

The Sharedness of Situational Definitions Online: Comparing the Alternative Platforms 4chan and Reddit

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| abstract

This paper investigates the sharedness of situational definitions within the distinct online platforms of 4chan and reddit, guided by the sociological understanding of the definition of situations. Analyzing shared cognitive frameworks that shape communication, the research explores how users define situations against the background of platform culture, platform architecture, and interface. Employing the Situational Analysis by Adele Clarke (2003), the study examines potential disparities in situational definitions between 4chan and Reddit. The findings show that the users of 4chan reject whereas Reddit users assume a shared situational definition. The juxtaposition offers an insight into diverse mechanisms, e.g. identity and collectivity in Internet culture, the function of uncertainty through anonymity or the construction of situational knowledge.

DOI 10.36158/97888929596063

Introduction

The digital age has revolutionized the way we communicate and share information, giving rise to a lot of online platforms that serve as virtual arenas for discussions, debates, and the dissemination of ideas. 4chan and Reddit, for example, are platforms that exist apart from social media platforms and yet have a great influence on current discourses. Just like in any other social situations, within these platforms the situational definitions of the users shape the communication. Drawing inspiration from symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), which posits situational definitions as the bedrock of communication, my study dissects the dynamic confluence of the sharedness of situational definitions across divergent platforms – specifically, 4chan and Reddit.

Situational definitions encompass the cognitive frameworks that individuals construct to make sense of social contexts, and their sharedness is crucial for successful communication. The dynamic interplay between users' perceptions, acquired knowledge, and situational thinking shapes the interactions within each platform's unique cultural ecosystem (Herwig, 2011). At the same time, research on the online communities in question has highlighted that the platforms' characteristics are closely linked to their

content and users' behavior (Auerbach, 2012; Tuters, 2018; Zeeuw & Tuters, 2020). This applies in particular to the anonymous and ephemeral platform 4chan. This platform identifies with an antagonistic position regarding social media platforms and their users – the so-called “normies”. In addition, research has shown that users are socialized by the platform culture. They learn to interpret the content and orient their communication according to the culture or the characteristics of the interface: users on 4chan have learned to assume that – to a certain degree – all information that is posted is fiction, falsehood or coated in layers of irony (Tuters, 2018; Zeeuw & Tuters, 2020). On the other hand, users on the discussion-driven platform Reddit anticipate that they might get a lot of so-called upvotes for a funny, thoughtful or weird post (Leavitt & Robinson, 2017; Morrison & Hayes, 2013).

These findings indicate that the situational definitions of the platform users are an important element in the analysis of the platforms. Nevertheless, a sociological analysis of the respective situation definitions on those platforms is still lacking.

My exploration aims to unravel how users on 4chan and Reddit collectively define situations, highlighting the impact of platform-specific culture in combination with the platforms' architecture and interface. For this purpose, I will endeavor a Situation Analysis according to Adele Clarke (Clarke, 2003, 2021; Clarke & Friese, 2010): I present a qualitative analysis of five threads each on Reddit and on 4chan, as well as an analysis of the platform architecture and a document analysis of self-characterizing artifacts of both platforms. In order to keep the scope of the analysis limited, I decided to use only the most popular subforum 4chan/pol/ and compare it exclusively with Subreddits that can be associated with political topics. My research question is: Do the situational definitions on 4chan and Reddit differ? If so, what are the key aspects in which they differ with regard to the shared understanding of the situational definitions among users? I consider this question highly relevant, because these platforms are interconnected in many ways: users switch between platforms and with them contents, narratives and informations. An understanding of the given sharedness of situational definitions on platforms such as 4chan and Reddit can therefore be illuminating for many investigations: with regard to the spread of misinformation (Del Vicario et al., 2016), with regard to the culture wars between 4chan and Reddit (Nagle, 2018), the spread of memes (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017) as well as the spread of ideological content (Tuters, 2018) or conspiracy theories (Zeeuw et al., 2020).

In the following I will first summarize the related work regarding the two platforms 4chan and Reddit. Next, I will discuss the sociological concept of shared situational definitions. This is followed by a presentation of the data and Clarke's method of Situational Analysis. Based on this, I will create a so-called Situational Map for 4chan and Reddit, which will shed an analytical light on the sharedness of situational definitions on both platforms with focus on the so-called Situational-Marker. Finally, I will discuss the results and limitations.

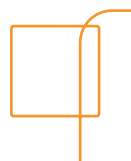
Related Work

Amid the evolving landscape of online communication, a wealth of research has explored on the two platforms. For this reason, I focus my overview on those contributions that can help to understand the situational definitions on 4chan and Reddit.

4chan distinguishes itself as a fringe platform with a unique culture stemming from its anonymity and ephemerality. It is often regarded as part of the “vernacular web” (Peeters et al., 2021), characterized by communication deliberately made incomprehensible to outsiders. Users engage in games (Fathallah, 2020), memes (Chen, 2012), trolling (van Reenen, 2013), and LARPing (Tuters, 2018), contributing to the platform’s distinct identity. The anonymity of users is integral to the platform’s culture, dating back to the early days of the Internet (Auerbach, 2012). The /pol/ (politically incorrect) subforum, in particular, is infamous as a farright enclave where movements like the Alt-Right, as well as conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate and QAnon, originated (Colley & Moore, 2022; Pollard, 2018). While quantitative studies have gathered data on the subforum /pol/ (e.g. Jokubauskaitė & Peeters, 2020; Papasavva et al., 2020), there remains a gap in sociological evaluation of the platform.

