Combating Online Abuse: What Drives People to Use Online Reporting Functions on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Online abuse has emerged as a huge problem across the Internet and especially on social networking sites (SNSs). To combat this unacceptable online behavior, many SNS providers begin to implement built-in reporting functions/systems on their platforms. However, the effectiveness of this new function on SNSs depends on users’ willingness to adopt and use. Thus, the main objective of this study is to identify the factors driving people to use the built-in reporting functions on SNSs. Drawing upon Theory of Cognitive Appraisal and the literature of social appraisal, we identified three major appraisal processes related to the use of online reporting functions on SNSs: primary appraisal (perceived emergency and perceived responsibility), secondary appraisal (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use) and social appraisal (evaluation apprehension). We tested our research model with 117 Facebook users. Our findings suggest that perceived responsibility of the incident and perceived usefulness of the reporting functions are important factors promoting the use of built-in online reporting functions, whereas evaluation apprehension is an obstructing social factor to the use of built-in reporting functions. We expect that the results of this study make significant contributions to research and practice.

1. Introduction

Social networking site has become the world’s most popular online social venue where many people, especially the youth, have been spending significant amount of time socializing with their networks of friends. This results in a profound impact on daily life, which might not always be a good thing. According to a recent survey conducted by Opinium Research [1], 65 percent of teenagers have been abused online, with 87 percent of online abuse happened on Facebook and 18 percent occurred on Twitter. Online abuse is an umbrella term that encompasses online abusive interpersonal behaviors including cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online sexual harassment, and grooming [2]. Online abuse not only elevates victims’ daily levels of anxiety [3], but also causes adverse psychological effects to victims, such as suicidal behaviors, social difficulties, substance use and delinquency [4]. Effective prevention and intervention strategies are thus urged to promote and maintain a healthy online social environment.

Many social networking sites (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat) have responded to the call for prevention and intervention of online abuses and launched built-in functions on their platforms. Users can report online abuses to the review teams of SNS providers, and the teams will assess the reports and then carry out corresponding actions. Despite the efforts of building and launching online reporting functions, the responses of SNS users in terms of their willingness to use these functions remain unknown. Similar to any information system, the success of this new function depends on whether users are willing to adopt and use it. Thus, the main objective of this study is to identify the factors driving people to use online reporting functions on SNSs.

To the best of our understanding, existing reporting literature mostly focuses on individuals’ reporting crime/violence to police [5], or whistleblowing and peer-reporting in the organizational context [6]; there is a lack of theoretical insight into individuals’ online reporting behavior in the context of SNSs. To advance our theoretical understanding of this new and important phenomenon related to the use of SNSs, we draw upon the Theory of Cognitive Appraisal and literature on social appraisal to derive our research model. Specifically, we investigate the relationship between the appraisal processes and users’ reporting intention in the context of SNSs.

We organize the rest of this paper as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical foundation of this study and present the research model and related hypotheses. We then describe the research
methodology and present the results of data analysis. Finally, we conclude with discussion and implications for both research and practice.

2. Theoretical Foundation

In this section, we review the literature related to behavioral responses to online abuse. In addition, we introduce the Theory of Cognitive Appraisal as well as literature on social appraisal and discuss how individuals’ decisions to use of online reporting functions of SNSs are influenced by the appraisal processes.

2.1. Behavioral Responses to Online Abuse

Prior research found that most online abuse – cyberbullying, sexual harassment, grooming, and cyberstalking -- is not reported to authorities [7, 8]. Victims of abuse are also found to be reluctant or unwilling to tell others, particularly parents, about the abuse [9]. Rather, they tend to conceal their emotions and avoid taking any action[10, 11]. Dehue, et al. [12] found that 31 percent of victims pretended to ignore the online abuse incident, as they felt that nothing could be done to help or that they did not have resources to deal with the situation. In contrary, individuals who are not directly involved with online abuse (i.e., bystanders) are found to display a greater likelihood of reporting online abuse when compared to those who are directly involved (i.e., victims) (Steinmetz 2013).

