

Michelle Kilburn:

Why Individuals Choose to Post Incriminating Information on Social Networking Sites: Social Control and Social Disorganization Theories in Context

Abstract:

Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and many more social networking sites are becoming mainstream in the lives of numerous individuals in the United States and around the globe. How these sites could potentially impact one's perception of community, as well as the ability to enhance (or impede) strong social bonding, is an area of concern for many sociologists and criminologists. Current literature is discussed and framed through the lenses of social disorganization and social control theories as they relate to an individual's propensity to commit crime/indiscretions and then post comments relating to those activities on social networking sites. The result is gained insight into the communal attributes of social networking and a contribution to the discussion of the relationship among the social components of the internet, criminal activity, and one's sense of community. Implications and areas of future research are also addressed.

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Author:

Asst.-Prof. Dr. Michelle Kilburn:

- Department of Criminal Justice and Sociology, Southeast Missouri State University, One University Plaza, Cape Girardeau, MO, USA
- ☎ 573-986-6414, ✉ mkilburn@semo.edu
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Social Networking: Facebook at the Forefront

A social networking site, in general terms, is defined as a website where users can create a profile and then connect to others in order to form a personal network (Pew Research, 2007). As of October 2011, Facebook was the most popular online social network in America and the world. Facebook started as a "virtual year-book" for college students but has quickly become a social phenomenon available to anyone who has access to the internet. In 2004, Facebook had 1 million users. Today, there are more than 800 million active users on Facebook. Approximately 1 person out of every 14 in the world is a Facebook user. On average, more than 250 million photos are uploaded per day and members interact with more than 900 million objects (groups, events and community pages). Users average 130 friends and spend more than 55 minutes per day on Facebook ("Facebook Statistics," 2011). The volume and type of information that is available to friends, family, and even the general public, can vary greatly.

In 2007, Peluchette & Karl conducted a study of college-age student profiles and found that 53% posted photos involving alcohol use; 50% used profanity; 42% made comments regarding alcohol; 25% posted photos containing semi-nude or sexually provocative photos, and 20% made comments regarding their sexual activities. In their study they suggested that students make a conscious effort to portray a particular image and those who post socially unacceptable information may do so to impress a particular audience – their peers.

Police officers routinely use social networking sites to investigate crimes and those who are suspect of committing those crimes (Masis, 2009). For decades, police have utilized confessions and admissions made by criminals to their friends, in an effort to secure enough evidence to prosecute perpetrators for their criminal actions. This same technique readily applies to social networking sites because criminals "cannot resist bragging about their handiwork" (Watkins, 2010).

"In the 20th century, police developed evidence from items such as fingerprints and DNA. In the 21st century, the computer and the Internet have become fertile fields for police to plow in the search for evidence" (Marsico, 2010, pg. 976). Police are using social networking sites to go "undercover" as friends on suspected offender profiles (Watkins, 2010).

Why would an individual choose to post information on social networking sites that could be used against them in a court of law? Why are young adults choosing to post activities that might be considered socially unacceptable behaviour? Utilizing the foundational frameworks of social control and social disorganization the author postulates the motivations behind, and purpose of, such activities in an online social medium such as Facebook. Analyzing such actions through these theoretical lenses provides insight into what makes a community and the relationship between communities and one's propensity to commit crimes.

Social Control Theory

Social Control theorists seek to identify those features of personality and the environment that keep individuals from committing crimes. They believe it is the extent of a person's integration with positive social institutions and with significant others that influences resistance to criminal temptations. They tend to ask why people actually obey rules instead of breaking them (Schmalleger, 2009).

Facebook can be used by profile owners to engage with their friends and strengthen existing bonds and attachments (Young, 2011). It is certainly recognized that social networking sites can play a positive role:

"By forming groups of people with similar interests (particularly if the interest or hobby is not mainstream), social networking sites can create a sense of unity and belonging in people who might have previously felt alienated in society because of an inability to relate to local people. Particularly in areas with smaller populations, the chance of discovering others with similar interests is infrequent; but, by

removing these location barriers through online communication, the chance of meeting people with the same interests is greatly increased" (Wheeldon, 2010, para 6).

