The Role of Anonymity in the Flaming Activity on YouTube in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT: In recent days, YouTube has been labeled as the number one website with the most number of flames. The term flaming refers to offensive language such as swearing, insults and hating comments. Anonymity is one of the major components of YouTube that leads one to flame. Anonymity renders an environment that encourages irresponsible acts by people to display offensive behaviors. The aim of this study is to examine the role of anonymity in the flaming activity in Malaysia. In order to support the direction of the study, the uses and gratification theory is proposed in order to explain flaming and its relation to anonymity. In-depth interview was conducted with 10 informants who were the flamers on YouTube. Thematic analysis method were implemented in order to analyze the data. The results of this study concludes that most of the flamers kept their identity anonymous due privacy concerns and for the freedom of speech. The rest of the flamers used their real name as a form of publicity, identity defining and to boost their self-confidence.

KEYWORDS: YouTube; Anonymity; flaming

INTRODUCTION

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. The term flaming refers to offensive language such as swearing, insults and hating comments (Moor, 2010).

First and foremost, anonymity is one of the major components of YouTube that leads one 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, 2014). Most users of YouTube are anonymous and go with an anonymous name and a random avatar to represent them in their 'channel' page (Khan, 2017).

Anonymity is characterized by its "unidentifiable" 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 computer mediated communication 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.

A recent study by Kwon and Grudz (2017), on swearing behaviour on YouTube revealed that one of the reason for aggressive and emotional texts on YouTube is due to the fact that most of its users are anonymous. This study examined comments on the official Donald Trump's channel and proved that anonymity is also one of the reason for the users of YouTube to spread hostility on this site. Another study by

Fernandez (2017) on the issue of racism on social media also proved that anonymity leads to hate-speech and also encourages racism. It was revealed that extremist communities uses YouTube as their platform to display negativity due to the low anonymity barrier of the site.

Anonymity is being reviewed in this study mainly because the prime reason for one to flame is because of the hidden identity of the user. When an account of a user appears anonymous, the tendency of the particular person to flame increases. More swearing, hate-speech and hostility is displayed due to the absence of one's identity.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative method which is the in-depth interviews were done for this study which includes intensive individual interview or meeting with a limited number of participants to explore their points of view on a specific thought, situation or circumstance (Boycee & Naele, 2006). Face-to-face interviews was conducted after a mutual agreement on the venue and date. This technique empowers to produce factual data, participants' assessments, preferences, attitudes and other supportive data turning out amid the discussion with informants.

Along these lines, up close and personal interview method guarantees the quality of the answers and expands the response rate (Duncan & Fiske, 2015). The population of this study is those who comments negatively on YouTube's comments' section whom better known as flamers or trolls. The 'flamers' were identified through the comments' section of YouTube. Flamers were chosen through YouTube comment section in Malaysian themed recent YouTube videos using purposive sampling. They were then messaged privately to their YouTube inbox asking for a face-to-face interview session.

The criteria of a flamer in this study is anyone who comments negatively on YouTube despite the number of times he/she has flamed online. According to Mason (2010), the minimum sample size to achieve saturation point suggests a number of 10 respondents of interview to obtain a valid data. Other reasons for choosing 10 respondents are due to the fact that different individual has different point of view and also to obtain a variety of answers on this issue and avoid biasness. Since the in-depth interview method will be implemented in this study, the method only requires a small number of informants (Guion & McDonald, 2011).

The thematic analysis technique is used for analyzing the data for this study. The thematic analysis is done through line-by-line coding on the findings and the researcher gathered data through brief ideas of the information obtained (Creswell, 2007).

This study questions on the role of anonymity in the act of flaming on YouTube videos in Malaysia. The aim intended in this study to understand the role of anonymity in the use of YouTube by Malaysians, thus the theory proposed is the Uses and Gratifications (UGT). 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 computer-mediated communication (Lin, 1999).

For this study, this aspect 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. Since the theory questions on what people do with media, and looks into both behavior and psychology part of a person, it is best used to explain the phenomena of flaming in the context of the willingness of one to reveal their identity on this site.

FINDINGS

Identity revelation in social media has always been a choice for every user. The participants of the online world can choose to either keep themselves anonymous or reveal their identities. A condition or character with respect to whom or what a thing is; the characteristics, convictions, and anything that recognize or distinguish a person or a thing (Olins, 2017). According to Fearon (1999), identity explained in two ways, in which social category and personal identity, which is directly proportional

to online discourse activities where both social aspects and individuality matters.

"In the former sense, an "identity" refers simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes. In the second sense of personal identity, an identity is some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable (p. 4)."

As for YouTube, the users need to be registered and needs to complete a login process in order to create an account on the site. The users must provide a name and valid email address for the process. Certain users even upload an image or an avatar that represents them. Anonymity has always been a popular issue of discussion on any online forums. Therefore, the researcher had asked the question of whether the name used in their YouTube account real or anonymous. The following are the transcripts of those who prefer to keep their image and identity hidden.

