



Emotional Support of Translational Community on Imgur

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Abstract

To begin exploring the online social environment of today's youth, this study examines a social media website that claims unique levels of "niceness"— Imgur (Smith, 2015). Imgur (pronounced Imijer) is an open image sharing community website where users can submit still or gif photos. From there, users are allowed to comment on each other's photos within the limit of 140 characters. Using a content analysis of user comments, this study explores the degree of emotional supportiveness, civility, and sense of community identity users express on Imgur. Imgur uses up-votes, a positive or negative voting system where users can display their sentiments towards another's post, to capture users' support. Due to Imgur's unique engagement system, this study also explored the value of using up-votes to capture sentiments of this website community by discussing differences in data results when up-votes are, or are not, factored into expressions of users' sentiments. Our results showed that, overall, Imgur comments tended to be somewhat supportive of other users, and that user comments tended to be civil in nature. The correlation between supportiveness and civility was only significant when up-votes were used as a multiplier, and expressions of sense of community identity did exist, though in relatively small numbers.

Key words: Imgur, Online, Community, Comments, Emotional, Support, Civility

Introduction

Social interaction on the Internet has led to the development of unique online social cultures. Shreyer (2012), argued that as these online social cultures are often composed of people from differing countries they should be considered virtual transnational communities. This characterization of transnational communities aligns itself with Vertovec's (2009) definition of transnationalism, which suggests that such communities are "sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states" (p. 2). The study of international interaction in online spaces is particularly pertinent for examining youth culture, as adolescents worldwide have reported preferring online social spaces for meeting people, interacting, and sharing their thoughts and language (Black & Steinkuehler, 2009).

As online virtual spaces have become the preferred transnational interaction sites for youth (Black & Steinkeuhler, 2009), it is important to gain a better understanding of the kinds of positive and negative experiences young internet users have when they



engage with others online. Social discourse in online communities can vary widely in levels of civility and kindness, ranging from emotionally supportive discussion boards created for those with an illness (Klemm et al., 2003) to unsolicited salacious harassment found on some of the most prominent and widely used social networking sites (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). To begin exploring the online social environment of today's youth, this study examines a social media website that claims unique levels of "niceness"—Imgur (Smith, 2015). Imgur (pronounced Imijer) is an open image sharing community website where users can submit still or gif photos. From there, users are allowed to comment on each other's photos within the limit of 140 characters. In their claim for niceness, Smith (2015), an executive of Imgur, stated the following:

A visit to Imgur is consistently cheery. The success of a photo, meme or comment is almost directly tied with its subtle humor or how uplifting it is — a phenomenon the Schaafs called 'niceness at scale' when I met the team in New York a year ago. The front page usually has a smattering of feel-good stories or cries for support for an ailing loved one, and negative comments are almost always down-voted into total oblivion.

A 2016 report by Quantcast indicates Imgur users are geographically diverse, with users from the United States, Russia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany (Imgur, n.d.). The average user is male, age 18-24, with low income, and no children (Imgur, n.d.). Imgur's leaders call their demographic "the 'modest male' — not the nefarious 'bro,' but the kind of modern guy who appreciates nerd culture, video games, comics, subtle humor and puns" (Smith, 2015).

Using a content analysis of user comments, this study explores the degree of emotional supportiveness, civility, and sense of community identity users express on Imgur.

Imgur, like other online communities, has its own social norms, traditions, and idioms (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Much like Facebook that established the tradition of a thumbs up to indicate liking another post (Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs, & Bellotti, 2010). Imgur uses up-votes, a positive or negative voting system where users can display their sentiments towards another's post, to capture users' support. Due to Imgur's unique engagement system, this study also explored the value of using up-votes to capture sentiments of this website community by discussing differences in data results when up-votes are, or are not, factored into expressions of users' sentiments.

