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SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACTS BEHAVIOR AND NORMS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



On social media, a recognized set of norms have not caught up with the speed in which social media has been adopted into our lives, leading to ambiguity concerning what behavior is appropriate online. This paper explores the unique features of social media and their impact on behavior and social norm creation:

Large Networks and Over-Sharing:

In order to manage large social media networks users need to keep track of a complex number of behaviors that are acceptable across groups. This causes confusion when trying to create network-wide social norms on how one should behave (and what one should share).



One-to-Many Communication and Self-Interest:

Social media facilitates a one-to-many communication style, which increases focus on self-interest. This makes it harder to take the perspective of others, impacting both empathy and critical thinking.

Unlimited Access to Social Media and Emotional Regulation:

The constant access we have to social media for emotional release makes us more sensitive to situations that do not go as planned, leading to frustration and more impulsive behavior.

Disjointed Communication, Lack of Eye-Contact, and Empathy:

Communication on social media is disjointed, making it easier to divert attention away from others. Also, the lack of eye-contact inhibits our ability to physically sense another person's distress. Both characteristics lower our ability to empathize with others.

Perceived Anonymity on Social Media:

Being part of a crowd creates perceived anonymity and activates diffusion of responsibility and deindividuation. This increases conformity to harmful views and decreases critical thinking and the likelihood of reporting harmful content.

Recommendations:

- Promote personal responsibility and dedication to modeling healthy behavior on social media
- Proactively respond to harmful content by reporting it and stating that it is unacceptable
- Social media platform commitment to preventing the uploading of violent and other harmful content that violates terms of agreement
- Increase perspective-taking in order to facilitate an online discourse based in understanding and mutual respect
- Increase other awareness by stressing impacts social media behavior has on others and personal relationships
- Empower critical thinking skills through engagement with challenging content and opposing viewpoints on social media, in order to avoid agreement-only networks
- Promote life skills related to emotional regulation and coping to reduce a need for ranting and venting on social media
- Interrupt deindividuation and crowd mentality by promoting personal feelings of responsibility online

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACTS BEHAVIOR AND NORMS

Social media is used by hundreds of millions of people, with teens and young adults making up its largest user demographic (Pew Research Center, 2013). The most popular social media platform, Facebook, bragged that in a single day 1 in 7 people on this planet logged on (Dredge, 2015), illustrating the importance of social media in social interaction. Social media has changed the landscape in how we connect with one another, and has many positive outcomes. For example, social media is a space for social activism, support, emotional expression, news, and developing new and old friendships. However, negative interactions such as harassment, bullying, promoting violence, and discrimination are also occurring on social media. As in any social space, social norms provide structure and guidelines on what is appropriate and healthy behavior (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011). However, on social media, a recognized set of norms have not caught up with the speed in which social media has been adopted into our lives, leading to ambiguity concerning what behavior is appropriate online. This ambiguity means that harmful aspects of social media communication can be created and maintained.

Social norms are learned through social exchanges with others, deeply ingrained in us, and critical for healthy social interaction. Social norms are constructed over time, and conformity to these norms increases the longer group members interact with each other (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011). In-person, norms are established among different social groups, and these norms become represented in societal rules and laws. On social media, these rules are reflected in the Terms of Agreement and Community Standards published by platforms. Violations of these standards result in sanctions of varying severity against the user (Facebook, 2015).

We learn what qualifies as appropriate online behavior through our social learning, such as when we see others punished or reinforced for their behavior (Bandura, 1971). In this way, platform and peer responses to content can influence our behavior and how we form social norms online (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011). Platforms use an enforcement strategy that relies almost exclusively on users to find and report harmful content, meaning that community standard violations are not consistently discovered or enforced (Facebook, 2015). Over-reliance on a user-based notification method can lead to instances of false-positives, generating more frustration and confusion among users. In response, users have developed a wide range of their own strategies to deal with violations of group social norms, creating platform-wide ambiguity. Ambiguity concerning what is acceptable and what will result in sanctions creates situations where harmful content continues and cohesive social norms are unclear (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011).

