

The Rhetorical Use of Anecdote in Online Political Discussion

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Abstract

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This study reports how people in a Reddit thread used anecdote as a rhetorical device during the discussion about the result of the 2015 UK general election. As the Internet has developed rapidly, academic interest in online discussion forums has grown, although few studies have been conducted on the development process of online political discussion. In addition, the election result was not what pollsters expected, which triggered national debates about further financial cuts on welfare and civil sectors. The present study, therefore, focuses on a thread asking people to provide their reasons for the Conservative Party victory in the 2015 election in Reddit, a popular online discussion board in English. The study employs Gee's discourse analytical framework to explore the online discussion, with a particular focus on the use of rhetoric during the discussion. The analysis reveals that people attempt to defend and justify their voting behaviour in the election by providing an anecdote and by writing it in a similar style to academic writing. The result also indicates that anecdote might work as a rhetorical device to persuade others as to their voting reasons. These results suggest that the anonymity of the Internet might influence the use of rhetoric for users in justifying their voting.

Keywords

Political Discussion, Online Discourse, Rhetoric, Reddit, the 2015 UK General Election

First submission: January 2016; Revised: June 2016, Accepted: June 2016

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Introduction

The result of the 2015 UK general election was somewhat surprising. Although pollsters predicted that none of the parties would gain a majority (i.e., 50%+1) in the House of Commons (BBC, 2015), the UK Conservative Party gained 330 seats and became the majority party in the House (UK Parliament, 2015). However, given that there were a number of protests and strikes against the austerity of the Conservative government of 2010-2015, and given that the party advocated further cuts in welfare and the civil sectors during the campaign period, the result seems much more serious. In fact, after the election, one Reddit user launched a thread asking for reasons for voting for the party.

The Internet certainly is a popular sphere where people can discuss various topics. Discussion boards such as Yahoo, Reddit and 4chan are popular online forums. For example, Yahoo has numerous discussion groups; moreover, it offers its services in various languages, such as in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. Another popular forum, 4chan, attracts 680 million page views per month from the US, the Netherlands, Poland and other countries (4chan.org, 2016). While they can accommodate many kinds of discussion topics (e.g., hobbies, education), the political topics in particular have been popular for citizens to involve. In fact, there are a number of online discussions, such as a proposal for tax policy during the US presidential election campaign (Price et al., 2006), the policies of the European Union (Karlsson, 2012), and the 2008 US presidential election (Liang, 2013). As such, these forums have attracted academic interest concerning how people discuss political topics on the Internet.

Despite a large number of academic studies about online political discussion, there are not many studies looking at its insight. However, some studies report that a particular person or group dominates and manipulates an entire discussion forum (e.g. Hagemann, 2002; Karlsson, 2012). In particular, Hagemann explored an online discussion forum about politics in the Netherlands and found that only 25% of the discussion participants posted nearly 90% of the comments (ibid: 69). That is, a few people in the thread posted most of the comments there while others posted a few. Similarly, Karlsson (2012) found that particular groups use online discussion forums as places to push their own ideas and proposals rather than as a place to discuss issues raised there (ibid: 77). To this point, Hoffman et al. (2013) argue that some people use the Internet actively so that they can influence the political decision-making process. In other words, domination in online discussion forums could be an intentional tactic to impact politics. However, the studies by Hagemann (2002), Karlsson (2012), and even Hoffman et al. (2013) do not focus on the process of domination or the use of online forums. In fact, it is difficult to find any article exploring ways of manifesting opinion during online discussion, i.e. how the general public develops their political discussion on the Internet.

Drawing from the above background, the aim of this study is to explore how people discuss politics on the Internet. In order to achieve the research's purpose, this study selected a thread in the online forum Reddit (<http://www.reddit.com/>), where people discussed why they voted for the Conservative Party in the UK general election on 7 May 2015. It has attracted great interest as to why the Conservative Party won a majority in the election, since pre-election polls and exit polls indicated a different result (BBC, 2015). Taking the current election system in the UK parliament (first past the post: FPTP) and the number of protests against austerity under the previous

government (a coalition of the Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties) into consideration, it is worth questioning why many people voted for candidates of the Conservative Party. Therefore, this research initially sets a research question (RQ) and two analytical questions (AQs):

RQ: How do people convince others about their voting reasons during online political discussion?