Research on the platform’s interface highlights its high ephemerality, with posts typically lasting only a few hours before being deleted permanently (Bernstein et al., 2011; Potts & Harrison, 2013). Consequently, users often create “General Threads” to summarize previous discussions, as the platform’s content is not saved. Otherwise the content is not algorithmically organized but displayed chronologically. Despite the transient nature of posts and user anonymity, users have developed situationspecific expectations, indicating a level of adaptability to the platform’s dynamics.

In contrast to 4chan, Reddit is significantly more mainstream. It offers users the ability to create their own Subreddits, and the platform is structured and user-centric. While users are registered with pseudonyms, the use of throwaway accounts is a common strategy for anonymous interaction on the platform (Ammari et al., 2019; Leavitt, 2015). Reddit has been the subject of investigation across various disciplines, with many empirical studies focusing on specific Subreddits to explore social issues without considering the broader platform context (Chandrasekharan & Gilbert, 2019; Farrell et al., 2019; Leavitt, 2016; Morini et al., 2021; Morrison & Hayes, 2013). However, recent literature emphasizes the importance of understanding the platform’s context, including its culture, norms, and conventions, in interpreting communication on Reddit (Proferes et al., 2021). For instance: Moderators on Reddit actively curate Subreddits to remove undesirable content, contributing to the establishment of “macro norms” (Chandrasekharan & Gilbert, 2019; Chandrasekharan et al., 2018) on the platform. Reddit has been noted as a space for misogynistic discussions, known as the manosphere, as well as for discussions on racism and extremism (Farrell et al., 2019; Gaudette et al., 2021; Topinka, 2018). Unlike 4chan, discussions on Reddit are organized based on the number of responses and user up- or downvotes. Research indicates that this voting mechanism influences the dissemination of news on the platform, with upvoted content being deemed more relevant and trustworthy (Leavitt & Clark, 2014; Leavitt & Robinson, 2017; Leavitt, 2016). However, concerns have been raised about the potential for extremist ideologies to gain traction in certain Subreddits through this voting mechanism (Gaudette et al., 2021). Additionally, Reddit’s voting system is directly tied to users’ karma scores, which represent their social ranking on the platform. Higher karma levels indicate greater trustworthiness and may elevate a user’s status within a Subreddit (Morrison & Hayes, 2013). Thus, while Reddit offers anonymity, it also provides opportunities for users to gain social recognition and status.



Shared Situations as Framing of Online Platform Communication

To date, there are only a limited number of research approaches that address the definition of situations in digital spaces (Fujii et al., 2023; Roth & Laut, 2023). The challenge in applying this sociological concept to the digital realm lies in the question of presence within virtual environments. The literature has extensively explored how and to what extent presence can be established in the digital space, and whether face-to-face interactions are comparable to those occurring in mediated environments. For example, the theory of *telecopresence* posits that individuals can experience and participate in a physical situation remotely (Zhao, 2015). In this view, spatial and temporal dimensions are reconfigured to accommodate mediated experiences. Consequently, presence is understood not as a physical attribute, but as a socially constructed phenomenon. Here, the spatial dimension, particularly the metaphor of cyberspace, plays a significant role. Many classical approaches describe the social space of mediated interaction as fluid and unbounded (Castells, 2009; Turkle, 2017). Within this framework, actors establish the conditions for interaction by mutually constructing each other's presence or by constituting the space as a social resonance space (Lindemann & Schünemann, 2020). Following Knorr Cetina's (2009) understanding of the synthetic situation I assume that the actors within this virtual space must then necessarily define the situation in order to interact appropriately. The famous quotation of the Thomas Theorem, «if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences» (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572), highlights the significance of the situational definition as a determinant of communicative action. To engage in action or communication, actors need to know about the situation they are in. Goffman's question, «What is it that's going on here?» (Goffman, 1974, p. 8), underscores this need for situational understanding. Actors orient themselves to situational objects and draw upon previously known situational definitions, which are mentally anchored to varying degrees (Esser, 2020, 340f; Kroneberg, 2006, 5f). These definitions are shaped through socialization within specific situational contexts; for instance, one must participate in a video conference or an online political discussion to grasp the characteristics of these situations and differentiate them from others (Roth & Laut 2023). The crucial aspect is that the situational definition can be assumed to be shared by all participants present (Esser, 2002). Sharedness is either assumed or indicated by the participants, and prevailing situational definitions are typically those considered true or enforceable. When a situational definition is shared, it implies that: 1) the knowledge of the situation can be assumed, 2) the perception of the situation is shared, 3) all participants have a similar way of thinking about the situation, and 4) the participants act according to the situation. These four elements of sharedness are pertinent theoretical constructs for understanding the dividedness of situational definitions. To delve deeper into the analysis of situational definitions on platforms like 4chan and Reddit, I will enrich the first three points with additional theoretical insights to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

- *Situational Knowledge*. A social situation entails specific knowledge, including details about the participating actors, the environment, the objects present, and the socio-cultural, political, and economic background, along with related discourses (Clarke, 2003, p. 564). Depending on the situation, additional knowledge may be necessary. Users of social platforms must understand how to interact with the platform's interface and with others on the platform.

