Article

Upvoting extremism: Collective identity formation and the extreme right on Reddit

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Abstract

Since the advent of the Internet, right-wing extremists and those who subscribe to extreme right views have exploited online platforms to build a collective identity among the like-minded. Research in this area has largely focused on extremists' use of websites, forums, and mainstream social media sites, but overlooked in this research has been an exploration of the popular social news aggregation site Reddit. The current study explores the role of Reddit's unique voting algorithm in facilitating "othering" discourse and, by extension, collective identity formation among members of a notoriously hateful subreddit community, r/The_Donald. The results of the thematic analysis indicate that those who post extreme-right content on r/The_Donald use Reddit's voting algorithm as a tool to mobilize like-minded members by promoting extreme discourses against two prominent out-groups: Muslims and the Left. Overall, r/The_Donald's "sense of community" facilitates identity work among its members by creating an environment wherein extreme right views are continuously validated.

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Right-wing extremist movements are increasingly expanding beyond national borders, and the Internet is a fundamental medium that has facilitated such movements' increasingly "transnational" nature (Caini and Kröll, 2014; Froio and Ganesh, 2019; Perry and Scrivens, 2016). The plethora of online platforms play a significant role in the "transnationalisation" of the extreme right by enabling such movements to attract new members and disseminate information to a global audience (see Caini and Kröll, 2014). The Internet, however, functions as more than a "tool" to be used by movements. It also functions as a space of important identity work; the interactive nature of the Internet's various platforms allows for the exchange of ideas and enables the active construction of collective identities (Perry and Scrivens, 2016). Here, the Internet has facilitated a transnational "locale" where right-wing extremists can exchange radical ideas and negotiate a common sense of "we"—or a collective identity (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Futrell and Simi, 2004; Perry and Scrivens, 2016).

Researchers who have explored right-wing extremists' use of Internet have typically focused their attention on dedicated hate sites and forums (e.g. Adams and Roscigno, 2005; Bliuc et al., 2019; Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Burris et al., 2000; Futrell and Simi, 2004; Perry and Scrivens, 2016; Scrivens et al., 2018 Simi and Futrell, 2015). As a result, the nature of right-wing extremists' use of online platforms that are outside the mainstream purview of digital platforms—including Facebook (e.g. Ekman, 2018; Nouri and Lorenzo-Dus, 2019; Stier et al., 2017), Twitter (e.g. Berger, 2016; Berger and Strathearn, 2013; Burnap and Williams, 2015; Graham, 2016), and YouTube (e.g. Ekman, 2014; O'Callaghan et al., 2014)—has gone mostly unexplored by researchers, despite the fact that lesser-researched platforms (e.g. 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, etc.) have provided adherents with spaces to anonymously discuss and develop "taboo" or "anti-moral" ideologies (see Nagle, 2017). Scholars who have recognized this lacuna have called for further exploration of extremists' use of under-researched platforms. Conway (2017: 85), for example, noted that "different social media platforms have different functionalities" and posed the question how do extremists exploit the different functions of these platforms? In response, the current study begins to bridge the abovementioned gap by exploring one platform that has received relatively little research attention, Reddit, and the functional role of its voting algorithm (i.e. it's upvoting and downvoting function) in facilitating collective identity formation among members of a notoriously hateful subreddit community, r/The_Donald.

The collective identity of the extreme right online

The notion of "collective identity" lies at the heart of the social movement theory framework and has provided valuable insight into the impact of right-wing extremists' online discussions in shaping their identity (e.g. Futrell and Simi, 2004; Perry and Scrivens, 2016; Scrivens et al., 2018). The social movement literature posits that collective identity

is actively produced (e.g. Diani, 1992; Hunt and Benford, 1994; Snow, 2001) and constructed through what Melucci (1995: 43) describes as "interaction, negotiation and the opposition of different orientations." In addition, according to the social constructionist paradigm, collective identity is "invented, created, reconstituted, or cobbled together rather than being biologically preordained" (Snow, 2001: 5). As activists share ideas among other members of their in-group, these exchanges actively produce a shared sense of "we" and, by extension, a collective identity (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Futrell and Simi, 2004; Melucci, 1995; Snow, 2001). In addition, a collective identity is further developed through the construction of an "us" versus "them" binary (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). By "othering," or identifying and targeting the groups' perceived enemies, such interactions further define the borders of the in-group (Perry and Scrivens, 2016).