AQ1: How do people explain their reasons for voting for the Conservative Party?

AQ1–2: How do they describe the Conservative candidates or Members of Parliament (MPs) and, where possible, other candidates in their constituencies?

1. Literature Review

1.1. Online Political Discussion

As academic interest in online interactions has increased, the literature to date has attempted to explore how people negotiate their opinions during online discussion, in particular, in political discussion forums. For example, people have debated in online forums about the taxation policy proposed by President Bush in the US (Price et al., 2006), the policies of the European Union (Karlsson, 2012) and the 2008 US presidential election (Liang, 2013). Among these studies, Price et al. (2006) have investigated how an individual's opinion regarding a proposed tax policy emerges and changes during the discussion. While their results show that an individual's opinion changes through that individual's own argument, it was hard to find a relationship concerning how an individual's opinion affects another's opinion (ibid: 63). In other words, a person in the forum would produce his/her own opinion independently, although they had a chance to read others' opinions before posting his/her own opinion. On this point, it is arguably possible that such people might have obtained information from outside the Internet (e.g., newspaper, radio: Vaccari, 2013). However, it is almost impossible to investigate how people on the Internet obtain information from outside the Internet, as they do not normally show their information source.

Although Price et al. (2006) have attempted to explore how people negotiate their opinions during discussion, much of literature has focused on word use in online discussion forums, which could be termed 'incivility' or 'bad behaviour'. For example, online flaming, defined as a verbal attack with the intention to offend other people (Blom et al., 2014: 5) is a popular topics of studies. Lee (2005: 388–389) explains that flaming starts when a person ignores a suggestion about writing manners in his/her comment posted on an online forum. However, Lee (ibid) does not explain why users ignore such suggestions from other users. To this point, Blom et al. (2014) argue that a description such as "this editorial was written by a complete idiot" (ibid: 8) could be an example of online flaming. Although any word use can be an instance of flaming, it is often difficult to know or predict which particular word use will potentially trigger online flaming. For example, a comment which attempts to make a counterargument in a forum could be a cause of flaming or backlash among other users (McLelland, 2008). The issues with online interaction above imply that the nature of the Internet – anonymity – could play an important role, as it might be difficult to know whether an individual would use such an expression in offline interaction (cf. Nagy and Koles, 2014).

Despite the literature studying online flaming, above, there is a slight difference regarding the notion of incivility. While Papacharissi (2004) regards the use of offensive expressions as incivility, some studies specifically define the frequent use of racial expressions (e.g. Hughey and Daniels, 2013; McLelland, 2008), dominating a forum (e.g. Karlsson, 2012) and online bullying (e.g. Erdur-Baker, 2010) as incivility. For example, people may use racist language to prevent other people from expressing their opinion when they are discussing a technical issue (Anderson et al., 2014). Such behaviour may not be expected in a face-to-face interaction in some contexts, since it is deemed 'uncivil' (Papacharissi, 2002). However, such uncivil remarks might appear in a particular face-to-face context, such as at a football match. As such, people may need to know whether they can use uncivil remarks. Yet, as mentioned above, the anonymity of the Internet might be an obstacle to the understanding of the context in an online forum. In short, online anonymity might either directly or indirectly affect the dynamism of online interaction.

Although word use and the anonymity of the Internet are a popular topic among online discussion studies, the present study argues that these do not represent the whole spectrum of online discussion. In fact, studies exploring professional politicians' discourse have revealed how they engage in political discussion. Therefore, the next section will review these studies, with a particular focus on the use of rhetoric.

1.2. Rhetoric in Political Discourse

Although the studies above attempt to explore political discussion on the Internet, it is difficult to find studies which have an insight into online political discourse. In contrast, studies on political discussion in face-to-face contexts provide some insight into it. For example, Rapley (1998) explored how an Australian politician constructed her speech in Parliament. Rapley (ibid) found that the politician in question used rhetoric, putting herself in the centre of the “ordinal Australian” (i.e. ethos) – that is, she was a member of the general public who could be found in the street in Australia. At the same time, Rapley claimed that her rhetoric justified her credibility as a Member of Parliament (i.e., a professional politician) and that it legitimated her speech regarding questions about immigrants and multiculturalism policies (ibid: 342). This is how ethos work: she convinced audiences outside Parliament about her eligibility in speaking up about those issues (cf. Andrews, 2014; Leach, 2000). As such, a politician may use rhetoric to justify his/her legitimacy so that the general public in the politician's constituency and other fellow politicians will support him/her (van Dijk, 2008: 157–158).

