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Abstract

What is posted on the Internet about a person's identity and reputation has the potential power to affect others' perceptions of them. This study aims to understand and describe how this occurs by undertaking a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the website Lamebook. It asks in what ways people's online identity and reputation are shaped by others, or by one's self, that may influence others' opinions about them and how is this being done? The results suggest several characteristics of power relations are being exercised by people against others and themselves that harm their identity and reputation. These are achieved through gossiping and spreading rumours to persuade readers to believe harmful information about others and themselves. This study demonstrates the importance of being aware of how Internet users present themselves online and the potentially harmful consequences this has when viewed by a potentially large and unknown audience. The implications of this study advise Internet users to consider carefully potential negative outcomes to one's identity and reputation from negative information and illustrate how others possess power to shape these in a harmful way.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Identity, Internet, Gossip, Power, Reputation, Rumours

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The Power Gossip and Rumour Have in Shaping Online Identity and Reputation: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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What is posted on the Internet about a person's identity and reputation has the potential power to affect others' perceptions of them. This study aims to understand and describe how this occurs by undertaking a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the website Lamebook. It asks in what ways people's online identity and reputation are shaped by others, or by one's self, that may influence others' opinions about them and how is this being done? The results suggest several characteristics of power relations are being exercised by people against others and themselves that harm their identity and reputation. These are achieved through gossiping and spreading rumours to persuade readers to believe harmful information about others and themselves. This study demonstrates the importance of being aware of how Internet users present themselves online and the potentially harmful consequences this has when viewed by a potentially large and unknown audience. The implications of this study advise Internet users to consider carefully potential negative outcomes to one's identity and reputation from negative information and illustrate how others possess power to shape these in a harmful way. Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Identity, Internet, Gossip, Power, Reputation, Rumours

Information posted about people on the Internet has power to shape others' views and opinions of someone with potentially negative consequences that affects perceptions of another's identity and reputation. Casual attitudes towards privacy, increasingly easy-to-use software, particularly social media sites like Facebook, and less inhibition when revealing details of one's private lives all play a role in this issue (Acquisti & Gross, 2006). The power of written texts to influence thought and opinion about someone or something has always existed in social life. The need for individuals to monitor what information appears about them on the Internet is a crucial problem for people to consider.

Power plays a crucial role in written discourse because it controls the social beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of people of any society or group (David & Dumanig, 2011; van Dijk, 1998). These can be in any documents, but particularly so on the Internet. Power is a complex strategically driven phenomenon produced through social interaction from many directions and human actors often resulting in the maintenance of inequitable social relations (Foucault, 1980, 1981). People use it in specific ways in social situations to control outcomes, and as a persuasive device through the use of language to cause the inequality and marginalisation of others.

Gossiping and spreading rumours are types of power tactics used on the Internet, particularly social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, to persuade others to believe information about themselves or others. The words used can present to the world an image not wanted. Gossip and rumour can result in stigma and shaming for people where their identity and reputation are judged negatively. Peluchette and Karl (2010) state Internet users do not appreciate the consequences of posting negative material to websites. Additionally, employers routinely use the Internet to gather character information about current and potential employees and base hiring people on this information (Clark & Roberts, 2010).

An example of how power may operate to negatively shape someone's identity or reputation is Adam Devine and his Facebook page comment. He posted an inappropriate comment about a baby (Lamebook, 2009) on his Facebook timeline leading to accusations of paedophilia, but claimed his account was hacked. This was not believed by his Facebook friends, many writing hateful comments on his page. The Loyal K.N.G. (2009) blog reproduced his Facebook page showing the negative comments he received from his friends and his full name and photograph. Such an example serves to warn us of what can happen if we do not control the information posted about us online.