"No. Obviously not because I don't want to reveal myself when I do flaming comment. And I... Ya. It is like...For you to comment freely, you need to have to have some privacy. You cannot reveal yourself and write flaming comment on the video. And hiding my identity gives me a freedom to comment flaming type of comments."
(Informant 1)

"Not my real name because I don't want people to know who I am. I can express my opinions freely without fear."
(Informant 3)

"No. Not my real name because of privacy issues."
(Informant 5)

"I don't want others know who I am. This will make me easy to comment whatever I want. No one can find me. Or track me."
(Informant 7)

"No. it's not. I think it's privacy to put your real name there. It's easily to search for my name after that if someone wants to search."
(Informant 8)

"Not my real name. I don't prefer to reveal my identity."
(Informant 10)

According to the majority answers of the informants above, anonymity has been a major part or reason for them to comment maliciously on YouTube. This is solely due to the anonymity reasons where their identity kept hidden.

This can be proved by the study that has been done by Kwon and Gruzd (2017) where a study was done on a set of YouTube videos based on Donald Trump's campaign channel. This study investigates whether forceful comments and swearing on YouTube content is in fact infectious and contagious. The result of this research affirms that swearing is not solely a result of an individual discourse and speech tendency but also a spreadable social practice that involves anonymity. This study confirms that anonymity plays an important role in aggression level portrayed on social media especially on YouTube.

Another study by Khan (2017) done on user participation and consumption level of YouTube. This study involves a sample of 1143 users of YouTube where it revealed that anonymity is one of the major cause of negativity displayed on the site. This also supports the idea of privacy online and freedom of speech of those who performed hostility online, similar to the answers to the informants above. This provides justifications on why most users prefer to be anonymous when it comes to interacting and commenting on social media sites.

The rest of the informants agreed of using the real name as their YouTube account username. The prefer allowing their names online simply for publicity, identity defining and due to self-confidence level. Their answers listed below;

"Yes it's my real name. Because I sign up account, and put up the videos of mine on YouTube. By that way I want people to notice me by my real name. I'm not just a commenter on YouTube; I also upload videos to YouTube. Now, when I become a grown up man so I feel

like why hiding your name? Why faking your real username, like you making some other – for example, Animal Lover for example but now I feel like I'm mature enough so I can face it. Face the world. Face any hatred or any kind of predicaments so I feel like I can handle it. So, I use my real name."

(Informant 2)

"Yes, my real name. I don't think I should fake it. Since it's my account, it should be in my name and it should define my identity. So, why should I use a different name for that?"

(Informant 4)

"It is because I don't have any reasons for faking my name."

(Informant 6)

"It is because I feel that I don't unnecessarily comment irrelevant things. I make sure my comments are truly what I believe in and I don't feel the necessity in hiding my identity when commenting on any video Section."

(Informant 9)

According to the informants above, revealing their actual name on YouTube is the right thing to do to retain their originality. As a term, it frequently conveys positive meanings — "authentic" or realism can be characterized as "adjusting to a unique in order to repeat fundamental elements" or "not false or impersonation." At the point when connected to identity, it inspires meanings of being "consistent with one's own particular identity, soul, or character," (Merriam-Webster, 2014). This proves that users with real name experiences self-confidence through identity defining on social media cites.

Haimson and Hoffman (2016) suggested that on the web, realness' portraying nature reflected in the decisions users must make in regards to individual or enlightening divulgence. When rounding out online profiles or drawing in with others on the web, the online users must settle on decisions about uncovering or enabling access to subtle elements of one's life. These decisions speak to a sort of "personal branding" that may seem to be genuine relying upon the setting of the revelations and the standards and affordability of a given site. These can be a factor on why certain users of YouTube need the

access of YouTube for publicity and fame as related to the answers on Informant 2.

The answer provided by the informants on the issue of identity revelation concluded as a recap in the figure 1 below;
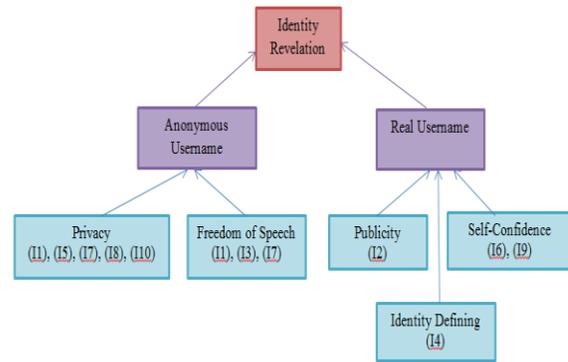

Figure 1: Identity revelation recap

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study concludes that most of the flamers kept their identity anonymous due privacy concerns and for the freedom of speech. The rest of the flamers used their real name as a form of publicity, identity defining and to boost their self-confidence. It is indeed a choice of the users of YouTube to whether or not to reveal their identity but in most cases anonymity do motivate flaming activities as it keeps their image hidden. In other cases, the flamers are more than happy to reveal their identity for satisfaction purposes which also supports the justification on the use of the uses and gratifications theory to explain this phenomenon.

Considering practical contribution of this study, psychologically, the human minds tend to reflect whatever they see in their daily activities. From the act of flaming and by becoming 'keyboard warriors', peoples spread hatred by hating each other, hating other religions, other races and beliefs, other countries and this situation follows through. Whatever people see and read will affect them in both online and offline mode and chances are that hatred will be conveyed in their daily lives as a Malaysian and provokes conflict.

Hopefully this study will also be an advantage for the government as it will provide data on how severe this problem really is. The government will then be able to implement new laws and policy for future YouTube users and gradually the act of flaming can be decreased. This study also may add relevance to the future data of Cyber Security Malaysia, MyCert and other concerning parties. It is also recommended that artificial intelligence to be used on YouTube in order to tackle to issue of anonymity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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