Literature Review

Schreyer (2012) suggests that internet communities are the first step to understanding international communities; they serve as an avatar to international interactions in real life. What happens on the internet does not stay on the internet; for good and bad, the effects of online interactions permeate into users' offline lives as well. As a result, internet users benefit from an increase in their social capital or networks of human contacts that help internet users in all aspects in their life. The degree of positive emotional support, civility, and sense of community users feel as they interact in online networks has the ability to positively impact users' ability to cope with life. Therefore, this study employs a



content analysis to explore the type of experience Imgur users have on this social networking site as they interact with and post content.

Emotional Support

The general health and wellbeing of individuals, and cumulatively of societies, are significantly impacted by the levels of emotional support experienced online. Van Dijk (2005) suggested that social capital is aided via online interaction by increased social contact, civic engagement, and an increased sense of community.

Emotional support is also considered a fundamental element of close, personal, relationships (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Research has shown that high levels of social support create a protective barrier from the damaging effects of stress on physical health (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996). Positive manifestations of emotional support can come as expressions of care, concern, love, interest, and legitimizing/empathizing with another's feelings as well as expressions of encouragement, appreciation, reassurance, and respect (Burlison, 2003). An emotionally unsupported person who does not receive this kind of positive emotional support is more likely to exhibit the side effects of stress. Specifically, a person who has had involvement in cyberbullying is more likely to display negative levels of physical, physiological, and academic wellbeing (Kowalski & Limber, 2013).

Online Civility

Online civility impacts the wellbeing of individuals and societies. Civility is important for encouraging deliberative dialogue, particularly online. Minds become more closed and lose a willingness to even consider another person's point of view when said point of view is expressed in an uncivil manner (Hwang 2008). Thus, potential for cooperation and mutual understanding can be lost from an online comment made in a rude or insulting manner. Civility does not require agreement, however, it does require politeness (Brooks and Greer, 2007), such as refraining from swearing, rudeness, or inflammatory terms (Santana 2014). One can be supportive yet uncivil by supporting racists or cruel ideas, or by using encouraging words with vulgarities mixed in. One can also be civil, yet unsupportive, by politely disagreeing with another's ideas.

According to Lee and Kim (2015), anonymity, lack of responsibility and online context climate (in order of most influential to least influential) are the factors most likely to increase malicious online comments. Anonymity manifests itself when users employ pseudonyms instead of real names. To maintain their anonymity users will also eliminate links that could lead other users to the disclosure of their true identity. Anonymity has been ascribed to creating a power imbalance as it is more difficult to respond effectively to an unknown identity (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). This is particularly true for many episodes of cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010).

The disinhibition created by internet anonymity tends to make online user comments ruder and more offensive than comments received in face-to-face interactions (Casale et al., 2015). Santana (2014) explored the impact of anonymity on civility levels found in online comments and discovered anonymity drove uncivil comments up to 53%. Alternately, Marahan-Martin and Schumacher (2003) found that anonymity had an



opposite effect for those who were lonely to begin with. In this instance the disinhibition derived from anonymity took a positive direction by increasing friendliness, personal disclosure, emotional supportiveness, and fun (Marahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003). As a rule, Imgur requires anonymity and punishments as high as having one's user account terminated can be inflicted if anonymity is not adhered to. Therefore, this research explores the impact anonymity has on the supportive and civil nature of users comments.

Lee and Kim (2015) describe internet responsibility as a level of rules, and their enforcement. They found that if a website's rules, and their enforcement, are slight, then vitriolic comments are more likely to be present on the website (Lee & Kim, 2015). For Imgur, responsibility is applied through self-policing (Schaaf, 2015). Users report infringements of the websites' rules and then moderators determine the appropriate level of punishment; ranging from a warning (with three chances), a discard of the post, or a full-on termination of one's user account. Imgur's up-vote system also allows for users to self-police. This process determines which comments will be seen at the top of the webpage and which should be down-voted to such a low position on the webpage that they will likely remain unseen.

The online context climate described by Lee and Kim (2015) is set by users and how they interact on a website. The types of comments users make can be accepted as a social norm that new and existing users follow. Preece (2004) encouraged the use of role models online, stating that watching others is how children learn etiquette. Preece (2014) noted that, like children, newcomers on a website watch other established users to determine the normal modes of behavior on a site and then they follow that observed pattern of behavior. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that people rely on intersubjective consensus more frequently than they rely on objective data (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005). Imjur's online context climate for Imgur could have been established years ago when the comments section was intended to be a caption contest. While the instructions to create captions for the image are no longer present, the tradition of comments being like a caption contest may still linger.