This paper is a critical study of written texts using the theory and qualitative methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It is analytical research that studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are practised by the use of talk and text in a particular social situation (van Dijk, 2001). The purpose of CDA is to unmask power relations embedded in the text (Janks, 1998). This is why this method is called critical (Janks, 1998); the practice of writing text shapes a social structure and its beliefs and attitudes, as well as constraining something or someone (Fairclough, 1992). The Internet's content is a reflection of social and cultural practices and text and photographs can be posted online to practice abuses of power, dominance over others and inequalities.

In this paper, the types of text examined do shape the identity and reputation of someone, regardless of the audience which reads such text. That text possesses power to shape those aspects of someone is a significant problem because it impacts on one's interactions with society. What is written about you and is posted to a wide audience has the power to do that. Facebook is an excellent medium to examine this; however, obtaining text to analyse is prohibitive due to ethical concerns. I will use data from the website Lamebook (www.lamebook.com) which reproduces Facebook postings with informant details masked. This study's contribution is to bring awareness of managing one's Internet presence. Studies in many disciplines demonstrate the consequences of this (Michelson & Mouly, 2002; Noon & Delbridge, 1993) whilst Solove (2007) warns of damage to one's identity and reputation because negative information was posted about a person on the Internet. As Gatling, Mills and Lindsay (2014) state in their CDA study, being aware of how text influences readers to make decisions about issues is important to address the inequalities in society that the written word often influences.

Literature Review

The purpose of this review is to give the study a context by clarifying the four main criteria it addresses: identity, reputation, gossip and rumour.

Why Protect Identity and Reputation?

A person's identity and reputation, whilst different, are sought to be shaped favourably in others' minds and fiercely protected especially when damaged. The Internet, in particular social media such as Twitter and Facebook due to their accessibility to the public despite privacy settings, can damage a person's reputation and result in social ostracism, economic disadvantage through not being able to obtain employment, or legal consequences. Fine (2008) suggests people engage in forms of self-presentation and impression management to modify their images in the eyes of others. If they are gossiped about or rumours are spread about them many will resort to legal or other measures to correct this, but the information on the Internet can remain there permanently.

Distinguishing between identity and reputation is important to clarify for this study. Therefore these definitions describe what is meant by either. First, with defining identity, Hogg

and Abrams (1988) describe it as a self-concept; what someone believes about themselves and how this is presented to society. Believing this, they want others to believe their self-concept as well. Wendt (1992) states identities are stable and role-specific about self, hence they want to be maintained as a presentation to others in a certain way. When a stable sense of identity is established there is little thought by the self to shape it, but when threatened or questioned repairing or revising it becomes a conscious activity to alter its presentation to the world (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2012).

A reputation is a product of a relationship between individuals where a person will follow a course of action creating information and expectations about themselves in the views of others (Bellah, 1986; Chong, 1992). This involves asserting power over others to maintain a positive perception of self, as occurs on Facebook when people spread rumours about others behaviour, yet give a one-sided account to protect their reputation. Krebs (1982) states this type of behaviour is about oppositional intentions; if a person is being spoken about acts altruistically then they are seen as good people and described to others as such, but if people are seen as egotistical they are talked about in negative ways. Chong (1992) states this motivates people to be self-conscious about the implications of our behaviours so we maintain a good reputation, which suggests an appreciation and awareness of the power talk and text can have over us if it is not carefully maintained.

Goffman's (1959) work on identity has always been a key source for scholars to explain why people behave in ways to present their self-identity to the world. This is the concept Goffman calls 'the peg' whereby one hangs one's presentation to the world and carries out different acts and roles according to the context of the social situation they find themselves in. When one's identity or reputation is damaged, repairing it becomes a preoccupation. The Internet did not exist in its current form at that time, yet his assertion that people will engage in behaviours to avoid being embarrassed or humiliated and present themselves favourably to the world (Goffman, 1959) exists as much now, only the mass media have increased the potential viewing audience of those may judge a person's identity or reputation purely on Internet content.

