Abstract

Online shaming is a phenomenon where citizens engage in social policing by shaming transgressions via the Internet. It has been argued that the proliferation of new communication networks and digital recording devices have the potential to bring about a new paradigm for ensuring conformity to social norms through the self-regulation of society. Incorporating literature from criminology, law, psychology, sociology, and surveillance studies, this two-part exploratory empirical study conducted in Singapore aims to give an account of why people engage in online shaming (Study 1), and attempts to assess how the authorities view this emerging socio-technological phenomenon. We also examine who is likely to be deterred and who is likely to contribute content to online shaming websites in relation to personality traits, adherence to Asian values and social responsibility (Study 2). The in-depth interviews reveal that people engage in online shaming mainly to raise awareness about the lack of civic-mindedness in society. They also show that the authorities remain optimistic but cautious about the use peer-surveillance to ensure conformity to norms and laws. A survey of 321 Singaporeans suggest that people who are more likely to be deterred by the threat of online shaming are those who are more socially responsible, more agreeable, more neurotic and adhere more strongly to Asian values. Furthermore, our findings suggest that individuals who are more likely to contribute to online shaming websites tend to be more socially responsible and open to new experiences. The theoretical, technological and policy implications of the findings are discussed.

Introduction

The present study examines the phenomenon of showcasing social transgressions on websites. Across the globe, the impact of online shaming websites has been palpable (Saranow 2007), often targeting socially undesirable behaviours such as unsafe driving and bad parking and signalling a revival of shame as a form of social control. The Internet’s power to shame first caught the attention of the press in 2005, when a seemingly minor social transgression, namely a South Korean woman refusing to clean up after her dog on a public train, caused a furor over the Internet (Krim 2005). Upset by her lack of social consciousness,
other train commuters took pictures of the incident using camera-enabled mobile phones and posted them up on a popular blog. Within days, the woman’s personal particulars were disseminated widely over the Internet as netizens from around the world criticized her actions (Krim 2005). Finally, the mainstream media in South Korea and even the United States reported this event as news, discussing its surveillance and privacy implications.

The Internet presents itself as a new avenue for norm enforcement: the public is now empowered to act upon such deeds by publishing them online. This might bring about a change in terms of how new technologies can be used for societal self-regulation via the deterrence of deviant behaviours. However, shame as a deterrent affects people in different cultures to varying extents (Massaro 1991). Furthermore, people of different personalities also respond to shame differently (Lewis 1971).

Online shaming arises from peer surveillance and relies on the ease and widespread use of new Internet applications (open forums, online news portals, blogs) and communication devices with recording capabilities (camera/video-enabled mobile phones, digital recording devices). Some pundits have argued that these technologies and applications “create an opportunity for the public to snoop on the snoops and watch the watchers” suggesting the empowering potential of such technologically enabled practices (Rheingold 2004).

Our study explores the motivations of online shaming contributors as well as Singapore government’s view on online shaming using in-depth interviews. Furthermore, we aim to sketch the psycho-social profiles of people who would be deterred by online shaming and people who would participate in it by contributing content online. Singapore, with its high broadband Internet and mobile phone penetration rates, as well as its reputation as “the fine city” (Aglionby 2002), provides a suitable setting to study online shaming. In fact, a number of local blogs and websites have sprung up since 2005, spotlighting incidents of inconsiderate behaviour in public spaces and reinvigorating public debates about topics of citizen empowerment, self-regulation of society, civility, privacy, and so forth.

**Literature Review**

**Why do people engage in online shaming?**

The rise of the phenomenon of online shaming may be regarded as a novel spin-off from the idea of surveillance as a form of social control. Closed-circuit television (CCTV) in public places today is an example of surveillance employed to deter deviant behaviours. Although doubts have been cast on the effects of CCTV on crime reduction, some governments remain positive about using them to deal with antisocial or undesirable behaviours1(Williams and Johnstone 2000). Not surprisingly, CCTV has been compared to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (Williams and Johnstone 2000), a conceptualization of a prison with a central tower of watchers and an outer peripheral ring consisting of those being watched – “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” is induced in the inmate (Foucault 1977).

In recent times, new technologies have enabled the opposite – a form of surveillance where the practice of surveillance is inversed. Mann (2004) proposed the concept of sousveillance – French for ‘to watch from below’ – as the inverse of surveillance. It can be conducted across hierarchies or on a person-to-person level (Mann 2004). An example of the former scenario is where a member of the public takes a video recording of police transgression, such as in the 1991 Rodney King incident. Sousveillance is thus more transparent and is conducted in a “peer-to-peer” manner (Mann, Fung and Lo 2006). This new conceptualization of surveillance is one that is concordant with the idea of peer surveillance in our study.

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1 Anti-social or undesirable behaviours include littering, urinating in public, traffic violations; fighting; obstruction; drunkenness; evading parking meters, bad parking, etc.
An example of peer surveillance is the idea of a neighbourhood watch, a crime prevention strategy involving greater levels of citizen participation, aimed at reducing crime by asking residents to report suspicious activities in their neighbourhood to the police. Such schemes can either be state- or self-initiated and there is evidence to show that they can be effective in reducing crime (Bennett, Holloway and Farrington 2006). Furthermore, neighbourhood watching may act as an alternative form of policing and control in communities where regular law enforcement forces are either not present or denied access (Zurawski 2005).