Similar to the above study, Kienpointner (2013) found that the US President, Barak Obama, uses rhetoric to justify his political orientation – consensus and the integration of people – in his speeches. A major finding is that he uses self-criticism, i.e., accepting his own weakness, to appeal to audiences who are tired of being told a story of ‘super humans’ (ibid: 366). On this point, Andrews calls this type of rhetoric “the art of persuasion” (Andrews, 2014: 17) – namely, a method of engagement with the audience. In fact, although admitting weakness might raise the question of his own eligibility as the US President, it also successfully makes his orientation reasonable and “acceptable” (ibid) wherever people tire of hearing success stories (ibid: 361). In other words, it is considered that rhetoric may not work well to convince audiences in one context, while the same rhetoric will work in another context.

The above studies seem to raise a point to explore in online political discussion. First, politicians use rhetoric to convince fellow politicians or the public. As Kienpointner (2013) argues, the aim of the rhetoric used by President Obama is to justify his policies and convince others that his policies are acceptable. Similarly, this was the case with the Australian politician who attempted to justify her doubts about Australian multicultural policy by defining herself as the ‘ordinal Australian’ (Rapley, 1998: 341). These acts to convince others during discussion is called an act of persuasion (Wilson, 2003). According to Wilson, people in fact engage in convincing others when they interact with each other, whatever the purpose of the interaction is (ibid). For example, as mentioned, using an appropriate phrase in a speech given in a parliament (Rapley, 1998) can be seen as an act to convince fellow members that the speaker is the right person to do so. Therefore, it is worth asking the question: How do people in online forums convince other users? In other words: how do they use the “art of persuasion” (Andrews, 2014: 17) in an online environment? Moreover, how does their rhetoric contribute to the discussion in an online forum? The next section will examine this question further.

2. Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Background

Drawing on the previous chapter, this research will refer to the theoretical background of rhetoric. Rhetoric often appears during interactions, as it is understood as an “act of persuasion” (Leach, 2000) or convincing other people. The act of persuasion is commonly seen, for example, in political speech and the advertising of commercial products (ibid: 209). In political speech, a politician may use rhetoric to justify the legitimacy of a policy so that other politicians will support his/her policy (see van Dijk, 2008: 157–158). In the example of van Dijk, one politician justified a policy of further restrictions on immigration by emphasizing the risks brought by immigrants and the ultimate goal of the policy: how ‘harmful’ they were and how to ‘protect’ his country with ‘good’ people from them (ibid). While ideological remarks occur in this statement (e.g., ‘good’, cf. Baločkaitė, 2014), the rhetoric above is powerful since the position (or social role) of speaker is taken by a politician, making the claim credible. In other words, the rhetoric above might not be so powerful or convincing (if at all) if a member of the general public were to use it.

Credibility in rhetoric is called “ethos” (Leach, 2000: 214). Ethos is characterized by a person or author who advances a proposition (Andrews, 2014: 18), as argued in the example by van Dijk above. In addition, there are a further two concepts in understanding rhetoric: “pathos” and “logos”. Pathos is an appeal to people’s emotion (Leach, 2000: 214). For example, the phrase ‘immigrants are harmful and we need to protect our country with good people’ strongly appeals to emotion. The phrase basically contends a negative consequence (i.e., ‘bad people will dominate good people’) if they do not take the necessary steps against increasing numbers of immigrants (cf. Leach, 2000: 214). In contrast, logos indicates a proof as to how valid an argument is (Andrews, 2014: 18; Leach, 2000: 214). Logos indicates order of words or development of argument (i.e. logic). For example, referring to the actual number of gun crimes per year might offer a strong claim for increasing the number of police officers. As such, a provision of facts during the discussion could support one’s claim. All in all, ethos, pathos, and

logos can work to make a phrase convincing; however, it is important to know what context or situation applies behind an act of persuasion.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This research collected data from a Reddit thread which discussed the UK General Election of 8 July 2015. The dataset of this research is available in the thread titled: “People who voted Tory – why did you do it?”. The thread title is, in fact, a question for other users as to why they voted for the Conservative Party. In addition, the question also asks them to provide detailed reasons for their voting behaviour:

“Self-explanatory - I'm not asking in a snarky way, I am genuinely curious. Could you please explain your reasoning for voting the way you did? Thanks!
Edit: and please actually explain - don't just say "the economy"
Edit2: fame and glory!!”
(Thread creator)

This thread seems to have been created immediately after the election, since there is no exact postdate on the thread. In fact, no posts have an exact postdate; however, there is an indicator as to how old each post is based on the current date. For example, if it were 13 August 2015 today, a post made on 12 July 2015 would be marked as '1 month ago'. While there are approximately 790 posts in the thread, this study analysed the first 56 comments from the dataset, including the first post, to ask people to give their reasons for voting in the election. The word length of each comment varies from around 10 to 200 words. Due to the nature of Reddit, the entire thread is publicly open and visible; therefore, the dataset in this research is still visible and accessible. Again, the aim of the thread was to ask for the reasons why people voted for the Conservative Party and to ask them to explain their voting behaviour.

Based on the RQ and AQs (see Introduction), this research employs the analytical framework proposed by Gee (2011) to explore the use of rhetoric in the discussion. As Gee (2014: 11–12) argues, it is important to consider context behind interaction, since interaction is characterized in it. Notably, Reddit is highly anonymized website – it is almost impossible to know who users are (e.g. their occupation, social positions). Moreover, as argued in the section 3.1, political claims can be powerful when ethos, pathos, and logos are set; therefore, Gee’s analytical model seems useful to analyse these concepts, in particular how they appear and are supported in anonymized environment. Among the seven tools that Gee suggested to conduct discourse analysis (ibid: 22–25), this study particularly focuses on the concepts of identity, politics, and connection to highlight rhetoric in online discussion. In the model, “identity”, here, means a social position or role of a person (i.e., equivalent to ethos), while “politics” means a statement which a person wishes to manifest (ibid). In particular, politics here includes any supporting reason of their identity (ibid). Provided that political claims can be reinforced with credibility as discussed above, identifying one’s social position would indicate how credible their claims are. “Connection” in Gee’s framework indicates the order of a sentence to make sense of writing (ibid). In particular, focusing on connection might inform a method of logos (Andrews, 2014: 18) in rhetoric.

3. Result

The results of the analysis found that the users in the dataset explained their voting reason by providing an anecdotal story and constructing sentences in their post logically. However, they seemed to provide the anecdote to excuse about the result, as mentioned below. Moreover, they organize their comments in a similar style to formal writing which may be more common in academic and business settings, though not completely identically. The employment of a formal writing style in posts suggests that the users were trying to convince others by developing their arguments logically and linearly in their posts. In other words, formal writing might play a rhetorical role in the discussion. In addition, this strategy seems to make the anecdote more persuasive.

3.1. Use of Anecdote

To respond to the AQs of this study (see Introduction), this section describes how people justify their voting reasons. The study found that people provide an anecdotal story (i.e., information which other people may not have a chance to know) to defend their voting reasons:

“To me, it was down to a local issue. Our MP (tory) has stepped in a fair few times to give local events and causes a needed boost in a [sic] otherwise forgotten area.

Without him our town would of [sic] lost out on the new schools and facilities we desperately need, promised 15 years ago by Lab/Lib councils. Wasn't much information from the other candidates about what they'd do for local or in parliament except party snippets.

So sorry, I voted for someone who does his job well, unfortunately this was part of a national system/party I don't agree with.”