To illustrate, in a study of Usenet Groups, which functioned like an early form of social media does today with information sharing, Buchanan and Smith (1999) demonstrated how even with anonymity users of it would desire to avoid negative assumptions and criticisms being made about them. They would also assert power over others to convince readers of another being wrong, engaging in gossip to defend themselves against accusations. As Buchanan and Smith agree with Goffman, this was Goffman's concept of the personal front or peg being people display to the world (Goffman, 1959, 1963) which functions to control the perception others have of one's identity or reputation. If damaged by gossiping or rumour spreading, the person attempts to defend themselves and correct the impression others have of them to something more positive (Buchanan & Smith, 1999).

Tholander's (2003) study of Swedish primary school pupils interacting in classrooms also demonstrated Goffman's idea of people using gossip and rumour to protect their identities and reputation. Tholander's key observation was that pupils would spend considerable time spreading gossip about other pupils aiming to persuade others about the trustworthiness of those being gossiped about. Insinuating another pupil had done something wrong shaped the views of the other classmates, persuading them to believe the negative information being transmitted (Tholander, 2003). Shaping a positive reputation at the expense of another was seen daily. Yet when the gossiper's front, or reputation, is damaged by other pupils' and they in turn are gossiped about, considerable effort was undertaken to convince others it is another person who is at fault. This is now a common strategy Internet users employ to protect their identity and reputation at the expense of another person or group.

A key finding in protecting identity and reputation studies is that people will deliberately use specific words to protect themselves while harming others if it achieves a goal of preserving one's own identity and reputation to the world positively. Using this strategy through text is a form of power because it attempts to shape someone's reputation and identity to persuade others to disapprove, shun or ignore them. The Internet is, through its anonymity, well placed to be able to facilitate this.

Gossip and Rumour Research

There is a significant difference between gossiping and spreading rumours. The definition of gossip is that it is the provision of information transmitted from one person to another (Wittek & Wielers, 1998) regardless of it being factual or not. It is also an evaluative measure used to shape an opinion about someone (Eder & Enke, 1991). Gossip is usually a verbal activity but with the increased use of the Internet it functions there as a mechanism to harm others. It also has an inner-circleness to it constrained by groups or geographic regions (Rosnow & Foster, 2005). However, the Internet, as radio and television have achieved, removed this as inner circles enlarge when more people have access to information about others.

Rumours are false or true statements with inscribed private meanings that maybe be negative or positive (Donovan, 2007; Rosnow & Foster, 2005; Schmidt, 2004) but develop into beliefs about someone. People do not need intimate knowledge of those being the subject of rumours on the Internet; therefore the words that comprise a rumour can persuade someone to believe something about another and make judgements that may be false. Nevertheless, the words used about another can be powerful to persuade readers and encourage false judgements to be formed which the person may not wish to be known or are untrue.

People have always been urged to be mindful of gossip and rumours. Smith (1913) wrote in *The American Journal of Nursing* about the need for professional female nurses to guard their personal reputation. She argued female nurses must be vigilant of their behaviour when off duty. Describing how some had met a group of men who gossiped about the nurses' behaviours, Smith also argued this not only shaped the reputation of those individuals negatively, but tainted the profession of nursing as being irresponsible and of low moral standards (Smith, 1913). The article was an important cautionary one because it showed how gossip specifically could shape another's view of someone. She also cautioned that such perceptions can have far reaching consequences for themselves and the groups they identify with.

Deal (1998) described a similar situation to Smith's how others possessed power to persuade people to believe negative information using gossip and rumour power mechanisms. He described how both were used in Chester, England between 1560 and 1650 when widows were frequently described as being evil witches. Once labelled, negative reports of their reputations and identities spread beyond the area where the gossip occurred with people suggesting to stay away from them (Deal, 1998). These women had difficulty stopping these accusations in their local area and when they travelled. They were shunned and discriminated against based purely on heresy gossip (Deal, 1998). The nurses and the widows in Deal's and Smith's studies experienced the power others used to shape their reputations in a harmful way due to the transmission of gossip and rumour that influenced perceptions others had of them. Early studies argued gossip was a phenomenon operating in tight-knit private groups or connected physical communities (Deal, 1998; Fiske, 1987; Spacks, 1986). Now it operates in larger spaces and has the potential to harm as greater numbers of people have access to information about others (Harrington & Bielby, 1995). Internet users employ these power mechanisms to protect their identity and reputation whilst damaging others, assisted by the ease

to do this across the Internet (Pearson, 2009). The persons gossiping or spreading rumours are asserting a form of power over another. This effectively persuades others that harmful and inaccurate information is true about someone and influence others to make decisions about that person based on this information.

