

The Rise of Reddit: A Case Study on Persuasive Technology

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic of 2020 enticed millions of people to make use of social media platforms such as Reddit, which benefited greatly from this public exposure. Reddit allows individuals to interact anonymously with and share interests with strangers from all over the world. It is a social media platform that appeals to a niche community. The purpose of this study is to investigate Reddit as an example of persuasive technology, as well as to analyze Reddit's future in today's digital society. This study has significance for both researchers and practitioners, and broadens contemporary assumptions about strategic planning for social media platforms.

KEYWORDS: *Reddit, Social Media, Persuasive Technology, Social Media Influencers*

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of 2020 enticed millions of people to make use of social media platforms. These platforms include Reddit, which benefited greatly from this public exposure. Reddit allows individuals to interact anonymously with and share interests with strangers from all over the world (Baterna, 2022). Reddit provides a vast array of forums, social news and discussion threads. Its users share content, ratings, comments and news regarding a variety of different topics. The platform contains 1.2 million of what it calls communities, which attract almost 164 million visitors each month (Dreamgrow.com, 2022). Reddit allows people to join these communities in which they share opinions common to those others in the community. It even allows users to create additional communities that reflect their belief systems and provides opportunities to like-minded users who wish to share their posts (Horne, 2016). The purpose of this study is to investigate Reddit as a prime example of what has become known as persuasive technology, as well as to analyze the future of this platform in today's digital society.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Humans are curious creatures. We sometimes have more questions than answers. Reddit is a place where those questions can be posed. The platform was founded in 2005 by Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian. It is best described as a social networking and news website that allows registered users, or Redditors, to post and discuss content ranging from news reports, entertainment, and images to personal stories (Roshan, 2020). Baterna (2022) suggested that Reddit might be the best of the various social media platforms for

the following reasons: (a) It is designed for anonymity, (b) It priorities user feedback, (c) It has content-driven social credibility, (d) It has developed strong niche communities, and (5) Its general administrators enforce moderate standards.

Reddit's strategy is to be a social media platform that serves as a source of everything that is new and popular. With its millions of specific communities, people can post, discuss, and vote on practically everything in the world (Roshan, 2020). Reddit is structurally managed as a vertical structure. Its goals have evolved as it has grown, but its community aspect and its vision have remained the same because of the vertical structure of the company and the management of CEO Huffman (Vella, 2015). However, the Reddit site is self-governed by its users, or redditors as they are called, who can post links or threads on any topic, often consisting of content they collect or create themselves. Then others in their communities vote them up or down. The site relies to a large extent on the goodwill and the use of the free labor of the moderators, who keep the community humming (Vella, 2015).

The Reddit culture emphasizes the power of community and connection, alongside the growth and evolution of its communities and the users behind them (Word Press, 2021). It creates a community and a culture that brings people together and shows the power of a community of people with like interests. Furthermore, this platform heavily encourages user engagement, so people using it need to be invested and make authentic contributions to the site to allow the social aspect of it to thrive. The community strategy helps users

research specific topics about which people are talking in real time, and this community aspect allows users to connect with people who want to engage with their brand (Pusztai, 2020).

Reddit is broken up into more than a million communities known as “subreddits,” each of which covers a different topic. These subreddits are accessible to registered users who can join, share, comment on, or like posts from other users. The subreddits are freely created by users, not by Reddit, and allow anyone to join the discussion. Depending on one’s interests, the subreddits can look different because of the number of users, the users’ creativity, and how the community sets up its thread. Each subreddit is monitored by the moderators or the creator of the thread, which gives them the right to set up additional rules for the community (Tuomchomtam, 2019).

Even with the success of the company, only 18 months after founding the site, Huffman and Ohanian sold the company to Advance Publications, which publishes Conde Nast among others, for an undisclosed sum. Its two founders agreed to stay on as part of the magazine empire’s digital network (Vella, 2015). At the end of 2020, Reddit reported that it had over fifty-two million daily active users (Caffrey, 2021)

LITERATURE REVIEW – PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY

Persuasive technology is the concept of using technology to change people’s behavior. Reddit is a primary example of persuasive technology, due to its community-themed forums that allow people to participate in different topics of their choosing. Fogg (2003) coined the term “captology” to describe the domain of research, design, and application of persuasive computers and technologies. Such technologies are designed to change opinions, attitudes, and values, i.e., to be persuasive. Persuasive technology has developed as the internet has emerged. For example, Amazon is a persuasive technology because it does not just process orders. It offers suggestions based on its users’ preferences and profiles (Fogg, 2003).