- *Perception of the Situation*. The classical sociological issue of double contingency (Luhmann, 2005, p. 156) involves uncertainty about the shared perception of the situation. It is crucial for participating actors to assume that they perceive the situation in the same way. In contrast to face-to-face communication, matching perceptions on communication platforms can be challenging because physical presence inherently conveys information that need not be explicitly communicated (Luhmann, 2005, p. 560).
- *Situational Thinking*. Certain logics govern thinking in social situations. For instance, Niklas Luhmann posits that the logic of payment is exclusive to the economic system, while the logic of belief is exclusive to the religious system (Boldyrev, 2013). Applied to the sharedness of the situation, this suggests that every known situation corresponds to a learned logic of thought.
- In conclusion, a shared definition of the situation, encompassing the aspects mentioned above, is essential for communication. The impact of a shared situational thinking on digital platforms and their communication remains unexplored. In the subsequent analysis, I aim to bridge the theoretical considerations outlined above with concrete events on 4chan and Reddit.

Materials and Methods

The qualitative analysis is based on a dataset comprising five randomly selected threads from 4chan/pol/ and an equivalent number from political Subreddits, including r/conservative, r/uspolitics, r/worldpolitics, r/AskALiberal, and r/conspiracy. Additionally, relevant documents from each platform were incorporated to provide insights into their self-characterization and platform culture. This included for Reddit the Encyclopaedia Reddita v2, threads from r/NewToReddit, as well as for 4chan memes sourced from the 4chan.org/pol/ board. To capture the broader cultural context, /pol/-related entries from KnowYourMeme were also included, given its role in documenting memes and narratives generated within /pol/. Furthermore, the study analyzed the platforms' interfaces to understand the forum architecture's role in shaping communication dynamics, both structurally and conceptually (Potts & Harrison, 2013). To address the research questions, the study employed the method of Situational Analysis developed by Adele Clarke (Clarke, 2003, 2021; Clarke & Friese, 2010), rooted in Grounded Theory and drawing inspiration from Levi Strauss' world/arenas/negotiation frameworks (Strauss, 1978). This approach facilitates an exploration of the social situation through three key components: situational maps, social worlds/arena maps, and positional maps. In this study, the primary focus is on situational maps, serving as a tool to delineate major human, nonhuman, discursive, and contextual elements within the research situation. Constructing these situational maps required a holistic approach, encompassing both content analysis and examination of user interfaces, including interaction possibilities, content visibility, forum architecture, user practices, and forum culture. This approach involving qualitative analysis and document analysis was chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of both platforms. Categories related to platform affordances, content, and self-characterization were developed using a Grounded Theory approach, allowing for iterative refinement and redefinition of categories as the analysis progressed.

Results

Below are the situational maps created for 4chan and Reddit, providing a thorough examination of each platform’s unique attributes. These maps were developed through a synthesis of qualitative thread analysis, examination of platform infrastructure, and analysis of self-descriptive materials, as detailed previously. A more detailed breakdown of the analysis findings is available in figures 1 and 2.

The subcategories within these maps exhibit slight variations compared to Clarke’s research examples, underscoring the adaptable nature of this method. For both platforms, I delineated the following categories: Topics, Content Types, Non-Human Elements, User Elements, Mode, and Situational Marker. I particularly want to underscore the Situational-Marker category as the primary outcome of my analysis. This category acts as a repository for platform-specific catchphrases and terms – integral components of the platforms’ internal vernacular. They represent, in essence, crystallized situational knowledge, indicating how and whether the given situation is perceived as shared. Therefore, I will exclusively focus on this category for both 4chan and Reddit in the following sections. This will serve as the foundation for comparing the two platforms in terms of their shared definitions of situations, offering deeper insights into how these elements influence communication and interaction, elucidating the nuanced interplay between situational perception, knowledge, and cognition.