Methodology and Method

This study uses CDA principles and practices that key scholars such as van Dijk (2001, 1995) and Fairclough (1989, 1995) state demonstrate the operation of power and what inequalities exist in text. It is crucial to be state upfront that the goal of CDA, and this study, is to unmask embedded and concealed power relations that can shape identity and reputation, the act of explaining relationships between language, power and ideology as shown in texts (Janks, 1998). It is a method that focuses on relationships of power, dominance and inequality, how these are reproduced through text (van Dijk, 2001; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) and importantly it is not a neutral approach to texts yet rigour will be discussed in this section.

Critical Discourse Analysis Method

Critical Discourse Analysis examines written text systematically for specific examples of the operation of power relations that may exist. It focuses on relationships of power, dominance and inequality, and how these are reproduced through text (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2001). This study does the following:

1. It addresses a growing social problem, in this study being the potential harm a negative presentation of one's identity and reputation on the Internet and its consequences may cause;
2. The ideological work of CDA is to describe the power relations that are occurring between people who attempt to persuade others to believe information about another's identity and reputation in a particular way; and,
3. Such an analysis aims to describe the types of social interactions people have with each other that shape identity and reputation and how this is achieved through the written texts.

Research Question

The research question was, what are the characteristics of text from an Internet site that has the potential power to shape the identity and reputation of the person depicted in the text and how do they do this?

Sampling, Data Collection, Analysis and Ethical Issues

I collected 100 postings from Lamebook generated from users who posted Facebook extracts to it. The data are valid because they were not altered in any way. I also obtained written permission from the owners of Lamebook to use the postings. I addressed the ethical use of data following advice from The Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR; 2002), Bruckman (2002) and Madge (2007). First, that no password is required to be used to access the site so all postings are public and second, Lamebook's policy does not specifically prohibit the online material from being studied. The data were managed by using Weft QDA qualitative software as an aid in organising large amounts of text.

Three questions were asked of the texts during the analysis:

1. What types of relationships are occurring and between whom?
2. What aspects of power are being demonstrated, such as, who has what power over whom and what examples show this?
3. What can be drawn from the performances of those who post harmful text that suggest power is being exercised to persuade others information about another?

I identified who was involved and then examined the words to see where and how unequal power relations were being used to harm others and, importantly, draw out and describe inferences about why they may be harmful to the perception of one's identity or reputation. Paying attention to the way certain words are used and the way they are presented and drawing inferences from them is an important first step in identifying power relations between people.

The next step was to break down the text into micro-detail, framing it into categories. Assigning a category is important to give order to the text and illustrate examples where power relations that are unequal are persuading others to judge those who post the online information. Once data are analysed inferences about the text were made about what is going on in terms of power relations. It also assists in showing any patterns of power relations and identifies repeated things that are happening, as well as building an explanation of what is occurring.

As van Dijk (2001) advises, the way the text is constructed needs to demonstrate the particular linguistic style and wording that suggests inequality is taking place. What the results demonstrate are power mechanisms, operating through gossip and rumour, being structured and used to cause suffering, stigma, shame, injustice, inequality, insecurity and self-doubt (Fairclough et al., 2004) which do shape our views of how we view someone.

Criticisms of CDA, Researcher Relationship to the Data and Study Rigor

CDA research is criticised because the researcher is not neutral in drawing out and writing about the power relations being exercised. It is clear that it is a specific specialised set of methods that search for patterns of social inequality amongst groups exercised by power imbalances (van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2002). It is a way of describing how these operate. As the Internet is a place where someone's identity or reputation based on the material posted online can be a site of power imbalance, CDA is appropriate for this study.