Indeed, these same processes of collective identity formation occur within—and are facilitated by—online communications. Similar to how "face-to-face" interactions in the "real world" form collective identities, so too do the "many-to-many" interactions in cyberspace (Crisafi, 2005). As a result, the Internet's many online platforms have facilitated extreme right-wing identity work (Futrell and Simi, 2004; Perry and Scrivens, 2016). As Perry and Scrivens (2016: 69) explained it,

> [a] collective identity provides an alternative frame for understanding and expressing grievances; it shapes the discursive "other" along with the borders that separate "us" from "them"; it affirms and reaffirms identity formation and maintenance; and it provides the basis for strategic action.

Each of these elements enhance our understanding of the Internet's role in developing a collective identity among extreme right-wing adherents. But among these virtual spaces, Reddit in particular has received criticisms in recent years for its proliferation of extreme right-wing content.

"The front page of the Internet": Reddit

While the social movement framework has been useful in advancing our understanding of right-wing extremists' use of the Internet, particularly on the more traditional websites, forums and mainstream social media platforms to build a collective identity, it remains unclear how the unique voting features and content policies of one under-researched virtual platform, Reddit, shape the formation of a collective identity among members of right-wing extremist movements who use the platform.

Created in 2005, Reddit has become the fifth-most popular website in the United States (Reddit Press, n.d.) and the 20th-most popular website in the world (Reddit.com Competitive Analysis, n.d.). As a "social news aggregation" site, Reddit describes itself as "a platform for communities to discuss, connect, and share in an open environment, home to some of the most authentic content anywhere online" (Reddit Content Policy, n.d.). Here users may participate in, contribute to, and even develop like-minded communities whose members share a common interest. A unique component of the platform is its voting algorithm, which provides its users with the means to promote and spread content within a particular subreddit. To illustrate, Reddit users retrieve interesting content from across the Internet

and post that content to niche topic-based communities called "subreddits," and those who share similar views (or not) can convey their interest—or disinterest—by giving an "upvote" or "downvote" to the posted content in the subreddit (Wildman, 2020). "Upvoting" a post, for example, increase its visibility and user engagement within a subreddit (see Carman et al., 2018), and as a result, the most popular posts are featured on Reddit's front page for millions of users to see (Wildman, 2020). In short, using the upvoting (i.e. increasing content visibility) and downvoting (i.e. decreasing content visibility) function on Reddit, users shape the discourse and build a collective identity within their subreddit community. Previous research that explored bidirectional voting results on a related site, Imgur, has similarly found that users' upvoting and downvoting practices help reinforce social identity (see Hale, 2017).

While Reddit is designed to foster a sense of community among like-minded users, historically its laissez-faire content policy has failed to prevent users from posting and spreading hate speech on the platform (Gibbs, 2018) and has even facilitated the development of what Massanari (2017) describes as "toxic technocultures." For example, on the one hand, its content policy defines "unwelcome content" as material that incites violence or that threatens, harasses, or bullies other users (Reddit Content Policy, n.d.). Conversely, the policy admits that it "provides a lot of leeway in what content is acceptable" (Reddit Content Policy, n.d.). This hands-off approach is largely meant to facilitate an open dialogue among members of Reddit's numerous communities, wherein users may express their views on controversial topics without fear of being banned from the site or harassed by those with opposing views (Reddit Content Policy, n.d.). As a result, Reddit tends to stop short of preventing users from posting controversial ideas. In fact, until recently, Reddit condoned racism and hate speech on its platform, according to a recent statement by the site's CEO, Steve Huffman (Gibbs, 2018).[1]

It comes as little surprise, then, that Reddit has witnessed an influx of extremist communities (Feinberg, 2018). In response, Reddit launched a "quarantine" feature in 2015 that would hide a number of communities that regularly produce offensive content. Here, users must explicitly opt-in to view quarantined communities as a mechanism to prevent users from inadvertently coming across extremely offensive content (Account and Community Restrictions, n.d.-b). One previously quarantined and recently banned subreddit community, r/The_Donald, has been receiving specific criticism for its extreme right-wing content.

"America First!": r/The_Donald

r/The_Donald was a subreddit community where members could discuss a variety of matters relating to Trump's US presidency. Since its inception in 2015, Trump's most fervent supporters have assembled on r/The_Donald, with numbers surpassing 700,000 subscribers (Romano, 2017). Some members of r/The_Donald represented a variety of extreme right-wing movements and ideologies, including the "manosphere," the "alt-right," and racists more broadly, though all members were united in their unwavering support for the US president (Martin, 2017).

