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Commenting on YouTube rants: Perceptions of inappropriateness or civic engagement?

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Abstract

Ranting is often conflated with flaming and hating, which are frequently interpreted as inappropriate forms of online interaction. Scholars have categorized rants, which contain emotional criticisms of something or someone, as ''anti-social'' (Vrooman, 2002). However, scholars are moving away from universal interpretations of inappropriateness, and now engage in contextual analyses of online behavior. The present study examines a random sample of 330 text comments (drawn from a pool of 13,609 comments) that were posted across 35 rant videos on YouTube. Ranters describe numerous technical and social problems with the video-sharing site. But how are rant videos received on YouTube? Do commenters characterize them as inappropriate? Do rants stimulate productive discussion or do most commenters prefer to express emotional support for the ranter? Rather than displaying personal offense, numerous commenters discussed how problems with YouTube were being publicly revealed in video rants. Such issues are particularly relevant, as expectations about communicative norms are being proposed and contested in new media sites (Markham, 2011). This study argues that under the right circumstances, ranting helps construct an emotional public sphere (Lunt and Stenner, 2005) that generates discussion among similarly concerned YouTube participants about their online communicative rights and privileges.

Keywords: Rants; Computer-mediated communication; YouTube; Civic engagement; Social media; Impoliteness

1. Introduction

Scholars have explored the often painful effects of emotional and agonistic online interaction (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010a; Herring, 1994; Lange, 2007a; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011; Tannen, 1998). Haters, griefers, trolls, flamers, and ranters engage in behaviors that are typically assumed to impair productive communication. The arrival of video platforms has prompted renewed concerns about the possibilities of achieving meaningful public discourse (Buckingham, 2009; Hess, 2009) in heterogeneous global forums (Burgess and Green, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2006; Lange, 2007a). Yet, newer scholarship argues that online conflict is not always destructive; under certain circumstances, forms of conflict can play an important role in social life (Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010a; Pagliai, 2010; Shum and Lee, 2013).

Passion and aggressive emotions have been also viewed suspiciously by civic engagement scholars (Goodwin et al., 2001; Lunt and Stenner, 2005). Models of discourse tend to privilege dispassionate, reasoned argument as represented in the Habermasian (1989) ideal of deliberative discourse in the public sphere (Calhoun, 1992). Theorists often assume that emotions and rationality are separate and incompatible (Lunt and Stenner, 2005). However, social movement researchers now recognize that ''emotions can be strategically used by activists *and* be the basis for strategic thought'' (Goodwin et al., 2001:9; emphasis original). Indeed, arousing empathetic feelings can stimulate support for social goals.

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To investigate the impact of emotional talk online, this study investigates whether YouTube video rants are considered inappropriate by viewers, as indexed through text commentary posted to rant videos. Rants are emotional messages, often exhibiting anger or frustration, that identify a problem or criticize things such as interactants' behavior or the performance of technical features or systems (Lange, 2012). On the video-sharing site of YouTube, many video makers address the camera to rant about troublesome issues ranging from unfair copyright policies to confusing layout changes on YouTube's video pages.

This study asks: Are rant videos that identify problems about YouTube considered by viewers to be inappropriate? Are the viewers who post text comments interested in or offended by the form, content, or emotional timbre of rant videos? How do commenters react to the emotional pitch of the rant videos? Of particular interest is analyzing how interpretants actively interpret and evaluate meanings of videos that creators have labeled as ''rants.'' These rant videos occur within a specific ''genre of participation'' (Ito, 2009) which refers to how people engage with, orient to, and interpret media and interactive practices in ''social, routinized ways'' within a particular media site (Ito et al., 2010:15). The genre of participation rubric is a media analogy to communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), in which networks of participants with different roles orient around certain goals in a particular setting (such as classrooms or workplaces). In communities of practice, participants operate within a specific context that exhibits structural opportunities and constraints, and so too do participation genres orient around media that contain technical and interactive parameters. Pragmatics is fundamentally concerned with the ability of interactants to ''pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate,'' (Levinson, 1983:24), and this study similarly evaluates the appropriateness of rant videos within the genre of participation of the media platform of YouTube. Attending to how rant videos are interpreted and evaluated in a specific media context is fruitful for exploring whether ranting holds the promise of identifying and addressing communicative complications that prevent full and equitable participation in online contexts.

2. Prior conceptions of impoliteness

Research on politeness initially drew on Brown and Levinson's (1978) important work, which focused on politeness as face work. A subsequent turn shifted the focus from a top-down approach that privileged analysts' universal assumptions of politeness (also known as second-order politeness or politeness2) to invoking a bottom-up approach that explores whether interactants interpret specific behaviors within particular contexts as polite (also known as first-order politeness or politeness1) (Locher and Watts, 2005).

A similar approach applies to research on impoliteness, which is not the inverse of politeness, but exhibits its own characteristics. Although a single definition of impoliteness has not emerged, it would seem that, ''deviation from norms or expectations, associated with different discursive practices and based on an individual's cognitive experience emerges as a common denominator in the way that many scholars account for impoliteness phenomena'' (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010b:61).

''Inappropriate'' behavior has been defined as the same as or different from ''impoliteness.'' To some scholars, ''inappropriate behavior is not always impolite,'' (Culpeper, 2012; Schneider, 2012:1026) while for others they are interchangeable terms (Meier, 1995). The definition of inappropriate behavior may be inferred from researchers' nearly tautological descriptions that equate it with behavior that insiders deem as not appropriate for a specific interactive context (Culpeper, 2012; Schneider, 2012). Notably, according to Watts (2005), inappropriate behavior is ''always'' marked. Inappropriate behavior may be marked by interactants (Shum and Lee, 2013) or gleaned through instruments such as researcher-driven questionnaires (Schneider, 2012).

Shum and Lee (2013:55) investigated impoliteness and disagreement in Internet discussion forums, and concluded that ''whether an utterance is considered as polite or impolite, or appropriate or inappropriate, depends largely on the norms of the local context.'' Contemporary approaches on computer-mediated communication focus not on ''universal'' behavioral standards but rather attend closely to contextually appropriate norms (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010b; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011; Shum and Lee, 2013). If impolite and inappropriate behavior, which are treated as interchangeable terms in this study, are always marked (Watts, 2005), then it is logical to explore whether text commenters operating within the participation genre of YouTube mark rants as problematic.

A parallel move away from researchers' conceptions to native understandings of problematic talk has also taken place in online communication scholarship. Prior research revealed concerns with ''flaming,'' which includes being abusive, making offensive comments, or sharply criticizing interlocutors (Kim and Raja, 1991). Flames are often directed toward individuals as *ad hominem* attacks (Arendholz, 2013; Thurlow et al., 2004). Flaming is also associated with ''speaking incessantly and/or rabidly on some relatively uninteresting subject'' or ''[directing] hostility at a particular person or people'' (Raymond, 1996:193).

Scholars have questioned the validity of researcher-based assumptions of flames (Lange, 2006; O'Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003). Even if researchers feel discomfort it is difficult to speak of ''flames'' if participants do not register offense (Arendholz, 2013; Avgerinakou, 2003). Further, agonism is not necessarily perceived negatively across all cultures