My position as researcher to the text is not to assume that every person is a victim of power struggles through gossip and rumour, but to highlight what the social problem of harm that comes from Internet information is and how this problem manifests. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) advise on a way to manage bias in CDA studies; be consistently sceptical of the data as one interprets it. Being sceptical means being aware I am examining text, not gathering information verbally from the authors who posted information on Facebook that was reproduced on Lamebook. This acknowledges a weakness of a CDA study; that it is strictly textual and the researcher may misunderstand in their interpretation of the text the actual intent of the author.

Achieving rigor drew on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) advice. First, the methodological framework is explicit aiding the study by being open about what is being sought, a hallmark of an ethical study (Higginbottom, Pillay, & Boadu, 2013). Second, the study can be transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is where employing a detailed account of how power is operating, making explicit the patterns of relationships between those involved and putting them in a context and using the process of thick description (Geertz, 1973; Holloway; 1997) encourages a rigorous analysis. Thick description involves describing as best as possible the

behaviours but also the contexts in which they occur (Geertz, 1973). Rigor is achieved in this study because it goes beyond mere description and demonstrates how power operates by providing details and context where inequalities have occurred so the reader can reach their own conclusions about the findings.

Findings: How Does Power Shape Identity and Reputation?

Inequalities and injustices exist in the Lamebook texts because when private information becomes public knowledge through gossiping and rumour spreading, it shapes the identity and reputation of the person. As Goffman (1963) stated, the author's peg or presentation strategy is to encourage positive perceptions of their own identity or reputation whilst persuading readers of the negative attributes of another. In these postings we likely do not know the person's involved, yet we make judgements about them based on our own interpretations. These tend to be less favourably and can, and do, influence our perceptions of someone that may not be what that person or the person being discussed wants to happen.

Fairclough (1992) states a social practice is learnt from the external messages a person receives from it, which then become accepted by all. This is an accurate assessment of the current use of social media. People make the choice to post private information about others and will post information that makes others look villainous and immoral. Gossip and rumour spreading are the main practices that are used as power strategies on the Internet. This social practice has become engrained in society as we choose to communicate more information to greater numbers using this medium.

The categories which suggested gossip and rumours were being used to assert power to bring inequalities to others involved reoccurring topics. These were: sexual shaming including adultery and infidelity, conflicts with parents, accusations of inappropriate behaviours such as paedophilia and bestiality, disclosing private information about one's self, admission of drug use, racist jokes and sexist comments mostly about women. Although the reader may be amused by such admissions, the mere presence of them on Facebook, and their reproduction on Lamebook, can create a problem if it is seen by someone who will base decisions about the author or victim purely on the text that exists.

Examples of the Operation of Power: Gossiping and Rumour Making

In these examples, the power to persuade the reader and evaluate someone's behaviour is illustrated. As Duncan (2004) states, gossip encourages group cohesion by creating stronger group identification particularly when trying to present one's self as positive and the other negative. However, the context of the Internet makes it difficult not to judge behaviours if that person does not repair negative views of themselves. In these examples people gossip and spread rumours to shape our view of someone in a negative way because of something they may, or may not have, done.

In Example 1 the text the authors' write encourages group solidarity and agreement by accusing someone of bestiality, convincing the reader that person is villainous and immoral, emphasised by the use of capital letter in the initial accusation:

Example 1:

Author 1: By the way no one knows the nick I know....He had Sizzle lick peanut butter of his (male genitalia)!!! AND HE DID IT WITH JAKE HIS OTHER DOG TOO!!!

Author 2: Really? That kid is into bestiality? What a sicko, get the (expletive) away from that friggin loser! What the hell is wrong with u nikki?? U can easily do much better than him in no time at all. Ur crazy lill lady

Author 3: My guess is.....peanut butter is not just for eating anymore!!!! Lmao. But for real tho I will never look at p/b the same anymore.

