The Use of Social Media for Shaming Strangers: Young People’s Views

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Abstract

Recent years have seen an increase in a practice known as online public shaming. Online public shaming is when social media, and related technologies, is used as a platform for ‘shaming’ individuals for perceived violations in social norms and etiquette. This qualitative study explored young people’s views on the occurrence and acceptability of this practice, including how it varies from related phenomenon such as cyber-bullying. The findings indicate that young people consider there to be a number of benefits to public shaming e.g. deterring similar behaviours, and these also make it distinct from bullying. The discussions raised a number of related issues surrounding privacy, surveillance and managing online ‘presence’, which highlighted several implications for practice and requirements for future research.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the term ‘Public Shaming’ and ‘Stranger Shaming’ has been adopted by the Media to describe an online practice in which social networking technologies are exploited for ‘shaming’ members of the public for their online and/or offline behaviours. Early well-known examples include the ‘Kitten Killer’ girl of Hangzhou who was caught on camera killing a kitten with her high heels, which was subsequently uploaded online to face the judgment of the public [1]. Within the UK, domestic CCTV footage of Mary Bale putting a cat in a dustbin was uploaded to Facebook, resulting in mass and vehement responses from the public against her behaviour [2]. Similarly, Paris Brown, the newly elected Youth Police and Crime Commissioner in 2013, was forced to resign when her racist and homophobic Tweets from several years earlier were uploaded to audiences on social media [3].

This practice, often intensified by Media involvement, certainly appears to be on the increase with a more recent example being the shaming of 20 year old Lancaster beautician, Gemma Worrall, who was internationally ridiculed for her Tweet, “If barraco barner is our president, why is he getting involved with Russia, scary” [4]. The post was re-tweeted thousands of times within hours and by the following day it had been picked up by National Media within the UK (e.g. Daily Mail, The Independent, Mirror, Huffington Post) and subsequently other nations’ Press within Belgium, Australia, Canada and the USA; all this for a spelling mistake and incorrectly identifying Barrack Obama as the president of the UK.

There is now a website, http://publicshaming.tumblr.com/, which is dedicated to publically shaming people for a range of different behaviours. These are behaviours that have been captured by personal Smartphones and uploaded to the internet, or behaviours that have been identified on social media (e.g. ‘Tweets’) and circulated more widely than the initial audience. The website was started in October 2012, initially attracting limited attention and focused on shaming welfare cheats in the United States; however the audience has now reached the thousands for certain topics, spanning themes such as racism, sexism, cruelty against animals, and homophobia.

Another dedicated website (and there is a growth in such websites dealing with differing levels of triviality and criminality) is the Facebook Group ‘Women Who Eat on Tubes’ (https://www.facebook.com/wwe.ot). Members of this group (12000 plus) upload unflattering photos they’ve taken of women, without permission or necessarily awareness of being the subject, eating while on public transport. This introduces interesting dimensions regarding the acceptability of recording or photographing fellow citizens in public, presumably for the amusement of the wider public but not without inconsequential emotional (shame) effects on the subject photographed.

The examples above are just some of the ways in which shaming has entered public consciousness as a potentially ‘new’ social practice, which capitalises on the sophistication of new social technologies. As a digital media phenomenon, online public shaming is not well researched and to-date there have been no formal studies that focus specifically on the practice of shaming strangers (individuals) through the medium of
social media. This practice may represent a ‘new’ phenomenon or it may merely represent a new term for common and better-researched paradigms of online social interaction (e.g. slut shaming, cyber bullying, trolling, information sharing).

In order to address the gap in research, a qualitative study was conducted to investigate the practice of using new social technologies for conducting ‘Online Public Shaming’. The study sought the views of young people and explored related areas including: recording ‘public’ behaviour on mobile phones, sharing and watching material on social media, and discussing contrasts between shaming and cyber-bullying. Key questions included:

- Under what circumstances is it considered acceptable or appropriate to conduct online shaming and;
- How do young people conceive online shaming (how is this distinct from other activities such as cyber-bullying)?