Although r/The_Donald was quarantined in June 2019 after members were accused of breaking Reddit's rules by inciting violence (see Stewart, 2019), hateful sentiment

continued to be a common occurrence there (Gibbs, 2018), until it was eventually banned (Tiffany, 2020). To illustrate, while the "rules" of r/The_Donald made it clear that "racism and Anti-Semitism will not be tolerated," they also specified that "Muslim and illegal immigrant are not races" (r/The_Donald Wiki, n.d.). These rules suggest, then, that moderators would most likely not remove discussions related to anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant out-groups within the community. Not surprisingly, r/The_Donald continued to experience an influx of extreme right-wing content, including discussions surrounding "white genocide," anti-Muslim sentiment, and anti-Black discourse (Ward, 2018). Racist memes also appeared to be increasing in popularity on r/The_Donald (see Ward, 2018; see also Zannettou et al., 2018). Despite these concerns, however, research on platforms such as Reddit remains limited. So too does our understanding of how these sites function to facilitate hateful content and collective identity formation.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting here that, following J.M. Berger (2018), we take the view that right-wing extremists—like all extremists—structure their beliefs on the basis that the success and survival of the in-group is inseparable from the negative acts of an out-group and, in turn, they are willing to assume both an offensive and defensive stance in the name of the success and survival of the in-group. We thus conceptualize right-wing extremism as a racially, ethnically, and/or sexually defined nationalism, which is typically framed in terms of white power and/or white identity (i.e. the in-group) that is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by some combination of non-whites, Jews, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, members of the LGBTQI + community, and feminists (i.e. the out-group[s]) (Conway et al., 2019).

Data and methods

This research is guided by the following research question: How does Reddit's unique voting algorithm (i.e. it's upvoting and downvoting function) facilitate "othering" discourse and, by extension, collective identity formation on r/The_Donald following Trump's presidential election victory? To answer this question, data were collected from a website that made Reddit data publicly available for research and analysis.[2] We extracted all of the data posted to r/The_Donald subreddit in 2017, as it marked the first year of Trump's presidency and a time when his far-right political views encouraged his supporters to preach and practice racist hate against the out-groups, both on- and offline (see Anti-Defamation League, 2018). Research has similarly identified a link between Trump's election victory and a subsequent spike in hatred, both online (e.g. Zannettou et al., 2018) and offline (e.g. Edwards and Rushin, 2018), in the year following his victory.

We then identified the 1000 most highly upvoted user-submitted comments in the data (hereafter referred to as the "highly-upvoted sample").[3] A second sample, which comprised of 1,000 user-submitted comments, was randomly sampled from the data (hereafter referred to as the "random sample") to serve as a comparison to the highly upvoted sample. The purpose of this was to explore what makes highly upvoted content unique in comparison to a random sample of non-highly upvoted comments.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In particular, the data were categorized using descriptive coding which was done with NVivo

Table 1. Descriptive information of the samples.

	Unique authors (%)	Thread-starting comments (%)	Comment vote score		
			Min	Max	Mean
Highly upvoted sample (N = 1000)	852 (85.2%)	893 (89.3%)	1320	7328	1915
Random sample (N = 1000)	929 (92.9%)	465 (46.5%)	−12	487	10

qualitative analysis software. After we reviewed each user comment in the highly upvoted sample and random sample, codes were assigned to the sections of text that related to the research question. This descriptive coding technique proceeded in a sequential, line-by-line manner (see Maher et al., 2018), which was a suitable choice for the current study because it allowed us to organize vast amount of textual data into manageable word/topic-based clusters. Given that there are no "hard and fast" rules for searching for themes using thematic analysis (see Maguire and Delahunt, 2017), significant themes emerged as we coded, categorized, and reflected on the data (Saldaña, 2009).

Findings

The findings are organized into two sections, one for each key theme that was identified in the data. Each includes an explanation of the patterns that emerged in support of each theme, both within and across the highly upvoted sample and the random sample. Here we draw largely from the words of the users in the samples (i.e. quotes). Descriptive information pertaining to the samples are also provided.

Descriptive information of the samples

Several macro-level patterns emerged across the sample groups, as is illustrated in Table 1. First was the relatively similar number of unique authors in the highly upvoted sample and the random sample (852 and 952, respectively). This suggests that the highly upvoted sample, and perhaps the highly upvoted content on r/The_Donald in general, does not consist of a group of authors whose comments make up a large proportion of the highly upvoted comments. Second, each sample consisted of a variety of thread-starting comments and response comments, but the thread-starter comments comprised a large proportion of the highly upvoted sample (89.3%) while the random sample contained fewer thread-starter comments (46.5%). Finally, a comparison of the measures of central tendency across the two samples revealed that the comment vote scores varied substantially. This is expected because the highly upvoted sample consisted of the most highly upvoted comments found in the r/The_Donald in 2017.