The recent proliferation of different forms of “lateral surveillance” or peer monitoring comes not only as a consequence of the development of new digital technologies, but also as a response to the fears associated with living in the risk society (Andrejevic 2005). The self-initiated watch groups are in some ways similar to those who contribute online shaming content to websites – they do so voluntarily, spending their own time and resources. However, unlike the neighbourhood watchers whose aim is risk reduction and maximization of security, individuals who engage in online shaming of fellow citizens are more concerned with the (re)enforcement of social norms and promotion of civility within their societies.

In the literature, the deterrence effect of shaming was found to be dependent on several conditions, including: whether shaming was reintegrative or stigmatising (Braithwaite 2001); the sense of social responsibility of offenders (Tittle and Logan 1973); and the personality traits of emotionality and constraint (Agnew, Brezina, Wright and Cullen 2002).

Arguably, people who contribute to online shaming websites are more socially responsible, but can also be regarded as whistle-blowers, reporting peers who violate social and other norms. Whistle blowing is also regarded as being prosocial in nature, although whistle-blowers might have egoistic goals in mind besides altruistic ones (Dozier and Miceli 1985). Hence, it is important to determine why individuals engage in such online shaming practices and how those efforts are viewed by the institutions of the state. It is also important to determine the perceived impact of online shaming on society and assess whether those engaged in it believe that it represents an effective way for improved enforcement of social norms and laws. To this purpose, we decided to adopt a qualitative approach in order to study the motivations of people who sustain the phenomenon of online shaming and assess the responses from the law enforcement agencies (Study 1). We also aim to provide a quantitative, survey-based evaluation of the likelihood of contribution and deterrence by the citizens, examining social, cultural and personality factors at the individual level (Study 2). The proposed conceptual model for both studies is presented in Figure 1 (below). Furthermore, to guide our research in Study 1 we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the motivations of people who contribute to online shaming websites and what do they see as the impact of their efforts?

RQ2: What are the views of the law enforcement officials on online shaming and its potential to promote a self-regulated society?
Who are the people likely to be deterred by online shaming?

**Shame as deterrence.**
Dissatisfaction with existing methods of punishment has pushed the legal community towards exploring alternative punishments and reviving shame as a deterrent (Massaro 1991). Shaming is defined as “the process by which citizens publicly and self-consciously draw attention to the bad dispositions or actions of an offender, as a way of punishing him for having those dispositions or engaging in those actions” (Kahan and Posner 1999). It is also regarded as a more cost-effective punishment (Garvey 1998). The deterrence effects of shaming are twofold; ‘specific deterrence’ deters the offender from recommitting an offence while ‘general deterrence’ deters others in the same community (Schwarcz 2003). Grasmick and Bursik (1990) regard social disapproval as an important factor in inhibiting behaviours within the deterrence perspective. In the context of this study, we choose to focus on the general deterrence effect of online shaming as we are interested in examining the impact of online shaming posts on the general community, less so on the offender. Thus, we are particularly interested in exploring the effectiveness of shaming as a deterrent vis-à-vis an individual’s characteristics, and we propose the following hypothesis:

\[ H_1: \text{Individuals who are more socially responsible are more likely to be deterred by online shaming.} \]

The experience of shame also has cultural implications. Massaro’s (1997) study of shaming cultures observed that shaming sanctions are effective in communities that are relatively close-knitted and have shared expectations of morality and behaviour. These conditions are found amongst Japanese, Eskimo tribes and Tobriand islanders but not in America (Massaro 1991). Bedford and Hwang (2003) posit that the mechanism of social control in a Confucian society should be shame rather than guilt, unlike in the West where guilt functions as a form of social control.

Asian values, often associated with Confucianism, focus on the respect for harmony and consensus rather than conflict (Cleary 1991; Martin and Nakayama 2004). The values also encourage obedience and conformity, stating that members should adapt to values in the social system (Cleary 1991; Martin and Nakayama 2004). The notion of shame is a “salient emotion in Confucian society” and avoidance of it is an “overriding concern” (Ho, Fu and Ng 2004, 77). Confucianism places a heavy importance on shame through its emphasis on social norms (Chu 1972) and in Confucian societies, individual identity is tied closely to the identity of the group to which a person belongs. Such relational identity is “conducive to
shame as a method of social control” (Bedford and Hwang 2003, 133). China, Hong Kong and Singapore are characterized as having collectivistic cultures influenced by Confucianism (Chuang 2003). Moreover, Singapore has taken active steps to promote its version of Asian values as a dominant socio-political paradigm, emphasising order in society, obedience and social harmony. Considering the above literature on shame and cultural values, we hypothesize the following:

**H2**: Individuals who adhere more closely to Asian cultural values will be more deterred by online shaming.

**The psychology of shame.**
The capacity to feel shame is possessed by all, but there are “individual differences in the degree to which people experience shame or guilt across a range of situations” (Lewis 1971), providing grounds for the development of the psychological concept of shame proneness. Psychologists regard shame as an “unconscious, primitive and initially physiological response to rejection and threat of casting out and social isolation” (Martens 2005, 400). It is also perceived to originate from an individual’s own negative self-assessment, independent of public disapproval (Martens 2005).

The relationship between personality and shame-proneness has recently been explored by a handful of researchers using the NEO Personality Inventory to assess personality dimensions according to the Five-Factor Model (Abe 2004; Einstein and Lanning 1998). The dimensions are commonly known as the “The Big Five”: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. According to Einstein and Lanning (1998, 560), shame may be better understood if “anchored within the five-factor space”.