Platform enforcement as well as other unique features of social media have created an environment in which healthy social norms are not ubiquitously followed. How these features impact the maintenance of harmful interactions, such as harassment, discriminatory speech, over sharing, internet mobbing, and violence promotion, is a question that needs to be explored in order to prevent this behavior. Such behavior has led to serious consequences regarding violence, school, work, legal, and personal reputations. This paper explores these unique features of social media and their impact on behavior and social norm creation. In addition, this paper will explore strategies to curb harmful behavior on social media and promote digital citizenship.

" ... on social media, a recognized set of norms have not caught up with the speed in which social media has been adopted into our lives, leading to ambiguity concerning what behavior is appropriate online. "



The Unique Features of Social Media

Social media is a communication tool that possesses unique characteristics that impact behavior and social norms. These unique features include large, dynamic networks of friends, a one-to-many communication style, unlimited access, disjointed communication, and lack of eye-contact. These features in turn lead to over-sharing, self-interested behavior, low impulse control, and low empathy, which all facilitate the creation and maintenance of harmful behavior on social media.

Large Networks and Over-Sharing

Managing social networks is performed very differently on social media than in-person. In-person communication often has boundaries between networks, this helps maintain each network's norms and level of personal disclosure. Conversely, social media acts as a single messaging platform across a user's network, which can build over time to include hundreds of friends, ranging from best friends to acquaintances to people the user has not met before. In order to connect with each of these sub-networks, users often use disclosure to display commitment and affinity. Disclosure is a beneficial tool to help strengthen and build connections, especially when face-to-face interactions are not available (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014).

However, disclosing across networks can have negative effects on employment and public reputation. For example, a grievance about an employer that is disclosed to friends on social media can still be seen by other networks that include co-workers, which can get users in trouble at work. People tend to underestimate how many people can actually see a user's posts (Bernstein, Bakshy, & Karrer, 2013), which can give users a false sense of who is impacted by over-sharing of content.

Since the level of acceptable disclosure is dictated by the type of relationship, users employ a combination of image management and disclosure to control their online interactions. Depending on the type of relationship a user has with a sub-network, disclosure may cross the line into over-sharing and be seen as a violation of that sub-network's norms. In other words, social media's ability to connect users to a large social network means that users need to be adept at both controlling their image and showing affinity through disclosure. In addition, users need to keep track of a complex number of behaviors that are acceptable in one group, but not another, as well as those that can be seen by the public. This causes confusion when trying to create network-wide social norms on how one should behave (and what one should share).

In addition over-sharing may also fulfill psychological needs, and can be a beneficial way to release emotion, self-express, and seek support. Users who express a strong need for acceptance and popularity are likely to use social networking sites frequently, mostly because of this ability to connect with a large network. To these people, a large social network acts more like an audience for approval than a friendship (Utz, Tanis & Vermeulen, 2012). These users are similarly more likely to self-disclose personal information and spend time updating their profiles in order to receive positive feedback (Utz et al., 2012).

The need for popularity also increases self-interested behaviors, which makes it more difficult to take others' feelings and perspectives into account. Moreover, these users often feel additional social media anxiety, which pressures them to behave in a way that garners "likes," which can lead to the spreading of harmful content online if it is reinforced (Feiler, 2014). This is even more impactful for teens, where 39% report feeling pressured to only post content that they believe will get them lots of comments or likes (Lenhart, 2015).

The desire to share content that will receive a lot of attention is problematic because according to research, content that elicits a strong emotion is the most likely to gain attention from others via likes, shares, and comments. It does not matter what emotion is evoked, as long as it elicits a strong response from the viewer (Kitroeff, 2014). As such, content that evokes strong positive emotions as well as those that bring about strong feelings of rage are likely to go viral (Kitroeff, 2014). Perhaps this is why violent content and insensitive material is shared as frequently as positive material, especially among users that hold discriminatory views or believe violence is normal.