2. Background

New media technologies, with instant and mobile access to communication platforms and recording capabilities, facilitate the easy and global spread of information. 92% of the UK population now owns a mobile phone, with 51% owning Smartphones and regularly using the phone to access the internet [5]. Accessing and sharing video content appears to be particularly popular among younger age groups, with younger adults “twice as likely as their older counterparts to post and share videos online” [6] [7]. Young people represent a particularly interesting population group because they have grown up surrounded by digital and mobile technology. As such, entire lives can be (and are) diarised online for public consumption, whether that be by the individual themselves or by others around them. Smartphones make it possible to more readily capture and disseminate footage of behaviours that would otherwise pass as fleeting, and thereby largely insignificant or hidden experiences [8]. The ability to record oneself can lead to the scrutiny of mundane behaviour [9], and as a consequence, also vulnerability to public shaming should these behaviours be perceived as breaching social norms.

Not surprisingly, these new technologies are challenging perspectives on the distinction between ‘Private’ and ‘Public’. This distinction is already a contested area that is constantly being renegotiated and the introduction of new social technologies merely adds to the complexity of these arguments [10][11][12][13]. Some suggest that younger populations have a different view of privacy from older generations [14][15][16]; presumably related to the emergence of ever pervasive social technologies. Research on ‘Contextual Integrity’ [17][18][19] highlights the importance of expectations and norms that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) inform what is ‘private’ or ‘public’. Yet even with clear guidance on the public nature of interactions on social media platforms, its members tend to grossly underestimate the size of the potential audience [20]. boyd (2007) describes this as the ‘Invisible Audience’[21]. Moreover, any perceived breaches of privacy can be greatly magnified if the media disclose it to the public [22]. As a result, what might have been a momentary lapse in judgment could be morphed into a scandal.

2.1 Shame and shaming

Shame can be defined as “The painful emotion arising from the consciousness of something dishonouring, ridiculous, or indecorous in one’s own conduct or circumstances” (Oxford English Dictionary). The act of shaming is a social act; one person putting another to shame, encompassing forms of social disapproval [23]. Shaming can be both a formal and an informal practice. Public exposure plays a particularly important role in eliciting shame [24] and therefore shame is often grouped with other socially generated emotions such as humiliation and embarrassment. Shaming can occur when the person committing the transgression appears to be untroubled by their behaviour [25] and therefore someone else seeks to induce shame, often through public exposure of their misdemeanor. When shame is induced by a second party this intrinsically involves elements of derision and contempt, and hence loss of dignity and humiliation [26][27].

2.2 Use of shaming to change behaviour

There is a long history in the practice of Public Shaming, with a host of examples including: stocks, flagellation, branding, sandwich boards, scarlet letters, amputating thieves’ hands and public execution. All of these served a dual purpose of acting as a deterrent to the wider community as well as forming a punishment for the illicit behaviour. Although forms of public shaming are still used (e.g. wearing high visibility jackets for community service within the UK, judges ordering convicted criminals to wear sandwich boards in the US) and some believe it to be an efficient alternative to prisons [28], the relative power was believed to have decreased as populations increased, families migrated to cities, and prisons became more institutionalised. Hence the community ties were less strong and public shaming was not as devastating (and
therefore as not as much of a deterrent) as a penal technique [29].

There are certain objections to the use of shaming for punishment. For example, it is said to be cruel, degrading, demeaning, humiliating, or otherwise generally inhumane. It is therefore argued that shaming penalties can violate an offender’s dignity, and by proxy ‘Human Rights’ [30].

‘Naming and Shaming’ is a distinct form of punishment generally inflicted by or against Governments. As a policy, it is a form of punishment by publicity, which is designed to inflict reputational damage on ‘moral’ grounds [31]. At country levels it has been used to depict the worst and best performers internationally on aspects such as schools, healthcare and human rights [32]. It is also popular strategy used by NGOs and News Media in order to enforce Human Rights norms and laws, although there are mixed views on the relative benefits [33]. At an individual level, research has explored whether ‘Formal Shaming’ could prove more beneficial than monetary sanctions against White-collar criminals; not least because of increased public awareness of crimes and demand for harsher sentences [34].

At an informal level, shaming can be used to regulate social norms. Social norms are customary rules of behaviour that coordinate our interactions with others [35]. They pervade every area of social life; guiding everyday behaviours as well as affecting fundamental perceptions [36]. Sustaining social norms is often achieved by informal social sanctions, for which shaming might be considered one mechanism.

