"Nobody Cares, Lah!" The Phenomenon of Flaming on YouTube in Malaysia

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History *Revised Format* May 2016 *Available Online* June 2016 **Keywords** *Social Networking* *Online Harrasment* *Flaming* *YouTube* *Malicious Comments*	**Objective:** The purpose of this paper is to investigate what motivates people to provide malicious comments on YouTube in Malaysia. This study will also question the differences between how flaming is constructed in each video classification and how are flaming comments categorized. **Methodology:** This study uses qualitative methods. Literature review has been summarized to contextualize the research problem. **Findings:** The paper offers rich theoretical insights to understand the practical issue of ridiculous comments by internet users on YouTube. **Implications:** Flaming or making ridiculous comments on social media has been a serious issue in Malaysia and other countries with high internet usage. Findings of the study will help understand the views of YouTube community in Malaysia on flaming. The study may further help understand the issue of flaming on other social media sites.

1. Introduction

Internet is an ultimate tool which connects people around the world which just a touch of the existence of wireless technology. These days, even the smallest computers can communicate with one another with the presence of the Internet and makes computer communications is easier than ever. Example of computer-based communication includes e-mails, chat rooms, websites, instant messaging, newsgroups, blogs and social networking sites. YouTube is the number one video-based website that is being accessed nowadays compared to other websites such as NetFlix, Vimeo, DailyMotion and so on (Nycyk, 2012). YouTube first began on 14th of February, 2005. Three 'PayPal' employees namely Chad Hurley, Steve Chan and Jawed Karim activated the site with the domain name "YouTube.com" (*YouTube Fact Sheet*, 2014). With the presents of Web 2.0 environment, YouTube has been one of the most successful interactive videos-based website (Nycyk, 2012).

There are many categories of videos that are available on YouTube such as animal, lifestyle, film, music, sports, education, news, travel and events, entertainment, games and many more (YouTube statistics, 2014). Users can upload videos of them speaking to the camera which is called 'vlogs'. Other users can type in a comment box or upload another video as a response to the user. However, not all the comments given are positive or constructive criticism. Nowadays, most of the comments found on YouTube are flames. In fact, flames are seen in almost every video on YouTube (Nycyk, 2013). The phenomenon of flaming has received a lot of concern over the past four

decades by many scholars and still does.

The main idea of this research is to look at the phenomenon of flaming on YouTube. The term flaming initially originated from the Hackers Dictionary 1983 which states "to speak rapidly or incessantly on an uninteresting topic or with a patently ridiculous attitude." Flaming usually happens when someone posts a provocative or offensive message or comments on online forums or Internet discussion group known as 'flame bait' (Moor, 2010). Looking into these issues in concern, thus, the research questions designed for this study are to investigate what motivate people to provide malicious comments on YouTube in Malaysia. This study also questions the differences between how flaming is constructed in each video classification and how flaming comments are categorized. Finally, this study also attempts to explore the perspective of YouTube community in Malaysia on flaming.

2. YouTube's Dark Secrets

YouTube has been the breeding place for online abuse and hate-speech. The number of 'trolls' and the rate of flames are increasing day by day to the point where it is almost impossible to find a video on YouTube without a flaming comment on it. Negativity on the Internet is a norm since its existence but in the recent time, the presence of hate-speech and online abuse is at its peak. According to a National Crime Victimization Survey, about 22 million students around the world are being cyber-bullied (*Student Reports of Bullying and cyber-Bullying*, 2013). One of the major acts of cyber-bullying that happens frequently and being concerned in today's Internet era is flaming. Flaming refers to the use of offensive language such as swearing, insulting and providing hating comments in a particular forum (Moor, 2010).

2.1 YouTube as a Hostile Medium

In recent days, YouTube has been labeled as the number 1 website with the most number of flames (Thompson, 2014). The term flaming refers to offensive language such as swearing, insults and hating comments (Moor, 2010). The Hacker's Dictionary (Steel et al, 1983) defines flaming as "to speak rapidly or incessantly on an uninteresting topic or with a patently ridiculous attitude" (p.158). Flaming was also defined as verbal attacks intended to offend either persons or organizations (Reing et al, 1997).

The context of flaming has varied over the years. The term 'flaming' and the act had been redefined with the changing of the era. Past scholars before the millennium who are from the 90s has a different point of views towards the phenomenon of flaming compared to scholars from the recent times. An earlier study done by Walther (1994) on the introverted communication reported that the actual occurrence of flaming is exaggerated in most situations. Study done by Lea & Spears (1991) adds to the statement by Walther, by proving results that only 3% of the entire interactions in an online forum were flames and other studies showed little or no significant levels of flaming (Lea & Spears, 1991). It was even concluded that flaming was not a universal circumstance in computer-mediated communication (CMC), though it was agreed that it existed in certain groups and associations.