One-to-Many Communication and Self-Interest

Social media is structured to facilitate a one-to-many communication style, in which the individual publishes their thoughts, feelings, likes, and opinions to an audience that extends past those directly involved in the interaction. For example, tweeting or writing a status update allows an individual to communicate with their entire audience at once, even if the content is primarily geared to a sub-network. Additionally, posting, liking, tagging, and commenting on content are all observable by one's audience, even if it is directed to a specific user. Therefore, all communications on social media, with the exception of direct messages, are public and seen by an audience that includes friends, followers, and friends of friends unknown to the original user.

Research into one-to-many communication shows that posting to an audience on social media increases focus on self-interest, as users are more likely to adopt their own frame of reference when asked to make social judgments (Chiou, Chen, & Liao, 2014). This makes it harder to take the perspective of others, a key component needed for both empathy and critical thinking. Therefore self-interest reduces a user's ability to understand the perspective of others and generate concern for others' well being (Konrath, O'Brian, & Hsing, 2010), a process which decreases the likelihood of engaging in helping behavior (Chiou et al, 2014). Also, self-interest negatively impacts one's ability to reason in social situations, damaging critical thinking (Chiou & Lee, 2013).

Moreover, the one-to-many style of communication is physically rewarding to us. Current research shows that disclosing personal information activates pleasure pathways in our brains (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). Of particular interest, these pleasure areas had greater activation when the user disclosed to an audience like on social media (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). This may explain why disclosing information on social media is addicting. Also, positive responses to disclosure can fulfill personal needs for support, validation, and emotional release. This reinforces the behavior and increases our likelihood to share personal information to a wide social media audience (Chiou et al., 2014). In this way, the one-to-many communication style found on social media is structured to reinforce over-sharing of personal information, opinions, thoughts, and likes as well as make it harder to adopt the perspective of others.

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Unlimited Access to Social Media and Emotional Regulation

Research shows that posting on social media reduces impulse control online and in real-life (Smith, 2013). This is because social media is quickly available in order to meet certain needs, such as self-expression and venting. The constant access we have to technology makes us more sensitive to situations that do not go as planned, leading to frustration and more impulsive behavior (Konrath et al., 2010). In this way, immediate accessibility to social media for purpose of emotional release reduces the need to exert self-control. In addition, once we see others act impulsively on social media, we tend to act impulsively as well (VanDellen & Hoyle, 2010). This occurs when users model others' behavior, especially when users see that behavior reinforced by attention and social support (Bandura, 1971). Therefore, the immediate availability of social media as a way to instantly release emotion and seek support leads to more impulsive posting, the most problematic being ranting, venting, and violent posting.

Emotional release on social media can be a valuable coping mechanism and result in social support, but its value as a coping strategy operates on a continuum. For instance, releasing emotions such as sadness, happiness, and low levels of frustration on social media can be beneficial for those who have difficulty expressing themselves during in-person settings or view social media as another way to connect with others. However, using social media as an outlet for anger or higher levels of frustration can become problematic. For example, people often state that they rant online in order to reduce feelings of anger; however, research demonstrates that the opposite occurs. Instead, ranting on social media maintains feelings of anger, and any relief ranting may produce is only temporary (Rolfes, 2014). Ranting helps to maintain anger because social media provides a platform for rumination. In this way, others can help fuel the poster's anger and reinforce harmful thoughts, which keep anger alive instead of releasing it effectively.

Coping with anger effectively is a critical skill that can be disrupted through social media exposure to violence. Research shows that exposure to violent media can increase aggressive behavior, thoughts, and emotions in adults and children (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). This occurs when others model the behavior seen in violent media and normalize it as an appropriate way to cope with anger (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). Social media exacerbates violence by making violent content easily accessible and creatable. By easily supplying violent content, social media reinforces problematic coping, which can lead to real world violence.