2.2. Theory of Cognitive Appraisal

Theory of Cognitive Appraisal describes how the mental processes affect individuals’ response to an incident [13-15]. It postulates that individuals’ response orientations are generally determined by their cognitive appraisal, which comprises the processes for evaluating the emergency or relevancy of a particular incident, and assessing available resources to control, minimize, or eradicate the incident [14, 15]. Cognitive appraisal involves two general processes: primary (threat) appraisal, and secondary (coping) appraisal. The primary appraisal (which involves the recognition of the threat incidents) activates individuals’ secondary appraisal (which involves the assessment of available coping resources to cope with the threat) [15].

In primary appraisal, individuals evaluate the emergency of an incident and their self-accountability of the incident. Their interpretation of the disruptive incident (i.e., to what extent is the incident urgent, and to what extent are they responsible to deal with the situation) determines their response tendency [16].

In secondary appraisal, individuals assess the resources that are available to them, and whether they can be used effectively, to cope with or avert the threats [15, 17, 18]. Lazarus [19] and Liang and Xue [20] stress the important of individuals’ “perceiving” the effectiveness of resources in addressing a threat incident. While individuals may be provided with resources (e.g., online reporting functions), they may be reluctant to make use of the resources to cope with the incident if they perceive the resources to be ineffective (e.g., useless or difficult to use). Therefore, individuals’ perception of the effectiveness of resources (e.g., online reporting functions’ usefulness and ease of use) determines how they respond to an incident.

2.3. Social Appraisal

Manstead and Fischer [21] extend individuals’ appraisal processes to the social domain and introduced social appraisal as an additional important appraisal process in decision making. Social appraisal involves the assessment of the normative significance of the threat incidents; that is, individuals often evaluate the significance of a response behavior in relation to its social consequences. Human beings are social animals and their self-perception is fundamentally social [21]. They care about the social rewards and punishments, often mind others’ evaluations, and are inclined to assess how others would evaluate their actions before deciding how to respond [22]. Thus, the appraisal of others’ evaluation has a significant impact on individuals’ response behavior.

In prior research, the cognitive and social appraisal processes has been used to explain reporting behaviors in such contexts as wrongdoing [23], whistleblowing [24], and bullying [25]. In the present paper, we draw on the Theory of Cognitive Appraisal [16, 26] and literature on social appraisal [21] to understand how individuals’ primary and secondary appraisals as well as social appraisal determine their intention to report online abuse on social networking sites. More specifically, we identify perceived emergency and perceived responsibility as components of individuals’ primary appraisal, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as the components of their secondary appraisal, and evaluation apprehension as the component of their social appraisal.
3. Hypotheses Development

Figure 1 depicts our research model. In this study, we define the reporting intention as the intention to use the built-in functions in social networking sites to report inappropriate posts or content. We posit that users’ reporting intention is determined by their primary appraisals (i.e., perceived emergency and perceived responsibility of the online abuse), secondary appraisals (i.e., perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of the online reporting functions), and social appraisal (i.e., evaluation apprehension).

3.1. Primary Appraisal - Perceived Emergency and Perceived Responsibility

Primary appraisal starts with an individual’s recognition of an incident. In primary appraisal, individuals evaluate whether they have “anything at stake” in the incident [15]. Perceived emergency refers to the extent to which individuals perceive that the negative consequences caused by the online abuse are emergent to be tackled. Individuals often evaluate the extent of emergency based on the potential harm resulting from an abuse incident [27]. If individuals consider the online incident hurtful or humiliating, they are inclined to appraise the incident as emergent to cope or intervene with [28]. Prior research shows that vivid emergency events draw individuals’ attention and urge individuals to prioritize resolving the situation [27, 29, 30]. Coping theory also suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt problem-focused coping (e.g., reporting to police or authorities) when they perceive high emergency in the situation [31]. Online reporting functions offer individuals a means to execute problem-focused coping strategy when faced with an abuse incident. We thus postulate that individuals will be more likely to report an online abuse incident when they perceive it as emergent via primary assessment.

Hypothesis 1: Perceived emergency is positively associated with users’ reporting intention.

