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Glamorizing rampage online: School shooting fan communities on YouTube



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ABSTRACT

This article examines a YouTube school shooting fan network. We analyze the network dynamics, potential efficacy and influence of this network. Our main task is to discover if school shooting fans form a small-world network and to study the social psychological characteristics of the group's formation and cohesion. Our theoretical approach draws from social network theory, group theory and subcultural theory. The data were collected from YouTube during April 2012. The network still existed in 2014, which shows that it continues to be potentially influential since it is easy to detect and hard to eliminate. Initially, profiles with references to school shootings were searched for by using various keywords related to school shootings. Only those profiles that included positive or sympathizing comments on school shootings were selected for further analysis. A total of 113 pro-school shooting profiles were identified, and 100 out these profiles belonged to the same social network, which resembles a small-world network. Our thematic analysis reveals that Columbine-shooting fans form the core group of the network, with the Columbine murders being a uniting factor among the fans. The results indicate that social networking sites provide a powerful arena for users interested in morally dubious material to find other similarly minded people globally. School shooting fans share a common language and they express similar ideological points of view and justifications for the mass violence.

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1. Introduction

The development of the internet and other communication technologies has in many ways changed the patterns of social interaction in advanced societies. People who are interested in similar ideas but geographically distant from each other can easily connect via social networking sites (SNS). In some cases, SNS users can create and maintain

strong and active networks, which share many characteristics of small-world networks. It has been argued that such networks are formed everywhere, from biological neural networks to collaboration networks of Hollywood actors [1–4]. These networks can carry diseases, innovations and radical ideologies. The small-world phenomenon is particularly useful framework when trying to understand the spread and influence of different actors, events, or behaviors.

In this study, we analyze networks of individuals who admire and glorify school shootings and shooters on YouTube or *school shooting fans*. School shooting fans have been detected in earlier studies [5–7], but some researchers suspect that their network is weak or no longer in existence

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[7]. We aim to investigate if this is actually the case. We begin by demonstrating that such a network of school shooting fans exists, and then we analyze its network dynamics and potential efficacy and influence. School shooting cases are interesting phenomenon to study because they attract a global following, and we suspect these followers become interrelated. This network aspect of school shooting fans has not yet been analyzed, and we investigate if such fans form a small-world network and then study the social psychological aspects of their group formation and cohesion.

The article is structured as follows. We first provide our theoretical model and literature review before moving into our research questions, data, and analysis. Based on our findings, we then discuss the significance of small-world networks in online environments, which are often easily accessible for average users but difficult to control or eliminate.

1.1. Theoretical model of small-world networks and group formation

We examine school shooting fan networks from the perspectives of social network theory, group theory and sub-cultural theory. Based on fundamental tenants of social psychology, group behavior is at the core of social behavior, and it is part of the human tendency to seek social connection [8]. People group together for any number of reasons [9]. We show in our theoretical model how these social connections are created and maintained. However, instead of analyzing local and dense groups, we describe how group behavior functions in small-world networks that may share some characteristics of groups, communities and subcultures.

Small-world network theory starts with the idea that people are often more connected than they think, despite possible geographic and socio-demographic distances. This is the lay notion of meeting someone previously unknown who knows someone one knows (*It's a small world*). Small-world phenomenon was first studied in social psychological experiments [10], but the paradigm rose to prominence in the 1990s with access to bigger data sets and greater computational power provided by faster computers [3,4].

Since small-world networks are clustered and their members are relatively close within the network [1,11], they may have some of the same features as groups. Group behavior is grounded on *the principle of homophily*, meaning that people are more likely to associate with others who are similar to them [12–14]. These similarities may be based on social identity, geographical location or interests. Geographical distances no longer restrict people's communication and interaction. Online communication is instantaneous and not dependent on physical proximity. By reducing the importance of geographic proximity, online communication offers increased possibilities to seek company outside one's daily circles who share similar interests. The more obscure and rare their topics of interest, the harder they will have to search to find others with a similar interests. However, ICT facilitates finding such people by expanding the geographic scope of ones' associates. Thus, ICTs extend the geographic

scope of the principle of homophily, now permitting geographically distant people with similar interests to find each other and interact.

The long tradition of social psychological group experiments has shown that group formation sometimes occurs even in minimally conducive circumstances, leading to the division of in-group (*us*) and out-group (*them*) [15,16]. This *principle of group formation* means that in some cases the only common denominator keeping the group together might be their fascination towards the same object or topic. Moreover, if group members are partly or fully anonymous, it will have an impact on group behavior within the network. In theory, anonymity will increase the importance of shared symbols and codes. This *principle of anonymity* is grounded in social group theories [17–19]. Anonymity enhances conformity to group norms [20] and attraction to the group [19]. We are particularly interested in these dynamics of what holds the group together and how the group maintains cohesion [21,22].

Group cohesion has been an important part of sociological studies on youth groups and subcultures. Sub-cultural studies show how people use symbols and signs to identifying themselves as members of certain groups or subcultures [23–25]. A subculture is defined here as a group or wider community that may subvert some of the norms, values or codes of the dominant or mainstream society. They share some of the dominant society's values or codes (e.g. clothing, style), but vary in exhibiting those styles on social context (e.g. mainstream job during weekdays and a member of a subversive subculture during weekends) [26]. Some subcultures are trans-generational, and some are inter-generational, as previous generations pass on tastes in music, style and other interests to subsequent generations. Even deviant subcultures have relatively stable social rituals, stories and symbols over time [27,28]. All this, we argue, might apply to the online context. Online subcultures might evolve into a persistent phenomenon if they are able to find and create unifying factors that keep them together and motivate new members to join.

Our study firmly falls in the tradition that recognizes peer groups are an important social influence [14,29,30]. Hence, people who are socially connected are likely to exert influence on each other – *the principle of influence*. These influences might be societally beneficial or harmful. The influence might concern only group members or it might extend to others outside the group depending on the structure, aims and communicative strategies of the group. Small groups of densely connected actors are unlikely to have substantial social influence [see [31,32]]. In contrast, large subcultural movements or small-worlds networks are able to spread information and ideas effectively and efficiently [33,34]. A network's size, structure and dynamic largely determine the influence it has [30,33], and these factors are particularly important when analyzing networks of potentially harmful communities such as school shooting fans. We will now briefly review previous research on the topic. We will first focus on the general characteristics of online communities. We then discuss online hate groups and terrorists before focusing on school shooting fans.

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