Disjointed Communication, Lack of Eye-Contact, and Empathy

Communication on social media is not continuous. Instead it is disjointed, meaning communication arrives intermittently and not in a steady stream. Therefore, disjointed communication gives the user control on how and when to post or respond. In contrast, there is less opportunity to control a face-to-face interaction. In those in-person instances, norms keep people from escaping to gather their thoughts, making it more pressing to deal with the emotions present in the situation and respond immediately. The necessity to instantly address another's emotions does not occur on social media, which makes it easier to divert attention away from others. This avoidance of dealing with others in the moment of conflict is unsupportive to empathy and further fuels focus on self-interest (Konrath et al, 2010).

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In order for empathy to occur, one must be able to both relate to another person's situation (by thinking about similar experiences) and physically sense the impact the situation has on that person (Bilton, 2015). On social media you are unable to make eye contact with others. In face-to-face conversations, people are forced to observe how they make others feel, providing an opportunity to empathize and feel mutual distress. The virtual-based communication style of social media inhibits our ability to physically sense another person's distress, lowering our ability to empathize with them (Bilton, 2015). Furthermore, as previously stated, research shows social media use also inhibits our ability to relate to another's situation through perspective taking. Therefore, social media communication may impact empathy in both ways. This makes it easier to perform low-empathy behavior, such as cyberbullying, arguing, shaming, or posting discriminatory comments (Arıcak & Ozbay, 2016). Such behavior is menacing and is considered online harassment, which 40% of adult users claim to have experienced (Drake, 2015).

Disjointed communication and lack of eye-contact on social media make it easy to overcome personal distress for others, suggesting that emotions such as guilt and shame do not occur (Bilton, 2015). This is problematic because such emotions are critical when it comes to internalizing empathy for others and preventing the violation of social norms (Muris & Meesters, 2014). When people feel personal distress over hurting another person, they learn the consequences of their actions and feel motivated to change their behavior and conform to norms. Social media removes the process that facilitates these feelings of shame and guilt, making it harder to empathize with others and learn social norms aimed at being respectful and kind to others. This may explain why violent videos, trolling*, flaming**, and ranting all continue to occur on social media.

In summary, large social media networks, one-to-many communication, immediate access to social media, disjointed communication, and lack of eye contact on social media can lead to issues such as over-sharing, self-interested behavior, poor emotional regulation, and lower empathy. These outcomes make it easier to perform harmful behaviors. The pervasiveness of harmful behaviors on social media sites means that their presence is reinforced through social learning. Inconsistency in enforcing the community standards that remove harmful content from social media also supports the message that this behavior is acceptable online. These processes make it more difficult to establish wide-reaching social norms that would normally keep this behavior from occurring online.

*Trolling is the making of a deliberately offensive online posting with the intent of upsetting others or eliciting an angry response from them.

**Flaming is the emotional and angry interaction between internet users, with a flamer being someone who intentionally creates a hostile interaction between users.

Perceived Anonymity

Research shows true anonymity online makes it easier to act impulsively and insensitively towards others (Suler, 2014). On one hand, perceived anonymity may make others feel more comfortable sharing information and expressing emotions, which can have positive benefits such as building a support network, feeling validation, gaining meaningful advice or insight, and fueling creativity. On the negative side, true anonymity leads people to disengage with their personal moral constraints, giving them the freedom to participate in deviant behavior that is not normal for them. This is because people feel less inhibited and protected from discovery when they feel anonymous during online communication.

However, anonymity is not guaranteed and is not the norm on social media. Being identified on social media is an advantage that allows others to find profiles and connect. In general users identify themselves on social media by using a full name or a nickname; sharing a photo of themselves; and posting their hometown, school name, email address, interests, employment, and cell phone number. Even though true anonymity is not the norm on social media, it continues to be a space where deviant behavior like harmful norms persists. This is because a sense of perceived anonymity is fostered through social media use, which can have a similarly powerful impact on our behavior as true anonymity does.