Postmes, Spears, and Lea (2000), did an analysis on the online communication norms and found out that different group carries different online interaction styles or norms through time. The norms that are created by the group are only applied within the group members and the norms stay inside the group. In which, certain groups accepts flames as a common communication style within them. Although for outsiders, the communication style may look as if it is being offensive and insulting to each other, as for the group members themselves, it may be funny or as a humorous element. Certain group seems to enjoy insulting one another while other groups are rarely flamed. This indicates that flaming can be a rather normative behavior in certain online commenting forums and communicating situation.

Flaming comments are the kind of extreme derogatory comments where it does not contain any constructive feedback or any improving ideas, but a bunch of swearing, hateful and negative comments either on the person shown on the video, the uploader of the video or other YouTube users that comment on the particular video. These groups of peoples are called the haters. According to Lange (2007), "a hater is someone who posts a negative comment that doesn't offer ant (criticism) or any helpful information. Simply commenting with 'gay' is hater like. Saying "this sucks go die" is hater like. (They) insult you and offer no suggestions on (improvements)".

2.2 Motivations to Flame on YouTube

To indulge one's self in an act or a behavior, there has to be a certain reasons or situational factor that eventually leads that to that act. In this case of flaming on social medias, especially YouTube, there are commonly a few factors that have been a trigger for one to post a malicious comment to that site. In this section, the researcher will look into the motivations of a person to flame or show hostility on the online commenting boards. To further discuss on this issue, four patterns have been identified related to the functions of YouTube and people's motivation on flaming, namely anonymity, miscommunication, online and offline personalities, and cyber aggression.

2.2.1 Anonymity

First and foremost, anonymity is definitely one of the major components of YouTube that leads to flame. According to Aiken & Waller (2000), anonymity renders an environment that encourages all the irresponsible acts by people to display offensive behaviors. Anonymity refers to an environment that involves around with secrets, hidden identity and masked personalities where basically, "the notion of anonymity is related to freedom from identification, secrecy and lack of distinction." (Scott & Orlikowski, 2012). Most users of YouTube are anonymous and go with an anonymous name and a random avatar to represent them in their 'channel' page (Varga, 2009).

Anonymity is characterized by its "non-identifiability" which generates through the removal of self-identifying elements such as name and address (Wallace, 1999). Anonymity has been one of the concerned topics since the presence of Internet and CMC and has been debated over decades. Scholars around the world had intensified the debate surrounding anonymity where some are for it and some are against it. Varga (2009) pointed out that anonymity is a must in a CMC environment to preserve 'information piracy' while Levmore and Nussbaum (2010) go against it by arguing that anonymity creates negative environment with hostility and juvenile levels of responsibility. This is most relatable to this study because anonymity is seen as the root which causes one to flame on YouTube as his/her identity remains unknown to the other users.

2.2.2 Miscomunication

The term flaming is considered an indistinct term where the definition is not clear and it is hard to define on what a 'flame' is and what is not. Miscommunication often leads to flaming as receivers misinterpret comments that are being directed to them. The importance of a text is mostly depends on the perceptions of the interactants (Lange, 2006; O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2008). Miscommunication happens when users violate the social patterns of an online community and their intentions define on how 'flames' or obnoxious messages are being judged (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003). It is clear that one's intention definitely defines how 'flame' is being interpreted and could cause problems with identifying offensive messages.

Sarcasm is also seen as one of the major elements of miscommunication as sometimes sarcasm is delivered as a funny statement but turns out to be misinterpreted by the receiver which causes problems to both sender and receiver (Edwards, 2008). Another reason for miscommunication is the absence of social cues when interacting with one another which explains the role of body languages during a conversation (Edwards, 2008). According to Moor (2010), both senders and the receivers of an online forum seem not to be aware of the problems that occur in most CMC and its effects of miscommunication, hence overestimating the efficiency of the communication. Miscommunication often happens in Malaysian YouTube videos due to its difference of multi cultures, languages and various commenting style carried by each ethnic. Flames also often happen due to the misunderstanding in the way a message is being interpreted by another user.

2.2.3 Online and Offline Personalities

The emanation of social networking sites has developed complication of how a person is to be understood by the online world. Relating one another in a network that grows as a social is the main idea of these sites. Thus, this creates a situation where one needs to develop a social standard or a new self to be portrayed to the outside world through the eye of social networking sites.

Hongladarom (2011) studied on the personal identity of Internet users in offline and online world. He argued that the use of the social media has become boundless and the self-understanding of both online and offline world has become vague and obscure. He stated that there is a fusion between the both worlds' selves in which reality itself is often informational. It means that both these selves do not have real meaning or essence. The characteristics and the personalities that being portrayed in these social media sites are usually what they want to show to the outside world

when generally in reality are not such.

Psychologically, people tend to create a personality that they adore through online and this often happens with the development of manners and personal feelings. Interestingly, ego is found to be one of the central points to one's conscious thoughts and behaviors. This has been studied by Rhee (2010), who researched on the development of virtual ego and online persona through his article entitled I, Myself, and e-Myself. The result of this study proved that online behaviors can be determined through the concepts of virtual ego and online persona. Relating to this study, a person who goes to YouTube often uses the medium to appear differently to the online compared to his/her offline self. This means the person acts whatever he/she wants when commenting on YouTube as a place to release tension, escape and to obtain self-satisfaction.