Sense of Community

Research shows that in-group civility is significantly enhanced when people identify themselves as members of a group (Chiu et al., 2015). Blanchard (2007) defines this form of online social community identity as "feelings of membership, identity, belonging, and attachment to a group that interacts primarily through electronic communication" (p. 827). While incivility drives individuals away from considering another's perspective, identifying oneself with a social community tends to make a person take on the communities' goals and perspectives, consequently increasing citizenship behaviors (Van Knippenberg, 2000). As Imgur users self-identify as "Imgurians," this study explores whether or not users' sense of social community is self-identified in their comments.

The literature suggests a variety of influencing factors that could impact the levels of niceness portrayed on Imgur. First, the anonymity Imgur offers, is likely to increase the level of incivility (Santana, 2014); however, social community identity and the context climate are likely to encourage more etiquette and niceness. Additionally, online



disinhibition suggests that anonymity can both encourage website use by those who would otherwise have trouble with live social interaction, but it can also increase rudeness due to the lack of accountability that would otherwise be present in a face-to-face interaction (White & Dorman, 2001). Therefore, based on the literature, the following research questions are posed in order to understand nature of comments on Imgur:

RQ 1: How supportive are Imgur user comments to other users?

RQ 2: How civil are Imgur user comments to other users?

Hypotheses 1: Civil comments will be more supportive than uncivil comments?

RQ 3: Do Imgur users express a sense a community identity in their comments?

RQ 4: Do Imgur up votes positively or negatively impact the degree of supportiveness, civility and sense of community expressed by users?

Methodology

About Imgur

A quantitative content analysis was conducted to explore Imgur's online culture, with user comments serving as the unit of analysis. User comments were collected daily for a week, from February 6th to 12th, 2016. Each day between 6 to 10pm, the top 10 images featured on Imgur's front page were collected for analysis. These images were chosen because they received the most up-votes for that day and were therefore considered the most viral images. From each post the top 10 user comments were archived for data collection. The top comments were chosen for analysis as these comments had the most up votes and were therefore representative of more users. In total, 700 comments were collected and analyzed. It should be acknowledged that the 2016 Super Bowl was a major event that took place during the week chosen for analysis; however, at the time of this study Imgur users indicated sports as being a low priority and interest (Imgur, n.d.).

To learn how supportive Imgur users are to those who post content, comments were coded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very unsupportive (1) to very supportive (5). Unsupportive comments reflected direct insults or negative sentiments directed towards another user. Somewhat unsupportive comments were also negative in tone, but dislike focused more on users' ideas rather than the character or person who posted the content. Likewise, very supportive comments included direct compliments or well wishes to other users. Somewhat supportive sentiments were coded as positive statements towards another user's idea or the building of a joke from the foundation of another user's ideas. Comments were coded as neutral if the statement did not reflect a positive or negative sentiment. When comments had multiple phrases, each sentiment was coded individually. Scores for the individual comments were then averaged and recorded. If the average score fell between two of the scaled options, then the option closer to neutral was used for the final code.

This research also explored the civility and incivility of users' comments. Incivility was determined using a coding scheme adopted by Santana (2014) who examined the civility of reader comments in online news stories. Uncivil comments were then identified as being one of nine types of uncivil expressions: 1) attacks, including personal or



inflammatory insults; 2) threats, which declared future bad events; 3) vulgarities, including uncouth suggestions of a sexual nature; 4) abusive or foul language, including swear words; 5) xenophobic or other hateful language or expressions; 6) epithets or ethnic slurs, including words against those from other places; 7) racist language including figures of speech, disrespectful names towards groups, and sentiments that were racist or bigoted; 8) disparaging on the basis of race/ethnicity or other group; and 9) assigning negative stereotypes or negative generalizations towards an identifiable group. When an uncivil comment was identified coders specified the type of incivility. Statements that were not uncivil were considered civil. Substitute words for swear words were coded as civil. Also, because humor is the tradition of Imgur, coders presumed a statement's intent towards irony over seriousness and, when in doubt, coded a statement as civil; this assumption may not be appropriate to apply to a website with a more serious tone.

