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The Viciousness and Caring of Sharing: Morality and Motivations of Online Shamers

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[to cite]:

Chen Pundak, Yael Steinhart, and Jacob Goldenberg (2018) , "The Viciousness and Caring of Sharing: Morality and Motivations of Online Shamers", in E - European Advances in Consumer Research Volume 11, eds. Maggie Geuens, Mario Pandelaere, and Michel Tuan Pham, Iris Vermeir, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 236-237.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1700220/volumes/v11e/E-11>

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online shaming entails two contradictory outcomes: informal enforcement against deviant behavior, and violation of privacy rights. A set of studies shows this duality and demonstrates the role of morality in driving participation in online shaming. The results highlight the moderating effect of high (vs. low) identifiability of the wrongdoer.

Public shaming is defined as informally punishing individuals who have deviated socially by informing the public about their conduct in a disapproving manner (Petley 2013). This research focuses on consumers who engage in public shaming on social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) against a wrongdoer who has acted immorally. In such contexts and given the growing prevalence of this phenomenon, public shaming may facilitate amending not only wrongdoers' behavior but also the behavior of the people who surround them (Jacquet 2015).

Moral concern may be the driving force behind public shaming, since such concern involves the desire to protect others as well as the desire to restrain them from doing harm (Janoff-Bulman and Carnes 2013). However, the decision to engage in public shaming consists of two contradictory motivations: informal enforcement against deviant behavior (thereby preventing offenses such as animal abuse or discriminatory customer service) and the violation of privacy rights and dignity (exposing the personal details of the wrongdoer). Given this dual nature of public shaming, we hypothesize that morality is more likely to drive consumers to participate in public shaming when the wrongdoer identifiability is low rather than high. When the wrongdoer identifiability is low, the probability of hurting the wrongdoer is low and the likelihood of educating the public is still high.

A preliminary study tested the assumption that people acknowledge both positive and negative sides to sharing shaming information. We presented 100 participants with six real-life cases of online shaming. Three cases involved low identified target (a vague photo/first name only/job description only), and three cases involved high identified target (a clear photo, and in two cases, a full name as well). Participants rated both the expected positive and negative outcomes of shaming above the mid-point on a 7-point scale. Yet, the average ratings of the expected positive outcomes were higher for the low identifiability cases than for the high identifiable cases ($M=4.87$ vs. $M=4.32$, $t(99)=5.24$, $p<.001$). Conversely, the average ratings of the negative outcomes were higher for the high identifiable cases than for the low identifiable cases ($M=5.02$ vs. $M=4.44$, $t(99)=5.26$, $p<.001$).

In our first study we demonstrated how moral concern interact with identifiability levels of the wrongdoer in driving actual choices regarding participation in public shaming. Participants ($n=141$) were presented with several posts and were asked to click "like" on one of the posts through their social media accounts. After making their choices, participants completed a moral concern scale. Logistic regression found that moral concern significantly predicted the likelihood to choose to "like" a shaming post in which the wrongdoer identifiability was low rather than high ($\chi(1)^2=4.87$, $p=.027$). Specifically, the $\exp(B)$ value indicated that an increase of one unit in the average moral concern score was associated with an increase of 62% in the odds ratio of choosing a low identifiable post.

In our second study, participants ($n=278$) were presented with a shaming post that included a photo of a woman (the wrongdoer)

dragging a swan out of a lake. We manipulated the identifiability of the wrongdoer by presenting different angles of the image: half the participants saw a high identifiable wrongdoer, and half saw a low identifiable wrongdoer. Participants were asked to rate the likelihood they would share this post.

As expected, the mean-centered interaction between moral concern and wrongdoer-identification was significant ($b=-.65$, $p=.0033$): Using the Johnson-Neyman "floodlight" approach, we found that participants with moral concern above 1.86 were more likely to share the post in which the wrongdoer was unidentified rather than identified. In contrast, participants with moral concern below $-.295$ were more likely to share the post in which the wrongdoer was identified rather than unidentified.

In a replication study, participants ($n=374$) were presented with a post that described a manager of a restaurant who had ignored a complaint about possible food poisoning. Half the participants saw a photo of the restaurant's manager, and the other half did not. Again, the interaction between moral concern and wrongdoer-identification condition had significant effect on participants' likelihood of sharing the post.

In our fourth study ($n=393$), we attenuated the negative outcomes of shaming by presenting more than one target as being shamed, thereby reducing the likelihood that a given wrongdoer would be hurt: Participants were presented with a post describing either a spa receptionist or a group of receptionists who had ignored an elderly customer. A photo of the receptionist or receptionists was presented either from the back (low identifiability) or from the front (high identifiability). Also, we manipulated moral concern instead of measuring them. An ANOVA found a three-way interaction: Among participants under the high-moral-concern manipulation, those in the low-identifiable-single-receptionist condition were more likely to share the post than were participants in the high-identifiable-receptionist condition ($M=4.55$ vs. $M=3.46$, $t(385)=2.59$, $p=0.01$).

In our last study we focused on the underlying process of our interaction, as well as the moderating role of group relatedness. When a person is being shamed in his own community, the negative outcomes and the positive outcomes can be particularly strong. Participants ($n=305$) were presented with a shaming post about an airline passenger who had misbehaved. The passenger's photo was either blurry (low identifiability) or sharp (high identifiability). Also, the passenger was described either as part of the participants' ingroup (same nationality) or as an outgroup member (different nationality). Higher moral concern were positively correlated with sharing likelihood when the wrongdoer identifiability was low and was an ingroup member ($b=.25$, $t(297)=2.04$, $p=.04$). Surprisingly, we also found a significant positive effect for moral concern when the wrongdoer identifiability was high and an outgroup member ($b=.28$, $t(297)=2.83$, $p=.005$). The effect of moral concern on sharing likelihood was mediated by expected positive outcomes of sharing the post ($b=-.21$; 95% CI: $-.43$, $-.04$) but not by the expected negative outcomes.

Taken together, our studies suggest that while people acknowledge the dual outcomes of shaming, morality and the extent to which the wrongdoer is identifiable affect the decision to participate in public shaming. While negative outcomes are acknowledged, the expected positive consequences are the ones that drive potential shamers' decisions regarding whether or not to participate in public shaming.

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