(User 1)

User 1 justifies his/her voting reasons by providing an anecdote (“Our MP (tory) has stepped in ... local events and causes a needed boost a [sic] otherwise forgotten area”), claiming he/she had to vote for a person whom he/she did not support (i.e., political identity: “So sorry, I voted for someone who does his job well...”). Here, the user presents an anecdote which explains how the Conservative candidate worked very well while other candidates did not. Moreover, ethos as a resident in an “otherwise forgotten area” is supported by the provision of anecdote. Such information is in fact difficult for people to know about (i.e., how candidates in other constituencies behave, and in particular how a candidate participates in a local event under the current UK election system). Therefore, the provision of such an anecdotal story represents its authenticity well, supporting his/her reason for voting.

A similar provision is also made during the discussion about financial cuts in the public service sector, such as National Health Insurance:

“I think out services [N.B. public service sectors] are suffering because of bad management and terrible procurement procedures. I was in the civil service for quite a few years, I saw deals where already overpriced equipment is delayed for years and the public purse forks out a few million for obsolete technology. And then thy go back to the same companies and consortium and sign another shitty deal that is late and over budget again and again. A number of non-jobs exist where people have been employed for years but there's no balls to get rid of them, along side over worked staff getting signed off

long term for genuine stress, and the consultants on a few hundred notes a day, and god knows why there were there, seemingly mostly wandering around in expensive suites and drinking coffee”.

(User 17’s second comment)

User 17 firstly claimed that he/she was an ex-worker in the public sector (i.e., ethos). Having described himself/herself as an ex-worker in the sector, he/she then claimed that a problem with the civil service was not the amount of funds available to them but mismanagement in the workplace. In order to make his claim persuasive, he/she provided his/her working experience in the public sector and described it in detail (“I was in the civil service for quite a few years, I saw deals where already overpriced equipment is delayed for years...”). It needs to be emphasized that only User 17 and other public service workers are able to describe how their work was managed and how they felt about it. The information that User 17 provided (e.g., “overpriced but old equipment”, “overworked and non-worked staff”) is, in fact, invisible or else unavailable to people working in other sectors or workplaces. Therefore, it is considered that ethos as claimed by users is supported by exclusive information (see the section below for further discussion).

3.2. Use of Rhetoric to Convince Others

In addition to providing anecdotes justifying their voting reasons, it is worth focusing on the function of such justification. While users justified their voting reasons by telling anecdotes, these stories seemed to blame politicians or political parties as not working. For example, User 1 said:

“Without him [N.B. Conservative candidate] our town would of [sic] lost out on the new schools and facilities we desperately need, promised 15 years ago by Lab/Lib councils. Wasn't much information from the other candidates about what they'd do for local or in parliament except party snippets...”

(User 1)

User 1 clearly states that the Labour Party and the Liberal Democratic Party did not work for what the local town needed. In fact, User 1 later writes in the comment above that he/she voted for a candidate whom he/she did not really support. The reasoning here indicates a negative choice according to which he/she did not actually have a positive reason or motivation for voting for the Conservative Party. Moreover, similar reasoning can be found across the thread. For example, User 3 says:

“One of my main gripes with the TV debates in tandem with FPTP - Local representatives get chosen by national party affiliations.

They may lead their parties but they're not who's representing you, especially locally.”

(User 3)

This comment seems to accuse the current election system of user 3’s voting reason. Under the FPTP system, a candidate is elected if he/she gains the largest number of votes in his/her constituency. In other words, it is possible that the number of votes for unsuccessful candidates be larger than the number of votes for the government. Therefore, User 2 says:

“Sometimes our system just doesn't give voters a decent option, and you have to make compromises.” (User 2)

User 2 argues that the election system (i.e., FPTP) places voters in a dilemma according to which they had to vote for someone whom they did not support. As argued above, the results of the FPTP system may not reflect the entirety of opinion in a constituency. Therefore, although a post by User 3 raised this substantial issue about the system - and it remains understandable - overall his/her comments seem to excuse the result of the election – it is not his/her fault that the Conservative Party won a majority in Parliament. In short, he/she seems to excuse the election result by seeking a cause resulting from an external factor which is beyond his/her control.

It is worth to note that users in the data set do not frequently use pathos. Although a comment by User 2 earlier indicates his/her emotion (“Even as an ardent lefty I fully sympathise with you about this.”), it seems uncommon to show their emotion in the comments in the thread.