The external threat

Across the 1000 most highly -upvoted comments were various talking points, including discussions about Reddit administrators, a recent solar eclipse, users on 4chan, and United States Senator Ted Cruz, among numerous other discussions. But a large proportion of the

comments (i.e. 11.6%) in the highly upvoted sample were hateful comments about Muslim communities, with claims that Muslim immigration is a persistent danger to Western nations, particularly to the United States, and that Muslim-perpetrated violence is to be expected as a result of the increasing levels of Muslim immigration. In particular, contributors generally agreed that increased Muslim immigration will result in what one user—who posted one of the most highly upvoted comments in the sample—described as "chaos and oppression and rape and murder"[4] (UserID: 977, *4143*[5]). Here, the highly upvoted comments not only suggested that "my Muslim neighbors" want to "rape my wife and kill my dogs," as one user explained (UserID: 272, *1532*), but also that "pedos [pedophiles] are rampant inside this mind fuck ideology, as their [religious] 'book' allows this shit to happen" (UserID: 309, *2300*). In addition, among the most highly upvoted comments was a link to a video of an "ISLAMIST MOB PUSHING A TEEN OFF A ROOF THEN BEATING HIM TO DEATH" (UserID: 600, *1526*), which was used by members to showcase the violent nature of Islam as well as to make the claim that such a "barbaric" religion is indisputably violent. Interestingly, while highly upvoted content reflected such comments as "we know muslims are NOT peaceful and will wreck shit" (UserID: 588, *1388*), much of the content oftentimes included the use of sarcasm to express frustration about a wider "politically correct" culture that, as one user best summed up, "[does] not allow us to report crimes perpetrated by Muslims because it's racist" (UserID: 555, *1548*).

Frequently discussed within the highly upvoted sample was a link between the increase of Muslim migration in the United States, and the West more generally, and the increased threat of terrorism there. Although racism was against r/The_Donald subreddit's rules, racist sentiments against Muslims were generally overlooked in the context of discussions around the "Muslim terror threat." For instance, one member's highly upvoted comment described the terrorist threat as follows: "MY NAME IS JAFAR I COME FROM AFAR THERES A BOMB IN MY CAR ALLAHU AKBAR" (UserID: 689, *1400*). Notably, although racist remarks such as these should warrant removal by r/The_Donald moderators, they were overlooked and, resultantly, were allowed to remain featured within the community to draw further attention to the external threat. As a result, among the most highly upvoted content were suggestions that Muslims largely supported terrorism in the United States, with some users also suggesting "NOT ALL MUSLIMS yeah, but damn near most of them it seems" (UserID: 353, *1565*) support terrorist attacks against the West. Consequently, commonly expressed in the highly upvoted comments were references to what was described as a key method to counter this "terror threat": preventing the so-called external threat from entering the Western world through immigration. Here, contributors oftentimes argued that it is imperative to, as one user who posted a highly upvoted comment put it, "halt our disasterous immigration policies" (UserID: 612, *1942*).

Together, extreme right-wing sentiments emerged in the highly upvoted content if it related to this external. Consistently uncovered within this sample were discussions about Muslims threat as "invaders" of the West and an increasing threat to the white population there. As but one more notable example, in a highly upvoted comment to a post titled "*Muslim population in Europe to triple by 2050*," one user expressed their grievances about the rising number of Muslims in Europe and the subsequent threat to the white race there:

In 2050 your gonna have a lot of younger Europeans who completely resent their elders for giving away there future for a false sense of moral superiority. I almost already feel it with my parents. My family is white and both of my white liberal parents talk as if whites are the worst people on the planet. I love them but holy shit they have no self preservation instincts. It's embarrassing. (UserID: 114, *1604*)

Similarly uncovered in the highly upvoted comments were members who described an emerging sense of desperation that the survival of their in-group is being threatened by the Muslim out-group. As one user put it: "Come on? We're getting slaughtered here, the previous car that ploughed though people on the bridge, Ariana Grande concert and now this? Our country has been infiltrated, we're fucked" (UserID: 355, *2189*). Here, the threat of Muslim-perpetrated violence and terrorism was described within the broader context of an Islamic "invasion" of Western countries. To illustrate, a large proportion of the content within the highly upvoted messages was a reaction to Muslim immigration into Western nations as a sign of Muslims "want[ing] to rule the earth" (UserID: 309, *2300*). One of the highly upvoted comments described this so-called Muslim "end game" as a means to destroy other nations to further their own goals:

Muslims have been trying to conquer us since the beginning of time. They used to steal our children and then train them to kill their own people. Didn't work then, and will not work now. There's not a single romanian out there in this whole world who doesn't know what the Muslim end game is. (UserID: 761, *1465*)

As a result of this external threat, members in the subreddit oftentimes discussed the ways that they should defend themselves and members of their in-group since, as one user put it, "[w]hy should we give up our lifestyle for their tyranny?" (UserID: 460, *1653*).

