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Doxxing to Deter: Citizen Activism on Social Media

Taylor Carriere

Kristen Walker

Kimberly Legocki
kvl4@stmarys-ca.edu

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"If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."
~Charlottesville victim Heather Heyer (Murphy 2017)

<div align="center">**Introduction**</div>

Outrage is a strong emotion and sometimes when people exhibit strong emotions they do not always pay attention to details. In this digital age, protestors (on any side of an issue) often act based their emotions and express opinions, feelings, and/or beliefs on social media. There are several instances when consumers express strong opinions about a company or brand using social media as the soap box. For example, after fashion designer Donna Karan defended film mogul Harvey Weinstein, a boycott began on Twitter against her struggling brand (Bhattarai 2017). Other expressions in recent times were the #GrabYourWallet movement, which boycotted retailers selling Trump family products, and the EpiPen petition that successfully created a savings card for users of the drug, after another price hike invoked consumer outrage seen on Facebook and Twitter (Chester 2016; Newcomb 2016; Sottile 2016). What happens when people utilize social media not only to express opinions, but to identify or shame others (i.e. doxxing)? Moreover, it is possible that perceptions of inaction by law enforcement, government, and/or lack of regulation increase the likelihood that people will take matters into their own hands. We seek to understand the marketing and policy implications in an era where personal information is exchanged often and readily available for discovery. Specifically, we posit that when government (or police) fail to act, protect, and regulate actions/behavior citizens will utilize social media to act, protect, and regulate actions/behavior.

Charlottesville, Virginia August 2017

On August 12th, 2017, a white nationalist protest rally was held in Charlottesville, Virginia (Stolberg 2017; Rosenthal 2017). Due to the imminent removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, white

nationalists had long planned this demonstration, dubbed "Unite the Right," though its execution went awry – the rally "exploded" into a wave of verbal and physical violence, impelling the governor to declare a state of emergency (2017). By Saturday afternoon, the gathering was declared an "unlawful assembly," and the Virginia National Guard arrived to clear the area as remaining protesters were arrested by police (2017). One day later, an online crowdsourcing campaign launched by @YesYoureRacist (alias of Logan Smith) and perpetuated by journalist @ShaunKing was used to identify demonstrators who attended white nationalist rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia on Friday evening and Saturday morning (Buchmann 2017). Beginning on August 13th, 2017, social media users began identifying demonstrators and tweeting their names to the account, using hashtags #Charlottesville, #ExposeTheAltRight, #GoodNightAltRight. @YesYoureRacist then attempted to corroborate the names with pictures from demonstrators' social media accounts with help. In other words, there was a call to crowdsource identifying information about those who attended the rally.

"Citizen Activists are grappling with how best to respond to white supremacists in real time, especially when it feels as if "the systems we have, the infrastructure we have, won't do anything. That's the place we're at and those are the questions we're sussing out," expressed online harassment researcher Caroline Sinders (Mother Jones). "Citizen activism" is a term ceaselessly used by media to define social media users negatively (and publicly) reacting to events, but what is "Citizen Activism" and what attributes best describe or typify it? We propose that citizen activism is emotional intensity and the frequency of posts (termed digital consumer activism) related to a protest and/or a political event.

Digital Consumer Activism is defined using two key dimensions in an event content analysis: frequency (number of times a consumer posted on social media) and emotional intensity (the discrete emotions expressed in their posts) (Legocki and Walker 2017). When citizens resort to

employing social media to expose mass discontent, we postulate that there are unintended marketing and public policy consequences that arise. First of all, in an effort to induce a sense of remedial justice for those perceived as victims, the privacy of those that are deemed the "perpetrators" is undoubtedly compromised. Along with public shaming through identifying the participants of an event, as seen in the Charlottesville incident, there is a question of what harm may come to those exposed by these activists. As private data becomes increasingly accessible through a variety of "information brokers," those who sell consumer information to "help" marketers and perform "people searches," Citizen activists can more easily expose the addresses, occupations, and family members of those they are attempting to punish (Mirani and Nisen 2014). We suggest that the implications of citizens utilizing social media to regulate the actions/behavior of others may result in public shaming, privacy invasions, increased vulnerability, and harm to those exposed.

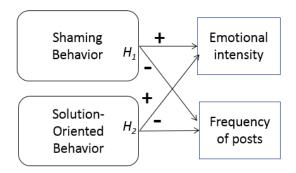**Outrage on Social Media: Doxxing or Citizen Activism?**