Perceived responsibility refers to individuals’ subjective assessment of their sense of obligation to deal with the online abuse incidents [32]. Perceived responsibility plays a prominent role in the appraisal process for reporting behaviors [33, 34]. Perception of responsibility is a self-evaluation of conduct, which is often associated with morality and moral reasoning [35]. Individuals are taught how to act prosocially through learning from how to be a responsible person for the welfare of self and others [36]. Prior research shows that individuals who believed that they had the responsibility to mitigate the harm of an incident of abuse, they would adopt coping strategies aimed at resolving the adverse situation [37] and were more likely to help actively [38, 39]. Studies in the reporting literature also showed that the intention to report a crime, a violence, a wrongdoing or a peer was positively associated with perceived responsibility [23, 40, 41]. Therefore, we hypothesize that, if individuals believe that it is their responsibility to intervene with an online abuse incident, they are more likely to report the incident.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived responsibility is positively associated with users’ reporting intention.

Upon interpreting the incident as highly emergent, individuals may believe that they have the responsibility to minimize the negative consequences from the offensive incidents [42]. Edwards, et al. [23] found that individuals appraise their accountability of the incident (e.g., to what extent are they responsible for what is happening in the emergent situation) after they have assessed the urgency of the situation. Nickerson, et al. [43] found that individuals developed a sense of responsibility for others when they recognized the negative consequences of the aversive events on others and also considered the aversive events as highly emergent [37]. Accordingly, we postulate that, if individuals evaluate an online abuse incident as emergent, they will consider it their personal responsibility to address the incident. Therefore, we posited that:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived emergency is positively associated with users’ perceived responsibility.

3.2. Secondary Appraisals - Perceived Usefulness and Perceived Ease of Use

In secondary appraisal, individuals evaluate their control over the situation by considering the resources that are available to them to cope with the situation [14]. Prior research suggests that individuals incline to appraise the effectiveness of available resources (e.g., online reporting functions) in response to online abuse incidents [18].

System appraisal is a vital process for individuals to evaluate their coping potential in response to the online abuse. Among the various factors influencing system use, previous research suggests two salient determinants that are especially important in individuals’ secondary appraisal processes. Individuals will first evaluate the usefulness of the system, that is, whether the system will deliver and
handle their messages or requests, and help them solve the problem. They will then assess the ease to use of the system, and appraise whether the benefits of usage are out-weighted by the effort of using the system [44].

We refer to this first system appraisal as **perceived usefulness**, which refers to the extent to which users believe that using the online reporting functions would enhance their performance in tackling the problem of online abuse. With an online reporting functions embedded in social networking sites, users can usually report abuse by clicking the report button next to a post and then indicating the type of the abuse. Users can also keep the evidence of online abuse and send details of it in their report to the review teams. Prior technology adoption literature has demonstrated perceived usefulness as a key appraisal element for determining usage intention [45]. We thus hypothesize that, if individuals consider the online reporting functions useful for tackling the online abuse incident, they will be more inclined to use it to report abuse.

**Hypothesis 4:** Perceived usefulness is positively associated with users’ reporting intention.

The second vital system use appraisal is individuals’ assessment of their interaction with the online reporting functions. **Perceived ease of use** refers to the extent to which the users believe that using the online reporting functions is free from cognitive effort. If individuals perceive the online reporting functions as easy and effortless to use, their intention to use the system is higher. Conversely, a complex system, which is difficult to use and requires substantial effort to learn and operate, is less likely to be used by individuals [46]. In addition, prior research suggests that individuals who appraise the online reporting functions easy to use would often perceive the system useful [47]. There has been extensive empirical evidence for the significant impact of perceived ease of use on system usage intention, and on perceived usefulness [46, 48-50]. Therefore, we posited that:

**Hypothesis 5:** Perceived ease of use is positively associated with users’ reporting intention.

**Hypothesis 6:** Perceived ease of use is positively associated with perceived usefulness.

### 3.3. Social Appraisal - Evaluation Apprehension

In social appraisal, individuals assess others’ evaluation of their actions in response to an incident. Social world is an integral part of the appraisal process. Inasmuch as individuals receive social rewards and punishments (in the form of approval and disapproval) from other people, their decisions are often conditioned by their assessment of others’ evaluation on their behaviors. Evaluation apprehension theory also posits that individuals’ behaviors will be enhanced or impaired by their perception of others’ approval or disapproval of their actions [51].