<p>Topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politics* News Tech Culture History Oeconomics Religion Science* Conspiracy Personal* Other* 	<p>Non-Human Elements</p> <p><i>Threads</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thread Name Thread Image Thread Stats Reply-Button Expand-Button Date/Time Bump Limit <p><i>Answers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Images Citation-Links External Links Text 	<p>Situational Marker</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td><i>Identification</i></td> <td><i>Truth</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Normies/Anons</td> <td>Bait</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Newfag/Oldfag</td> <td>Larping</td> </tr> <tr> <td>/Our Guy/?</td> <td>Trolling</td> </tr> <tr> <td>/b/tard</td> <td>Sauce</td> </tr> <tr> <td>/pol/ack</td> <td><i>Semantics</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td>-fag</td> <td>Red-/Blackpilled</td> </tr> <tr> <td>-tard</td> <td>Trips of Truth</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>Poe’s Law</td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Mechanism</i></td> <td>Beta Uprising</td> </tr> <tr> <td>For the Lulz</td> <td>Kekistan</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Meme—Magic</td> <td>The Left Can’t</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Copypasta</td> <td>Weaponized</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Shitpost</td> <td>Autism</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Roll/Bump</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	<i>Identification</i>	<i>Truth</i>	Normies/Anons	Bait	Newfag/Oldfag	Larping	/Our Guy/?	Trolling	/b/tard	Sauce	/pol/ack	<i>Semantics</i>	-fag	Red-/Blackpilled	-tard	Trips of Truth		Poe’s Law	<i>Mechanism</i>	Beta Uprising	For the Lulz	Kekistan	Meme—Magic	The Left Can’t	Copypasta	Weaponized	Shitpost	Autism	Roll/Bump	
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Figure 1. Situational Map of 4chan.org/pol/.

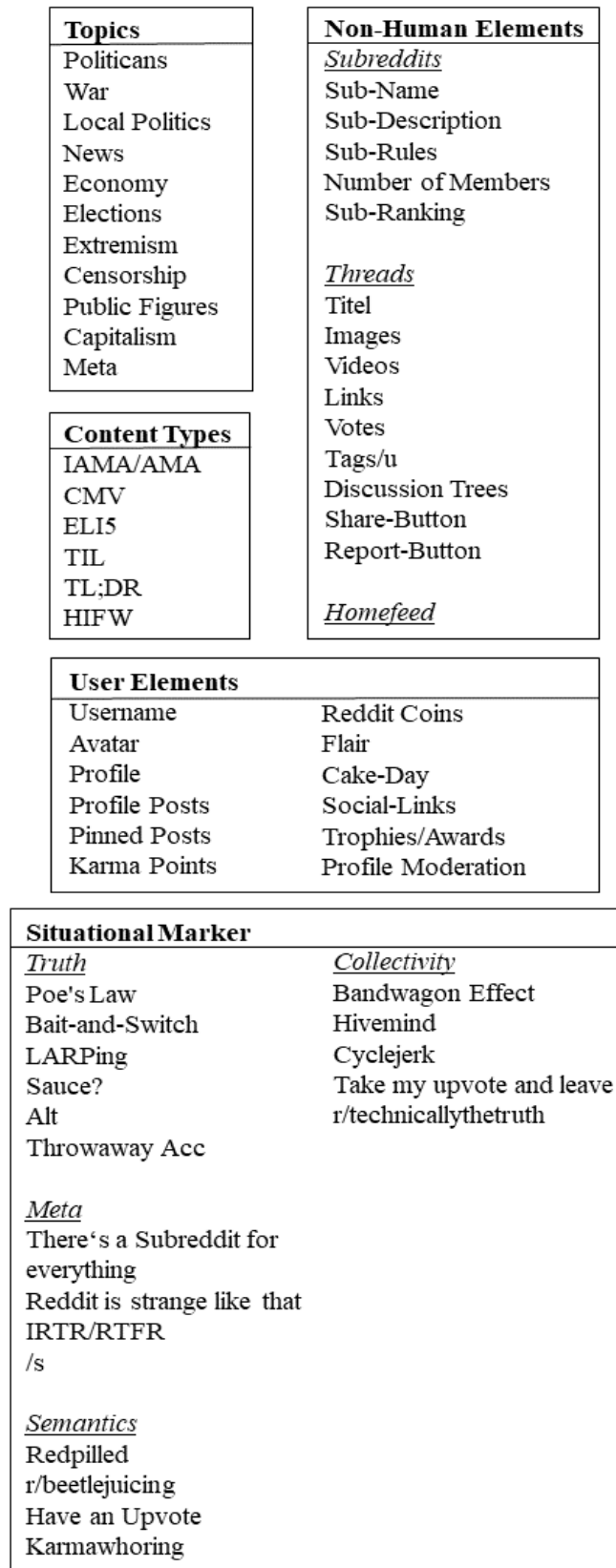


Figure 2. Situational Map of politically themed Subreddits.

4chan

I categorized the Situational-Markers on 4chan into four subcategories: 1) Semantic-Marker, 2) Identification-Marker, 3) Truth-Marker, and 4) Mechanism-Marker. Among these, the Semantic-, Mechanism- and Identification-Markers suggest an assumed sharedness of situational definitions, while the Truth-Markers indicate a non-sharedness of the situational definition. In the subsequent discussion, I will delve into the analytical coherence of this apparent contradiction.

Semantic-Markers include terms and catchphrases that are specific to the platform's culture. These terms, such as "redpilled" or its variations like "blackpilled" and "whitepilled", reflect deep familiarity with both the platform's culture and the required situational knowledge. Such markers rely heavily on shared knowledge among long-term users.

Identification-Markers denote the internal social classification system, where users are categorized as either insiders or outsiders. Terms like "normies" and "newfags" highlight the distinction between those familiar with the platform's culture and those who are not.