The likelihood to feel shame had been found to correlate positively with neuroticism (Abe 2004; Einstein and Lanning 1998) and agreeableness (Einstein and Lanning 1998). It was also correlated negatively with openness (Einstein and Lanning 1998) and extraversion (Abe 2004). As such, certain personality traits have been found to correlate with one’s likelihood to feel shame.

Besides personality traits, higher levels of social anxiety also appear to be exhibited by shame-prone individuals (Ang and Khoo 2004; Gilbert and Miles 2000; Harder, Cutler and Rockart 1992; Lutwak and Ferrari 1997; Thompson, Altmann and Davidson 2004). Agnew, Wright and Cullen’s (2002) study of general strain theory found that individuals with personalities high in emotionality and low in constraint were less likely to be deterred by punishments. According to Scheff (1988), it is not that social control is dependent on individual personalities, but that individuals have differing susceptibilities to shame. Given these relationships between personality traits and shame as a form of deterrence, and applying them to the context of online shaming, we propose the following research questions:

**RQ3**: Is there a relationship between an individual’s personality traits and the likelihood to be deterred by online shaming?

**RQ4**: Is there a relationship between an individual’s personality traits and how closely an individual adheres to Asian values?

**Who is likely to contribute to online shaming websites?**
The act of contributing materials to online shaming websites can be regarded as an act of whistle blowing on individuals who behave in ways contrary to social norms. Dozier and Miceli (1985) argue that whistle blowing is more prosocial than altruistic in nature, as whistle-blowers might have egoistic goals in mind. Culture and nationality may also affect one’s view on whether whistle blowing is ethical (Hassink, de Vries, and Bollen 2007). For example, collectivistic Asian countries like Japan and Korea view whistle blowing more positively, perceiving it as contributing to the collective good. Thus, we hypothesize that:
**H3:** Individuals who adhere more closely to Asian cultural values are more likely to be socially responsible.

Jos, Tompkins and Hays (1989) highlighted that social responsibility was positively related to whistle blowing as people with high social responsibility believed in working towards group goals. Social responsibility is defined as the propensity of people to help without expectations of benefitting as it is regarded as “the right thing to do” (Midlarsky, Jones and Corley 2005, 910) and a personal duty (Bierhoff, Klein and Kramp 1991).

Social responsibility was found to be influenced by antecedents such as social class, culture and values, amongst other antecedents (Berkowitz and Lutterman 1968). Regarding online shaming as a form of whistle blowing, we draw upon the links between social responsibility and whistle blowing and propose the following hypothesis:

**H4:** People who have a stronger sense of social responsibility are more likely to contribute to online shaming websites.

Studies profiling individuals who are members of community crime prevention groups suggest that their profiles are very similar to individuals who participate in any type of voluntary activity (Rosenbaum 1987; Skogan 1988). Agreeableness is suggested to be the core dispositional trait contributing to prosocial behaviour (Graziano and Eisenberg 1997). However, besides this study there is little research focusing on the relationship between personality traits and social responsibility. The phenomenon of online shaming involves a self-sustaining community of individuals who contribute content to such websites. As such, it is also important to consider the traits of people who are likely to contribute. We would thus like to examine the following research questions:

**RQ5:** Is there a relationship between an individual’s personality traits and how socially responsible one is?

**RQ6:** Is there a relationship between an individual’s personality traits and the likelihood of contributing to an online shaming website?

Besides looking at personality, we are also interested in studying how social factors are related to one’s likelihood of contributing to online shaming:

**RQ7:** Is there a relationship between how closely an individual adheres to Asian cultural values and the likelihood of contributing to an online shaming website?

*The Singapore context.*

The Guardian newspaper, in a special report on crime, dubbed Singapore as having “developed such a reputation over the past 30 years for penalising the smallest offences that it is known to many tourists as ‘Singapore: the fine city’ (Aglionby 2002). Besides the formal system of punishments, there is a culture of shunning any disruption to the social order in Singapore (Clammer 1997). There exist “networks of informal social control” and the belief that one’s actions will always be watched by someone somewhere (Clammer 1997, 145). Singapore has been characterized by scholars as a Confucian society guided by Asian Values (Hill 2000). Such ethics include a culture of being ‘good citizens’ and watching out for each other (Clammer 1997). These ethics are propagated through the inclusion of Confucian curriculum into the moral education program (Hill 2000).
The use of surveillance is not uncommon in Singapore. CCTVs have been used to address traffic problems, ensure cleanliness and to maintain security in hotels. With regards to a less formal type of surveillance, several online shaming websites, most of which are run by disgruntled citizens, have documented many instances of inconsiderate behaviour. In addition, some large media organizations have set up websites encouraging the readers to participate, discuss issues and contribute content. For example, while the online news portal STOMP\(^2\) was not set up with the purpose of online shaming in mind, it has nevertheless provided a platform for many Singaporeans who are eager to play social police. A section of STOMP, Singapore Seen, is one of the most active sites where online shaming posts can be found.

**Study 1: In-depth interviews**

**Method**

For the purpose of this study, we define online shaming as a form of peer surveillance manifested via user posting of photos, videos and text on websites, blogs, forums and portals capturing inconsiderate, uncivil and illegal behaviours of citizens with the purpose of exposing and shaming such behaviours. In order to provide an exploratory account of this phenomenon in Singapore, we opted to use in-depth interviews as they are capable of eliciting in-depth, accurate and specific answers on sensitive topics (Wimmer and Dominick 2003) and are useful for examining the reasons and motivations of respondents. The high flexibility of the semi-structured questioning route makes this method particularly suitable for exploratory studies such as this one.

