

Negotiating optimal distinctiveness and social cohesion in unpopular opinion threads

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“Unpopular opinion” threads (UOTs) have emerged on Reddit (and elsewhere) as spaces dedicated to sharing opinions explicitly framed as contrary to the majority opinion climate. Some are anonymous and exist within spaces dedicated exclusively to UOTs, where their purpose is ostensibly a release valve for controversial opinions. However, the genre also emerges within interest-based communities, where participants’ (pseudonymous) identities persist outside of the UOT, raising the question of what other social functions UOTs may serve. While Reddit is emerging as a valuable source for language data collection (e.g. Dynel & Poppi 2019; Flesch 2019; Krendel 2020), UOTs remain relatively unexplored. This case study explores a UOT within r/WestCoastSwing, an interest-based subreddit dedicated to the pursuit of West Coast Swing dancing and offers an initial analysis of why and how members engage with these threads. The selected UOT includes 19 posts containing 43 “unpopular opinions” and 71 posts containing responses for a total of 6435 words. Coding for emergent themes and informed by positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove 1998), I analyze the social positions established by posters’ and respondents’ texts, and explore the relational work being done in these textual exchanges.

The analysis found that posters tended to use the UOT to position themselves as optimally distinct (Brewer 1991), differentiating themselves from the community’s majority opinion climate, while often also maintaining a degree of assimilation through framing strategies that licensed and/or mitigated their posts, as in (1). Responses alternated between accepting—even celebrating—the poster’s self-positioning as in (2) and engaging in second-order positioning, which enabled the respondent to either share in the poster’s individuation as in (3) or reintegrate the poster into the larger group, as in (4), sometimes even in opposition to the respondents *truly* unpopular opinion, as in (5). This positioning and repositioning complicates the binary of popular versus unpopular opinions, showing a range of possible alignments to the so-called unpopular opinions, while consistently remaining civil, despite the potential for conflict in a space explicitly for dissenting opinions. The uniquely permissive UOT environment appears to provide a relatively safe space to (re)negotiate individual and group identity, allowing members to assert their individuality while also allowing the group to ensure continuing cohesion, often in the context of contentious issues. This initial exploration of why and how opinion posters and respondents engage with these threads which, at first glance appear to be likely sites of conflict, provides a starting point for deeper engagement with online spaces that, counter to contemporary political tensions, may in fact facilitate disagreement without aggression.

(1) Sincere apologies but you asked for unpopular opinions

1. Some European dancers at international events are often incredibly snobby and unfriendly on the social dance floor. It's depressing and discouraging.
2. Music played by American DJs for US WCS dancers is often old and antique. They appeared to have lost touch with modern popular music...

(2) Those are some good unpopular opinions! Bravo.

(3) 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.

(4) I don't think those (except for maybe #1) are unpopular lol.

(5) 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)...

References

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