Mechanism-Markers refer to mechanisms within 4chan's culture that influence interaction, such as the concept of "meme-magic". These mechanisms are tied to shared experiences, such as users' belief that their memes influenced real-world events, reinforcing a situational thinking in the context of 4chan.

Truth-Markers introduce uncertainty into the communication process, reflecting the challenges users face in determining the authenticity of posts. The use of terms like "LARP" (Live Action Role-Playing) and "trolling" captures this uncertainty, as users must constantly assess the truthfulness of content within the platform's anonymity-driven environment.

Reddit

Continuing with the analysis, the situational map of Reddit reveals a notable contrast with 4chan, indicating a higher degree of structure influenced by the platform's architecture. Unlike 4chan, Reddit demonstrates a more pronounced emphasis on User Elements, although it remains less user-centered than platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Concerning the Situational-Markers, I have delineated four subcategories: 1) Semantic-Marker, 2) Meta-Marker, 3) Collectivity-Marker, and 4) Truth-Marker. It will be demonstrated that each of these markers suggests a shared situational definition on Reddit, including the Truth-Marker, which exerts a distinct influence compared to its counterpart on 4chan.

Semantic-Markers on Reddit are fewer in number compared to 4chan, as the platform does not rely heavily on exclusive language to distinguish insiders from outsiders. Nevertheless, terms like "karmawhoring" and "have an upvote" reflect engagement with the platform's unique affordances, such as karma points and upvotes, which help signal agreement or appreciation.

Meta-Markers refer to self-referential discussions about Reddit as a platform. Phrases like "IRTR" ("I Read The Rules") or "Reddit is strange like that" highlight how users address and navigate both formal rules and informal expectations.

Collectivity-Markers involve the emergence of collectively accepted outcomes through the platform's voting system. The "hivemind" and the "bandwagon effect" il-

illustrate how users rely on collective opinions to form situational perception. The upvote/downvote system creates intersubjectively agreed-upon truths, which are reinforced by a visible voting system.

Truth-Markers on Reddit, similar to those on 4chan, address the uncertainty in discerning the truthfulness of posts, particularly in cases of LARPing or trolling. However, Reddit's pseudonymity and karma system discourage users from adopting false roles for extended periods.

Discussion

Utilizing Clarke's situational maps, I've delineated significant disparities between the social situations of Reddit and 4chan. In the following, I will discuss what role this plays in the shared nature of the situational definition – particularly in their approaches to sharing or not-sharing situational definitions.

The analysis of 4chan highlights a distinctive communication environment shaped by both shared and non-shared situational understandings. The platform's anonymity fosters an insider culture, reinforced by Semantic-Markers and Identification-Markers, which help establish a sense of community through language and social classifications. For instance, the Semantic-Marker “redpilled” derives from the popular film *The Matrix*, wherein the protagonist, Neo, is offered a red pill by Morpheus, enabling him to perceive reality beyond the illusory world. “Redpilled” signifies the recognition of a reality hidden from others, often associated with numerous conspiracy theories originating from 4chan.org/pol/. Communication on 4chan is substantially enriched by such terms, understood primarily by long-term platform users. Similarly, I categorize the platform's memes as Semantic-Markers, as they embody specific platform knowledge. Long-term users mutually assume familiarity with these terms and their contextual significance within the realm of 4chan. This mutual assumption of concrete shared situational knowledge implies that users perceive situational definitions as commonly understood within this context. Complementary, the social categorization by Identification-Markers effectively signifies who possesses the requisite situational knowledge and who does not, facilitating the attribution of shared situational understanding. For instance, “normies” are those users who primarily engage with mainstream social media platforms, while 4chan users actively seek to differentiate themselves from these mainstream platforms. Referred to as “anons” (short for anonymous), these users perceive the platform as fringe and alternative, with exclusion forming a fundamental aspect of their identity. Even new participants (referred to as “newfags”) are labeled as outsiders due to their unfamiliarity with the platform's nuances. Becoming an “oldfag” necessitates familiarity with longstanding platform semantics and memes, which anons are unlikely to explain to newcomers (Semantic-Marker). This emphasis on cultivating a distinct culture underscores the reluctance of outsiders to be initiated, thereby creating a socially delineated category of insiders. Furthermore, Mechanism-Markers allows users to experiment with situational definitions, reinforcing the platform's reputation as a space where irony and serious political discourse blend indistinguishably. The concept of “meme-magic” illustrates this well, as users oscillate between viewing their actions as playful and interpreting real-world consequences as validation of their influence. One prominent mechanism is the phenomenon of “meme-magic”, purportedly originating during the 2017 Trump election. Users humorously assert that their memes played a decisive role in Donald

Trump's victory, although the specifics remain unclear. Given 4chan's reputation as a prolific meme factory (Chen 2012), coupled with users' adeptness at disseminating ideological content through memes, the notion of intentional meme manipulation appears feasible. For instance, anecdotal evidence from Hagen et al.'s dataset (2020) reveals users attempting to portray Joe Biden as a pedophile through memes (see figure 3).