Author 4: wow, is this something that should be on Facebook?

Author 1: Def. Barb the addict kicked me out cause I wouldnt lend him money to get high....

Author 4 tries to deflect the conversation by stating if this should be on Facebook, but author 1 responds by re-enforcing hence the power exerted here is to maintain the victim's identity as immoral and untrustworthy. This is a common tactic used to preserve one's reputation whilst shaping another's negatively. Example 2 further supports this power strategy as the male author derides his previous partner shaping her to be promiscuous:

Example 2:

Author 2: (Female): Who is in the yellow?

Author 1: (Male): (name of person masked) my slut ex gf

Author 3: (Female): i still can't believe you actually brought this in my house

Author 2: i wouldn't be surprised if he rode it around the house

Author 1: are u talking about the bike or the whore?

Friend 1: both

The gossiping here shows solidarity amongst people by transmitting information about a person's identity and reputation influences our view of behaviours. Setting up oppositional roles is done by the initiating author to present their view of the world as right, hence protecting them while persuading others to view the person being gossiped about to be at fault.

This strategy is taken further when the gossip or rumour spreading involves serious accusations. In Example 3, the originating author has not hidden any details about their intent to find out if a family member is a sex offender. The power strategy here is, as it is a controversial subject, we can be persuaded that the mere mention the father is a potential offender means his identity and reputation is one of being that:

Example 3:

Author 1: I need to find a free site that doesn't require registration to help me see if my dad registered as a sex offender, or not. If anyone knows of such a site, please let me know. He is not listed on Megan's law and if I find out he did not register, I am going to turn his ass in.

Author 2: i have an app on my iphone---i will check on there..what is his full name?

Author 1: Terry..thank you, hun, I owe you.

It is common that disclosing sexual behaviours such as this are widespread on social media as sources of rumour and gossip to shame and stigmatise people. The authors' make sure deceit is exposed to shape our view of the person who did the act. In Example 4, the author discloses the behaviour of someone who deceived someone into marrying them because of a fake pregnancy test.

Example 4:

Author: When you called me to ask me for my pregnant urine so you could trick Matt, I really didn't want any part of that. But I went against my better instincts with that one. Then the next thing I hear about 4 days later, you married him. You tricked that man into thinkin that you were indeed pregnant with his baby. Then after marrying him, you told him it's an egtopic pregnancy and you keep lying to him. Your marriage is based on lies...I feel tricked as your friend, betrayed that you would even let something that concerns me go as far like this. You don't even have the guts to be honest with me.

Example 5, displaying another common power strategy that shapes our view of someone's reputation, is a woman who discloses her husband's infidelity despite being separated from him. Like Example 4 the author discloses the act but this example clearly shows how the author uses words to present herself in a positive way maintaining her identity and reputation as positive whilst shaping her husband's negatively in a persuasive manner as well as the alleged mistress:

Example 5:

Who's idiot husband sends his mistress Valentine's Day flowers through UPS where his wife works? MINE! We've been separated for over 2 years but have been working on the marriage on and off, and he texts me every night good night and said Love you...I took back seat to 4 affairs with him. I know that makes me look totally dumb but I'm a kind hearted person, who believes people can change...So ladies if your man goes to LA Fitness you better warn him to stay away from the town slut that's a personal trainer there! I heard from many people she: Gives more rides than a Taxi. Gives more turns than a door knob. She's open like a 7 eleven...Hopefully he shares this post with his whore too, who is by the way married with 5 sons. Oh and yes I did contact her husband about the flowers, because he has every right to know!

The tone of this gossip is confessional because she discloses the revenge strategy she has to deal with this. She convinces the reader of the sexual impropriety and betrayal well, shaping our view of the husband and the mistress as perpetrators.

