How Trump's troll army is cashing in on his campaign

Kate Stohr and Kristen V. Brown
5/16/16 7:00AM

Save

MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN
FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE
AL 57417193 B
L12
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
100
ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS
TRUMP

Matt Adams is invested in the candidacy of Donald Trump, but not just because he wants to Make America Great Again. For Adams, Trumps' ascendency to presumptive presidential nominee of the Republican party comes with a cash prize. Potentially, he hopes, a big one.

Adams, a 46-year-old web developer and IT specialist in northern Maryland, runs the Facebook group Trump Nation. With 47,615 likes, it is among the most popular of the hundreds of Facebook pages dedicated to spreading the good word of Trump. And like many of the most popular Trump pages, it's hoping to profit from the candidate's fervent fandom: in addition to posts extolling Trumpian virtues, it's hawking custom-designed Trump t-shirts, stickers, car flags, and, soon, a 14-carat-gold Trump lapel pin. Adams thinks Trump is the most marketable presidential candidate in history.

> **Half of the 25 most popular pro-Trump pages were selling Trump merchandise. By contrast, just four of the top 25 pro-Clinton pages had merchandise for sale.**

"If you have something cool for [Trump supporters] to wear, they will buy it," Adams said. "Everybody and their mother is selling something Trump."

Greenlight
Kids Debit Card
Join 2 Million Parents & Kids
Sign Up

G/O Media may get a commission
EXCLUSIVE FOR NEW CUSTOMERS
Caliper CBD

$35 at Caliper
Use promo code KINJATEN

G/O Media may get a commission
Hisense 55" H9G Quantum Series LED 4K UHD Smart Android TV

$650 at Best Buy

You may also like

READ MORE

- Don't Dream, It's Over
- Conservative Journalist Tries to Shame AOC for Participating in Society
- Joe Biden Calls for Trump's Impeachment for the Very First Time

BIKERS FOR
EST 2016
LIVE TO RIDE
RIDE TO LIVE
TRUMP

Prime Day's Best Deals
READ MORE

For Horrors Week, we present 6 scary podcasts for Halloween listening

Trump's rise to power was fueled by his business experience, so it may come as no surprise that many of his acolytes are similarly obsessed with money-making. We queried Facebook's Graph API to find pages that mention "Trump," "Make America Great Again," or a similar candidate-related phrase and found more than 700 pages discussing Trump's candidacy on Facebook. More than half of the total "likes" for those pages went to ones that, like Trump Nation, were selling something. Some of Trump's most visible online supporters, in other words, are people cashing in on his political success.

"You can never be too greedy," Trump once said. We can only imagine that the candidate would approve.

Facebook Pages Related to Donald Trump's Campaign

Jalopnik

American Automakers Are Learning A Bleak Lesson About Selling Cheap Cars

Today 8:20AM

Come alive with the forest.
Ad Council
Find one near you at
DISCOVER the FOREST.org

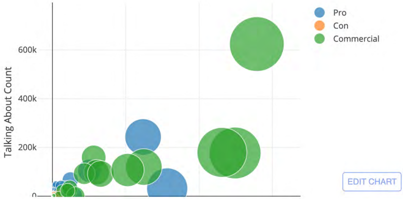
MORE FROM G/O MEDIA

READ ON THE TAKEOUT

Rare lobster saved from death row for being too dang beautiful

READ ON JALOPNIK

I Bought One Of The Cheapest Volkswagen Touaregs On Facebook Marketplace To Drive Across The Country



> **Data source:** Facebook Graph API search results as of April 9, 2016 showing the popularity of pages in support of Trump, against Trump and selling goods using Trump. Pages owned by the candidate himself or unrelated to the candidate's presidential campaign were removed from the dataset.

The goods for sale on the Facebook pages include t-shirts, ads, credit cards and online training seminars. Some pages have darker business practices, linking to spam sites designed to capture user e-mail addresses or sites that infect their computers with malware.

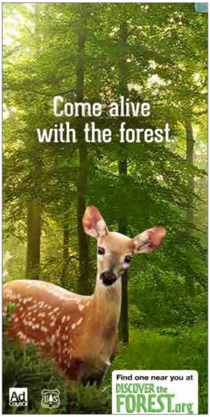
Not all of the entrepreneurs have particularly strong political loyalties, as they also run pages that sell gear targeted at Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders supporters. The promoters of this particular unisex Trump tank, for example, sell Clinton gear, too.