While some users engage in such activities solely for amusement, as indicated by the "for the lulz" (variation of the acronym LOL, Lot Of Laughter) mentality or employ these memes to propagate dark humor or deceive outsiders, colloquially known as trolling, others come to the conclusion that these memes speak truth. Consequently, 4chan distances itself from being labeled politically extreme, as users perceive content as ironic. However, outsiders often fail to grasp this irony, leading to misinterpretations. This marks a different situational thinking of the users inside and outside of 4chan. This understanding underscores the platform's ethos that content is primarily for amusement ("for the lulz"), with users prepared to attribute any real-life consequences to factors such as meme-magic or mere "shitposts". Marc Tuters (Tuters, 2018) suggests that this ambiguity can serve as a breeding ground for radical right-wing ideologies, as users can disclaim serious intent behind posted content. The sharedness of the situational definition returns at this point as function: The spread of any information is like an experiment and the real life consequences can be interpreted as desired and formed into a shared situational understanding. Finally, the Truth-Markers reveal a paradox within 4chan's culture: the lack of transparency precludes the establishment of a shared situational definition – but this non-shared nature of situational definitions is cultivated by users, enabling the proliferation of extreme opinions and uncertainty. An illustrative example is the term "LARP" or "LARPing", originating from the gaming community, which denotes the enactment of extreme political views, even if contrary to one's actual beliefs. Users often request proof or sources to verify claims, particularly in response to bait posts designed to provoke reactions. Trolling, the deliberate dissemination of false information, further contributes to the atmosphere of uncertainty. These terms reflect the per-



Figure 3. Image of the post GET1510931232672 at 4chan.org/pol/.

vasive ambiguity regarding the authenticity of posted content. The concept of the term “Poe’s Law” encapsulates this challenge, because this means that it is not possible to distinguish between sincere and insincere statements of extreme positions.

While users may rely on assumptions of shared knowledge to interact, the platform’s lack of transparency and the prevalence of trolling challenge the formation of a stable, shared situational understanding. The recurring theme of non-sharedness ultimately characterizes much of the interaction on 4chan, facilitating the dissemination of extreme ideas or misinformation while maintaining the veneer of irony and playfulness. This unique interactional dynamic contrasts sharply with platforms like Reddit, where sharedness in situational definitions is more structured and transparent.

Unlike the anonymity-driven culture of 4chan, Reddit’s architecture, including pseudonymity, the karma system, and Subreddit-specific rules, promotes a more stable communication environment where shared understanding is more easily established and maintained. The Semantic-Markers on Reddit are less exclusive than on 4chan, reflecting a broader and more inclusive user base. Reddit does not foster a strict insider/outsider divide; instead, its language is more focused on platform-specific behaviors such as upvotes for good posts. Similarly, terms like “karmawhoring” denote users actively seeking karma points, and phrases like “have an upvote” emphasize agreement or appreciation. These examples suggest that Reddit’s Semantic-Markers are more intertwined with platform affordances and infrastructure, such as username addressability and the voting system for upvotes and karma points. This indicates that cultural narratives on Reddit are less likely to be deeply ingrained in semantics. Instead, non-human and user elements take precedence, forming an interpretive framework for the situation. Pseudonymity provides certainty that interactions likely involve real individuals whose contributions can be easily understood and contextualized. The voting system and associated karma points promote transparency in situational perception for all participants. Thus, Semantic-Markers on Reddit imply that the platform’s affordances continually prompt users to construct a shared situational definition. The Meta-Markers reveal that Reddit users frequently engage in discussions about the platform itself, often addressing both formal Subreddit rules and informal cultural expectations. These markers highlight the importance of norms in guiding behavior on Reddit. Unlike 4chan’s freewheeling, often rule-averse culture, Reddit fosters an environment where rules and community guidelines are more visible and significant. For example, acronyms like “IRTR” for “I Read The Rules” and “RTFR” for “Read The Fucking Rules” underscore the importance of adhering to Subreddit rules, particularly for newcomers. Failure to do so often results in community members pointing out this oversight. Another commonly used phrase, “Reddit is strange like that”, signifies instances where user behavior deviates from expectations. This sentiment is echoed by the community r/NewToReddit, which describes Reddit like this: «We have our own peculiarities here at Reddit; you can make the world’s best Meme and it gets no attention. Then someone reposts it and it gets all the upvotes and awards Reddit can give» (r/NewToReddit, 2023). This highlights how communication on Reddit is shaped by both formal and informal expectations, with users readily acknowledging and discussing these norms. Formal rules provide users with a clear understanding of what is expected of them and what they can expect from others in the community. These rules serve as important guidelines for communication, complemented by informal expectations. Phrases like “Reddit is strange like that” indicate instances where expectations were not met, suggesting that users assumed a shared situational understanding. Such unmet expectations imply a common perception, thought process, and knowle-