Anger on social media has been examined in extant literature, though its relation to altering public policy has been researched minimally, with a focus in forum posts and opinion articles (Fahoury 2017). In terms of public policy, political frustrations have been exposed on various platforms, however, the discussion is largely based on annoyance from other users, and an overall lack of unity (Duggan 2016; Smith 2016). Previous studies discuss the infliction of harm on various brands through "hashtag" movements, and propose that marketers take note of the impact of social media on their reputation (Armano 2017). In our research, we grasp that first, an incident occurs, and the resulting consumer conversations/actions on social media are called 'doxxing,' and/or 'citizen activism' by some news sources. These conversations (organized by #hashtags) often occur on Twitter. The growing significance of information exchanges on Twitter wields the power to alter the outcomes of world events, as evidenced by the Twitter data we analyze. Social media continues to connect users, but the use of Twitter by government representatives and policymakers is blurring

the line between lighthearted, social exchanges and real-life implications. Twitter is increasingly utilized as a tool for mass, instant communication (i.e. President Donald Trump's controversial tweets) it may be that the true authority lies in the amount of 'noise' displayed through outrage, disappointment, and repetition. These consumer conversations on social media exhibit commonalities of a lot of conversations (frequency) involving anger (a level of emotional intensity).

In situations such as Charlottesville, the consumer response and reaction on social media happens before mainstream media, police, and/or the government can act/react to the event. The consumer response/reaction is now able to take advantage of the amount of information/data available on the Internet, regardless of its accuracy, and use it to identify, shame, 'out,' and in essence, take matters into their own hands. This has been exhibited with the #MeToo movement, a hashtag aimed to combat widespread sexual assault, as well as with #DeleteUber, a boycott against Uber after the service dropped its surge-pricing in the midst of a political protest (Isaac 2017; LaMotte 2017).

The concern is whether these activities by consumers on social media (Twitter in particular) are utilizing social media tools and abundance of information to assist police and regulators, or causing more harm and unintended consequences. Because there are negative connotations of doxxing, it is essential to explore the difference between doxxing and citizen activism. Though the terms are used interchangeably, we posit that doxxing differs from citizen activism, specifically by intent. As shown by our conceptual framework in Figure 1, applying deterrence theory and agency theory we posit that there is a difference between exhibiting shaming behavior online (doxxing) and exhibiting solution-oriented behavior (activism).

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Academic research on doxxing is sparse. Studies that do exist are typically in research on privacy, yet the concept has not been explored in marketing (Buozis 2017; Douglas 2016). In extant research, doxxing is described as a tactic utilized by radical cyber activists, like Anonymous, to bring justice to those the group deemed as a threat to freedom (Coleman 2012). This literature defines doxxing as the "leaking" of PII (personally identifiable information), residing in a "legal grey zone" because mined information is accessible on public websites (2012). What are the implications for private information being publicly accessible, especially in times of civil unrest and "perceived injustice?" Though doxxing has been studied as how hackers responded to an incident (The Boston Marathon), our research will focus on the ease in which private data is attainable to any citizen with internet access (2017). Is it possible that the dissemination of private data, accessible to a growing number of other users, will push citizens to become 'forced public figures'? We will examine and the conflict between government regulation and citizen expectations of protection.

Other research further explains the "legal grey zone" in which doxxing resides, and the conflicting notion of social media regulation in a democratic world (2017). While extant studies pose the question as to whether doxxing is a form of direct democracy, they do not differentiate doxxing from activism, nor explain the unintended marketing or public policy consequences that result from citizens taking a situation into their own hands (2016; 2017). We will first explain both doxxing and citizen activism, and then discuss the repercussions of replacing public policy with shaming or

solution-oriented behaviors. Is there a difference between doxxing and activism, based on shaming behavior versus solution-oriented behavior on social media? We posit these differences will be demonstrated by emotional intensity and frequency of content posted on Twitter.

Agency and Deterrence

Agency theory explains that one party (agent) has responsibility to make decisions and/or perform duties for another party (principal) often on a contractual basis (Anderson, 1982). Though agency theory has been explored in marketing relationships, it has not yet been examined as a consequence of a lack of regulation from a citizen's government. It is important to note that the principal—agent problem has been examined as a conflict of the government acting for its own self-interest (through colluding with businesses), though that does not apply to our study (Investopedia 2015). Extant literature posits that agency relationships are pervasive in marketing, as the agency relationship is a necessary component of all exchange transactions (Bergen 1992; Dutta 1992; Walker, 1992). We plan to exhibit the unintended public policy and marketing consequences from a unilateral agency relationship. This unilateral relationship exists when the citizen, or principal, is forced to become their own agent, as the government fails to act on their behalf. Other literature addresses the informal contract between the agent and principal, and assumes that the principal is dominant in the agency relationship (1992). While this study will not be discussing the formality of agency relationships, we will explain the capacity of this relationship in terms of government and citizen. Furthermore, this research has assumed that the principal is the organization, while the agent is the employee, or person who must undertake some action on the principal's behalf (1992).