2.2.4 Cyber Aggression

The aggression occurs in an online situation is one of the elements that contributes to an individual's tendency to flame. There are two types of incitement for aggression, namely, proactive and reactive aggression (Dodge, 1991). Proactive aggression is a motive directed and contemplative form of aggression result from external consequents. Reactive aggression, on the other hand, is the result of provocation and driven by hostile impulse of others (Dodge, 1991). In other words, proactive is the type of aggression that is initiated without any threat or provocation while reactive aggression is only proposed as a reverberation to a perceived threat.

For this study, reactive aggression will be the point of convergence. According to Dodge and Coie (1987), belligerent and hostile biasness causes reactive aggression. Hostility biasness develops when a person interprets another person's messages or intention as a belligerent medium even when the person that who conveys the message does not has the intention of being harsh or hostile (Crick & Dodge, 1996). Reactive aggression is seen to be the defensive element as a response to a provocation threat (Dodge & Coie, 1987). The increasing rate of stress in online communication discussion may result hostile commenting situation which will likely trigger an individual to "return the comments with a flame to escape or diffuse such stress" (Alonzo and Aiken, 2004, p.211). This is what happens on YouTube. Users often comment negatively as a result from returning comments that discomforts them which then creating a flame war.

3. Theoretical Implications

Based on the review of literature and after looking into all the perspectives of the previous studies, it is important that the theories that supports best for such studies has to look into both motives and psychological side of the issue of flaming on social media. This will help explain the ill-use of social media (particularly YouTube) to flame in Malaysia. The communication theory that can be used to look into the phenomena of flaming in the context of CMC is known has Uses and Gratifications Theory. Next section will look into brief explanation of this theory and its relevance to issue of flaming on YouTube.

3.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) has been coined and developed by the researchers in the early 1940s to explain the traditional media (Blumer & Katz, 1974) and in recent years it was also utilized in the studies of Internet and computer-based communications. UGT is a theory which explains why and how people use certain media to gratify their needs and desires (Blumer & Katz, 1974). Ultimately, the UGT is a theoretical framework that is treated to be one of the most appropriate frameworks that explain both psychological and behavioral propensities of a person in a CMC (Lin, 1999). For this study, this aspects suits best to explain the psychological thinking and the behaviors of those who uses YouTube and those who indulge themselves in the act of flaming.

UGT focuses on what active audience do with media instead of directing on how media influences people. Since flaming in CMC is a concept that involves personality traits as its predictors, UGT is the best theory to start with to know its basis. According to Katz et al. (1974), UGT concentrates on clarifying the perspectives of social and psychological motives. The study on motives helps to understand the reason behind why people use certain types of technology or media to gratify themselves and the psychological needs and motives behind its use beyond social perspectives (too many ands). In this study that focuses on flaming on YouTube, UGT is a good fit in explaining the gratifications of the flamers of YouTube and as well as analyzing the intentions of the YouTube community in using the site.

4. Research overview

For the later phases of this study, content analysis and in-depth interviews will be utilized in order to study the flaming phenomenon on YouTube. In-depth interviews include intensive individual interview or meeting with a limited number of participants to explore their points of view on a specific thought, situation or circumstance (Creswell, 2012). In this area of study, the users of YouTube will be interviewed in order to clarify their thoughts and views on the issue of flaming on YouTube and also to find out the motivations behind posting flaming comments to the site. This includes their perceptions, psychological thoughts and philosophical justifications to the act of hostility practiced online, especially, YouTube.

Unstructured interview pattern will be used for this research where questions of research will not follow any guidelines (Creswell, 2012). The main question will be on the views of YouTube community of the issue of flaming followed by situational questions that will come along in the process of the interview. A total number of 10 flamers will be interviewed to find out the reason behind posting malicious comments online and two persons from each category on YouTube community such as the victims, lurkers, video uploaders and YouTubers.

This study also includes content analysis as the method of analyzing the data. For this study, the comments of YouTube in the comments section will be studied and analyzed by identifying flames and grouping them accordingly. The difference between each category of YouTube videos also will be studied, analyzed and classified into proper patterns. The thematic analysis technique will be used for analyzing the data for this study through line-by-line coding on the findings and the researcher will be able to gather data through brief ideas from the information obtained (Creswell, 2014).

5. Final notes

Flaming is indeed a severe issue that is currently happening in the online world. There are so many negative issues happening as the consequence of this act. It is an issue that needs a lot of concern in Malaysia and has limited study in our context. This study should be conducted as many interesting findings will be able to be identified at the end of the study. This study will be useful for many parties such as the all the YouTube users in order to identify their commenting limits, parents in order to guide their children, and the website itself in order to set up its settings according to each countries' video viewing preferences. For example, sensitive words, such as, 'keling' and 'barua' and others seemingly offensive words in Malaysia can be banned or flagged on YouTube. Hopefully this study will also be an advantage for the government as it will provide data on how severe this problem really is. Then, government will be able to implement new laws and policy for future YouTube users and decrease the act of flaming gradually.

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