HILLARY
CLINTON
FOR PRESIDENT

Hillary Clinton For President

READ ON lifehacker
10 Ways You Should Be Using Vinegar in Your Garden

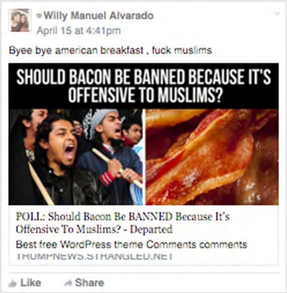
READ ON GIZMODO
The Army's New Night-Vision Goggles Look Like Technology Stolen From Aliens


Come alive with the forest.
Find one near you at DISCOVER the FOREST.org

Classic Tee

$22.99

What's disturbing is that in a review of dozens of these pages, we found many entrepreneurs embrace rhetoric filled with bigotry, misogyny and hate in order to attract clicks and turn a profit. Take this anti-Muslim post, for example, shared to a Trump fan page called Donald Trump for President 2016!!!!!!:



Willy Manuel Alvarado
April 15 at 4:41pm

Byee bye american breakfast , fuck muslims

SHOULD BACON BE BANNED BECAUSE IT'S OFFENSIVE TO MUSLIMS?

POLL: Should Bacon Be BANNED Because It's Offensive To Muslims? - Departed
Best free WordPress theme Comments comments
TRUMPNEWS.STRANGLED.NET

The post linked to TrumpNews.Strangled.net (a now dead site) that then redirected to a site that pays users to share links. The blatant racism here, it seems, was part of a pay-for-clicks ad scheme. The post itself received more than 371 comments before it was removed six days later, presumably for violating terms of service.

The profit-motivated political trolling appears to be almost exclusive to Trump. We compared Trump fan pages to those for Hillary Clinton: half of the 25 most popular pro-Trump pages were either selling Trump merchandise or using the Trump brand to promote content hosted on other sites. By contrast, just four of the top 25 pro-Clinton pages had merchandise for sale.

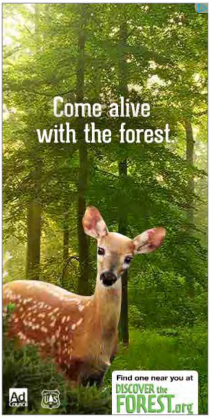
It is the nature of Trump himself that makes his candidacy ripe for this kind of exploitation. The Trump brand was already an easily marketed and recognizable commodity. His political brand has followed suit, with his official campaign gear so popular that some have wondered whether his presidential run is really just an elaborate scheme to sell hats.

Some of Trump's most visible online supporters are people cashing in on his political success.

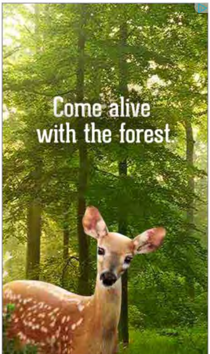
Al Ferretti, a Minnesota digital marketing consultant who runs Trump for President Fan Club as well as two other Trump fan pages, told us that when he did an online survey of those who visited his page's corresponding website, 70 percent of respondents offered up their email addresses.

"In all my years as a marketer, I've never seen anything like it," he said. In other words, Trump fans are easy pickings.

The most popular Facebook page our query returned was "Donald Trump For President," which has more than 700,000 likes and the highest user engagement of the Trump pages, according to Facebook's metrics. It appears to exist primarily to redirect traffic to RedStateWatcher.com, a pro-Trump site



Come alive with the forest.
Find one near you at DISCOVER the FOREST.org



Come alive with the forest.

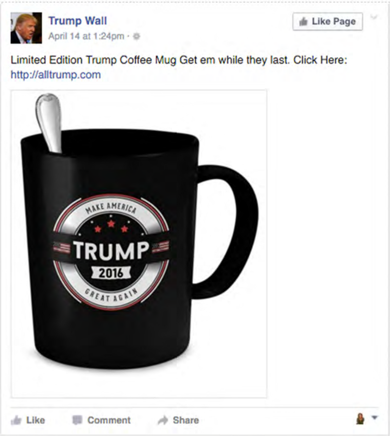
founded in 2015 that is the embodiment of ad dollar-generating clickbait. (Its owners run a number of other clickbait sites, including one devoted to Bigfoot.) One of the page's posts linking to a RedStateWatcher.com story titled, “What do you think of Donald Trump’s nickname for Hillary Clinton?” attracted more than 5,000 likes and 1,600 comments. For comparison, a Buzzfeed post revealing the true color of The Dress got 10,000 likes and 2,400 comments. Red State Watcher is estimated to bring in as much as $300 in revenue per day.

Of the dozens of Trump pages seemingly run by click-farms, just one responded to our request for an interview, though the anonymous operators of the Trumpians fan page declined to provide the name of their company, citing the "volatility of Trump haters." Trump's Facebook page is the only one of over 100 the company runs that's dedicated to an individual politician. "The other [candidates] don't have any value from a merchandise perspective 😉 ," the operator said by Facebook Messenger.

Many of Trump's fan sites hide behind a veil of anonymity as they spread repetitive—and often hateful—content around the web in a quest for revenue. Often you’ll find posts promoting the same merchandise appearing on multiple pages, like this “limited edition” mug that appears on three of the top five most popular Trump pages we found.

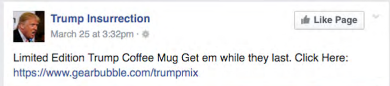
operator said by Facebook Messenger.

