Citizen Activism: Anger and Persistence in #Charlottesville

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CITIZEN ACTIVISM: ANGER AND PERSISTENCE

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Introduction

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. 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 explore 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.

❖ On August 12th, 2017, in response to the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, white nationalists planned a demonstration, dubbed "Unite the Right". The rally "exploded" into a wave of verbal and physical violence, impelling the governor to declare a state of emergency (2017).

❖ 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).

❖ Social media users began identifying demonstrators and tweeting their names to the account, using hashtags #Charlottesville, #ExposeTheAltRight, #GoodNightAltRight.

❖ Online activism is defined using two key dimensions, frequency (number of times a consumer posted on social media) and emotional intensity (the discrete emotions expressed in their posts).

Literature Review

To understand the difference between doxxing (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)) and activism, we apply two theories in our conceptual framework to explore aspects of citizen activism, agency theory and deterrence theory.

❖ 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 government regulation.

❖ 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. 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).

We posit that one of the unintended consequences of deterrence theory will be an amendment to public policy, to satiate a necessity for accountability.

Research Questions

We see to explore citizen activism with two questions:

What is the average emotional intensity of tweets posted by users who are one-time participants vs. highly-engaged users posted 3 or more times?

What are percentages of shaming-oriented vs. solution-oriented behavior by frequency of posting?

Methods and Materials

This study uses a mixed-methods approach for an exploratory analysis of social media content. The data set includes 63,116 tweets posted between and including August 14, to August 21, 2017 containing at least one of the following hashtags indicating an intentional participation in the Charlottesville conversation: #Charlottesville, #GoodNightAltRight or #ExposetheAltRight.

A codebook was created following similar schemas used by marketing scholars in conducting sentiment analysis of social media content (Makarem & Jae 2015; Kumar & Sebastian, 2012; Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian 2012; Hoffman 2011).

A total emotional intensity score and content related to citizen activism was calculated.

Proposed Outcome

	1	2	3
Harm	657	59	56
Solution	3101	653	1660
Shame	12480	5404	1015
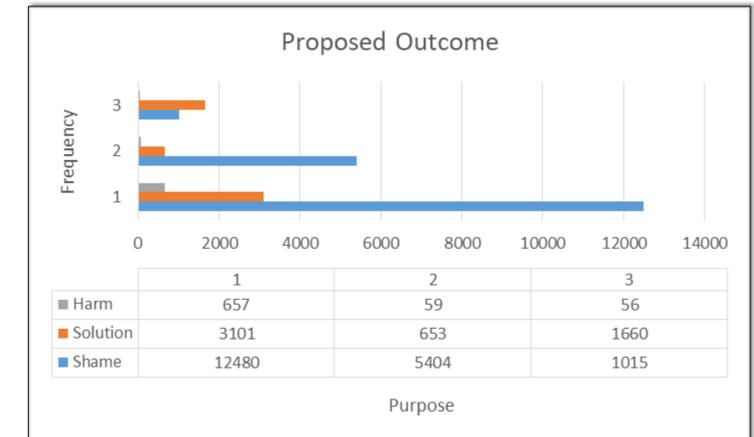
Preliminary Results

Initial findings demonstrate that users who tweeted just one-time exhibited more shaming-oriented behavior (77%) vs. solution-oriented behaviors (19%).

Those tweeting 2 times, strongly exhibited shaming-oriented behaviors (79%) vs. solution-oriented behaviors (11%).

Last, the highly engaged user group tweeting 3 or more times exhibited solution-oriented behaviors (61%) vs. shaming-oriented behaviors (37%).

Key finding = Highly committed users were more likely to post content supporting solutions than engage in shaming behaviors, including doxxing, reporting people to employers, publicly shaming or threatening with physical harm.

Partial References

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