Elster (2009) states that there is an inherent social obligation to shame those who violate pervasive social norms [37], and Solove (2007) suggests that, “in a world of increasingly rude and uncivil behaviour, shaming helps society maintain its norms of civility and etiquette” [15]. Moreover, research indicates that online shaming against those who violate social norms might be proliferating fast in cyberspace [38].

2.3 Online public shaming

Despite its appearance in popular media within recent years, it is not clear how ‘online’ ‘Public Shaming’ is defined. There is neither an obvious ‘popular’ use of the term nor an agreed definition. In the absence of an existing definition, for the purposes of this research, the term ‘Online Public Shaming’ is used to refer to the process in which a person uploads material (e.g. screen shot, photo, video footage, texts’) to popular social media sites (e.g. YouTube, Facebook) of some behaviour they have captured (or identified through other means) of someone behaving in a particular way that they disapprove of, or perhaps is deemed (by the person who uploads the material) to be contravening some form of expected social norm. As a consequence of the material being uploaded to online sites, the behaviour is exposed, judged, and disseminated to the wider public; who may then respond in various ways. The ‘Shaming’ element presumes that the objective is to instil shame in the individual for their behaviour. The process can be further intensified if official media outlets pick up on the material. The use of ‘online’ infers the use of social media to facilitate this shaming process, however the behaviour open to ‘Public Shaming’ can be online or offline in nature.

In line with the definition above, the following characteristics of Online (Public) Shaming are proposed:
- The shaming is targeted at an individual.
- The shaming is conducted by members of the general public rather than Government or institutions
- The shamed behaviour can be legal or illegal
- The audience on social media plays a pivotal role in facilitating the shaming.

Based on the above discussion, figure 1 depicts a proposed conceptual model for the process of Online Public Shaming. Each of the stages are associated with different psychological, social, and technological processes.

3. Research methods

In consideration of the limited academic literature on ‘Online Public Shaming’, a qualitative approach was selected. Thematic Analysis [39] was considered to be the most appropriate form of analysis due to the flexibility it offers for providing a rich description of the dataset and exploring different perspectives on the research questions.

The main aim of the research was to explore young people’s views of and norms surrounding the phenomenon of ‘Online Public Shaming’. The following research questions motivated the analysis:
a) What meanings do young people associate with online shaming?
b) How do young people distinguish between ‘cyber shaming’ and ‘cyber bullying’?
c) Amongst young people, under what conditions is it considered acceptable (and unacceptable) to record/capture and upload/disseminate ‘public’ behaviours on social media?

3.1. Data collection and analysis

To explore the research questions above, 6 focus groups were conducted between December 2013 and February 2014, involving 30 participants (21 female, 9 males) aged between 18 and 25 years of age. Focus groups included 4-6 participants, recruited from a university population who received a course credit and/or £10 for their participation. Focus groups lasted between 1- 1½ hours and were audio recorded for subsequent transcription. The audio data was appropriately anonymised but maintained distinctions between individual contributions in order to enable comparisons and contrasts in views. The data was coded in order to identify themes in line with the key research questions. The focus groups were asked the same questions, a shortened version of which is outlined in Appendix 1. Participants were not preselected according to their experiences of online shaming. Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the focus group data.

4. Findings

Six themes emerged from the analysis of the data with reference to the research questions. These are discrete themes but there is notable overlap between the areas.

4.1 Conceptualising ‘shaming’ through social media

This theme refers to how participants discussed the act of online public shaming and rationalised its use. There were clear and common views on the value of shaming as a mechanism for highlighting and critiquing displays of socially acceptable behaviours, with one group employing the term ‘duty’ to justify its use.

‘I think shaming is just generally just to show someone what they have done wrong, it may not be illegal but it’s not socially acceptable’ (FG4)

‘I would feel like I have some obligation to share that, to show people kind of how bad it is getting... you feel some kind of duty to’ (FG6)

There was an element of blame attributed to the target of shaming, stressing that the individual chooses to behave that way (in public) or make comments public on social media and should therefore be accountable for their actions. The importance of ‘evidence’ was also apparent here.