Blanchard's (2007) measurements social community identity were adapted to determine how frequently users express their sense of community identity. Sense of community was captured in one of four expressions about Imgur: liking, comfort, helping others, and importance. Specifically, expressions of liking were reflected in comments about specific features, functions or experiences Imgur affords. Comfort expressions were manifest through sentiments that mentioned Imgur's ability to make users feeling at home. Helping others was reflected in statements that openly requested aid from other users, or offered aid to other users. Other identification statements reflected the importance of Imgur in the user's life.

This study used up-votes in an effort to quantifiably showcasing the number of users who had similar sentiments to those who provided comments on Imgur but didn't take the time to offer a similar sentiment themselves. Using these voting numbers as a device of measurement can garner greater accuracy of a reflection of the people creating and curating the comments; or the community as a whole. It would not be reflective of Imgurians to give a comment with 4 up-votes the same weight as a comment with over 2,000 up-votes. To use the up-votes as a multiplier we would take, for example, a very supportive comment with 30 up-votes, and code it as 30 very supportive comments, and a neutral comment with 60 up-votes was coded as 60 neutral comments. For the sake of examining the use of up-votes as a multiplier in terms of research methods, a separate data set that refrained from using the multiplier was also maintained, and comparison of the results will be detailed hereafter.

In order to determine if civil comments are more supportive than uncivil comments (Hyp 1), an independent sample t-test was run. In all other instances descriptive statistics were used for highlighting the data. To explore the social media platform where users can up-vote another users comments, an independent sample t-test was run to compare the up vote data with the data without the up votes (RQ1). In all other instances inferences are made regarding differences between the up vote data and the data without the up votes. Prior to conducting the content analysis two coders were trained and a pilot test was conducted. To establish intercoder reliability, two coders examined 10 percent of the comments (i.e., 70 comments) resulting in an average Cohen's Kappa of .95, with the lowest item being .86.



Results

The first research question explored the level of support users provide others through their comments. Using a five-point scale, with very supportive comments being a 5, user comments analyzed leaned toward being more supportive than unsupportive. However, it should be noted that Imgur may not be as supportive as the site suggests. Without the up-vote multiplier, the data revealed Imgur users are somewhat supportive of other users ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .99$); however, when the multiplier is taken into account these users were considered even more supportive online ($M=3.68$, $SD=.88$). An independent sample t-test revealed a significant differences between the mean level of supportiveness with and without the use of the up-vote multiplier $t(702.33) = 6.61$, $p < .001$; however, when the multiplier was taken into account the data showed users were even more supportive of other users.

When exploring the civility of user comments (RQ2), the results show the majority (84.6% with the multiplier; 81.9% without the multiplier) of user comments are civil. Of the percentage of comments that were uncivil (16.5% with the multiplier; 18.1% without the multiplier), foul language (8.8% with the up votes; 9.8% without the up votes) and vulgarity (4.2% with the up votes; 4.4% without the up votes) were the most common expressions. Table 1 showcases other ways users expressed themselves in an uncivil manner.

Hypothesis one explored whether or not there was a difference in the level of support found in civil and uncivil comments. Not surprisingly, an independent t-test with multiplier/up vote data revealed civil comments were more emotionally supportive ($M=3.71$, $SD = .85$) than uncivil comments ($M=3.56$, $SD=1.01$), $t(44,682.19) = 25.56$, $p = .001$. Quite different from the multiplier results, an independent sample t-test did not show a significant difference in the level of support within civil and uncivil comments. In this instance, civil comments appeared to be more supportive ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .97$) and uncivil comments leaned towards being less supportive ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.12$), but this difference was not statically significant, $t(146.87) = .95$, $p > .05$. Essentially, only with the multiplier, could one find that an uncivil comment was also likely to be unsupportive; suggesting that hypothesis one is only partially supported.