Other marketing research in agency theory has not yet examined a role reversal, where the organization is the "agent" as opposed to the "principal." In our case, we propose an unfulfilled relationship, where the principal is the citizen, and the government should act as the agent, and regulation (action) is implemented for protection. However, in the Charlottesville incident, the

government failed to act as the agent, thus forcing the citizen to take action, utilizing social media as their weaponry. We will further explain how this agency relationship creates citizen activists in our study. We posit that the occurrence of agency theory will first demonstrate the inception of citizen activism, which we will then distinguish from the act of doxxing. We hypothesize that a relationship will exist between a low emotional intensity, high frequency of posting and solution-oriented behavior (activism),

H_1: *Shaming behavior (doxxing) will demonstrate high emotional intensity and low frequency of content posted.*

Deterrence theory has been examined in literature on digital piracy and marketing, however, not in the scope of activism as an implication for no governmental oversight. We plan to explore deterrence theory as the replacement for formal regulation, enacted by the unfulfilled agency relationship between the government and citizen. In a 2003 study, Galleta, Peace, and Thong found that a high level of punishment certainty, a punishment probability factor in deterrence theory, decreases illegal actions (2003). In our study, though protests are protected under the First Amendment, we will look at the "alt-left" in the Charlottesville incident as participants in a hate crime, which may be subject to prosecution. Some research examines the negative effects of punishment certainty on software piracy, but did not examine deterrence theory as a remedy for governmental silence, effective through digital means (2003). We will explain how citizen activists increased punishment severity, through publicly shaming the participants of the rally. We posit that one of the unintended consequences of deterrence theory will be an amendment to public policy, to satiate a necessity for accountability. Similarly, the presence of deterrence theory was examined bilaterally, in relationships between business organizations. Bilateral deterrence theory predicts that as total power between two groups increases, punitive acts decline, because both partners have greater exposure to loss (Kumar, Scheer. and Steenkamp 1998). This research explains that

asymmetric relationships are inherently unstable, with only symmetry deterring punitive acts (1998). We will expand on this theory as a vehicle for new public policy to be implemented, as the instability of the relationship between users of social media and victims of public shaming grows. Through the examination of tweets posted during Charlottesville, we hypothesize that as deterrence theory replaces actions by law enforcement or regulation, citizen activists posting content high in emotional intensity will be more likely to exhibit shaming behaviors but with lower levels of frequency. level of emotional intensity and a low frequency of content posted,

H_2: *Solution-oriented behavior (activism) will demonstrate low emotional intensity and high frequency of content posted.*

Methodology

Sample

This study uses a mixed-methods approach for an exploratory analysis of social media content. The data set includes 79, 564 posted between and including August 14, to August 21, 2017. Tweets were downloaded using the Twitter Archiving Google Sheets (TAGS) system and included at least one of the following hashtags indicating an intentional participation in the Charlottesville conversation: #Charlottesville, #GoodNightAltRight or #ExposetheAltRight. To protect privacy., publicly visible userid handles and all geo-location information was removed. Eliminating duplicates, non-English, spambots, and other unrelated content (e.g. job postings) yielding a final usable dataset of 63,070 tweets.

Coding and Sentiment Analysis

The data coding instrument was created following similar schemas used by marketing scholars in conducting sentiment analysis of social media content (Makarem & Jae 2015; Kumar & Sebastian 2012). Using intensity scores from Strauss & Allen's (2008) and Kumar & Sebastian (2012), discrete emotional words were categorized for "low", "medium" and "high intensity with

points assigned. Points were also assigned for profanity and insult words. Word frequency analysis and coding was conducted using Nvivo qualitative analysis software. A total emotional intensity score was calculated for each of our two samples.

The analysis involved both inductive and deductive coding based upon Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013), with the authors using codes developed from extant theoretical literature as well as defining new codes identified in the tweets.

Findings

Adapting an approach from extant consumer emotion and behavior research (e.g. White & Yu 2005), the strengths of the relationship between the variables in our study were determined using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity.

H₁: Shaming behavior (doxxing) will demonstrate high emotional intensity and low frequency of content posted.

There was a strong, positive correlation between the emotional intensity of posted content and shaming-oriented behaviors (doxxing), $r = .952$, $n = 5$, $p = .012$, with high levels of emotional content associated with high levels of shaming behavior. No significant relationship was found between frequency and shaming behavior ($p = .413$). **Hypothesis 1 is partially accepted.**

H₂: Solution-oriented behavior (activism) will demonstrate low emotional intensity and high frequency of content posted.

No significant relationship was found between frequency and solutions-oriented behavior, $r = -.496$, $n = 5$, $p = .396$, or emotional intensity and solutions-oriented behavior, $r = .801$, $n = 5$, $p = .104$. **Hypothesis 2 is rejected.**

Discussion/Implications

Our research identified a strong statistical correlation between emotional intensity and shaming behaviors. As social media conversations heat up, the more likely it is for citizen activists

to engage in doxxing. In addition to the unapproved dissemination of private data, citizens, like those engaging in the Charlottesville protests, become unintentional public figures creating a conflict between government regulation and citizen expectations of protection. For law enforcement tasked with investigating cybercrimes like doxxing, monitoring the emotional intensity level of online conversations may be useful in trying to thwart rather than react after the fact. We encourage future research in this area.

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