‘Like obviously she said that and she can’t shy away from the fact that she has said it, so why not let other people see it?’ (FG4)

Interestingly though, there was an acceptance that there was an element of ‘bad luck’ in being shamed but this seemed to be rationalised by the potentially wider societal benefits in discouraging undesirable behaviours.

‘I think in a way if someone is caught doing something then it sets a precedent so it could have a positive impact. Like as in people wouldn’t do it because they are worried that someone might record them doing the same thing. But then I think it is unlucky and unfair for the people who do get caught doing something immoral. I suppose’ (FG3)

The relevance of online platforms in facilitating public shaming was reiterated in the description of social media as an ideal platform.

‘People make one small error in their lives... online world makes it a perfect platform to do it’ (FG1)

Although there was a lot of commonality between groups on their description of shaming as a potentially positive activity, there was a note of caution about the type of behaviours this represents. Specifically, that monitoring one another’s behaviour potentially introduces yet another level of surveillance.

‘I just think you’re so surveilled anyway I just don’t like another form of surveillance on people and the fact that it’s like we’re policing each other’ (FG1)

This is particularly telling when participants commented on the power of shaming in relation to traditional sources in order to enact justice with one (FG1) likening shaming to a ‘vigilante approach’ and social media as a form of ‘public prosecution’ (FG3).
‘I doubt it would have such a big impact if someone had...given it [footage of public behavior] to the police.’ (FG6)

There was little discussion of consequences for those involved with shaming, unless introduced by the researcher. Discussions were largely surrounding the immediate ‘goal’ of shaming rather than more enduring psychological or reputational impacts of being shamed. There were, however, certain areas for which shaming was not considered appropriate, which included historical incidents or those for which someone had already apologised.

4.2 Distinctions between cyber-shaming and cyber-bullying

Some of the most enlightening findings arose in the discussions surrounding the distinction between bullying and shaming. The theme above outlines how shaming is considered to have an objective, which includes discouraging similar behaviours and also highlighting to that individual that they are wrong and should change behaviour or attitude. In terms of how this varies from cyber-bullying, bullying was described as more personal and malicious than shaming. In addition, shaming was focused on the actions, with the opportunity for a positive outcome, whereas bullying was focused on the traits of the individual, with the individual involved described as the ‘victim’. Other distinctions were that shaming is deserved (not least because it can be supported with ‘evidence’) and a one-off activity, whereas bullying is sustained and intentionally harmful.

‘I like to think it sort of has a goal, like people want to get something out, out of shaming people...I think shaming tends to have a goal’ (FG4)

‘I think Cyber bullying is when they haven’t done anything, they don’t deserve it’ (FG3)

‘Cyber bully is more private than shaming...less personal in a way’ (FG5)

‘I think with Cyber bullying there’s ...not much of a positive thing from that... whereas with shaming... you can have a positive outcome...you have some flexibility in shaming...whereas cyber bullying you don’t have a choice you are just going in with that sole purpose to disgrace someone and making people laugh at their expense’ (FG6)

There were a couple of examples used to describe when shaming transitions to bullying. One of these was the initial instance in which the ‘innocent’ individual’s actions are intentionally taken out of context.

‘If you’re an innocent person and you get filmed doing something and potentially it is taken out of context then that’s bullying’ (FG3)

The second follows the instance of shaming wherein it turns into a personal attack involving the scrutiny of the entirety of the individual’s social media history i.e. beyond the incident in question.

‘Shaming can turn into bullying...find out what else they have said...people will always take things too far’ (FG4).

4.3 Use of Smartphones for recording

It is necessary to distinguish between the use of phones for recording and a decision to take recorded images and upload or share online. The discussions revealed that there is indeed widespread use of Smartphones for capturing photos and videos of everyday and unusual incidents. In general, there was little concern regarding the acceptability of recording or being recorded by friends, which seemed to indicate a level of trust or mutual understanding between friends as to the ultimate use of the material. The only exception to this was recording friends drunk, which was considered more of a taboo.

‘I wouldn’t be bothered if friends were recording me but I wouldn’t be too happy if it was a stranger and then not knowing what they are doing with it and stuff’ (FG1)

Alternatively, when questioned on the recording of strangers in public, there was general uncertainty surrounding the legality or broader social acceptability of recording strangers.