However, examples 4 and 5 suggest by their tone and misspellings that some postings are written in haste. This does not mean a power strategy is employed to shape someone's reputation or identity, but rather the intention, aside from anger, may be misinterpreted. In Example 6 the author posts explicit comments about his mother's alleged infidelity. Although the reader is unsure if this is a humorous post or not, the author clearly wants readers to view his mother's reputation and identity as adulterous and dishonest. A Facebook friend uses humour as a response to the oral sex reference, but the tone of the author's writing suggest some act did occur that is not humorous or amusing:

Example 6:

Author 1: Just when I thought things could not get any worst, I found out my mom is sucking someone else's (male genitals) behind my dad's back, but not only that, she cheated on whoever the (expletive) she was with. So pretty much my mom is a slut at the age of 50?

Author 2: DAMN BROTHER your family problems suck.

However, another variant of power the analysis showed was when the person who committed an act attempts to construct their identity and reputation as positive but another's negative. This is usually shown when people disclose their intimate relationship problems online. This can result in unintended power; that is, the power here is that it shapes our view of both authors in a negative way, as well as question why they would allow private disclosures in a public space. Example 7 shows such an exchange where author 1 employs words to convince author 2 to forgive her then uses words to attempt to damage the other author's reputation by posting infidelity and other sexual behaviours:

Example 7:

Author 1: If you really love me like you say you do you could forgive me, we got a baby together...we're both miserable and lost without each other, this is ridiculous, i said I was sorry i meant it, lets not forget you did me way dirtier...if you really wanna cut me off this easily then there is NO POSSIBLE WAY THAT YOU EVER LOVED ME

Author 2: ...i love you more than i love myself, but i can't be with you because i thought you were a completely different person i know i have (expletive) up but I thought you were better than me..but your not.. you let me down..i really thought you were a good girl

Author 1: then i shoulda just cut you off after you got your (male genitals) sucked by another girl because i thought youd never do that to me...(expletive) you ! you act like everything you did to me was fine!

Author 2: Stop putting this (expletive) on here if u wanna talk i'll give you one last talk

Author 1: being with someone else does make me sick to my stomach. i havent been with anyone else

Author 1: lol one last talk? You wwon't even pick up my calls. i'm done with the texting (expletive). at least here I can type fast and get my thoughts out

Author 1: you (expletive) destroyed all my (expletive) ! what's left? mini fridge and my dresser?

Author 2: u got other (expletive) to but fine don't whatever then u don't give a (expletive)

Author 2: this (expletive) is going all over the internet im done talkin to you

Author 1: the BABY IS SICK !! I can't just leave her

Author 2: have a nice life then

Author 1: wow youre (expletive) crazy...that's your baby

This interchange shapes both author's identity and reputation, suggesting that even online as in the physical world, people will accuse and defend often shifting topics to continue the argument. The language here shifts from persuading the reader to support author 1, yet author 2 uses language to try to deflect the criticisms. Both are trying to present to the world a positive view of their identity whilst constructing the other as negative. This interchange of power strategies is common on social media. Author 1 tries to shame author 2 by using their sick child to re-enforce our view author 1 is irresponsible and sexually dishonest. The inequalities here shape our view towards either or both towards a negative perception supported by the disclosure of their personal relationship issues in a public forum.

Whilst example 7 shapes our view of two individuals, other examples involve an online audience of participants who support the person who is using power to persuade others of a person's negative traits. Example 2 alluded to this with name-calling an ex partner, but in example 8 the scorned author uses humiliation to gather support in the online fight with the previous partner they had broken up with.

Example 8:

Author 1: Is single

Another Friend marks author status as 'likes this'

Author 2: Don't like this, bitch.

Author 1: i love u but we can't do this any longer

Author 2: You are SO PATHETIC

Author 1: U never really cared about me u wanted me to leave anyway don't say you didn't want this

Author 2: All you wanted from me was sex

Author 1: Yeah and did I ever get it maybe once or twice a man has needs

Author 2: Yeah, well maybe if you didn't have sex with my best friend I would have more.

Author 3: Was his (male genitalia) size a factor?