dge base among users, leading to anticipated actions. Expectations thus represent the perceived sharedness of situational definitions, manifesting the assumption that participants interpret the situation similarly and will act accordingly. Collectivity-Markers illustrate the central role of collective judgment on Reddit. This concept is exemplified by the notion of the hivemind, akin to a collective consciousness or intelligence. In Reddit's discussion culture, users often rely on the collective wisdom to find satisfactory answers to various inquiries. Contributions that are deemed particularly valuable by the community – reflected through the voting system – are prominently featured. However, this process can lead to what is known as the bandwagon effect. This phenomenon occurs when collective opinions, formed through the aggregation of upvotes or downvotes, become self-reinforcing. Users frequently observe posts receiving numerous downvotes without apparent cause, which then perpetuates further downvoting. Conversely, highly upvoted posts tend to garner even more upvotes simply due to their initial popularity. While this behavior resembles the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968), it implies that existing opinions about specific posts are challenging to alter. Contrary to the notion of an echo chamber, Reddit's bandwagon effect suggests that reactions to similar content can vary significantly. Users often base their situational understanding on the voting patterns of others, as these votes serve as value judgments, organizing perceptions of truth, correctness, and quality. Consequently, intersubjective truths and value judgments are generated, shaping participants' definitions of the situation. The Collectivity-Marker distinctly identifies which situational definitions are perceived as shared, reinforced by the sometimes excessive voting activity, which underscores and maintains this shared understanding. Lastly, Truth-Markers on Reddit differ significantly from those on 4chan. Notably, I discovered similar Truth-Marker terms on Reddit as on 4chan, such as LARPing and Poe's Law. This similarity underscores situations where users grapple with uncertainty about the situation and how it's perceived by others. However, the dynamics on Reddit differ from those on 4chan. The pseudonymity of users and the accumulation of karma points incentivize users to avoid negative attention. Instances of LARPing can result in downvotes if users fail to clearly mark their post as roleplay. As noted by Julian Dibbell (2010) regarding 4chan: «Names, in other words, makes failure costly. [...] namelessness makes failure cheap – nearly costless» (Dibbell, 2010, p. 3). However, on Reddit, the use of throwaway accounts or so-called alts (abbreviation for alternative accounts) offers a means to conceal communications from other account contacts, albeit with limitations. Pseudonymity, user profiles, and karma rankings significantly mitigate uncertainty regarding post or user trustworthiness. Despite this, LARPers can still engage in mischief on Reddit, but with greater finesse and adherence to situational norms. Subreddit dynamics further influence LARPing feasibility; for instance, politically motivated Subreddits like *r/conspiracy* may be more conducive to such activities due to shared situational perceptions. For example, in my qualitative study I analyzed a thread that originated from the Subreddit */r/conspiracy*. In this thread, under the title "ThEy aRE pHiLaNtHrOpistS!" (*r/conspiracy*, 2020), the enrichment of multi-millionaires (such as Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, and Jeff Bezos) through quarantine measures during the Covid-19 pandemic was discussed. The obviously mainstream critical perspective of the entire Subreddit is matched by the comments under this thread and it gets 5.660 upvotes. Such a thematization of the Corona protection measures seems to be rather excluded in other politically motivated Subreddits.

Contrary to the Truth-Marker's implication of non-shared situational definitions on 4chan, its counterpart on Reddit necessitates a shared understanding. LARPers align

their narratives with the prevailing situational definition to ensure success, highlighting the shared nature of situational understanding essential for their endeavors.

At this point, it is apparent that Reddit users predominantly operate under the assumption of a shared situational definition. The Semantic-Marker underscores how the platform's affordances compel users to align their understanding of the situation. Formal and informal expectations, as indicated by the Meta-Marker, contribute to a collectively understood situational definition. The Collectivity-Marker further reinforces shared understanding through the production of collective knowledge and value judgments. Even the Truth-Marker reflects the need for LARPer on Reddit to acknowledge the presence of differing perspectives, emphasizing the platform's inclination towards recognizing situational diversity.

Overall, Reddit's platform design and community expectations foster a communication environment that is more reliant on shared situational definitions, contrasting with the ambiguity and non-shared nature of interactions on 4chan. Reddit's combination of formal rules, voting mechanisms, and pseudonymity creates a structured space where users are more likely to assume common ground, facilitating clearer communication and collective meaning-making.

As shown in figure 4, 4chan users employ an auxiliary construct to establish an assumption of shared situational understanding despite the inherent dividedness. This construct, rooted in the attribution of anonymity and group identity as "anons", fosters a sense of sharedness necessary for generating communicative certainties and expectations. This intertwines with platform-specific semantics that serve as manifestations of forum culture.

This comparison of situational analyses between 4chan and Reddit unveils nuanced analytical dimensions. Notably, 4chan users construct their identity as "anons" in contrast to the distinction from "normies", while Reddit users perceive themselves as part of a collective. Interestingly, this collective identity on Reddit seems less dependent on distinguishing insiders from outsiders compared to 4chan, where technical openness (everyone can participate) necessitates cultural closure. Semantic Markers on both platforms reflect this distinction: 4chan stores its forum culture in semantic terms, whereas Reddit users semantically refer to the platform's infrastructure, facilitated by Subreddits (like r/NewToReddit) descriptions, rules, and stock posts.