‘I actually don’t know when it’s OK, or how legal it is’. (FG2)

Despite this, there was consistency between participants that it is entirely acceptable to record people in public if they are acting in such a way that invites attention. Moreover, you would actually be doing them a favour by recording it.

‘If they were doing something stupid or something I don’t think I mind about that because they are choosing to be like that’ (FG2)
‘If the person is trying to be funny then yes we recognise they are seeking attention, we are only helping them by putting it on social media’ (FG3)

In discussing less clear-cut behaviours in public, there appeared to be recognition that the prevalence of social technologies means that being recorded is an inevitable and acceptable function of modern living. This also emerged in relation to differing perspectives between younger and older demographics; and the tension this created.

‘There’s always a boundary I suppose. But if they are going to do it I think it’s now kinda accepted that ‘OK it’s going to be caught on camera’, whereas before there would be such a big hoo-ha about it’ (FG1).

4.4 Complexities of uploading and sharing on social media

The practices and decision-making for uploading and disseminating material on social media were characterised as more complex than recording. Whilst recording was a more instantaneous activity requiring minimal forethought of implications; uploading required attention to potential reputational issues or emotional impact on friends.

‘I’ll go through it and think ‘OK is it safe?’ (FG3)

Moreover, the decision to upload and share was often revisited and a cause for concern, especially in relation to friends.

‘I think it’s very complex... all the thoughts come into your mind like ‘have I offended him’ which wouldn’t typically happen like say a few years ago, I don’t know I think it’s very complex’. (FG1)

‘...it’s just like the way you are thinking and you start to have second thoughts in a way’ (FG3)

There were further intricacies to the mechanisms of sharing e.g. the use of tagging to ensure you reach the intended audience and avoid saturating social media feeds. Another interesting finding was the discussion on the changing landscape of social media, which seemed to be related to an increasing awareness of privacy issues. The dynamics of the complexity and decision-making also appeared to be related to changing personal circumstances e.g. job seeking, which is often in conflict with the enduring nature of social media.

‘A few years ago I probably would have felt a bit different, so I probably would have given it less thought before uploading something than I would now, I would definitely think about it more now’ (FG5).

4.5 Managing online presence

Somewhat related to the theme above on decisions to upload and share (and apparent responsibility to maintain friends’ reputation as well as one’s own), there was strong awareness of the legacy of all and any online presence, and therefore the necessity to invest effort in managing online presence. In association with this, there was recognition that once it was released on social media you ‘don’t have control of it’.

‘I think it depends when you’re younger you don’t think of that...you think this is hilarious...and then when you get older you do start to think…it’s like people have to completely manage themselves online’ (FG1).

Similarly, participants identified that it wasn’t merely online comments or behaviours that could potentially go viral; but entire backgrounds and social media history. This served as a nice contrast to the discussion of online shaming wherein those involved faced the same fate.

‘It’s just that if you make something that goes viral it’s not just the thing that goes viral it’s your whole profile that goes viral’ (FG1)

There was what appeared to be an element of regret that crept into a number of discussions in relation to previous content or behaviours they’d displayed on social media. This appeared to influence current judgments on appropriate content and is potentially related to the investment in managing of online profiles; presumably to avoid future regret.

‘You have picture that you find funny at the moment but might not find funny in 30-40 years they will still be there, it’s all really unrealistic but it’s just think about how the world might change and things might be viewed in a few years’ time’ (FG2).

4.6 Context of behaviour

Despite earlier assertions on the appropriateness of shaming and the availability of ‘evidence’ to justify it, there was a parallel discussion on the deceptive nature of context for their own or friends’ behaviours in ‘public’. Two key issues emerged from discussions.
Firstly, it is very easy to take behaviours and conversations out of context, especially if these are ‘private’ conversations, which are overheard in public and/or carefully selected from a longer dialogue (online or offline). In reality, this could happen to ‘absolutely anyone’.

‘I don’t know if you just over heard someone having a joke you don’t know the context of the conversation. I personally think that’s not right... quite easily got it wrong’ (FG4)

‘I think anyone could find something that absolutely anyone had said and take it out of context and make it offensive’ (FG2)

Secondly, the fact that people change behaviour depending on whether they expect people to be listening or watching.

