

Exploring the Detroit Lions Fan Base in an Online Community

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Abstract

In this essay, we explore the communication within an open source forum in the form of a subreddit. The interaction experienced on the forum pages and its associated chat room and podcast can be explained through several communication theories. For the purpose of this paper, 3 theories are selected and applied to the subreddit page to help decode the communication held within the forum. The three theories used as a lens to examine the r/Detroitlions subreddit are social presence theory, cues about us, and equalization effect. They each attempt to explain the interaction between users and their ability to communicate effectively in an online space. It is found that the page is extremely active and users are bonded together by their love of the Lions. The complexities of Reddit allows users to form relationships and be more present than on a typical webpage due to the availability of emojis, videos, and photos. The forum also promotes fair and equal discussion without fear of repercussion due to the page's system of anonymity. Users feel free to share any opinions and information they have as long as it pertains to the Detroit Lions.

Lions Fan Base

The spirit of the Detroit Lions fan base does not waiver. Despite being one of the worst performing teams in the history of the NFL, the Detroit Lions fan base remains confident and optimistic. This is ever present on the official subreddit for the Detroit Lions, r/Detroitlions. Subreddit is the term used to define each individual page on Reddit and is denoted as “r/nameofsubreddit.” I was immediately interested in studying the Detroit lions fan base from the beginning of this assignment because I am an athlete and I grew up in Michigan and have been a Lions fan since birth (yes, I even stuck with them through the infamous 0-16 season.) In the few weeks I spent following and studying the fan base, it is clear that Lions fans are optimistic for the future but are not afraid of making a few jokes about the franchise’s dismal past. The continued interaction on the subreddit gives hope to those fans who may think they are alone in grieving every Sunday night during football season that there are others suffering with them. The page is relentless in promoting current Lions players as well as critiquing front office personnel. Overall, r/Detroitlions is a great place for Lions fans to come together and discuss their team whether it is good or bad. The community’s reach is vast, with 77.5 thousand members with hundreds of active members at a time. The subreddit page is an open forum for virtually anyone to post trade rumors, draft opinions, free agent signings, and just about anything to do with the Detroit Lions. The behaviors displayed in the subreddit can be contextualized by prefacing the essay with a set of theories that will be used in examining the forum. The theories are social presence theory, cues about us, and equalization effect. The theories help explain online interaction and communication in an open forum setting. The subreddit, r/Detroitlions, is a successful, popular

open forum with over 75k members, but is limited to and challenged by the typical constraints of online communication.

In order to understand the subreddit and its various modes of communication, we must understand the forum's design and layout as well as the various demographics of its users. In true Midwest, Detroit, fashion the number one rule of the community is "Don't be an asshole." It is made clear from a single glance that the forum is for Lions fans and the NFC North, not for any petty or political arguments. If it does not directly involve the Lions or football within the NFC North, the moderators will take the post down. The page has 10 moderators, several of which have been involved with the page since its inception 9 years ago. Their job is to monitor and control the posts that are put up on the forum. They make sure users follow the rules clearly outlined early in the site. The rules are as follows: "1. Don't be an asshole. 2. Duplicate topic (don't duplicate). 3. Not about the Detroit Lions or NFC North. 4. Upvote Thread. 5. Non-descriptive title. 6. Trolling. 7. Inappropriate Self-Promotion. 8. NSFW." These rules are detailed further with a simple click, and are all outlined for all to read. The moderators are efficient in their monitoring but are fair but not afraid of any user, they treat everyone the same and monitor the content posted on the site. They allow for good discussion and only intervene when necessary. Most changes by moderators are not seen, as they remove posts that violate the rules rather than scolding users in a public setting. The forum is very inviting, as most Reddit pages are. It is simple, to the point, and is very effective in creating an easy method of communication. Having an open forum as the medium of communication is a great way to ensure there is free and easy transfer of information. Anyone can create and share a post, ensuring near total freedom of communication. Any member can feel free to post any information as long as it falls in the forums rules and guidelines. If a post lands outside of the boundaries, the group of moderators