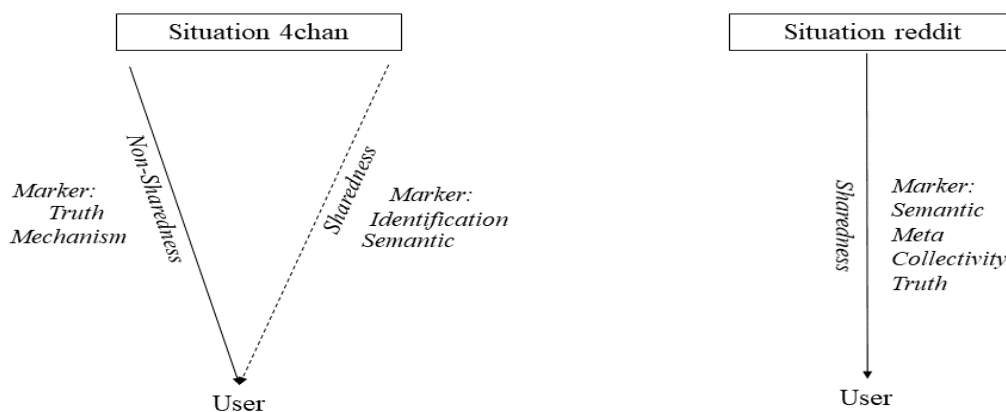


Figure 4. The situational definition on 4chan.org/pol/ and politically oriented Subreddits.

Repetition plays a vital role on 4chan to maintain shared situational definitions amid the platform's ephemeral nature. This repetition mitigates the constant threat of intransparency and uncertainty, offering new communication possibilities. On Reddit, efforts to eliminate uncertainties and intransparencies are structured through formal and informal expectations, indicating a mutually assumed shared definition of the situation. Notably, 4chan claims to have no expectations of its users, yet my analysis reveals numerous implicit expectations, particularly evident when normies or newfags fail to grasp platform semantics, resulting in exclusion. These expectations on 4chan, unlike Reddit's formal and communicable rules, are variable and perpetuated through user repetition, underlining situational knowledge as a social construct. Consequently, no user can possess all diverse situational knowledge because it is continually evolving within the platform's dynamic environment.

Upon comparing the analysis results of 4chan and Reddit, as depicted in figure 4, it's evident that these platforms exhibit distinct situational mechanisms concerning the (non-)sharedness of situational definitions, influencing user actions and communication. On 4chan, the platform's lack of transparency serves as a communication driver, leading to a constant interplay between play and seriousness, truth and falsehood, insider and outsider dynamics. Conversely, Reddit's shared situational nature establishes formal and informal structures of expectation among users, facilitating mutual imputation of these expectations.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore whether the situational definitions on 4chan and Reddit differ, and if so, how these differences manifest in terms of shared situational definitions among users. The findings demonstrate that these two platforms present distinct mechanisms. While Reddit fosters a culture of shared situational definitions, reinforced by formal and informal expectations, 4chan operates in a context where communication thrives on non-shared situational understandings. The construct of anonymity on 4chan, coupled with cultural nuances such as the "anon" identity, creates an assumption of sharedness, yet interaction is often driven by uncertainty and ambiguity. In contrast, Reddit's collective identity, shaped by platform architecture and transparency mechanisms like the voting system, promotes intersubjective truths and shared knowledge. These findings contribute to existing research by offering a nuanced comparative analysis of platform-specific communication cultures. The study advances the understanding of how different platforms shape user interaction through varying levels of shared situational definitions. It highlights the role of the platforms culture in influencing communication outcomes and sheds light on the situational markers as a sociotechnical piece of social interaction. By using Clarke's situational analysis, this research extends theoretical discussions about how platform design and user practices contribute to the formation of collective or fragmented situational understandings. However, this study has several limitations. The analysis focused exclusively on politically themed communication, meaning the findings may not be fully representative of broader platform dynamics. Additionally, the fluctuating and interconnected nature of the terms and catchphrases across both platforms posed challenges in categorizing them cleanly. Despite efforts to mitigate overlap, this may have influenced the situational maps.

Understanding the dynamics of shared situational definitions on platforms like 4chan and Reddit opens up multiple avenues for further investigation. The spread of misinformation, for example, can be examined in light of how these platforms either promote or hinder shared situational definitions, as demonstrated by studies like Del Vicario et al. (2016). Additionally, the ongoing culture wars between 4chan and Reddit (Nagle, 2018) could be better understood through the lens of how each platform's users interpret and interact with different situational markers. Moreover, the role of memes in shaping platform cultures (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017), particularly in the context of their viral spread and ideological content (Tuters, 2018), highlights how these markers influence collective narratives. Finally, the growth of conspiracy theories on both platforms, as explored by Zeeuw et al. (2020), can be tied back to the ways in which these communities develop and negotiate shared situational definitions, or resist them entirely, leading to the proliferation of alternate truths.

In this sense, the contrast between 4chan and Reddit offers a valuable perspective on how different platform designs shape communication patterns, culture, and the dissemination of ideas.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the author, Christina Laut-Berger. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of platform users.