“ Even though true anonymity is not the norm on social media, it continues to be a space where deviant behavior like harmful norms persists. ”

Diffusion of Responsibility and Deindividuation

Classic social experiments conducted by psychologists such as John Dodd (1985) show that being part of a crowd can produce feelings of anonymity. Being part of a crowd leads to diffusion of responsibility, meaning that one's personal responsibility to act appropriately is diminished when part of a crowd. In addition, perceived anonymity is also facilitated by removing one's ties to individual responsibility and social norms, a process known as deindividuation. In such a situation, individual awareness and inhibition are lessened, making it easier to conform to crowd actions without feeling personally responsible for the consequences.

Conformity:

Research found that being part of a crowd can increase identification with a group, which causes the individual to conform to group behavior (Reicher, Spear, & Postmes, 1995). For example, one study found that when users are anonymous, the acceptance and performance of deviant behaviors such as trolling, flaming, and cheating were largely influenced by their online social group (Chen & Wu, 2015). This means that adherence to a social group, as mediated by being anonymous, is powerful at changing individual behavior. Other researchers found that flaming behavior continues to occur in online conversations, even when identifiable information on the users was available (Bae, 2016). Therefore, when perceived anonymity was present, users still felt a strong identity to a social group and exhibited harmful behavior in response to users seen as outsiders.



Conformity to a social group in instances where true anonymity is not possible may occur because other factors are influencing deindividuation on social media. Social media creates an environment in which we feel separate from ourselves without actually being anonymous, as we are physically separate from other users. In addition, users can easily discover groups they identify with online. Being able to quickly identify those we agree with online may increase group identity, which in turn has been shown in research to lead to group conformity (Reicher et al., 1995). Therefore, a perceived anonymity originates from being part of a social media network, which may pressure us to find smaller groups we agree and identify with, and conform to their behavior. This process becomes problematic when groups identify around harmful topics. In order to gain acceptance and positive reinforcement from the social group, harmful messages are shared. Ultimately, harmful content is inflamed by social media because sharing it promotes acceptance of and validates troubling behavior and norms.

Lazy Information Processing:

Deindividuation increases our reliance on mental short-cuts and leads us to engage in lazy information processing (Konnikova, 2013). Lazy information processing increases the likelihood that others will simply conform to the thinking of other members of the social group (Konnikova, 2013). For example, deindividuation can lead to a focus on mental short-cuts, such as using stereotypes and bias as a source of information. In addition, when deindividuation leads to group conformity, users are less likely to challenge the opinions and statements of others, instead choosing to agree. As such, an online social group is powerful at changing its members' views on certain topics, thus reinforcing certain norms and behaviors within their group. Such a situation becomes problematic when agreement-focused groups adhere to social norms around harmful behavior. This lazy information processing means the other users will blindly like, share, or repeat the comment without taking the time to critically assess the information (Tetlock, 1983). In such instances, harmful posts are agreed with and left unchallenged by critical thinking (Rauch & Schanz, 2013).

Features such as Facebook's news feed allow users to specifically follow people and pages that have similar interests and opinions, effectively creating a place to agree with each other on certain topics instead of a space to engage with challenging media (Rauch & Schanz, 2013). When groups are formed around a negative topic, such as prejudice, violence, hate, and misogyny, and deindividuation is activated, discriminatory thoughts are vocalized more than they would be during in-person communication, where individuals do not feel anonymous (Evans, Garcia, Garcia, & Baron, 2003). In this way, the internet generates more negative talk. When diffusion of responsibility and deindividuation act to increase conformity during times of perceived anonymity, this talk is readily agreed with by members of certain social networks that do not challenge it.

“ lazy information processing means the other users will blindly like, share, or repeat the comment without taking the time to critically assess the information. In such instances, harmful posts are agreed with and left unchallenged by critical thinking. ”

Social Media Justice:

The lack of confidence in a platform's ability to enforce community standards means that sub-networks will begin to create their own social norms and enforcement strategy. When a user inside or outside the network behaves in a way that goes against the norms or threatens the network other users will often engage in a kind of "social media justice". This do-it-yourself social media justice can involve petitioning for the platform to remove a user, publically shaming users, harassment campaigns, or calling for real-world consequences such as job loss. Social media justice may be effective at removing individual sources of harmful content, but it does not solve the underlying issue surrounding its maintenance on social media. When such social action turns into a social media mob that identifies with a harmful view, the harassment can be particularly traumatizing. This is because deindividuation and diffusion of responsibility can greatly amplify the activities of a social media mob by promoting conformity to group views and lessening responsibility for individual action.