**Participants**

In-depth interviews were conducted with two groups of people: the officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the individuals who engaged in online shaming in Singapore.

A group interview was conducted with four senior officials from MHA to ascertain the authority’s stand on the issue. The officials interviewed were in charge of policy development and strategic planning, except for a senior police official who was in charge of technology crime investigation.

Blog owners or individuals who regularly post materials about people who behaved inconsiderately were approached as potential interviewees. These blogs and websites were sourced through Internet search engines and via links from blogs of a similar nature. These blogs typically feature pictures, videos or blurs of inconsiderate behaviours. Several blogs concentrated on issues such as littering, misbehaviour on public transport, parking and driving. A request for a face-to-face interview was made through the contact details available on their websites (email); they were also informed about a monetary incentive.

Out of the ten interviewees contacted, four agreed to be interviewed face-to-face and one obliged to an email correspondence, after turning down other options such as a telephone interview. The remaining contacts did not reply despite three follow-up email requests. All of our interviewees were males in their 30s and 40s who owned either a blog or a YouTube channel solely devoted to shaming inconsiderate behaviours of fellow Singaporeans\(^3\). All interviewees updated and posted materials regularly, usually weekly.

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Procedure
Interviews with individuals who engaged in online shaming were held in a quiet, public area at locations convenient for the interviewees. Each interview lasted about 1 hr 30 mins, and was recorded on two digital audio recorders. Interviews with the MHA officials were conducted at the MHA headquarters.

At the start of the interview, interviewees were presented with a consent form informing them about what the study entailed. It was also made known that this study was supported by a research grant from MHA. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked and given a $40 SGD incentive.

Results
All the interview data was transcribed from the digital recordings by the authors of the study. The transcripts were then analysed in three distinct steps: creating notes and memos, identifying the main themes and subthemes, and grouping of relevant quotations with regards the identified themes and subthemes.

Insights from the individuals who engaged in online shaming.
In general, our interviewees were concerned about a perceived lack of civic mindedness among Singaporeans. They saw their online efforts as a platform for highlighting the existence of bad behaviours, with the hope that it would make their readers more aware of the problems and avoid behaving in the same manner.

Most interviewees indicated that they were more interested in highlighting the bad behaviour than shaming the person who committed it. Some interviewees saw no point in shaming the offender. Respondent A and E wanted to let the public know that they were being watched so that they would refrain from such bad habits. As Respondent A put it:

To let the people viewing this blog...know that they are being watched. So think twice before you act in the same way and don’t (be) inconsiderate to others.

Some interviewees were quick to make a distinction between shaming the offender and merely highlighting bad behaviour. As Respondent B said:

I’m not shaming the person, I’m shaming the behaviour. Shame is a strong word, maybe I’m just bringing awareness.

Respondent A felt that it was futile to shame the offenders as these people already knew that they should not be engaging in such anti-social behaviours. He suggested that these offenders would simply avoid visiting such blogs. Respondent C reported that his intention was to encourage good behaviour by highlighting the bad. He did not use harsh language on his website to criticize the offenders, arguing that:

[The] purpose is not to offend these drivers, it’s to encourage proper parking... if they are offended, then all the more they will continue to park improperly.

At the same time, one of the interviewees wanted to capture some form of identification when documenting the offence so the offender could still be identified (Respondent C):

So that someone out there may know the owner of this car and go and tell others, ‘Eh this fellow park(s) like this one.

Interestingly, one of the bloggers (Respondent A) acknowledged that he was taking active steps to cover or blur offenders’ eyes and faces, particularly when it came to posting pictures of young, underage
individuals, in line with the practice of the mainstream media in Singapore. Still, both Respondents A and D recounted incidents where the offenders continued with their behaviour despite knowing that they were being filmed. On the contrary, they said that the offenders may even feel proud that their acts were being shown online.

The interviewees turned to the Internet as a medium for sharing their experiences as they felt frustrated by the bad behaviours they encountered. Some also felt that they have been stonewalled by the relevant authority and thus turned to the Internet to raise awareness of the problems that they faced. The interviewees expressed that the Internet was a popular medium for the endeavors as they had more control over the content published. In fact, Respondent A set up his own blog after being frustrated that his contributions to a popular forum were being ignored or accepted only selectively. Respondents A and C also expressed doubts that the mainstream media such as the newspapers would publish their complaints, particularly in the case of issue that could be perceived to be religiously or racially sensitive.

**Impact of online shaming**

Although some interviewees were unsure about the effectiveness of online shaming in resolving problems directly, they still felt that their efforts were a starting point. Respondent D felt that the impact of his videos have been minimal as his problem was still unsolved, but at least he was “trying to take steps that can help” unlike others who pretend that the problem does not exist. Respondents C and E expressed their doubts over the effectiveness of online shaming as they noted that not many people come across these blogs. When asked to evaluate the impact of his blog on reducing the frequency of inconsiderate behaviours in Singapore, Respondent A commented:

> I don’t really measure, there’s no measurement on whether this has been achieved or not. But if you say that well, at least you all know that such thing exists, such blog exists, there are some people who did surf upon it and then I think the message did get across slowly. But for people who are doing it, they will avoid seeing it, you get what I mean?

Similarly, Respondent B felt that the problem of inconsiderate behaviour on public transport will never be solved for good, but he held a glimmer of hope that there are young readers of his blog who gradually grow up to be more responsible. However, he maintained that his blog did not aim to educate. He had set up the blog as a platform to air his grouses about things that “grinds his gears”. Respondent D was sceptical of community-based efforts as “a lot of Singaporeans live for themselves”. He was of the opinion that other Singaporeans would see civic-minded acts as being “crazy”.

Both Respondents A and D felt the government should be playing a bigger role than citizens when it comes to controlling such problems. They suggested more police patrols and stricter punishment as possible solutions. However, Respondent C was of the opinion that online shaming is a more effective method of resolving the problem as “there’s more of us than all those parking wardens combined”. He also saw the reduced number of contributions to his websites as a sign that the situation had improved.

To some extent, all our interviewees saw their online efforts as an attempt to improve the quality of life by raising awareness about inconsiderate behaviour. In contrast, Respondent B saw his efforts mostly as a hobby. He was in fact rather resentful towards the fact that his blog had been portrayed as playing “ethical police” in a newspaper report, although he appreciated the attention received from the mainstream media. Other interviewees felt encouraged that people were contributing content to their blogs and would continue with their efforts for as long as they can.

**Insights from the interviews with officials from the MHA.**

One of the potential effects of online shaming is the self-regulation of society. Against that backdrop, we sought to seek out the opinions of the MHA.
While the Ministry does not take any stand on the phenomenon, they see it as an area that is “interesting to explore” as it ties in new uses of technology that could possibly engage the community in its policing efforts to allow for “greater involvement of the community in our operations”. The role that the community can play is to “serve as the eyes, the ears and the hands on the ground”, complementing the role of the Ministry. In the words of one of the officials:

I think deterrence can come in many, many forms, and how effective the deterrence is, it actually depends on what sort of crime, what sort of tools you have at hand.

The officials suggested that online shaming could be viewed as ‘soft power’, with the ‘hard power’ being laws and penalties. If deterrence can be achieved through soft power, then hard power need not be exercised as often.

However, our interviewees also voiced their concerns about the potential pitfalls of online shaming. They pointed out the need to tread carefully as there is neither a system of checks and balances nor a guarantee of due process that the current system of laws provides. Online shaming “can potentially bypass all those processes”. It might end up as personal attacks on individuals and lose its effectiveness to deter:

So a person might not be convicted in court, he might not have been represented right, but somebody may have taken his picture and decided oh let’s just put it online, and show everybody that this person is doing something bad, but it may be taken out of context and so on and so forth.

The effectiveness of online shaming also depends on the behaviour at which it is targeted. One interviewee cited the common offence of jaywalking – if thousands of pictures of jaywalkers were put online, people would be numb to it and the purpose of online shaming would not be served. Looking at the bigger picture, if people who are unfamiliar with Singapore culture get caught on such websites unwittingly, the practice of online shaming would come across as ungracious and unforgiving. The reliability of materials online was also called into question as “anyone could have manipulated any information”. However, if the person who posted the online material is willing to testify in the courts of the law, such material would be accepted accordingly as evidence.

The officials also voiced their concerns that due to the permanent nature of digital information, it is likely that materials published online would “circulate for ages”. Online shaming might mean that the offenders will not get any reprieve even if they have amended their ways, which is contrary to the spirit of forgiving offenders and giving them a second chance:

So let’s say if you are going to shame this person for doing something, are you going to penalize him for his whole life?

In conclusion, while the Ministry is interested in the potential of new media, they also want to tread cautiously as there are potential pitfalls with online shaming that need to be further addressed. As online shaming often focused on the negative aspects, our interviewees also emphasised that there should also be avenues that reinforce positive behaviours instead of focusing on the negative behaviours only. Furthermore, one of the recurring themes in the discussions was the idea of online shaming as community-based initiative, rather than individual quest for civility and justice.
Study 2: Survey

Method
A survey was conducted to identify the characteristics of people who are likely to be deterred by online shaming and those who are likely to contribute to such sites. It was conducted through the online platform Survey Monkey over two weeks. A total of 359 participants completed the study. The survey was conducted in English and consisted of 106 items in total.

Participants
Two groups of participants were included in the survey. The first group consisted of 149 undergraduates from a large public university in Singapore. Participation was voluntary and course credits were given for completing the survey. The second group consisted of Singaporeans who had access to the Internet. After data cleaning, 321 responses were included in the final analysis.

Procedure
The online survey was made accessible to respondents from 4 to 17 February 2008. Undergraduates who participated in the survey were given the web link through e-mail. For the second group, web links were disseminated over the Internet via postings on local online forums with high viewer traffic and on two online shaming websites with the help of our in-depth interview respondents.

Measures
The online questionnaire developed consisted of the adapted Social Responsibility Scale, Asian Values Scale and Big Five Inventory. The authors constructed a behavioural intention scale to measure the deterrence effect of online shaming and likelihood of contribution to online shaming. Basic demographic information together with past contributions to online shaming was also recorded.

Deterrence and Participation (DDV).
In order to measure the likelihood of deterrence by online shaming, 10 items of self-reporting measures of future intentions were created. Although self-reporting measures are not actual measures of intention, Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) concept of behavioural intention has been used to measure future intention in many studies. In previous deterrence research, scenarios have been used to assess the propensity to commit crimes as measures of deterrence (Nagin and Paternoster 1993; Tibbetts 1997). In our study, the deterrence effect of online shaming is operationalised as the likelihood of committing an inconsiderate act; the perceived risks and certainty of being caught on an online shaming website and the severity of the consequences if one’s significant others found out. Items were asked in response to a scenario-based example. The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for the deterrence scale was .74.

Likelihood of contributing to online shaming website.
The likelihood of contribution to online shaming websites was measured by nine items that were created by the authors. Items in this scale measured participant’s willingness to contribute, ability to contribute and their attitudes towards contributing to online shaming websites. Whether reporting behaviour was the right thing to do, and whether it was the responsibility of the individual, were important determinants that were found in past studies on whistle-blowers, and these two factors were also included in the scale as “I feel that people who contribute to online shaming websites are doing the right thing” and “I take it upon myself to report bad behaviour online”. The Cronbach’s $\alpha$ was .69.

Asian Values Scale.
Items measuring the degree of adherence to Asian cultural values and beliefs were adapted from the Asian Values Scale-Revised (AVS-R) by Kim and Hong (2004). The AVS-R originally consisted of 25 items.

4 http://www.surveymonkey.com
measuring dimensions of values associated mainly with East Asian, Confucian-influenced cultures, that include “collectivism, conformity to norms, deference to authority figures, emotional restraint, filial piety, hierarchical family structure and humility” (Kim and Hong 2004, 15) using a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). 10 items measuring hierarchical family structure and humility were removed as they were less relevant to our study. Following the pretest, one item (“Children should not place their parents in retirement homes”) was also removed to achieve a higher final reliability of .67. The 14 items were averaged to obtain the Asian Values score, a higher score indicating closer adherence to Asian values.

Social Responsibility Scale.
A 20-item Social Responsibility Scale was used to measure social responsibility on a five point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) in this study. The 22-item Social Responsibility Scale (Berkowitz and Daniels 1964), adapted from Harris’s (1957) Social Attitudes Scale, was developed to study children who have a reputation of responsibility among their peers. The 22 items were found to have a correlation of .45 or higher with the scale as a whole (Berkowitz and Daniels 1964). Following the pretest, two items (“I have been in trouble with the law or police” and “Our country would be a lot better off if we didn't have elections and people didn't have to vote”) were removed to achieve a higher inter-item reliability of .69.

Big Five Inventory.
A 44-item Big Five Inventory (John and Srivastava 1999) was used to measure personality on a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). This scale “assesses the broad concepts of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to experience” (John and Srivastava 1999, 45). According to Costa and Widiger (2001), Extraversion is a measure of one’s “quantity and intensity of interpersonal interactions, activity level and need for stimulation” (5). An agreeable person would tend to be “soft hearted, good-natured, trusting, helpful and forgiving” (6). Conscientiousness measures a person’s degree of organization, effort and motivation in achieving desired goals and Neuroticism is defined as the chronic level of emotional instability. Individuals high in this respect tend to be susceptible to psychological stress and find it difficult to cope. Lastly, an individual high on Openness would be curious, actively seek and appreciate novel experiences. The items were averaged within each domain to get a score for each personality trait. The final reliabilities in our study were as follow: Extraversion (.85), Agreeableness (.70), Conscientiousness (.78), Neuroticism (.80) and Openness to experience (.68).

Results
The survey sample comprised of Singaporeans or Permanent Residents aged 18 and above (M = 22.4, SD = 4.81) of which 37.1% are male and 62.9% female (M = 1.63, SD = .48). The racial composition for the sample for Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others was 84.4%, 8.1%, 3.1% and 4.4% respectively. The respondents were mostly highly educated, 93.4% of which have post secondary education and above. Only 1.6% of respondents reported running an online shaming website. 95.3% have never contributed and 82.9% have never left comments on online shaming websites before.

Four sets of hierarchical regression analysis were conducted to evaluate the hypotheses. All sets of regression were controlled for demographic factors and past contribution to online shaming websites. The first block consisted of the following demographic factors: gender, age, race, education and gross monthly household income; the second block consisted of factors for past contribution control variables that include past contribution to online shaming websites (includes commenting and posting entries) and ownership of online shaming websites. The next block of each of the regression analyses consisted of hypothesized predictors as the independent variables.

Likelihood of deterrence by online shaming
In the first regression analysis, the likelihood of deterrence by online shaming was used as the dependent
variable. Social responsibility (H$_1$), adherence to Asian values (H$_2$), and the Big Five personality traits (RQ3) were entered as independent variables in the regression.

The overall regression result $F(7, 305) = 6.67$, $p < .001$, accounted for 12.5% of the variance ($R^2$ change = .13) in predicting likelihood of deterrence by online shaming. Social responsibility, adherence to Asian values, neuroticism and agreeableness had positive and significant effect on the likelihood of deterrence by online shaming. These findings lend support to H$_1$ and H$_2$, indicating that people who are more socially responsible ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$) and adhere more to Asian values ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) are more likely to be deterred. H$_1$ and H$_2$ were confirmed. With regards to RQ3, people who are more agreeable ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$) are more likely to be deterred while the traits of Conscientiousness, Extraversion and Openness were found to be not significant predictors. For the trait of Neuroticism, the prediction was also significant ($\beta = .13$, $p = .05$). Interestingly, gender was also a significant predictor of deterrence, with females being more likely to be deterred by online shaming than males ($\beta = .14$, $p = .05$).

In the second regression analysis, social responsibility was used as the criterion variable. Adherence to Asian values (H$_3$) and the five personality traits were entered as independent variables in the regression (RQ5).

The overall regression result was significant, $F(6, 306) = 14.3$, $p < .001$ and accounted for 19.7% of the variance ($R^2$ change = .20) in predicting social responsibility. Individuals who adhered less closely to Asian values ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$), were more socially responsible, contrary to the hypothesized direction. H$_3$ was not supported. However, findings for RQ5 showed that individuals who were more agreeable were more socially responsible ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$). People who scored higher on Conscientiousness were also more socially responsible ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$). Neuroticism and Openness were not significant predictors of social responsibility.

Thirdly, a multivariate regression analysis was conducted to look at the relationships between personality traits on adherence to Asian values (RQ4). The overall regression result was significant, $F(5, 307) = 4.9$, $p < .001$ and accounted for 6.5% of the variance ($R^2$ change = .07) in predicting social responsibility. People who are more agreeable ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), extraverted ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$), and neurotic ($\beta = .13$, $p < .05$), are more likely to adhere closely to Asian values.

**Likelihood of contribution to online shaming**

In the fourth regression analysis, likelihood of contribution to online shaming was used as the criterion variable. Social responsibility (H$_4$), adherence to Asian Values (RQ7) and the Big Five personality traits (RQ6) were entered as independent variables in the regression.

The overall regression result was significant, $F(7, 305) = 2.13$, $p < .05$ and accounted for 3.7% of the variance ($R^2$ change = .04) in predicting likelihood of contribution to online shaming. Only Openness and Social responsibility had a positive and significant relationship with the likelihood of contribution. The findings suggested that individuals who are more open ($\beta = .15$, $p < .01$) and individuals who are more socially responsible were more likely to contribute to online shaming ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$). Path analysis diagrams (Figures 2a and 2b) were drawn to illustrate the relationship between variables in our survey. The posited causal ordering in the models can be explained conceptually as we believe that personality traits are relatively stable (Hampson and Goldberg 2006; Rantanen, Metsäpelto, Feldt, Pulkkinen and Kokko 2007; Soldz and Vaillant 1999).
Discussion

The purpose of this study is to present an exploratory account examining the phenomenon of online shaming, a topic that has yet to receive much attention despite its important implications for understanding peer surveillance. We found that people engaged in online shaming mainly to raise awareness about the lack of civic-mindedness with an aim of improving the quality of life in their society. Perhaps not surprisingly, we also find that people with a higher sense of social responsibility are more likely to both contribute and be deterred by online shaming.

Why do people contribute?
The findings from the interviews with the online shaming contributors suggest that their contributions did not arise purely out of altruistic purposes. Most of the interviewees were motivated to start
shaming blog due to negative personal experiences and some were hoping to use the public reactions to the posts as support to pressure third-parties into taking action against the offenders. The interviewees seemed to possess a high sense of social responsibility. They talked about taking it upon themselves to highlight the bad behaviour and discourage others from offending, sometimes even at the expense of being labelled as “busybodies”. They saw their efforts as a contribution to the community. At the same time, most interviewees were modest about the impact of their efforts and felt that society should still be regulated by the authorities. Only one interviewee expressed faith in the concept of a self-policing community as being possibly better and more effective. Finally, most of our interviewees had received media attention through their blogs and this might have motivated them to continue their efforts.

It was also interesting to find out that most of the individuals who engaged in online shaming did not consider it to be shaming. This finding might have revealed genuine feelings on the nature of the shame or it might have arisen from the interviewees wanting to maintain a socially desirable appearance, not wanting to appear overly critical of the offenders. The focus of the blog posts were directed at the behaviour and less so at the person. This could be an example of reintegrative shaming at work Braithwaite (1993). To avoid ostracising the offender and driving him to recommit the offence out of spite, the focus is detracted from the person and instead drawn to the act.

Who are the people likely to contribute to online shaming?
Our survey study suggests that the effectiveness of online shaming depends on individual attitudes, personality traits and cultural values. People who are more likely to be deterred by the threat of online shaming are more socially responsible, agreeable, likely to be more neurotic and adhere more strongly to Asian values. Our findings revealed that individuals who are more likely to contribute to shaming on the Internet tend to be more socially responsible and open to new experiences.

Literature indicates that the characteristics of individuals who join community crime prevention efforts are comparable to those who engage in other voluntary activities (Rosenbaum, 1987). One of the ways online shaming manifests itself is through the voluntary reporting of inconsiderate acts to reduce the future occurrence of that behaviour. Since socially responsible individuals tend to engage in volunteerism (Hobfoll 1980), prosocial behaviour (Amato 1990) and place emphasis on achieving group goals (Jos, Tompkins and Hayes 1989), it is perhaps not surprising that those who are more willing to volunteer help are also likely to engage in online shaming.

Past literature on personality suggested that agreeable people are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviours (Graziano and Eisenberg 1997). There is a relationship between being more agreeable and being more likely to be socially responsible. People who were more conscientious were also likely to be more socially responsible. Roberts and Bogg (2004) characterized social responsibility as a specific facet of conscientiousness, thus it is not surprising that the two factors are closely associated.

There is also an association between openness to experience and the likelihood of contributing to online shaming. Openness to experience involves the dynamic pursuit and enjoyment of new experiences (Costa and Widiger 2001). Such people tend to have a greater threshold for ambiguity, exhibit greater willingness to try new things and absorb these experiences on a deeper level (Cheung et al. 2008). Since online shaming is a novel phenomenon which took off shortly after blogs and camera-enabled mobile phones grew popular, those who have been interested in it may be individuals are more curious or willing to explore terra incognita.

With regard to deterrence, it is found that individuals who are more socially responsible are more likely to be deterred by online shaming. People who are more inclined to behave in a socially responsible way are also more likely to be deterred as they believe that it is the right thing to do. We also find that women are more likely to be deterred by the threat of online shaming.
Studies have shown that people who adhere to Asian cultural values care a lot about reputation (Ho, Fu and Ng 2004) and the findings from this study support this claim by demonstrating that individuals who subscribe more closely to Asian cultural values are more likely to be deterred by online shaming. These individuals would be deterred by the consequence of online shaming as their reputations might be tainted when other people come to know of their inconsiderate behaviour.

Online shaming may cause other people to form a bad impression of the offender and this will in turn trigger negative emotions such as anger and loss of self esteem on the offender. The personality trait of Neuroticism is “a broad domain of negative affect including predispositions to experience anxiety, anger, depression, shame and other distressing emotions” (Costa, Terracciano and McCrae 2001, 322). Neurotic people are more likely to experience negative emotions and they will be more likely to fear penalties. They might therefore take extra steps to avoid having to face these penalties. Compared to others, neurotic people may want to avoid the stress that comes along with online shaming.

Agreeable people are cooperative (Vermetten, Lodewijks and Vermunt 2001) and hence will follow injunctive norms, which are norms that help people differentiate right from wrong. Agreeable people are more compliant and would be more willing to change their behaviour according to societal rules; thus, they would be more likely to be deterred by online shaming.

According to the past literature, both Openness and Extraversion were found to be negatively correlated with the likelihood of feeling shame. However, our study found that the relationship between Openness and the likelihood of being deterred was not significant. The relationship between Extraversion and the likelihood of being deterred was also not significant. We speculate that people might not be deterred by online shaming only because of feelings of shame. As Tibbetts (1997, 237) noted, “affective feelings of shame do not always follow external acts of shaming” and “external acts of shaming neither preclude nor necessarily precede feelings of shame”. Other reasons for the deterrence might be at work.

In studying the relationship between adherence to Asian values and social responsibility, the findings present an interesting relationship between the two variables. Contrary to our initial hypothesis (H3), it was found that people who adhere more closely to Asian values tend to be less socially responsible. This finding might seem counter-intuitive at first glance, but it is perhaps less surprising once the concepts of Asian values and social responsibility are further examined. If we consider collectivism as a core component of Asian values, a person who subscribes closely to Asian values is likely to lean towards being more collectivistic on the individualistic-collectivistic continuum, but the collectivism might be directed at the familial unit and not the society in general. Thus, while people who adhere more closely to Asian values tend to be less socially responsible, they are still more likely to be deterred by online shaming because they fear the effect it would have on their family’s reputation. Bringing shame upon the family is seen as not being filial in Asian cultures.

Lastly, the relationship between social responsibility and likelihood of being deterred was found to be significant. This is in line with literature suggesting that the deterrence effect of shaming is dependent on how socially responsible an individual is (Tittle and Logan 1973).

**Could online shaming work?**

New technologies continually offer new opportunities for shaming to be carried out in a society (Kahan 1997). Although our interviewees expressed doubts about the effectiveness of online shaming due to a fragmented nature of the blogosphere, we suggest that this situation may change in near future. Technologies that could provide highly efficient shaming platforms are undoubtedly social network sites (SNS). SNSs are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd and
Ellison 2007). Indeed, the profiles on Facebook, MySpace or Friendster are intended as online representations of one’s self and social networks, often used for contacting or being contacted by others (Gross and Acquisti 2005). In such networked environments, there is a sense of community through which shaming might be made much more effective as it is carried out in front of the offenders’ significant others (Braithwaite 1993). Massaro (1997) contends that shaming works in interdependent communities, which aptly describes social network sites of today, where family, friendship and professional ties all come together. Moreover, these communities no longer have to be geographically bounded, further enhancing the threat of shaming. Hence, we argue that online shaming might be more effective if applied in the context of social network sites, an area that could be explored by future research.

Community Empowerment or Civic Vigilantism?

It is worth noting that unlike some other forms of peer surveillance, online shaming does not rely on laws to indicate when an offence deserves a punishment; it addresses transgressions of norms, which is a subjective judgment by large. As there are no hard and fast rules to guide people who engage in online shaming, it is very likely that such an avenue would be open to abuse. The lack of due process in shaming the offender during online shaming has a lasting scarring effect due to the permanence of content on the Internet, even though the accused might not even be guilty of the alleged transgression.

In the context of Singapore, we see online shaming as a largely benign form of civic peer monitoring, which is yet to make a significant mark on society. The dominant technophilic discourse is evident in our interviews with the law enforcement officials as well as with the “online watchers”. New technologies are largely seen as participatory and capable of promoting greater community involvement. In this paradigm, technology-enabled peer surveillance serves to reinforce informal societal institutions (i.e. socio-cultural norms) and hence reduces the need for the “hard power” to be exercised. Still, such norm-enforcing surveillance schemes could potentially spit out of control and lead to a range of abuses, caused by the individuals acting like “civic vigilantes” online. While such issues have not been common in Singapore, the cases of "human flesh search engines" in China where online vigilantes engage in specific targeting of individuals who they perceived as responsible for social transgressions have lead to massive invasions of personal privacy, death threats as well as criminal charges (Canaves and Ye 2008). These examples demonstrate that the empowering potential of online shaming as a form of peer surveillance is still largely dependent on the individual sense of responsibility of the “watchers” as well as the formal institutions of the state.

Limitations

While our interviewees’ online shaming websites were among the most popular in Singapore, we cannot say much about motivations and perceptions of the individuals who declined our invitations to participate in the study. We would also like to refrain from making generalizations beyond the context of Singapore.

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