‘I think you say things differently, when you say something that you don’t intend others to hear’ (FG2)

‘I think private is something you do that you don’t expect anyone else to be watching’ (FG3)

‘I think you change your behaviour depending on whether you think people are watching or not’ (FG3).

5. Discussion

The study identified 6 primary themes in relation to the original research questions, which are depicted in Table 1. In terms of what meanings young people associate with online shaming, terms such as ‘duty’ and ‘obligation’ were employed to justify its use. It was most commonly referred to in relation to ‘shaming’ socially unacceptable behaviours, and served as deterrent for similar behaviours as well as punishing the individual in question. This aligns with the historical literature on the function of public shaming, and social media potentially reverses the effects of more urbanised societies on the utility of shaming.

The discussions revealed clear differences in the participants’ explanation of cyber-bullying and shaming, which were primarily rooted in the deservedness of the behaviours in question. The descriptions of cyber-bullying compared to previous research [40,41] but the similarity between the two practices is potentially in the consequences or longer-term effects of bullying or shaming; this was confirmed by the appreciation that shaming can turn into bullying. In relation to the question about the circumstances under which it is acceptable to record and share public behaviours on social media, broader topics of debate on ‘private/public’ spaces and managing online presence, were outlined. Common to these were complexities of managing online content (for immediate and longer-term reputation), the vulnerability to misinterpretation of behaviours, and the pervasive nature of these technologies within everyday life. Research by Trottier (2012) on ‘Lateral Surveillance’ offers a useful perspective on peer-to-peer surveillance and mutual monitoring, which these technologies encourage [42]. Related, is the notion of ‘self-censorship’ whereby individuals choose not to upload certain information, and in particular information that might harm reputation, is especially relevant to managing online presence. One of the most intriguing findings is in how dialectically opposed the rationale for shaming was in relation to the discussions about contexts of behaviour. Specifically, on the one hand shaming was presented as justified due to the ‘evidence’ of their actions, on the other hand it was recognised that anyone could have their actions taken out of context (and viable for shaming), not least because we all act differently if we believe we are being watched.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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| Concept of shaming | • Shaming socially unacceptable behaviours  
• Evidence of socially unacceptable behaviour  
• Obligation and duty to share  
• Deters others  
• Unlucky but justified  
• Social media as a perfect platform  
• Another form of surveillance  
• Achieves more impact than law enforcement |
| Distinction between cyber-bullying and cyber-shaming | • Shaming has a goal  
• Shaming as having a positive outcome  
• Cyber-bullying as not deserved  
• Cyber-bullying as more personal  
• Shaming can turn into bullying |
| Use of Smartphones for recording public behaviours | • Happy to be recorded by friends but not strangers  
• Unclear legal boundaries  
• OK to record strangers seeking attention  
• Expected and accepted feature of modern living |
| Uploading and sharing on social media | • Complex  
• More complex than it used to be  
• Retrospective concerns about decisions to upload and share |
| Managing | • Requirement to manage online |
online presence | presence for future prospects
--- | ---
 | • Changing perspectives on appropriate content

Context of behaviour | • Very easy to take behaviours out of context
 | • Everyone is vulnerable to having behaviour taken out of context
 | • You behave differently when you think you are being watched

5.1 Implications for practice

There are a few fundamental implications for practice, which generally reflect the current lack of regulation and oversight of online practices and mobile social technologies. The first of these is the limited regulation surrounding the use of new digital technologies for recording and uploading material on peers to social media. The norms surrounding this practice are still evolving but there is currently nothing that prevents a member of the general public recording a stranger (unless a minor) and disseminating it online. This potentially affords a member of the public more freedom than News Media or Government in ‘surveillance’. The European Convention of Human Rights Act (1998) [43] includes Article 8 on the “Right to respect for his private and family life” and Article 10 which protects the “Right to freedom of expression” but these are not readily applied in this context. Similarly, in terms of the legality of Media activities, Loosen (2011) outlines the distinction between public and private in journalism (an equally controversial and unresolved area) [44], and there are some safeguards in place to protect individuals from Media collection and use of information or images; these same rules don’t apply to individuals.