Author 1: Oh yeah...I don't like having sex with something I have to put under a microscope to see.

The presence of author 3's comment shows how the power strategy used to shape someone's identity and reputation in negative ways can persuade another to believe what is written. Gossip here creates unity here which further suggests that it is possible others will believe something negative about a person, judge them harshly and unfairly without facts and then choose to interact with them or not. Even if the reader who does this has no connection to those involved, it demonstrates the idea underlying the social practice of being careless with what appears online has the power to shape identity and reputation, and in turn as occurred to Adam Devine with his unintended paedophile comment, does have consequences in one's physical offline environment.

Discussion

These Facebook posts reproduced on Lamebook display how power operates to shape the identity and reputation of people who post there through the mechanisms of gossip and rumour making. Even if we do not know these authors the posts still can influence us to judge others harshly and unfairly, which can, and has, impacted on their own lives. These texts may be a small sample, but represent the operations of power within the discourse, or written text arena these posts operate in thus suiting a CDA analysis (Gatling et al., 2014, Wodak & Meyer, 2009). From the sample, the main social practice occurring suggesting some form of power to shape identity and reputation negatively is how one or more authors' use particular language strategies to maintain their identity and reputation as positive and an opposition negative. These behaviour strategies, of presentation, repairing and persuading others to believe negative information about another, are typical findings of identity and reputation research. However, the Internet's broad social context and the difference between it and other mass media in its immediacy pose a problem for those who choose to use it as the Facebook posters have in this study.

As Gatling et al. (2014) assert in their CDA study of middle-age representations, the film industry possesses much power to influence and control discourses and their outcomes. Whilst this is true, this study suggests the Internet is a place where there is more visibility of “ordinary” citizens, immediate interactivity compared to other mass media and greater ability to record and keep documentation of activity. These authors have been wronged in some way and in presenting the often private and unsubstantiated information about another are trying to persuade the reader to judge another’s action. Although it may be conjecture what we read of these Facebook postings and we may not know the intent of the author, the fact that these private postings have appeared in a public space, Lamebook, caution us about the potential power such postings have to shape our own identity and reputation.

Internet psychologists suggest that the Internet is a different medium for disclosure, more immediate and widespread than others, and that we normally monitor our behaviours before we say something about someone (Martin, 2013); but we are disinhibited, as Suler (2004) describes it, online. This gives a form of power to users because it is more immediate a medium to post something in haste or anger, whereas there are vetting processes and time lags to doing this on radio or television. As Deal (1998) suggests in his study of women being accused of witchcraft, when they moved to other parts of England they brought their tarnished reputation and judgments from others about the women’s identities to a new place even if they did not know them. The shaping to a negative perception is difficult to repair. I argue that this is the case in current times with the use of the Internet, but we can carry a negative perception anywhere if we are not aware of what is posted about us online. These women had a physical presence to prove themselves not as witches; the negative perceptions of us online take much work to correct as we are not present individually to the large audience this medium brings.

In answering this study’s research question, the characteristics of the text that had power to shape identity and reputation were reasonable easy to identify. Shaming and stigma type words, and accusations and attacks using controversial topics such as sexual behaviours, were present in the data set. How these were done where by revealing details of private interactions between the authors and with others supporting the author making these accusations. This may be common behaviour in human societies, but again from a CDA perspective, the social practices within the space of the Internet make us aware of what people can do to shape others’ view of our identity and reputation. This is why unmasking power relations is, whilst viewed as subjective and conjecture by some as having a bias in CDA work, crucial to understanding the types of activities people do to present themselves positively and others not so.

Perhaps Smith (1913) is correct in urging us to be cautious of our identity and reputation presentation. This analysis not just shows the type of text that shapes what we think about others; it has shown us that the language strategies used have wider implications on our offline lives. Gossip and reputation have been powerful mechanisms that have had negative impacts on many lives. Internet users may be doing the same thing, but they have a wider, more immediate audience who do not always forget the words spoken that harm what we seek to protect; our identity and our reputation.

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