Evidence of the above discussed external threat of the Muslim out-group, such as gruesome images of recent terror attack victims found in the highly upvoted content, further invoked a particularly emotional response from members of the in-group on r/The_Donald; when Muslim-perpetrated terrorist attacks occurred, the fear and anger that members of r/The_Donald expressed toward the external threat was reflected in their most highly upvoted comments. For example, a highly upvoted comment to an image of a terror attack victim noted: "[i]t's heartbreaking and bloodily gruesome but this corpse was once a person. How dare we deny their pain? We need to defend and avenge" (UserID: 989, *1468*). In effect, each member that upvoted this comment agreed with its basic underlying assumptions: that the in-group's very survival depends on some form of defensive action against the out-groups.

While the most highly upvoted comments consisted largely of references to the Muslim threat as imminent and the subsequent necessity of a "defensive stance," these highly upvoted comments failed to specify *how* members should respond to this threat. For instance, while contributors argued that the threat may, in part, be alleviated by striking down the "disastrous" immigration policies that allow Muslims to "flood" to the United States and the West, the highly upvoted comments provided no guidelines about how to defend themselves against Muslims who already reside within the country. It

would appear, then, that members' highly upvoted discussions around defending themselves from Muslims are meant to be generalized and, as such, are careful not to overtly incite violence against a particular person or group.

An assessment of the random sample of comments revealed that the highly upvoted anti-Muslim comments discussed above go unchallenged, at least visibly. This is largely because any comments that ran counter to the most highly upvoted narrative typically did not receive any upvotes by other members and, resultantly, were less visible than their highly upvoted counterparts. For instance, one user who suggested that "the basic ideals of Islam" include such things as "faith, generosity, self-restraint, upright conduct" (UserID: 1928, *1*) did not have their comment upvoted. Moreover, comments that opposed the more prominent anti-Muslim narratives, such as "Terrorist come in all colors. So do Americans" (UserID: 1680, *2*), were far from the most highly upvoted comments in the community. Similarly, users arguing that Muslims who commit violent acts have "psychological problems so it's not a terror related attack" (UserID: 1860, *1*) or that "there are a lot of good muslim people, but theyre bad muslims" (UserID: 1733, *4*) were largely unpopular within the community.

While there were a small number of particularly anti-Muslim comments in the random sample, they were less frequent (i.e. 1.6% of the random sample) and, for the most part, less extreme than those in the highly upvoted sample. To illustrate, one member in the random sample wondered "why do countries like Sweden let Muslim war criminals into their country with no repercussion?" (UserID: 1788, *2*). Another user here argued "if they make Europe more Muslim then the West will stop bombing the Middle East" (UserID: 1609, *30*). There were, however, a number of comments in the random sample that reflected the more extreme anti-Muslim content that characterized the anti-Muslim rhetoric in the highly upvoted sample, but the comments in the random sample received much lower voting scores than the highly upvoted messages—most likely because references to Muslims as an external threat were relatively rare among the comments in the random sample.

The internal threat

Commonly expressed in the data was another threat in most highly upvoted comments: The Left. Sentiment against this out-group comprised 13.4% of the most highly upvoted comments in the sample. An assessment of the most highly upvoted messages suggested that the Leftist out-group was perceived as violent, particularly against the extreme right-wing in-group. Here, a widely held belief was, as two users described, "the Left are not as peaceful as they pretend to be," (UserID: 392, *1982*) and they are "growing increasingly unhinged every passing day" (UserID: 880, *2065*). Members who posted highly upvoted content oftentimes noted that the Left is, as one user put it, sending "death threats to people who have different political views than [them]" (UserID: 880, *2065*). Users who posted highly upvoted comments in r/The_Donald community even argued that the Left was willing to go so far as physically attack their right-wing political opponents or, as one user put it, "smash a Trump supporter over the head with a bike lock because of his intolerance to non-liberal viewpoints" (UserID: 619, *1640*). Yet in light of fellow members being depicted as the victims of the Left's violence, an analysis of the

highly upvoted content revealed that members in r/The_Donald encouraged each other not to react to the Left because, as one user explained it, '[v]iolent backlash from the right is exactly what they're looking for so they can start point fingers and calling us the violent ones' (UserID: 1000, *2173*).

Also uncovered in the highly upvoted comments were discussions about the Left seeking to weaken the West in general but the United States in particular through their crusade against the white race. Specifically, users who posted highly upvoted content oftentimes expressed frustration about the how Left has constantly undermined the many societal contributions made by the white race, which—as one user best summed up— include "economies that actually work, philosophy as a whole, anti-biotics and health-care in general, printed press, technology in general, and so on" (UserID: 357, *1688*). Further added here were discussions about how the Left would rather focus on what white people have done wrong and "shit all over white people for what they did in the past" (UserID: 357, *1688*), as one user put it, rather than acknowledge the contributions that the white race has made to Western society. Together, the general sentiment was that the Left was seeking to deter whites—and by extension members of r/The_Donald com-munity—from feeling any source of pride for their white ancestry, as evidenced by the following highly upvoted comment:

> You're a white male kid. You've grown up being told you're the reason for all the world's ills. You want to speak out. You have to go to your high school in the dark, slouched, with your face hidden to simply post a sign that says It's okay to be white. Leave. School hands security footage over to the media. The media broadcasts the picture nationwide and says they are investigating. Just step back and take in how crazy this is. (UserID: 77, *2099*)

As a result, members of r/The_Donald conclude not only that Leftists "hate white peo-ple" (UserID: 479, *1582*), but that, and one user explained it, "our enemies sure want whites to be a minority or even dead" (UserID: 197, *1356*) as evidenced by their support for the immigration of "undesirables" into West in general and the United States in particular.

Apparent in the highly upvoted content was user support for discussions about the Left's support for immigration—especially from Muslims entering the West from dan-gerous countries. According to users who posted highly upvoted comments, this was another key component of the Left's so-called anti-white crusade. Members noted that although Muslim immigrants increase the risk of violence and terrorism in the United States, such a threat does not prevent the Left from encouraging them to migrate to the United States. Perhaps this is because, as one user who posted a highly upvoted comment emphasized, the Left "do[es]n't view ISIS or terrorism as a threat to this country at all . . . [and the Left is] more scared of Trump's policies than ISIS" (UserID: 720, *1361*). Still, users who posted the most highly upvoted comments in r/The_Donald noted that when "dangerous Muslim immigrants" inevitably commit violent acts against the West, members believe that these instances of Muslim-perpetrated violence are simply over-looked and excused by the Left. As one user explained: "Liberals will defend these sick fucks because they come from a different culture and don't understand western society" (UserID: 799, *4229*). The general sentiment expressed in this regard was that the Left

favors Muslim immigrants over the well-being of Americans—sentiment that was often-times met with frustration, as is expressed by one user: "the left's love affair with islam is so cringey and infuriating" (UserID: 687, *1653*). Linked to these discussions were conspiracy theories about the left-wing media playing a major role in distorting public perceptions about the "Muslim threat." One highly upvoted comment, for example, formed an anti-Muslim acronym, based on the media's distortion of Muslim-perpetrated terrorism: "**J**ust another random incident. **I**mpossible to discern a motive. **H**as nothing to do with religion. **A**lways believe the media. **D**on't jump to any conclusions" (UserID: 486, *1461*; emphasis in original).

An examination of the random sample of comments revealed few discussions about the so-called Leftist threat (i.e. 5.7% of the random sample). For instance, not only is the Left mentioned less often in the random sample than in the highly upvoted sample, but in less extreme ways as well. Instead, attacks against the Left are intended to be more humorous than serious. To illustrate, one user criticized the Left, noting that, "in addition to being unable to meme, leftists and ANTIFA can't shower either" (UserID: 1891, *17*). Similarly, another user admonished the "[t]ypical leftist hypocrites. That's why we can't play fair with them. They never reciprocate the gesture of good faith in anything" (UserID: 1719, *9*). Another less popular comment in the random sample suggested that the Left seeks to "protect free speech by banning it. Leftist logic" (UserID: 1751, *1*). This, however, was the extent to which the Left was referred in the random sample of comments.

Discussion

The results of the current study suggest that a particularly effective form of collective identity building was prevalent throughout the r/The_Donald community—one that was riddled with hateful sentiment against members' perceived enemies: Muslims and the Left. The thematic analysis of the highly upvoted content indicates that members most often agree with (i.e. upvote) extreme views toward two of their key adversaries to mobilize their social movement around the so-called threat. In particular, r/The_Donald's rules specifically condoned anti-Muslim content, which in large part explains why such content was so prevalent among the most highly upvoted messages. In addition, Donald Trump's own anti-Muslim rhetoric, which has emboldened right-wing extremists to commit hateful acts against Muslims (see Müller and Schwarz, 2019), may explain why his supporters on r/The_Donald were so eager to vilify the external threat. Known as the "Trump Effect" (Müller and Schwarz, 2019), the results of the current study suggest that Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric emboldened his fervent supporters on r/The_Donald to spread anti-Muslim content via Reddit's upvoting algorithm. Indeed, anti-Muslim hate speech is increasingly becoming an "accepted" form of racism across the globe and extreme right movements have capitalized on this trend to help mobilize an international audience of right-wing extremists (see Hafez, 2014; see also Froio and Ganesh, 2019). For instance, the othering of Muslims, specifically, is commonly used to strengthen in-group ties between far-right extremists against a common enemy (Hafez, 2014). By describing Muslims as the violent perpetrators and themselves as those who must defend themselves from "them," for example, members in r/The_Donald framed themselves as

victims rather than perpetrators—an othering tactic commonly used by right-wing extremists, among other extremist movements (see Meddaugh and Kay, 2009). This suggests that, by endorsing anti-Muslim sentiment, r/The_Donald offered extremists a virtual community wherein they may bond with likeminded peers around a common enemy. Worth highlighting though is that, while a large proportion of the highly upvoted content in the current study often frame Muslims as a serious and imminent threat, users tended not to provide specific strategies to respond to the so-called threat. Such behavioral monitoring may have been done in an effort to safeguard the community from being banned for breaking Reddit's sitewide policy against inciting violence.[6] Regardless of these efforts, recent amendments to Reddit's content policy that explicitly target hate speech led to the ban of r/The_Donald (see Tiffany, 2020).

There are a number of reasons that might explain why the Left is the target of othering discourse in the highly upvoted content on r/The_Donald. For instance, such sentiment most likely reflects the increasing political divide in the United States and other parts of the Western world, where the "right" often accuse the "left" of threatening the wellbeing of the nation (see Dimock et al., 2014). However, the results of the current study suggest that some users on r/The_Donald took this narrative to the extreme. To illustrate, the highly upvoted anti-Left discourse that was uncovered in the highly upvoted content mirror "paradoxical" identity politics expressed by the alt-right movement, which accuses the Left of authoritarianist censorship, yet position the far-right as the harbingers of "peaceful social change" (see Phillips and Yi, 2018). On r/The_Donald, the Left (i.e. the out-group) was construed as the opposite of peaceful on and even as a violent and physical threat to members of the in-group. Framing the out-group as a physical threat to members of the in-group served to further delineate the borders between "them" versus "us" and solidifies bonds between members of the in-group who, together, face a common enemy—a community-building tactic that is commonly discussed in the social movement literature (see Futrell and Simi, 2004; see also Perry and Scrivens, 2016). Notably, however, in the face of this so-called physical threat, within the highly upvoted comments users cautioned others from retaliating against "Leftist-perpetrated violence." It is probable that members may have wanted to avoid discussions of offline violence to avoid being banned from Reddit for overstepping its content policy against citing violence. If members instead were to encourage one another to react with violence against their perceived enemies, they would risk having their community banned for violating Reddit's content policy. Similar tactics have been reported in empirical studies which found that extreme right adherents in online discussion forums will deliberately present their radical views in a subtler manner in fear that they will be banned from the virtual community (see Daniels, 2009; Meddaugh and Kay, 2009).

Comparing the content in the highly upvoted sample with the random sample, it is clear that there was a complete absence of dissenting views among the most visible content in the highly upvoted comment sample. This suggests that Reddit's voting algorithm facilitated an "echo chamber" effect in r/The_Donald—one which promoted anti-Muslim and anti-Left sentiment. In particular, rather than encouraging a variety of perspectives within discussions on r/The_Donald, Reddit's voting algorithm seemed to allow members to create an echo chamber by shaping the discourse within their communities in ways that reflected a specific set of values, norms, and attitudes about the in-group.

For example, as evidenced by an analysis of r/The_Donald's most highly upvoted comments, members of the subreddit community tended to only support, or upvote, extreme views about Muslims and the Left. That is, among the community's most highly upvoted content was an absence of comments which offered an alternative perspective or even a dissenting view to the community's dominant extremist narrative. In some cases, members even used humor and sarcasm—which is commonly used by commenters on Reddit (see Mueller, 2016) and related sites like Imgur (see Mikal et al., 2014) regardless of political ideology—to express otherwise "taboo" anti-Muslim and anti-Left views, reflecting a long-standing tactic used by the extreme right to "say the unsayable" (see Billig, 2001).

Overall, our study's findings suggest that Reddit's upvoting and downvoting features played a central role in facilitating collective identity formation among those who post extreme right-wing content on r/The_Donald. Reddit's upvoting feature functioned to promote and normalize otherwise unacceptable views against the out-groups to produce a one-sided narrative that serves to reinforce members' extremist views, thereby strengthening bonds between members of the in-group. On the other hand, Reddit's downvoting feature functioned to ensure that members were not exposed to content that challenged their extreme right-wing beliefs, which in turn functioned as an echo chamber for hate and may have also functioned to correct the behavior of dissenting members—a possibility gleaned from the results of previous research on the effect of Imgur's bidirectional voting features on social identification (Hale, 2017). Seen through the lens of social movement theory, the extreme views against Muslims and the Left that characterized the "othering" discourses among the most highly upvoted comments may have been more likely to produce a stronger reaction from r/The_Donald's extreme right-wing in-group and, as a result, they may have been more likely to mobilize around these two threats.

Limitations and future research

The current study includes a number of limitations that may inform future research. First, our sample procedure may have implications for the study's findings, as the highly upvoted sample included a larger proportion of thread-starting comments than the random sample (i.e. 89.3% and 46.5%, respectively). As a result, fewer instances of right-wing extremist content found in the random sample could be the result of the greater proportion of response comments (i.e. comments that may be less visible than thread-starters, or support extremist content rather than feature it itself) when compared to the predominantly thread-starting comments of the highly upvoted sample. Future work should explore this possibility by creating a matched control sample in which the number of thread-starting and response comments are equal to that of the experimental sample. Second, we did not identify an important indicator of user engagement: the number of replies to comments in the highly upvoted sample or the random sample. Exploring the number of replies to comments featuring anti-Muslim and anti-Left content versus those without such content may provide additional insight into user engagement. Third, we drew from social movement theory to explore the role of Reddit's unique voting algorithm in promoting "othering" discourses that in turn facilitated

collective identity formation on r/The_Donald, but clearly there are other theoretical frameworks that could be applied in this context as well. Bandura's (2002) theory of moral disengagement, for example, offers interesting insights into the themes uncovered in the current study, including detrimental actions, injurious effects, and victimization. These aspects of Bandura's theory function to enhance the likelihood of moral disengagement and are bound by notions of "us" vs "them," all of which should be explored further.

In closing, the results of the study highlight at least of four additional paths for further inquiry. The first involves temporal change. Temporal analyses may be able to effectively capture how the anti-Muslim and anti-Left sentiment uncovered in the current study evolve over time. This, in turn, may offer new insight into the evolution of extremists' collective identities in virtual settings (see Scrivens et al., 2018) and provide more insight into whether and how the nature of r/The_Donald's echo chamber dynamics change over time. Second, the data for the current study was gathered from only the period after Trump's US presidential election victory, and not before. Future studies could, for example, incorporate an interrupted time series analysis into the research design, assessing whether Trump's election had a significant impact on the volume and severity of hateful speech on r/The_Donald. Since offline events can significantly impact the sentiment in far-right online communities (see Bliuc et al., 2019), determining the impact of offline events, such as Donald Trump's election, may shed light on if and how it emboldened right-wing extremist sentiment within the community. Other external events that may have influenced the most highly upvoted comments on r/The_Donald during the 2017 timeline include Islamist terror attacks such as the New York City truck attack and the London Bridge attack, or other galvanizing events such as the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. Future research should therefore attempt to account for these central events and subsequent interaction effects during the analysis stage. Research is also needed to assess how the banning of r/The_Donald impacted its online community in general and collective identity formation in particular, such as whether its users migrated to other political subreddits (e.g. r/Conservative), backup or mimic sites (e.g. TheDonald.win), or alternative platforms with more lenient content policies (e.g. Gab or Voat) in an effort to express their extremist views. Finally, future research could compare the discourse within and across a number of other extreme subreddits such as, for example, the recently quarantined r/Imgoingtohellforthis, which is known to promote "racist nationalism" (see Topinka, 2018). This may provide insight into how collective identities form in extreme online communities in general, and how Reddit's unique features facilitate collective identity formation, in particular.

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Notes

1. Reddit has since amended its content policy to discourage "promoting hate based on identity or vulnerability" (see Account and Community Restrictions, n.d.-a).
2. For more on the data, see https://files.pushshift.io/reddit/comments
3. Note that a Reddit "comment" is a user-submitted piece of text that is created in response to a particular "post." For instance, when a r/The_Donald member finds an interesting link to a news article, they may create a "post" which links this content to r/The_Donald, to which other members may comment.
4. All author names were assigned with pseudonyms to protect user anonymity. All online comments were quoted verbatim.
5. This number represents the comment's "vote score," or the number of upvotes given to a comment minus downvotes.
6. Reddit has used this policy to ban popular extremist subreddits in the past, including the anti-women community r/Incels in 2017 (Hauser, 2017) and the conspiracy theory community r/QAnon in 2018 (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018).

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