Travis Hirschi (2002), a major contributor to social control theory, contends that crime and delinquency occur when ties to the conventional and normative standards are weak or largely nonexistent. Many forms of traditional social controls include family, schools, communities, churches, youth athletic teams, civic groups, etc. and are often limited by geographical locations. Social networking sites make it very convenient for individuals to self-select their social groups or to weaken ties with groups who they may feel are too strict. Some of the social controls traditionally received from community, parents, civic, and religious groups may play a more muted role with individuals who rely heavily on social networking to form attachments. Technology affords the opportunity to evade social controls (Katz, 1998).

In a study conducted by Barker (2009), it was suggested that those who reported a disconnect from their peer group were more likely to turn to social networking sites. Older youth, who felt isolated and exhibited negative self-esteem, appear to turn to social networking for companionship. Barker suggested that individuals who feel a sense of negative social identity and self-esteem are more likely to distance themselves from their existing in-group and seek identification with other more favourably regarded groups. In summary, individuals looking for a social connection on Facebook, appear to be (1) looking for companionship, (2) desiring to identify with others (3) espousing a negative social identity and (4) male. Shy individuals are also more likely to have favourable attitudes toward Facebook (Orr, Sisc, Ross, Simmering, Arseneault, & Orr, 2009).

In the context of social control theory, individuals may choose to post socially unacceptable behaviour in an attempt to develop social bonds with a targeted group on Facebook. For example, negative messages about certain moral behaviours increased male profile owner's perceived physical attractiveness. "We might speculate that if greater attractiveness is perceived for males who misbehave, confirmatory and rewarding reactions by others might reinforce such behaviours or set observational learning dynamics into play encouraging others to behave in a similar manner" (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008, pg. 45).

The internet provides a platform that makes it extremely easy to reach like-minded individuals located in various geographic locations, which removes one of the major barriers that limit group activity. Hate groups can exploit these and other online attributes to spread, legitimize and entrench hateful messages (Citron & Norton, 2011).

In a rather extreme example, social networking sites appear to also allow terrorists to disseminate propaganda to a young age group that could emphasize with their cause and could possibly agree to join. In the same way that marketing groups can view member's information to decide which products to push or target on a website, terrorist groups can view adolescent profiles in order to decide if they are going to target a particular individual and how they can effectively develop their message (Weimann, 2010).

Youths' patterns of peer relationship, friendship quality, and behaviour adjustments at ages 13-14 appear to be predicting similar qualities of interaction and problem behaviour on their social networking sites at ages 20-22 (Mikami, Szewdo, Allen, Evans, & Hare, 2010). Establishing strong and positive social controls both on and off-line at an early age is important and appears to have an impact on acceptable behaviour in adulthood.

Social Disorganization Theory

Social disorganization is a condition that is said to exist when a group is faced with social change, uneven development of culture, maladaptiveness, disharmony, conflict, and lack of consensus. Social disorganization theories depict this social change, social conflict and the lack of social consensus as the root causes of crime and deviance. Shaw and McKay (1931) in their study of Chicago's Concentric Zones in the 1930's discovered that the first generation of immigrants tended to be law-abiding but it was the following generations in the transitional zones of the city/community that tended to become more criminal or reject social

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norms. In general, social disorganization theory refers to the inability of a community's structure to realize common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls (Schmalleger, 2009).

A key theoretical proposition of social disorganization is that socially disorganized communities are less able to control the general behaviour of residents, thus affecting delinquent and criminal behaviour (Kornhauser, 1978; Shaw & McKay, 1931). Shaw and McKay (1942) theorized if a community is not self-policing some individuals will exercise unrestricted freedom to express their dispositions and desires.

Jones (1997) postulated that some online groups are virtual communities whereas others are "virtual settlements," which have fewer stable members, less frequent interaction, and fewer emotional connections. Others have suggested that greater online access and interactions can lead to networked individualism rather than community networks (Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase, Chen & Hampton, 2003). This networked individualism allows people to "remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of a work unit and household. Individuals switch rapidly between their social networks" (Wellman, 2002, p. 15) opposed to remaining in a group or community. Although these sites may be often referred to as online communities, some research suggests that individual users support networked individualism rather than a sense of community (Reich, 2010).

In the context of social disorganization theory, individuals may choose to post socially unacceptable material on Facebook because the "community," to which they feel the strongest ties, is not really a community in the respect that social norms are reinforced and social consensus is strong and unified. Because online groups and communities are composed from members around the world, a lack of cultural development, maladaptiveness, and disharmony may be present. Also, the "norms" of online social networking media may not always mirror the social norms of a more geographically restrictive, face-to-face society.

For example, there is currently a wealth of media attention about how the current, younger generation is much less concerned about privacy than older generations (e.g., Dolliver, 2007; Robinson, 2006; St. John, 2006 as cited in Peluchette & Karl, 2010). Various details that older generations might find embarrassing are not uncommon on Facebook (Cole, 2006); and, when teens are seen getting a plethora of attention from posting outrageous and silly YouTube videos, it becomes apparent that keeping your life an open book can often be a ticket to fame (Funk, 2007). Stone & Brown (2006) purported that it appears that not all students want to hide information about their personal life. The Internet allows users to express themselves and to find similar-minded friends or communities. So while older generation Facebook users may see Facebook as a way to stay socially connected with old high school friends, younger generation Facebook users may feel it is simply a conduit to publish every aspect of their life to friends, family, networks and their online communities. Whether the information is incriminating or not, may not be a new generation of Facebook user's primary concern. Just as Shaw and McKay (1942) found that second generation immigrants lacked the social consensus and cultural transmission of their predecessors, the younger generation of Facebook users appear to be more accepting of behaviour that goes outside traditional social norms (Cole, 2006).

Another interesting feature of social networking sites is that overall impressions of a particular individual can be influenced by people other than the person who owns the profile. Postings by other people can not only reflect the character of the individuals who made the post, but it is also possible that observers' reactions of those posts may affect perceptions as well (Walther, et. al., 2008). For example, a user may choose not to disclose information regarding marijuana use at a party the night before; but, a "friend" might choose to post on the user's wall a comment that directly references the illegal activities.

Summation and Recommendations

Relating to social control theories, Facebook users tend to develop bonds and connections with targeted groups. They have the ability to self-select social groups that mirror their current belief system or values and to evade traditional social controls such as parents, community, church, civic groups that might challenge those beliefs. Social networking provides the ability to find like-minded groups around the world and removes the geographical limitations of "real world" communities. Face-to-face controls (i.e., family,

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schools, churches, civic groups) that have challenged socially unacceptable norms now have the potential of being muted or completely “tuned out.”

In regards to social disorganization theories, social networking communities tend to have fewer stable members and may be more comparable to networked individualism rather than communities. Social norms, cultural transmission, or social consensus may not be present, or if they are present, may not be strong and/or unified. Research indicates that norms of online communities may not mirror socially acceptable norms found in face-to-face communities. For example, the new generation of Facebook users appear to be more accepting of behaviour that goes outside traditional norms (i.e., posting private, personal, or incriminating information). It also appears that wall posts from Facebook “friends” can influence or reinforce negative social activity that may or may not want to be directly disclosed by the user.

While social control and social disorganization theories can be used to suggest reasons why individuals choose to post incriminating evidence on their Facebook pages, there is still a real need to empirically study not only Facebook user’s comments on their personal, community and group pages, but also to study user’s “friend” wall posts/ comments. The author suggests further research on how social control and/or social disorganization theories might provide a theoretical foundation to help explain the desire to post criminal activities on Facebook.

Most of what we know about Facebook users and their attributes are based on studies from high school/college students. The author suggests studying criminals’ motivations for posting criminal activities on Facebook. There is also a need to study criminal offenders’ social networking profiles to see if online peers tend to encourage or discourage criminal behaviours.

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