The second area surrounds the actual practice of ‘Shaming’. There is considerable literature on the prevalence of cyber-bullying and requirement for enhanced prevention mechanisms, and yet the practice of shaming has received minimal attention to-date, despite the devastating impact it could have. The general argument justifying its use appeared to rest on the rationale that it could have a positive effect and the individual was ‘deserved’ of shaming. Yet subsequent discussions highlighted the deceptive nature of context online (and offline) and how we regularly behave differently depending on whether we think we are being observed (herein lays the nebulous nature of the private/public debate). Moreover, as humans we often ‘go too far’ or ‘get it wrong’ and long-term impacts are rarely considered. In concert, we have a circumstance in which the division between shaming and bullying is even less obvious. This raises questions as to how shaming can be regulated to protect individuals, and also how the proportionality of shaming can be judged.

The final and potentially more underpinning issue is that this type of activity is a representation of the sheer extent of surveillance within society. No longer must citizens only fear surveillance from Governments and Organisations; they must also be conscious of surveillance by peers and strangers. Significantly, the surveillance by peers and strangers is not seeking to identify criminal activities, it is intending to identify and judge everyday actions and engagements. This is what Murakami-Wood and Webster (2009) allude to when discussing the relative balance between a ‘surveillance society’ and a ‘surveillanced society’ [45]. This has fundamental issues for ‘public’ behaviours given, ‘I think you change your behaviour depending on whether you think people are watching or not’ and the norms of acceptable public behaviours are both culturally and temporally variable.

5.2 Future work

This study was an initial look at young people’s views but each of the themes warrants further investigation. One of the main limitations of this work was the participant sample and it is not clear from this study whether the findings are representative of young people’s views or an artifact of the student population. Future research would therefore gain value from looking at a younger, school-aged, population and potentially compare with an adult group.

The current study did not interview anyone who had specific experiences of being shamed, or conducting the shaming, online. A study into both of these would provide insights into alternative perspectives of the phenomenon. Similarly, an in-depth case study (from initiation through to longer-term implications) of a known case study of online shaming would provide a rich dataset for examination. It may also prove fruitful to explore the linguistic, semantic or sentiment variations between cyber-bullying and cyber-shaming. Although the participants’ description of the two may vary, there may actually be substantial commonalities in the linguistic content and process.

6. Conclusions

The present study explored young people’s views on the use of social media for conducting public shaming of individuals. The study revealed some interesting insights into the justification of shaming as a positive practice to change or deter similar behaviours, which in participants’ view sets it apart from perspectives of cyber-bullying. More generally, the findings from this research agreed with previous literature on the prevalence of Smartphones for capturing and
disseminating material on everyday behaviours. However, it also highlighted the sheer complexity of decisions and processes for sharing material online, and how this is intertwined with the necessity to manage one’s own online presence, along with a responsibility to maintain the reputation of friends’ online profile. There were recurring discussions on the challenges and dynamics of ‘private’ versus ‘public’ spaces, which was closely related to the notion of ‘context’ and enduring nature of social media content. The findings are consistent with previous literature on: shaming to maintain social norms; use of smartphones; changing views on privacy and surveillance; and cyber-bullying. Although there were clear distinctions made between bullying and shaming, the impact on the individual could be just as catastrophic and lasting. This study has provided a qualitative examination of the views of young people towards online shaming and has identified interesting phenomenon that require further investigation.

7. References


8. Appendix 1

Focus group schedule:
1. What sort of things do people record on their mobile / smartphones?
2. What sort of videos do people post on social media sites?
3. What sort of mobile phone video recordings have you watched?
4. How do you know when it is ok for you to record someone else’s behaviour and upload it to social media?
5. How do you know when it is ok for you to repost or share other people’s postings on social media?
6. Have you ever video recorded someone you didn’t know on your mobile phone and posted it on social media?
7. Can you tell me about the video recordings you/friends make of people you do know and those of people you don’t know?
8. Sometimes the things people write on social media (e.g. Twitter) are reposted beyond their original social group by other people and end up going viral on the News Media. Can you think of some examples?
9. Have you ever come across the term ‘shaming’ on the internet? What does it mean to you? Can you give me some examples?
   a. Do you think this is different from cyber-bullying?

Available:
http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_E.pdf