**Evaluation apprehension** refers to the fear of being judged or negatively evaluated [52]. The use of online reporting functions is often hindered by individuals’ evaluation apprehension. This concept is salient in the reporting context because of the potential social impact and retaliation threats within a social circle. The lack of identification in online reporting has been shown to produce only marginal anonymity, because others may still be able to construe and infer an identity through contextual information [53]. As a result, individuals may not perceive freedom from social evaluation when considering reporting online abuse; they may be apprehensive of others’ criticisms or ridicule of responses, especially in the high social presence of the social networking sites [54]. Prior studies show that many users underuse the available coping resources or facilities due to a heightened fear of judgment in their social circles [55]. Likewise, we posit that individuals will be reluctant to report online abuses when they are concerned with others'(negative) evaluations of their behavior.

**Hypothesis 7:** Evaluation Apprehension is negatively associated with users’ reporting intention.

![Figure 1. Research Model](image)

### 4. Research Methodology

Facebook was chosen to be the platform of the study, since Facebook is the most popular social
networking site in Hong Kong, especially for teenagers and young adults [56], and it has recently launched a series of reporting functions for users to report any inappropriate post or content that violate the term of use. Facebook reporting functions are extensive which allow users sending their feedback to the one who posted, or reporting the post to the Facebook review team. Facebook has review teams working around the world to review and assess reports.

4.1. Data Collection

We tested the proposed research model with Facebook users recruited from undergraduate courses in Hong Kong. University students are appropriate respondents in this study as they are heavy users of the Internet and social media [57, 58], and at a high risk of exposure to online abuse [59]. An online questionnaire was used for data collection. Before filling in the questionnaire, they were instructed the mechanism of Facebook reporting system. For the respondents who have no reporting experience on Facebook, they were asked to try the Facebook reporting system by reporting an inappropriate post on Facebook. The reporting trial was designed to let respondents understand the procedures of Facebook reporting system. In order to minimize the response bias and negative impact aroused by the questionnaire, we followed the general principles (i.e., autonomy, beneficence, justices, privacy, and confidentiality) for ethical research practices on human subjects in our data collection procedures [60]. The respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and could refuse or discontinue the study at any time.

A total of 117 usable questionnaires were collected. All respondents are active Facebook users. A majority of the respondents are between 18 and 23 years old (95.3%), and 69 (58.9%) of them are females.

4.2. Measures

Table 1 presents the measures and their sources of this study. All the measures were adapted from prior research with minor modification to fit the online context and with the specific focus on Facebook. The measures of perceived emergency and perceived responsibility were adapted from Nickerson et al [43] Measure for evaluation apprehension was borrowed from Burn [61]. The measures of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and reporting intention were adapted from Lee et al [45]. All measures used a seven-point Likert scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Measurement Items</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Construct</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Emergency [43]</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Responsibility [43]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation Apprehension [61]</td>
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<td>Perceived Usefulness [45]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Ease of Use [45]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting Intention [45]</td>
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</table>
5. Data Analysis and Results

We adopted the Partial Least Squares (PLS, as implemented in SmartPLS 2.0.M3) to assess both the measurement model and the structural model of the proposed research model [62].

5.1. Measurement Model

To assess reliability and validity of the constructs, we followed the established guidelines for conducting analysis using PLS [63].

Reliability was assessed by examining composite reliability. The composite reliability of the constructs are between 0.78 and 0.94 (above the 0.7 benchmark), indicating good internal consistency of the measures (see Table 2). Convergent validity was assessed by examining the item loadings of the constructs, and the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) of the constructs. Loadings of all items are greater than the recommended 0.5 cutoff [64] (see Table 3). The square root of AVE for each construct is also greater than the recommended level of 0.5 (see Table 2) [65].

Discriminant validity was assessed by examining the two criteria suggested by Barclay, et al. [66]. The square root of AVE of each construct is greater than the correlations of the construct with other constructs, and no item loads higher on a construct than on the one it intends to measure (see Table 2). The results show that our construct demonstrates good convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix and Psychometric Properties of Key Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>PE</th>
<th>PR</th>
<th>EA</th>
<th>PEU</th>
<th>PU</th>
<th>RI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PE</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>PU</td>
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<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RI</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1: CR = Composite Reliability; PE = