

NEGOTIATING OPTIMAL DISTINCTIVENESS AND SOCIAL COHESION IN UNPOPULAR OPINION THREADS*

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Established in 2012, the subreddit¹ r/UnpopularOpinion ballooned in size from 25,270 members as of January 2018 to 1,791,183 members, producing an average of 599 posts and 11,469 comments per day as of December 2020 (Subreddit Stats 2020a).² This subreddit is dedicated entirely to the expression of so-called unpopular opinions, beliefs that posters present as minority opinions likely to receive censure if expressed in regular social interaction. Although some posters on r/UnpopularOpinion use throwaway accounts created exclusively for sharing a single post, many also appear to post from accounts that they use regularly across the social networking site, thus linking their unpopular opinions to their broader social identity on Reddit. The expression of such deviant opinions, specifically presented as counter to the majority, appears risky or even anti-social, but their increasing popularity suggests that they nonetheless serve a valuable purpose for posters.

At first glance, the purpose of such threads may appear to be consequence-free expression of suppressed opinions to an anonymous audience (Oh 2019), but the phenomenon is not limited to r/UnpopularOpinion. Similar unpopular opinion threads (UOTs) have also appeared in interest-based subreddits such as the serious leisure community, r/WestCoastSwing, where participants, though still rendered anonymous by usernames, build social ties online and identify with the community both on- and offline. In this context, UOTs seem particularly high risk as they entail participants sharing unpopular opinions about their community within that same community. However, r/WestCoastSwing's internal UOT is the most commented upon thread in the entire subreddit, with minimal evidence of incivility or flaming. What then is happening in this thread? How are opinions being expressed and responded to and what service are they providing for individuals and communities?

To begin to address these questions, this case study explores the social function of the r/WestCoastSwing UOT. I consider its utility for posters and for the community as a whole and aim to shed light, not only on the use of UOTs in interest-based communities, but also on the broader practice of opinion sharing and identity online.

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¹ Within the social media website, Reddit, subreddits represent individual communities of users organized around a shared topic. These threaded forum-based communities are publicly readable, but only registered Reddit users may post, comment, or upvote content.

² Rates were calculated on the basis of per diem data for November 1, 2020 through December 1, 2020 from Subreddit Stats (2020a).

1. Online opinion expression

The study of online opinion expression has been dominated by attempts to account for the so called online disinhibition effect (Suler 2004), which, in its toxic form, is linked to flaming, cyber-bullying, and other aggressive anti-social behaviours online (e.g. Lowry et al. 2016). The effect is theorized to be driven by anonymity, deindividuation, and particularly the invisibility created by a lack of eye contact (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012; Suler 2004). Such online anonymity is also theorized to be the driving force behind increased online opinion expression (Luarn and Hsieh 2014) and has been found to reduce the fear of social isolation that typically suppresses opinion expression in face-to-face contexts (Ho and McLeod 2008). This is reinforced by findings that individuals with the greatest fear of social isolation are also the most likely to express opinions online (Oh 2019). In addition to feeling safer expressing opinions online than in person, internet users have also been found to be more likely to express minority than majority opinions in online discussion forums (Yang and Li 2016; McDevitt, Kioussis and Wahl-Jorgensen 2003). Majority opinion holders, by contrast, seem to engage in social loafing, relying on others to do the work of expressing and upholding majority values. This implies that the online context encourages not only opinion expression, but especially deviant opinion expression. Together, this research suggests that online forums, like r/UnpopularOpinion, may be seen as safe spaces to vent opinions that are too controversial to express in face-to-face contexts.

However, not all research in this area has shown such favourable conditions for opinion expression. Woong Yun and Park (2011) found that individuals were less willing to express minority than majority opinions in their online discussion forum, creating a spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1974) in which the majority opinion appeared to be the only opinion due to dissenters' unwillingness to express their beliefs. Online spirals of silence were also found by Neubaum and Krämer (2018) who concluded that they were specifically driven by fears of retaliation from other internet users expected to be particularly aggressive under the influence of the online disinhibition effect.

In response to the body of work focusing on the toxic online disinhibition effect, Lea and Spears (1991) proposed an alternative model of online expression focussing on social identity (SIDE). Starting from the idea that individuals have differing identities as discrete selves and as members of various groups, Lea and Spears (1991) found that subjects who were cued to identify with a shared group identity, and who experienced deindividuation were more likely to align their behaviour to the group norm than were those who had low group affiliation and high individuation. By attributing variances in behaviour to the interaction between community norms, degree of deindividuation, and extent of identification with the group, SIDE is better able to address the inconsistency of other work on online behaviour and the diversity of behaviours observed in technologically uniform online environments like Reddit, where group norms range from extreme self-disclosure and support to extreme aggression (Kilgo et al. 2018).

Building on this research, Kim and Park (2011) argue that SIDE alone is insufficient to explain the complex behaviour of online group members. Instead, they propose that it interacts with Brewer's (1991) optimal distinctiveness theory. Optimal

distinctiveness theory posits that individuals seek social identities that balance “opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation” (Brewer 1991: 475). This creates tension between norming and individuating especially when individuals are exposed to salient markers of deindividuated group identity online. Thus, the very factors that the SIDE model predicts will lead to greater norming—deindividuation and increased identification with the group—may, where the group is too large (as are many online groups), also promote individuating moves. This tension provides a promising foundation for understanding UOTs as a site of identity negotiation in the context of individuals’ relationships with groups in the increasingly globalized online world.

Though opinion expression may be increased in online versus face-to-face interaction, the effect is not universal and individual contexts play a key role in participants’ feelings of safety and willingness to express opinions. Notably, however, work in this area has typically been conducted in artificial scenarios, either by asking participants to imagine their likely behaviour or by inserting them into constructed online environments where they have no existing rapport with their (often artificial) interlocutors. Thus, these findings may not be generalizable to opinion expression in organic, online interest communities with existing rapport and group identity. The current study aims to begin to address that gap by analysing organically produced data from an existing online community that pre-existed the current study and so was not subject to any researcher intervention.

2. **r/WestCoastSwing**

With over 2.5 million subreddits (Front Page Metrics 2021) featuring news sharing, information seeking, and discussions on an impressive range of topics, Reddit is one of the largest social network sites online today. Infamous for its heterogenous mix of highly supportive and intensely aggressive and anti-social communities (Kilgo et al. 2018), Reddit is the site of an increasing body of research exploring the demographics of users (Kilgo et al. 2018), their motivations (e.g. Moore and Chuang 2017), and their social roles (e.g. Buntain and Golbeck 2014). Researchers have also tracked the evolution of Reddit (e.g. Singer et al. 2014) and used game theory to understand participation on the site (Massanari 2013), but thus far, neither the phenomenon of UOTs, nor the behaviour of West Coast Swing dancers on the site have been explored.

Both of these unexplored areas come together on r/WestCoastSwing which serves a community of 1,394 members posting an average of 0.67 posts and 2.77 comments per day as of February 2020 (Subreddit Stats 2020b).³ Impressionistically, the subreddit is composed primarily of individuals from the more progressive end of the political spectrum, spanning Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and North America and all interactions on the subreddit are carried out in English.

³ COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the West Coast Swing Community, leading to the cancellation of most of the events that form the core activities of the community. Posting and commenting rates were, therefore calculated using data for January 1, 2020 through February 29, 2020, a time when events were still taking place and the community was relatively unaffected by the pandemic.

On June 6th, 2019, a Reddit user posted a new thread in r/WestCoastSwing. This thread asked the community to share their unpopular opinions and, after three subsequent edits by the original poster, also included six of their own unpopular opinions. In 12 subsequent days, 25 other users contributed a total of 115 comments to the UOT making it the most responded to thread in the subreddit. In addition to the original post containing 6 unpopular opinions, 18 comments expressed an additional 37 unpopular opinions, for a total of 43 unpopular opinions in the thread. Of these 18 comments 5 also responded to a prior opinion, while 66 comments exclusively responded to prior opinions. The remaining 31 comments were classified as digressions into information seeking and rapport building that did not directly respond to the unpopular opinions. Overall, all but 6 of the 37 unpopular opinions received at least one response, and all but one of the unpopular opinion posts received some form of response.

Some participants in the thread self-identified as being from the US, Australia, or Europe, while the majority did not disclose their location. Three participants openly identified as male and one implied male identity; none of the other participants disclosed or implied their gender. Another basic demographic characteristic in this community is that of an individual's role within the dance partnership, namely leader or follower. While traditionally closely tied to gender, with men taking the leader role and women the follower, roles are increasingly seen as a choice that need not be linked to a dancer's gender and need not be consistent over time. Some members display their dance role ("Lead" or "Follow") as a flair beside their username on the subreddit (Figure 1), though most do not. Within this thread, one participant used a "Follow" flair and five used "Lead" flairs, while one additional participant stated that they were a follower, four that they were leaders, and two that they danced both roles. Thus, thread participants consisted of two followers, nine leaders, two dancers of both roles, and thirteen who did not declare their role.⁴

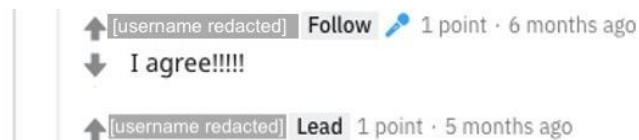


Figure 1. Lead and follow flairs on comments from the UOT on r/WestCoastSwing

3. Methodology

In the interest of exploring an organic community without the intervention of survey instruments, as have previously been used in online optimal distinctiveness research (e.g. Gabbiadini et al. 2014; Reysen et al. 2016; Kim and Park 2011), this work employs Harré and von Langenhove's (1998) positioning theory to analyze the organically produced texts within the r/WestCoastSwing UOT. Positioning theory posits that all social

⁴ The relative prevalence of disclosures of masculine identification and of lead role vs feminine identification and follow roles deserves further exploration but is beyond the scope of the current study.

interaction (acts and speech acts) serves to position the actor and those interacting them within a storyline which affords each actor certain rights and responsibilities, and thereby gives their acts and speech acts varying levels of social force (Harré and van Langenhove 1998). All of these factors interact such that while speakers require access to certain levels of social force to take certain positions, and the positions taken are crucial to the establishment of a storyline, established storylines can also constrain the positions and social force available to participants. Individuals who find themselves positioned by another's storyline may accept their positioning and associated social force, but they may also renegotiate positions and even the storylines associated through second order positioning achieved through in their responding acts or speech acts. Basing analysis in the positioning moves involved in actual communicative acts, positioning theory enables the use of naturalistic interaction data to explore how participants in UOTs deploy linguistic strategies to themselves and others with regard to both individual and group identity.

To support the positioning analysis, the transcript of the UOT was extracted from Reddit. After initial cleaning of the data, digressions into information provision or solidarity building which did not involve positions related to the unpopular opinions were identified and removed, leaving only the posts containing unpopular opinions and chains of responses to them. Some chains of responses grew quite long as commenters variously positioned and repositioned themselves in relation to the initial opinion. The data were then coded for unpopular opinion type, metadiscursive elements accompanying opinions, and response types. Because the mere posting of an unpopular opinion implies the positioning of the self as distinct from the rest of the group (Figure 2), both coding and subsequent analysis of the patterns revealed by the coding were focussed on the ways that metadiscourse from the opinion posters may serve to augment the basic positions available in this storyline and on the subsequent positioning moves of the respondents vis-a-vis this initial storyline.

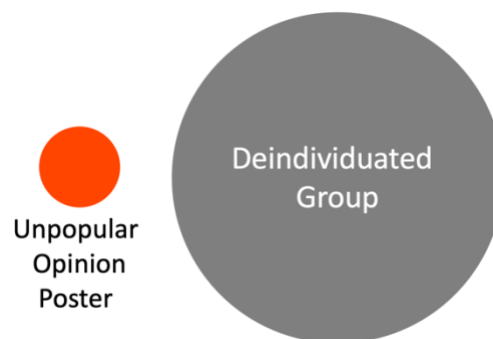


Figure 2. Default positioning established by an unpopular opinion post.

5. Positioning opinions

In this UOT, the opinions consisted of 15 suggestions (e.g., “I think we need more feedback for advanced dancers on space management”) and 28 evaluations (e.g., “My

unpopular opinion: West Coast Swing is best when danced to music that swings or shuffles.”), the majority of which were clustered around the topics of dance education (8 opinions), music (7 opinions), roles within the dance (i.e. leaders and followers) (5 opinions), competitions (3 opinions), social dancing (3 opinions), professional dancers (3 opinions), and online discussion forums (3 opinions), as well as a variety of less discussed topics such as self-image and gatekeeping (14 opinions). Across all these topics, opinion posters differentiated themselves from the rest of the group by claiming to have opinions which, in order to be appropriate for an UOT, must—by definition—be distinct from the majority opinion. Such differentiation may serve as a key technique for achieving optimal distinctiveness (Brewer 1991) within interest-based communities, like West Coast Swing, which, through the increased connectivity of the global internet and international travel, have become significantly larger than the small local communities that predated recent online globalization. Such groups may be too large for group members to achieve optimal distinctiveness while remaining undifferentiated members of the group. However, when users on r/WestCoastSwing post an unpopular opinion, it not only positions them as differentiated from the group, but also reciprocally positions members of the group as homogeneously holding the opposite opinion. This achieves the individuation required to satisfy the individuals’ uniqueness needs however, as optimal distinctiveness is characterized by “opposing needs for assimilation and differentiation” (Brewer 1991: 475), differentiation alone is insufficient.

In line with this need for assimilation and for avoiding the social isolation that has been theorized to prevent minority opinion expression in public discourse (Noelle-Neumann 1974), all but two unpopular opinion posters⁵ also paired their opinions with additional discursive strategies that refined the positions available to participants in the thread. The most common strategy (24 opinions in 12 posts)⁶ was the invocation of the unique context of the UOT (e.g. “Sincere apologies but **you asked for unpopular opinions**”; “Let’s throw in **something actually unpopular**” *emphasis added*). This strategy introduced a storyline wherein the poster takes on a contextually sanctioned position as the presenter of a suitably unpopular opinion as requested by the thread’s originator. This then forces respondents to self-position within the same storyline which, because of the sanctioned status of the unpopular opinion, does not permit a response of righteous indignation and instead calls for forbearance towards the potentially volatile unpopular opinion.

Another strategy observed in eight opinions over three posts was the anticipation and mitigation of offense (e.g. “I know **that might sound elitist or judging**, but **I really don’t mean it that way**” *emphasis added*). In fact, one of these three posts bookended a list of opinions with “Sincere apologies” and “Sincerely hope I haven’t offended

⁵ Both of these opinion posters posted only one post containing one opinion each.

⁶ Because some posts include multiple opinions, sometimes presented in numbered lists, both the number of posts featuring a given strategy and the number of opinions within those posts that are under the scope of a given strategy (some are employed within numbered lists, others as introductions or codas to a full post). Because some posts and opinions are paired with multiple mitigation strategies, these numbers do not add up to the total number of posts or opinions.

anyone.” This strategy creates a storyline wherein the opinion poster’s considerate and apologetic position forces respondents to self-position either as generous and understanding of the poster’s considered opinion (and apologies) or as unreasonable and unfair should they choose to respond with aggression or rejection.

Other strategies, which included responses to previous opinions (2 opinions in 2 posts) and other softeners (4 opinions in 2 posts), rely on similar storylines. The former positions the poster relative to someone who has already taken the position of unpopular opinion poster, thus invoking the license of the context (as seen in the first strategy) and demonstrating the appropriate respondent position by providing a civil and reasoned response. The latter, like the anticipation and mitigation of offense, positions the poster as friendly, cooperative, and aware of the vulnerable position that the expression of a minority opinion has put them in. This similarly forces interlocutors to either respond generously in recognition of this vulnerability or be positioned as anti-social and unkind. Thus, by engaging in mitigation strategies, the opinion posters achieve an initial positioning as optimally distinct: neither a deindividuated member of the group, nor a fully isolated community of one, but a unique, individuated member still linked to the group (Figure 3).

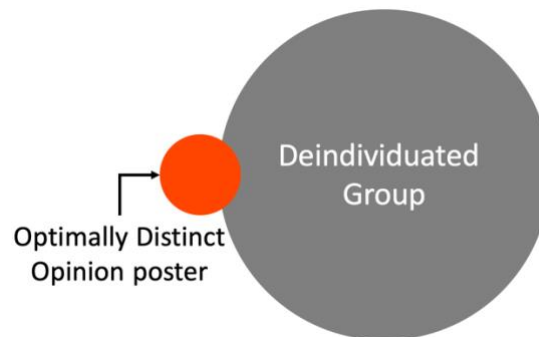


Figure 3. Positioning established by unpopular opinion posts that are accompanied by mitigating strategies, thus maintaining group affiliation while still claiming distinctiveness.

5.2 Repositioning responses

Opinion posters are not the only group members with optimal distinctiveness needs, however. Following Kim and Park’s (2011) findings, respondents are also expected to experience tension between aligning with the group norm and seeking optimal distinctiveness, which means that they may not be satisfied with the deindividuated positions made available to them by the opinion posters. As Harré and von Langenhove (1998) note, first order positioning may always be questioned and negotiated through second order positioning. Respondents may either take up one of the positions made available by the poster or, if the available positions are unsatisfactory, reposition themselves and the opinion poster through second order positioning.

In this UOT, the most common style of response repositioned the respondent as equally as optimally distinct as the opinion poster. Twenty-one responses to 15 opinions over 13 posts constituted agreement with the so-called unpopular opinion (Figure 4, Path A), thus rejecting the assumption that all members of the group (other than the opinion poster) homogenously hold the popular opinion. Though such agreement was not an available response under the first order positioning wherein the opinion was presented as one that was not held by the respondents, by expressing agreement respondents repositioned themselves not as deindividuated members of the larger group of majority opinion holders, but instead as belonging to the smaller and more optimally distinct group sharing the ostensibly unpopular opinion. As seen in example (1) this positioning could also make appeals to expertise by implying that increased learning has allowed the respondent to take this “unpopular” stance. This strategy was particularly common in response to suggestions for changes to dance education, implying a common desire to align with improvements to education and possibly a tendency to agree with suggestions more readily than evaluations.

- (1) My unpopular opinion: West Coast Swing is best when danced to music that swings or shuffles.

Respondent:

I love how versatile it is, but now that I've finally learned to hear and feel a swung rhythm, I definitely agree that it feels a lot better to dance to.

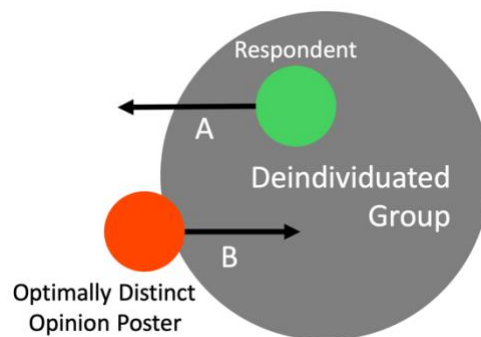


Figure 3. Repositioning in response to an unpopular opinion post. Path A represents respondents repositioning themselves as distinct through agreement with the opinion poster. Path B represents respondents repositioning the opinion poster as a member of the deindividuated group, typically by refuting the unpopularity of the opinion.

While agreement repositioned the respondent without questioning the positioning of the opinion poster, the second most common response (5 posts) questioned the position of the opinion poster by refuting the unpopularity of the opinion as seen in examples (2) and (3). The second order positioning established by this response positioned the opinion poster, not as a unique individual, but instead as a member of the same group that they

sought to differentiate themselves from. Generally, responses of this nature aligned both the respondent and the poster with the group norm as in (2), where the opinions are claimed to be “common knowledge” or the reason for well-established conventions. However such responses occasionally served to flip the positioning. In (3) for example, the respondent not only repositioned the opinion poster as belonging to the homogenous majority, but also, through framing the popularity of this opinion as “unfortunate”, positioned themselves in the original opinion poster’s position as a unique, differentiated individual.

- (2) I don't think those (except for maybe #1) are unpopular lol. Referring to #2, pretty sure it's common knowledge that the line between allstar and champ is very blurred. For #3, that's the reason registry points are only counted for JnJs.
- (3) Except if you look at the average dance night, there's almost no swung rhythm, so I think #1 is actually a pretty popular opinion (unfortunately for me)...

Where an unpopular opinion was successful in differentiating the poster, respondents largely accepted the forced positioning set up for them by the opinion poster. Most commonly, respondents produced partial and indirect disagreements which positioned them as differing from the poster without violating the group norm of civility. In the case of more volatile opinions, however, respondents sometimes chose to position themselves in a more distanced way by commenting on the unpopularity of the opinion itself. This type of response (e.g. “Those are some good unpopular opinions! Bravo.”), not only positioned the respondent as disagreeing with opinion, but confirmed the poster’s positioning as holding an opinion that is truly distinct from the entire group. At the same time, such responses celebrate the unpopularity of the opinion (e.g. “Bravo”) and use exclamation marks to mark them as friendly interactions (Waseleski 2006), despite the differences of opinion that underlie them. Thus, such responses ratify the UOT as a place where unpopular opinions are a desired outcome in and of themselves that can, despite differing opinions, build solidarity within the group.

Despite this trend towards solidarity building, one opinion (shown in example (4) below) elicited direct, forceful disagreement. Unlike the other opinions which were framed in ways that mitigated the face threatening nature of divergent opinions, the framing of this opinion forced respondents to self-position in one of two undesirable ways. They could either agree with the opinion that men only learn to dance in order to meet women or they could dissent and be positioned as both wrong and “stupid”. It is no surprise then that respondents felt obliged to question this storyline. The first respondent to this opinion established a second order positioning in which the opinion poster was positioned as deviant even within the UOT context for having posted a “blanket statement” rather than an opinion. While this distinction seems inaccurate (opinions often take the form of generalizations or blanket statements), it appears to respond to the author’s failure to frame their opinion as just an opinion. By failing to explicitly mark that this is a personal opinion and instead implicating others’ intelligence in the utterance it becomes an invalid form of engagement in the UOT, one that cannot be celebrated as it

fails to focus on individual distinction and instead denigrates the broader group. Following this proclamation, the respondent then positioned themselves, not merely as disagreeing with an opinion, but instead as a righteously defending the truth that they, who are “far from stupid”, “know”. Such a position, contesting the truth value of the opinion’s content was not seen where opinions were presented with mitigating techniques, even where they were disagreed with. Thus, it seems that this storyline, with its untenable positions for the other group members fails to meet the criteria for participation in the UOT, despite being an expression of a clearly unpopular opinion.

- (4) ... 3. Men get into dance to meet women && the people who think otherwise are stupid....

Respondent:

...As far as #3 goes, that's not an opinion. It's a blanket statement that is not necessarily true. Benji Schwimmer, for one, is gay; it'd be pointless for him to meet women. I have male friends who got into dance because they took some kinesiology elective and ended up liking it. I also know men who got into dance because of their girlfriends/wives and ended up staying. I don't "think" otherwise; I know otherwise, and I know for a fact that I am far from stupid.

Finally, in one rare context where an opinion poster used first person plural reference to accuse the entire community (including the opinion poster) of intellectual elitism and egotism (5), no response was given. Unlike the previous opinion which accused those who disagree of being “stupid”, this opinion left room for other members of the community to disagree. It did not, however, include the sort of mitigation moves that were present in opinions that were celebrated for their unpopularity. Thus, by refusing to engage with this opinion’s denigration of both the poster and the rest of the community, participants avoided both the open conflict that might emerge from disagreement, as well as any sanctioning of the opinion which might position them in the undesirable position of believing themselves and their peers to be elitist and egotistical.

- (5) Westie community is intellectually elitist. We like to think that we are smart and technical, and also artistic and creative, and also stylish and modern, and also respect our history, etc, etc. Very special, unlike those other commoner dances. While in fact we are in it for the same reasons, and really not different at all, just think too much about ourselves.

Through the various strategies of second order positioning outlined above, respondents frequently counter the individuation achieved by the opinion poster through either claiming to share the unpopular opinion, thus positioning themselves as members of the same more exclusive group as the original poster, or by refuting the unpopularity of the opinion and therefore bringing the newly individuated opinion poster back into the undifferentiated mass of the larger community. Even where such positioning was not possible due to the undesirability of the opinion expressed, so long as mitigation strategies were present, respondents maintained civility even in disagreement, suggesting

that UOTs may provide an important venue for communities to negotiate sensitive issues without the risk of serious internal discord or fracturing of the group.

5.3 Managing contentious topics

In addition to serving individuals' needs for optimal distinctiveness, this UOT also allowed for the negotiation of contentious topics within the WCS community, for example, the assignment of dance roles. The WCS community is undergoing a shift from strictly gendered roles (women follow; men lead) to allowing any dancer to choose to lead, follow, or even do both. Though increasingly supported, this movement is not without its (sometimes loud) detractors and, as such, is a salient topic in the WCS community's public discourse (e.g. Jacobson and Szekely 2018). This challenging topic comes up multiple times in the UOT, and yet in no cases does it devolve into aggression or flaming.

For example, in example (6) a poster suggests a rather controversial solution that would assign roles by weight.

- (6) Lead / follow should be segregated by weight. Due to the follows larger line of travel they have greater leverage. This is ideal when the leader is bigger as it evens out the physical differences...

Respondent A:

That is a very unpopular opinion! Lol. In this case, I'd be leading all day every day. 😊 I'm also pretty tall. But when I follow, I have my own sense of timing, and I make sure that I'm not dragging my leader; I make sure that I'm *following*. It's my main role, so I gotta make sure I'm making it as easy as possible for my leads.

Respondent B:

I'm 6ft and 165lb and a chap. I'm told by leaders male & female that I'm feather light as a follow. Physical measurements don't necessarily predict a dancer's dancing.

By arguing that weight and height should determine roles, the opinion poster ostensibly seeks a degendered imagining of role assignment. This opinion, however, invokes biological arguments that have been used to defend traditional gendered roles insofar as men are said to be bigger, stronger, and therefore biologically predisposed to lead, while women are presumed to be smaller, weaker, and therefore predisposed to follow. This not only out of line with the current move towards choice in the West Coast Swing community, but also activates the broader socially sensitive topic of body weight. Hence, this post had the potential to be very volatile, but instead the first response features "lol", smiley faces, exclamation marks, all of which are often used as softeners online (Waseleski 2006). In another response, while there are fewer softeners, the poster nonetheless disagrees only indirectly by providing his own case as a counter example without directly attacking or contradicting the opinion poster. In short, these are overwhelmingly civil responses that, nonetheless, clearly disagree with the poster and

express contrasting opinions. Such a discussion appears to be possible because, within the context of an UOT, the expression of a potentially dangerous opinion is licensed and the storyline established by this contentious positioning allows all of the social actors to engage in ways that mark disagreement without disintegration of the group.

5.4 Negotiating group identity

Contrary to Reddit’s infamous reputation for promoting adversarial behaviour and free speech at the expense of all else under the logic of “if they don’t like it they can leave” (Kilgo et al. 2018), the Redditors in r/WestCoastSwing seem to prioritize civility and community belonging even when disclosing and discussing unpopular opinions. While this may relate to the necessity of cooperation in shared activities such as partner dancing, the nearly complete anonymity of Reddit users, combined with Reddit’s reputation as a hot bed of online aggression and conflict, mean that this finding was in no way guaranteed. Thus, I argue that this perhaps unexpected civility can be accounted for by considering how the unique context of the UOT interacts with the norms of the group as predicted by the SIDE model. The SIDE model (Lea and Spears 1991) predicts that when members of the group are cued to see themselves as deindividuated members of a relatively homogenous group, they will be more likely to assimilate to group norms. Thus, when the context of the subreddit and the content of the unpopular opinion comments position all members of the WCS community as belonging to a single undifferentiated group sharing the same majority opinion, those group members may be more likely to align themselves with existing group norms. Those norms are illustrated in the explicit metacommentary in example (7) which received nothing but agreement and reinforcement in responses.

- (7) Unpopular Opinion: r/WestCoastSwing is better than Westie Discussion of the Day.
 Just a few reasons why:
 Reddit's discussions are more civilized than Facebook's.
 Reddit's structure is better for organizing & finding posts. Reddit's
 upvote/downvote system is better than Facebook's reaction likes.
 No waiting on one moderator to post each question anonymously.

The setup of this contrast between r/WestCoastSwing and the more fractious environment on the corresponding Facebook page, Westie Discussion of the Day, frames the group on r/WestCoastSwing as not only better, but more civilized than their Facebook counterparts. Thus, when users are deindividuated as members of the subreddit, they are more likely to uphold the norms of the community and remain civilized even when navigating challenging topics and disagreements—provided those that they interact with are also marked as members of the group by mitigation strategies that indicate either civility or the licensing provided by the unique context of a UOT. Furthermore, upholding this norm of civility also aids in establishing optimal distinctiveness for all members of the subreddit as it differentiates the roughly 1900 Redditors from the larger

community of over 6000 participants engaged in uncivilized Facebook debates, while still allowing them to lay claim to the global group identity of WCS dancers.

6. Conclusion

Using r/WestCoastSwing as a case study, this paper has shown that UOTs, as contexts where typical sanctions against divergent opinions are temporarily lifted, may provide a safe site for the negotiation and renegotiation of individual and group identity in interest-based communities. UOTs allow participants to navigate contentious topics by creating a space where heterogenous opinions are explicitly sought. Furthermore, in cases where prevailing group norms value civility, such navigation can be conducted without the flaming and aggression so often associated with anonymous online spaces. Such threads also allow participants to position themselves as optimally distinct, which in the current global internet environment, is likely to be increasingly important. Members of interest communities are not just part of a small local community of maybe a few hundred co-participants, but instead part of a huge global community of people traveling, posting on social media, etc. Thus, UOTs allow individuals to carve out spaces of uniqueness without being socially isolated. Finally, as outlined in section 5.4 these threads can play a role in establishing group identity, not just through the negotiation of the opinions themselves, but also through the maintenance of group norms that allows the group participating in the UOT to differentiate themselves from other related groups. Ultimately, this case study supports Kim and Park's (2011) updated SIDE model of opinion expression online: participants are not limited to either online disinhibition or spirals of silence, instead, the particular group and the particular context can work together to cue varied opinion expression behaviours and responses to them as participants strive to achieve optimal distinctiveness.

7. Limitations and future work

Given the scope of this work, considering only one thread with 26 participants and 116 posts/comments, generalizability is limited. Thus, future work extending this pilot study over UOTs in multiple subreddits would be beneficial. Exploring interaction patterns and identity negotiation within r/UnpopularOpinion would also provide valuable insight into the role of UOTs outside of socially cohesive common interest subreddits. Finally, a comparison between the relatively amicable r/WestCoastSwing UOT and the more volatile (non-UOT) discussions on Facebook's Westie Discussion of the Day, where all but the original poster comment in their own names (or well-known pseudonyms), would offer insight into the role of anonymity and invisibility in the disclosure of and response to unpopular opinions (Luarn and Hsieh 2014; Kilgo et al. 2018). This proposed research would, however, require very careful management of the considerable ethical concerns associated with the use of Facebook data (Hennell et al. 2020).

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