3.3.A Well-organized Writing Style

The results suggest that the organization of posts can also work as a form of rhetoric, in particular *logos*. Some users would write their comments in a well-organized paragraph, developing their arguments in a linear (i.e., logical) order. The post below is an extract from a well-structured post:

“One of my main gripes with the TV debates in tandem with FPTP - Local representatives get chosen by national party affiliations. They may lead their parties but they're not who's representing you, especially locally. Incumbent Lib Dem here in Cardiff was pretty good had worked hard voted against student fees, held her seat for 10 years and worked with the community... she came to my door multiple times during the run up to the election, not a leaflet - her personally. But there was no way she was going to hold her seat in a largely student area. Luckily the Labour woman who replaced her also looks to be quite adept with good principles but she has no experience in government I didn't see her once, a small tree in flyers though. PR won't be enough to fix this, either get rid of TV debates (which I am sure many disagree with) or reform our system of government (another major problem).”
(User 3)

This post is structured in terms of “Statement” (what a writer wants to say), “Supporting Sentences for Statement” and “Restatement” (writing the Statement in the last sentence of the post) in linear order. User 3 states his/her main opinion in the first two sentences, i.e., that the election system is problematic (*viz.*, FPTP). The user then explains why he/she thinks in this way, although the explanation is anecdotal (e.g., “she came to my door multiple times ...”). In the final sentence, the user writes the statement but in a paraphrased way. While this style is commonly seen in academic writing (e.g., papers, reports, essays), this academic writing style can often be found throughout the thread:

“Thanks! There's going to be some unpopular opinions coming up: I felt the previous Lab government were over-spending whilst in power, and their softer approach to reducing the budget deficit with promises of investment this time round lead me to feel they still have a similar economic approach. Correctly or incorrectly, I think lowering / ending the deficit will make the UK more resilient and stable in the future, and I didn't feel Labour takes this as a primary driving concern ...”
(User 17's second comment)

This study found User 17’s comment above begins with an acknowledgement to another user (who asked User 17 questions about the issues) and the user’s answers to the question (N.B. the quotation above is shortened). Each answer was also structured in a well-organized way: statement, explanation, and either restatement or a specific point. Therefore, the comment is structured not only as an acknowledgement to answers but also each answer is organized so that a user can follow the comments logically.

4. Discussion and Limitations of this Study

The above result showed how Reddit users use their anecdote as rhetorical device during their discussion on voting reason in the UK general election. Under anonymized environment, they use their anecdotes to support their ethos (see section 4.1) and logos (see section 4.3) to manifest their voting reasons, while they do not appeal to pathos (i.e. emotion) of others. Drawing from discussions in sections 3.2, and 4.1 to 4.3, this study argues that Reddit users showed their voting reason as follows: they support their voting reason (i.e. ‘identity’ in Gee’s framework) with anecdote (‘politics’) by writing in a linear way (‘connection’). Moreover, findings of this research could be fitted into the literature in many ways. First, although the literature has found that online discussion tends to involve aggressive words or phrases (‘flaming’: see Papacharissi, 2004), this research found that some people attempt to persuade others without using such phrases. Instead, users discussed the voting reason in a seemingly moderate manner, which is something unreported in previous studies. Second, the literature to date has explored how professional politicians justify their statements (e.g. Kienpointner, 2013) but not how the ‘general public’ justifies its opinion. Third, although it is still possible that the dataset in this study may include a post from a professional politician, the anonymity of the Internet masks such identifiable information, making it invisible. Therefore, the results have some limits to its generalizability.

As shown in the Literature Review section, the studies exploring online political discussion tend to observe verbal attacks and the use of offensive words during discussions. However, the results of this study do not witness the exchange of such words, instead observing the provision of anecdotes and persuasion in well-organized paragraphs (in some cases). This writing style is similar that of professional discussion, in particular academic writing (e.g. organizing through an opening sentence, supporting sentences and restatement), being well-structured and organized (Swales and Feak, 2009: 45). However, users do not include reference lists, citations (e.g. ‘author-date’) or abstracts, which would be included in academic writing (i.e. proof of claims: logos). Moreover, there are often grammatical mistakes (e.g. lack of a subject or verb) and conversational phrases used in posts. The lack of these elements and grammatical mistakes in Reddit posts would partially support Crowston et al. (2010), who claim that it is almost impossible to establish conventional rules (such as academic genre) in online writing. While their posts do not provide academic-style ‘hard evidence’, they use their anecdote as their proof of claims. In particular, given that Reddit is one of the UGC websites (where people provide its content: OECD, 2007), and given that the demographics of its users are not known, this study argues that writing style in the thread might reflect its (potentially) complex demographics among users. However, in reference to the previous studies, it is still impossible to know the exact reasons for writing in such a way in this context.