Research question three examined the frequency of Imgur users who expressed a sense of community identify. Of the sample, only 5.7% (5.2% without the multiplier) of the comments showcased such a comradery or identification. Of those that expressed a sense of community, the majority reflected on their comfort with this medium (3.9% with the multiplier; 2.7% without the multiplier). Table 1 provides a more detailed look at these sentiments.

The fourth research question explored the impact up votes have as a multiplier. Differences and comparisons of the multiplier are provided in Table 1 and in the results of research question 1-3 and hypothesis 1.

Table 1

The Degree of Civility and Sense of Community Expressed in Imgur User Comments
Imgur User Comments



User Comments

Without Up Votes

User Comments

With Up Votes

Percent (Raw Number)

Percent (Raw Number)

Uncivil Comments

18.1% (127/700)

16.5% (37,409/228,131)

Negative Stereotypes

1% (7)

2,960 or 1.3%

Disparaging

4, or 0.6%

270 or 0.1%

Racist

10, or 1.4%

2,669 or 1.2%

Epithets or Ethnic Slurs

2 or 0.3%

202 or 0.1%

Xenophobic

12 or 1.7%

0 or 0%



Foul Language

70 or 9.8%

19,997 or 8.8%

Vulgarity

31 4.4%

9,593 or 4.2%

Threats

8 1.1%

2,301 or 1%

Attacks

18 2.5%

2,629 or 1.2%

Community Identity

37 5.2%

13,012 or 5.7%

Important

6, 0.8%

2,424 or 1.1%

Comfort

19, or 2.7%

8,919 or 3.9%

Helping

12, Or 1.7%

2,614 or 1.1%

Liking

3, or 0.4%

225 or 0.1%



Discussion and Conclusions

Our results showed that, overall, Imgur comments tended to be somewhat supportive of other users, and that user comments tended to be civil in nature. The correlation between supportiveness and civility was only significant when up-votes were used as a multiplier, and expressions of sense of community identity did exist, though in relatively small numbers.

We were also able to find insights into the users of Imgur when we compared the results of the data which used the up-vote multiplier with the data that did not. For example, the differences in data gives insights on what sort of comments Imgurians are more likely to up-vote. They are significantly more likely to up-vote comments that are supportive to each other. Imgur users are also significantly less likely to up-vote comments that are disparaging of other groups, or that include attacking language. Furthermore, Imgur users are significantly less likely to up-vote comments indicating a liking of Imgur.

The difference in results with the multiplier and without the multiplier also indicate a difference between commenters and lurkers. Commenters are the ones participating in writing their thoughts on the screen for all to see. Lurkers are those who don't comment, just observe, and perhaps up-vote or down-vote as they feel inclined. While the reality of what sort of user a person is more of a spectrum than a discrete, lurker-or-commenter, term - this data can still show that those who lean towards the lurker side of the spectrum are more supportive of other users, but are less appreciative of comments about liking Imgur, than those who lean towards the side of commenter. Also those who lean towards the lurker side are more adverse to comments which are attacking, or disparaging of other groups, than those who lean towards the commenter side. Those who lean towards the side of lurker are also more likely to display a relationship between supportiveness and civility than those who lean towards the side of commenter. Overall, one could say that in the world of Imgur, lurkers, the quieter ones, are nicer than commenters. Further studies could be done to find what drives these differences in commenters and lurkers. What is inhibiting commenting behavior in the lurkers? Is it time constraints? shyness? or simply being more inclined to think longer before speaking? Are the lurkers always the ones driving up levels on niceness on social media?

Further studies could also be done on how specific rules of social media sites effect the outcome of supportiveness and civility rather than overall presence of rules, and their enforcement. For example, the results of this study showed most of the incivility displayed by Imgur users came in the form of foul language; which perhaps was predictable since use of swear words is not expressly forbidden in the website's list of rules. Are there other specific rules, or lack thereof, that effect specific aspects of supportiveness and civility? We also hope future research will apply the use of up-votes as a multiplier as we did here to continue to find out more about the lurkers of social media, and the whole communities, rather than just the loud ones.



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