has the authority to take the post down. Although this forum is rather complex in its abilities of sharing information including text, video, picture, etc. it is still limited in its possibilities. The online forum nature of the page struggles to fully encompass the emotions and arguments had on the site. Virtual communication puts severe limits on the ability to transmit emotions and make specific points clear. Not having the nonverbal actions and emotions (facial expressions, hand gestures, etc.) limits the ability for users to interact and connect on a deep level. It has been found that online communication makes it harder for individuals to interact and truly connect via text, but in recent years that view has greatly shifted due to the addition of features allowing for more expression. The addition of emojis and other shareable items such as gifs help, but they are not enough to truly articulate the nonverbal in a conversation.

In order to understand the fan base and the type of people lions fans are you just need to reach the home page. In true Lions sarcastic fashion, the title of the forum reads “Detroit Lions Football: Undefeated in Super Bowls!” Any football fan understand the jest behind this title; the Lions have never even reached a super bowl and haven’t even won a playoff game in decades. This is a perfect example of the sense of humor Lion’s fans have. Detroit Lions fans are tried and true, will stick with the team through thick and thin but accept the past and understand the mishaps and brutal season of the past and are able to joke about it. Unfortunately, the Reddit users who posted the most did not have much biographical information available, but based on the posts and language used in the posts it seems as though the typical user is a 20-40 year old male. The most popular users posted relatively often, showing they were in tune with the internet and strictly posted about football. The group of individuals who access this site is vast, nearly 78 thousand users. Even though not all 78 thousand users engage on the platform daily, there was a noticeable spike in the week immediately preceding the NFL draft, during the draft and still

ongoing after the draft. The main purpose in the last few weeks of this page has been to spread draft and trade rumors, react to draft picks in real time, and most recently, critiquing the draft class and free agent signings. It seems as though most users have been satisfied with the off season performance of the Lions. Many of the posts have included highlight reels of recently drafted or signed players, as well as some anecdotal information attached. Whether that is a personal interaction with players (watching them in person) or disseminating information and links found on other websites, the fans interacting on these pages are dedicated and love Detroit Lions football.

The subreddit can be examined using multiple communication theories. The rest of this essay will focus on three: social presence theory, cues about us, and the equalization effect. Since the the internet and computers became widely available to the public, scholars have been conducting research regarding online communication and have come up with many theories. These three are just a few of a multitude of possible theories that can be related to the reddit forum r/Detroitlions.

Social presence theory is displayed in the r/Detroitlions open forum. Social presence theory is defined as “a psychological phenomenon regarding how individuals perceive one another.” (Baym, 2002) Early theorists believed that mediated communication would lead to diminished social presence. That was assumed that because in an online space, people’s faces and hand gestures cannot be seen and therefore social presence is lowered. Recent theorists don’t necessarily agree. They believe that social presence is determined by the individuals and the agreed upon cues. If you know what specific cues are used in order to transmit emotion or specific feelings, social presence isn’t necessarily decreased. In r/Detroitlions, social presence is rather high. The most involved and popular users have their specific cues that emit emotion

including extensive punctuation, emojis, gifs, videos, etc. It seems as though there is an unwritten, agreed upon language involving these cues that assist in improving social presence. Every active member seems to be in tune with the aforementioned cues and use them to transmit their emotions and craft their message based on the emotions they want to portray. Modern technology has significantly increased the availability of social presence in mediated communication through various innovations which is shown in r/Detroitlions.

Another theory that can be applied and seen in the r/Detroitlions forum is cues about us. There is a great sense of community within the forum due to the widespread communication regarding a common theme. This also plays into the Communitarian hypothesis that maintains the idea that the internet can bring people closer together based on just about any common shared interest (Nic, p. 217). Similarly, cues about us says that “communication within and online group promotes greater group identification and self-categorization in line with social identity” (Walther, Parks, p. 539). In a fan base forum such as r/Detroitlions, there is an immediate connection between all users. They join the group because they are fans of the Detroit Lions and the ongoing communication in the forum strengthens their interests and creates a heightened sense of community. From studying the actions of the group, it is clear that the group has an intense fealty to the Lions. The constant posts and communication dealing with trades, signings, and other intricate conspiracy theories is remarkable. The forum serves a great space for fans to come together as one to discuss and bond over their beloved Detroit Lions.