In addition to the organization of the writing (i.e. ‘connection’), it worth mention how people use rhetoric to persuade others. For example, a study by Atkins (2015) found how professional politicians use their position (i.e. ethos: ‘identity’ in Gee’s model) in the party to persuade fellow politicians; however, people in the Reddit thread used anecdotes (i.e. logos: ‘politics’) to justify their reasoning. While it is understandable that people in Reddit cannot refer their social status to convince others, their use of rhetoric is complex – while they claim their ethos, they organize their comments in a linear way. The cause of this complexity could be rooted in the anonymity of the Internet (see below).

It is worth emphasizing how people provide their logos (i.e. anecdotes) to justify their voting reasons. While their use of anecdote identifies their voting reasons with an external factor, it is interesting to note how people excuse about their behaviour in face-to-face settings on the Internet. In fact, Hipp et al. (2015) found a similar result in their exploration of online narratives about rape in the field of psychology. The results Hipp et al. saw that people seek to absolve their responsibility for their behaviour (i.e. rape) to victims and justify their sexual assault. Although Hipp et al. admit that the users’ demographics in Reddit might reflect the general population (i.e., it includes those who do not commit sexual assault), it is still notable that they excuse their behaviour in online forums (ibid: 3-6). While it is not possible to assert that online users normally excuse about their offline behaviour on the Internet, the results of Hipp et al. (ibid) and this research might imply a characteristic feature of online discourse.

Despite the provision of their ethos supported by their anecdotes, it is worth emphasizing the impossibility of validating or confirming the genuineness of this information on the Internet. This is the most challenging issue in online interaction research, since it is almost impossible to track down each online user. Although it is claimed that the demographics of Reddit users are close to the general population (Duggan and Smith, 2013), the claim apparently does not reflect the complete background of Reddit users, as the study by Duggan and Smith surveyed online users in the US who were older than 18 years old. Indeed, there are many types of online discussion forums of which anonymity is less strong than others. For example, Moodle, which universities often use for interaction between their students and staff, is not so anonymized that demographics of its users are clearer than Reddit. However, Reddit does not provide background information of its users – they need to interact each other without knowing others. While it is impossible to claim that anonymity definitely influences the discussion style in the thread, the Internet is certainly a unique place for people to discuss political topics.

There is a need to explore why people are able to discuss things in a moderate manner. Just as the reviews of the literature found a general trend of flaming during online discussion, it is necessary to carry on a further investigation of such discourse. Although this is only a suggestion, it would be beneficial to studying the relationship between people’s general perceptions of the Conservative Party and their policies, particularly their financial cuts in welfare.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that people persuade others by using ethos and anecdotes when organizing their posts in a similar way to academic or professional writing. The organization of the comments guides readers (i.e., the users in the thread) to understand individuals’ voting

reasons in the general election smoothly, since it works as rhetoric to persuade other people. This step-by-step writing style might make users' claims seem legitimate and persuasive. In addition, the study also found that people use anecdotes to justify their political identity and to describe the candidates in their constituencies. While the reference to a personal, anecdotal story is considered as supporting a user's claim about his/her voting reasons, such claims become more powerful within a well-organized structure.

As discussed above, the rhetorical organization of comments in the online forum suggests that the anonymity of the Internet might influence what kind of rhetoric people need to employ during the discussion. In particular, people cannot know how candidates in other constituencies work (i.e., beyond their own local areas) unless people in that area disclose such information. Since the Internet is a relatively anonymous environment, they may need to structure their comments thoroughly so that other users can be convinced by their comments. As such, in an anonymous environment, people do not have any means to see whether their claims or evidence are genuine; nor do they know what kinds of people other users are. Therefore, the interactions taking place on the Internet can be very different from those in everyday life.

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