Bystander Effect:

In addition, perceived anonymity leads to the bystander effect, which impacts platform's ability to discover and respond to community standards violations. According to the bystander effect, the more people that observe an emergency, the less likely any one person will take action to stop it. This is because feelings of responsibility to intervene are diffused away from the individual and onto others in the crowd (Darley & Latane, 1968). In this way, perceived anonymity can lead to reductions in reporting by bystanders seeing harmful content online. Since the burden of enforcement of community standards falls almost entirely on user reports, harmful content continues to live on social media. Without consistent reporting and enforcement of community standards by platforms, social norms become ambiguous and hard to follow.



Conclusion

The unique characteristics of social media based communication mixed with perceived anonymity creates an environment that supports over-sharing, self-interested behavior, low impulse control, and low empathy behavior. This is especially problematic when large agreement centered social media groups surround themselves with harmful values that users conform to without fear of sanctions from platforms that do not enforce community standards consistently. The structure of social media facilitates an environment where harmful content is maintained and reinforced, as well as a space where reporting is less likely to occur. Yet, platforms continue to depend exclusively on user reports in order to discover harmful content.

Understanding the unique environment of social media will allow us to effectively change harmful online norms and promote healthy behavior. This should decrease harassment, over-sharing, insensitivity, and violence on social media. In order to change norms, we need to promote digital citizenship, which involves a personal commitment to following healthy online social norms and becoming an active voice for acceptable behavior on social media.

In order to promote digital citizenship generally, the following recommendations have been made:

- Promote personal responsibility and dedication to modeling healthy behavior on social media
- Proactively respond to unkindness and harmful content by reporting it and stating that it is unacceptable in this space
- Social media platform commitment to preventing the uploading of violent and other harmful content that violates terms of agreement
- Employ better avenues of response that do not solely depend on user initiative to report

In addition, we need to target the major barriers to norm changes on social media: self-interested behavior, low-empathy, impulsivity, and perceived anonymity. As such, the following recommendations have been made:

Self-interested behavior

- Stakeholders, such as schools and employers, should target problematic over-sharing by raising awareness of consequences
- Increase personal accountability for content posted, shared, and liked on social media
- Increase self-esteem and individual identities so that they are not tied with needs for popularity and social media anxiety
- Empower critical thinking skills through engagement with challenging content and opposing viewpoints on social media, in order to avoid agreement-only networks

Low-empathy

- Increase perspective-taking in order to facilitate an online discourse based in understanding and mutual respect
- Increase other awareness by stressing impacts social media behavior has on others and personal relationships
- Foster self-conscious feelings of pride and accomplishment by reinforcing positive helping behavior on social media
- Increase opportunities to display empathy and concern for others on social media

Impulsivity

- Promote life skills related to emotional regulation and coping to reduce a need for ranting and venting on social media
- Stakeholder involvement in teaching others to think before they post
- Platform recruitment of technologies that can interrupt emotional posting by helping them cool down or prompting them if they 'really want to post that'
- Increase frustration tolerance and create opportunity to engage with challenging content in a productive way

Perceived anonymity

- Interrupt deindividuation and crowd mentality by promoting personal feelings of responsibility online
- Platforms should include information on how to respond to harmful social media content proactively and effectively, including conflict-resolution skills
- Empower individuals by making the process of reporting easy and clear, and have a system to follow up with the person reporting the content

Implementing these recommendations will allow us to take the necessary steps to creating a healthy environment by instilling positive social norms and user responsibility on social media.

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CITIZENS CRIME COMMISSION
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Social Media Impacts Behavior and Norms

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