cunt', 'twat', 'wanker'… I've even caught myself saying things like 'taking the piss' – they're all not stuff I say much, but they're so common here and I end up swept up in it I guess." (u/meta4_, 2020)

Another user, CantonaStorms92, himself a Singaporean, admitted to being more likely to use words like 'lads', 'mate' and 'bruv' in his comments on the subreddit, citing a clear difference in response when he appears to use these Britishisms. "Somehow it's easier to feel at home like that, I dunno." (u/CantonaStorms92, 2020)

This, too, could be an extension of the anonymity that Reddit allows, that is, the ability to go online and to exist in that space without anyone being aware of your own origin unless you make it known deliberately. It is entirely possible to conduct ourselves in a way that allows for other users to think that we may originate from a certain place, or that we are of a certain background. It is considerably easier to mimic linguistic features from other cultures online, because prosodic requirements are eliminated. Mimicking accents is far more difficult, and one who mimics an accent is far more likely to be found out as a result – the text-based nature of interaction on Reddit eliminates this possibility.

5. **Conclusion**

Admittedly, the analyses presented in this paper so far may not draw on a sufficiently large number of datapoints – the census data, while comprehensive, only managed to reach a small percentage of subscribers. Further, it is possible that language in general is contracting, and that the nature of interaction on Reddit and other forms of social media, across borders, means that text-based variations from region to region could be converging into one 'internet English' of sorts. At this point, though, the mode of communication described/discussed here seems to be particularly interesting, especially with regards to the perceptions of users about their ability to support the team based on where they were born and where they live, and with regards to their linguistic correction in order to bolster the perceived sense of acceptance that they enjoy.

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