A positive effect of an open forum such as r/Detroitlions is the equalization effect. The equalization effect claims that “individuals who may be reluctant to speak out in FTF (face to face) discussions because of status differences might feel more comfortable making contributions in CMC (computer mediated communication) groups.” (Ho, Mcleod, p. 192)

Sports fans are extremely passionate about their sports and their teams. Online forums allow for free expression of opinions without the fear of repercussions. In r/Detroitlions, the dialogue and communication during a discussion is much safer than the same debate would be in a sports bar or even in a friend's man cave. Sharing explicit opinions on touchy/personal sports subjects can upset many diehard fans. Having the safety of anonymity online creates an atmosphere of comfort where members can express their opinions with no fear. They can speak their minds without the fear of seriously upsetting anyone and having to deal with those repercussions in real time.

After a few weeks of study and immersion, some major trends began to appear within the group. The listed group moderators are not necessarily the group's leaders as it may seem at first. The moderators are more like the policemen of the page, enforcing rules and removing content that does not follow the explicitly stated rules. There are no clear cut leaders of the page, but some users are more active than others in posting opinions, starting conversations, sharing fun Lions news stories they find on other social media platforms, etc. It seems as though most of the relationships formed on the page start and end online. They are online only and do not extend past the keyboard and into reality. The only in person interaction I found evidence of was that one user has a podcast which he co-hosts with another user in the group. Outside of the podcast, it seems as though the majority of interaction occurs on the forum in the posts and comments section of the chat room associated with the page. The official chat room associated with the page has 1,553 members and is described as "From the meticulous to the meta, this chat covers all things/r/Detroitlions." The chat is more active than the page itself, with users messaging each other from the early hours of the morning to deep into the night.

The busiest times for the page occurred immediately preceding, during and following the NFL draft. There was a slew of posts made hourly regarding draft predictions, picks, and future trade options because of the draft selections. The forum exploded around the time of the draft, with hundreds of fans commenting on posts, giving their opinions of the decisions made during the draft. Unlike past seasons, the atmosphere was generally positive. The Lions have historically made poor decisions around draft time and the fans in r/Detroitlions were surprisingly happy with the choices made by the ownership and management of the team. As expected on open forums due to the equalization effect, there were some “hot takes” thrown around sparking serious debate. Many fans wanted the Lions to pick Tua Tagovailoa instead of Jeffery Okudah with the 3rd overall pick. The debates ran hot and heavy in the comments section, seeing as there was no real fear of repercussions. This created a lot of buzz on the forum and sparked lots of good debate in comment sections of posts.

The subreddit r/Detroitlions is a seemingly perfect example of a typical large scale online community. Its users are tied together by one single characteristic and bond over that one thing. Through time, users create bonds and familiarize themselves with each other through sustained dialogue and communication. Besides the fact that the page has accrued over 77 thousand members and hundreds of daily active users, it still has to deal with the challenges of computer mediated communication. The forum is limited by the constraints of online only communication for the most part, but Reddit is a relatively advanced and comprehensive platform that allows for extensive use of other cues that allow for more personal connections. Reddit successfully incorporates chat rooms, emojis, and the ability to add video and pictures in order to break down the barriers that are often accompany online communication. The ability to share more interactive forms of media that allow for more personalized content is one area that allows

Reddit to thrive and be a lasting force in online communities as new technologies emerge. Along with anonymity, Reddit allows for its pages to be self-moderated which creates an open environment for sharing opinions without fear of repercussions. The open forum subreddit r/Detroitlions battles the same limitations that other online communities face but the features offered by Reddit help alleviate some of those limitations and create a space for collective group communication and correspondence.

References

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