Furthermore, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are persuasive technologies, each created specifically to change the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of its users. Persuasive technology companies consider use factors such as motivation, ability, and triggers when designing their applications and sites. Their objective is to persuade users to spend more time clicking and scrolling. One motivation is linked to our innate desire for social connection. A user must have the ability to easily do what the app wants them to. Triggers are features that prompt behaviors, like notifications, that keep the user wanting to fulfill a desire for reinforcement, and entices users to come back. The home screen on cell phones is a good example (Center for Humane Technology, 2021). Individuals may think of their phones and computers as tools (Center for Humane Technology, 2021). A hammer that people use to drive a nail

and cell phones are both tools useful in our daily lives. But if their phones are just tools to help people stay in touch with others, how is it that they have such a strong impact on people’s lives? Are individuals using their technology, or is the technology of these devices using individuals?

By all measures, Reddit’s platform has the characteristics of a persuasive technology, including social news aggregation, web content rating, and community discussions. It provides a platform for online communities to submit links, create content, and to discuss whatever topic that interests them. Reddit users can even post links to other content on the web and then other users can vote the posted links up or down, causing them to appear more or less prominently on Reddit’s home page.

Individuals can also be influencers on Reddit. Its users feel they have a voice to speak out, due to subreddits being devoted to a specific kind of content to which people can relate. Micro influencers on Reddit are based on the top communities on the site. From there, a user can analyze the karma amount of the users. Karma is the user’s score, a total of their number of upvotes against their downvotes (Ellis, 2019). When a person has a high karma, it means that their posts are well-liked and their profile is viewed often, making them influencers in their community. The top communities are Gaming, Funny, AskReddit, Pics, and News. Each has over 20 million members and the influencers have karmas that exceed one million. The Gaming community’s top influencer is MisterT12, the Funny community’s top influencer is SrGrafo, the AskReddit community’s top influencer is Dystopian Advocate, the Pics community’s top influencer is N8theGr8, and the News community’s top influencer is hoosakiwi (Reddit). These influencers have made their accounts in their respective communities appealing and have created an online presence that entices people to follow them.

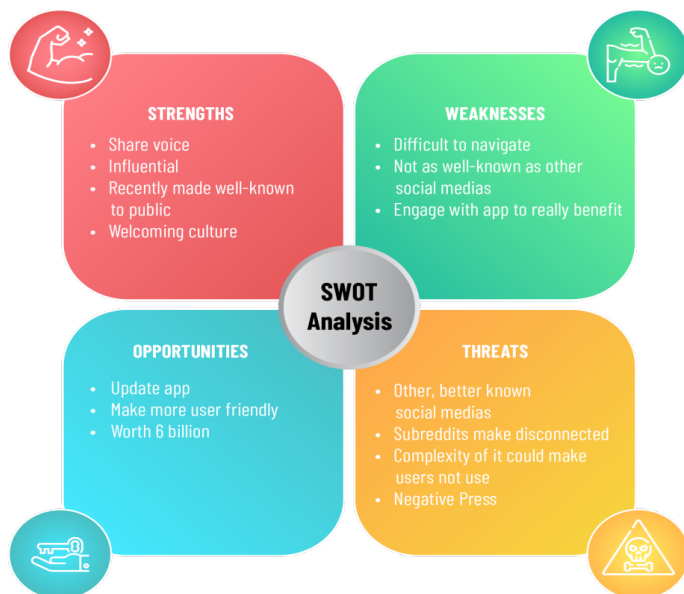
ANALYSIS/FINDINGS

The researchers for this project utilized a variety of marketing tools such as SWOT analysis and Competitor analysis. SWOT analysis is a particular kind of strategic management tool, to gain a better understanding of Reddit, in comparison with other social networking and news websites (see Figure 1). Reddit’s increasing popularity poses a threat to other popular and more established social media sites, as it allows people to share videos, thoughts, and pictures within a specific community of others that have similar interests. Reddit can also link to other sites, and it even encourages people to post links in order to get feedback and gain better karma (Thompson, 2020). In the welcoming community that Reddit offers, people can become micro influencers and others’ voices can be heard. Users are able to share, but it is important to be mindful of which subreddit on which one is posting, or other users may respond negatively to an off-topic post (Widman, 2021).