Many of Trump's fan sites hide behind a veil of anonymity as they spread repetitive—and often hateful—content around the web in a quest for revenue. Often you’ll find posts promoting the same merchandise appearing on multiple pages, like this “limited edition” mug that appears on three of the top five most popular Trump pages we found.


Trump Wall

April 14 at 1:24pm ·

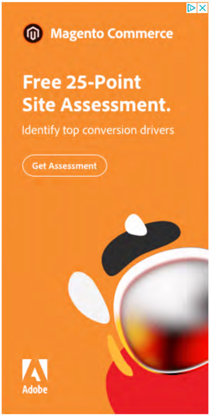
Limited Edition Trump Coffee Mug Get em while they last. Click Here: http://alltrump.com

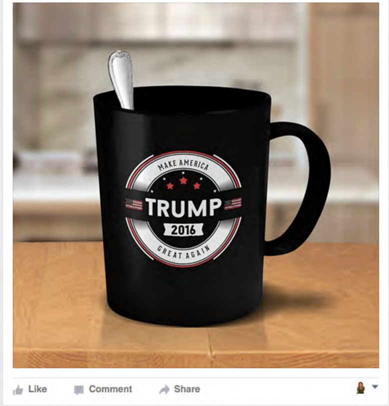

Trump Insurrection

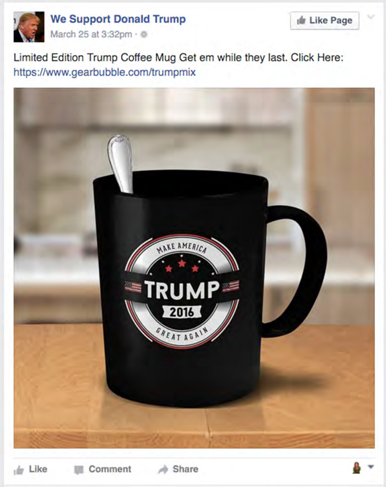
March 25 at 3:32pm ·

Limited Edition Trump Coffee Mug Get em while they last. Click Here: https://www.gearbubble.com/trumpmix

Find one near you at
DISCOVER the FOREST.org
Ad Council


Magento Commerce
Free 25-Point Site Assessment.
Identify top conversion drivers
Get Assessment
Adobe



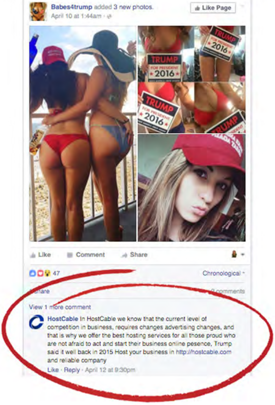


We Support Donald Trump
March 25 at 3:32pm ·

Limited Edition Trump Coffee Mug Get em while they last. Click Here: https://www.gearbubble.com/trumpmix

This pro-Trump gem, Babes4trump, mostly posts mildly pornographic photos of women who ostensibly support Trump. The top comment on every single post is from a web hosting company, hawking its services:

greenlight
Kids Debit Card
Join 2 Million Parents & Kids.
Sign Up



Babes4trump added 3 new photos.
April 10 at 1:44am

HostCable In HostCable we know that the current level of competition in business, requires changes advertising changes, and that is why we offer the best hosting services for all those proud who are not afraid to act and start their business online pesence, Trump said it well back in 2015 Host your business in http://hostcable.com and reliable company
April 12 at 9:30pm

Come alive with the forest.
Find one near you at DISCOVER the FOREST.org

We reached out to HostCable, which is based in Mexico, via Facebook Messenger, but were given ambiguous answers about the company's connections to Trump and the Facebook page. The company said that while it doesn't run Babes4Trump, its "social media promotion network" hosts a number of Trump websites and runs an app that automates posting of comments to them.

In some cases, the support is genuine even if the desire for profit is, too. Ferretti said that while he does sell Trump tees and mugs through his pages, he and his two partners' main hope is to "help connect supporters and ultimately help get [Trump] elected." Since starting the page last July, he estimates he's sold about a thousand t-shirts at $22.99 a pop—just enough to cover the cost and time spent running the page. He expects it to ramp up once Trump officially clenches the nomination at the Republican convention this July.

Adams, of Trump Nation, has invested in a more elaborate operation: he has a team of part-time contributors that help him create new graphics and original videos and who post content dozens of times a day. After launching his Trump store a month ago, he says he's had a few hundred orders. He eventually hopes to turn Trump Nation into a home for the new Common Sense Conservative movement—and into a nice-sized portion of his pay check.

Adams said he takes issue with pages spreading hate in a quest to profit off Trump. "Some people are out there just trying to whore a few dollars out of it," he said. "I'm trying to build a brand—and a respectable discussion."

Kate Stohr is a data journalist and community builder based in San Francisco, CA.

Kristen is a technology reporter for Fusion. She enjoys tea, giraffes and the occasional app.

SHARE THIS STORY

GET OUR NEWSLETTER

Subscribe

DISCUSSION

Start the discussion