Negative press can threaten Reddit’s culture. However, this

situation can easily be offset with better brand awareness. In Figure 1, readers can see a visual breakdown of Reddit's performance in the market.

Figure 1 – SWOT Analysis



Strengths – Reddit is a very influential app that allows users to share the voices and it welcomes new cultures and trends.

Weaknesses - Reddit is not a well-known app. This platform is also difficult to navigate.

Opportunities - In order for Reddit to continue to prosper, this platform needs to be updated to be more user-friendly so that new users are able to understand the organization. Currently, Reddit's worth has been increased to \$6 billion, continuing to grow as more new people discover this social network.

Threats – Negative press and the complexity of the app are major threats that explain why more people do not use the app now. Also, other easy-to-use social media platforms with which Reddit competes are continuously growing in popularity.

Figure #2 - Competitor's Difference Between Reddit, Twitter, Pinterest, and TikTok

Looking closer into a Competitor analysis, this research demonstrates Reddit's market advantages (See Figure #2). Major social media platforms like Twitter, Pinterest, and Tiktok, have limited sharing features and lack forums in which individuals can be heard amongst a listening crowd. Twitter allows users to post links, videos, photos, or comments, so if the posted content becomes popular enough, many people could see the post (Vo, 2017). Even though Twitter functions similar to Reddit, Reddit is unique in that it has specific communities on which people can share, which allows them to have greater influence in their chosen community. Tiktok has become a popular and influential social media platform in a short amount of time. Tiktok, like

Reddit, allows users to share videos and encourages other people to like and comment on them. However, Reddit can compete successfully because this social network offers more means of posting in specific communities. In closing, Twitter, Tiktok, and Pinterest are well-known social media platforms. Yet, Reddit's unique subreddit feature, not present in the other three platforms, gives Reddit a greater potential to be successful and possibly even more successful than its competitors now.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Reddit is an emerging social media platform with great market potential. Reddit is in fact a social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website. At the end of 2020, Reddit reported that it had over fifty-two million daily active users (Caffrey, 2021). Based on this analysis, Reddit's current success and popularity are expected to increase, widening the gap between Reddit and its direct competitors.

Several strategic implications from the research are noted:

- **Successful online platforms must continue to reinvent themselves so that they can stay relevant to their demographics. [Supporting documentation]**

The need for behavior change, for “reinventing online platforms,” is an urgent one. Online platforms must support innovative social media marketing. With new features and platforms emerging every day, social media marketing must constantly evolve and adapt (Baker, 2022).

- **Marketers must understand how to leverage persuasive technologies in order to communicate effectively with their customers.**

Different social media platforms have different purposes and customers. However, persuasive technologies are designed to change the attitudes or behavior of users through persuasion and social influence, but not through coercion. Social networks owe their popularity to persuasion technologies. With the development of the digital component of persuasion technologies and their “approach” to users (wearable and invasive devices), the degree of their influence will increase (Asmah, 2022).

- **Building sustainable relationships with niche communities is essential in a digital economy.**

Niche communities are a growth opportunity for business. Human communities thrive because of a desire to gather in tribes and to congregated with people like us. Communities can become more passionate and sustainable when we talk with our tribe versus talking to everyone in larger communities or big social networks. This desire to be tribal in nature provides the opportunity for marketing campaigns to engage with niche communities and speak to topics that they are interested and passionate about (Csizmadia, 2022).

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat & Co are successful as companies but not in terms of engagement. Niche communities are doing the things that big companies are not. They are reaching these communities because they are focused on one topic, more engaging, less noisy and overcrowded, less invasive, and less competitive. Greater loyalty is possible when users have a stronger connection to a topic and if a brand can connect it will be rewarded with loyalty (Csizmadia, 2022).

CONCLUSION

In closing, Reddit is on the path to become one of the most influential social media/news websites throughout the world. It is making internal changes to its structure and increasing the number of its employees, as it should, considering the growth it has seen over the past five years. Additionally, Reddit is making changes as industry trends evolve, such as adding videos, allowing for longer videos than most sites, and creating an easier-to-navigate platform that not all competitors have. This case study examined Reddit as a social media platform in order to understand how virtual communities share similar opinions and interests. If Reddit can continue its stronghold on this niche, it could become one of the most influential social media platforms in the world. The purpose of this research is to investigate Reddit as persuasive technology, as well as analyze the future of this platform in today's fast-evolving digital society. This study of Reddit has significance for both researchers and practitioners, and broadens contemporary assumptions about strategic planning for social media platforms.

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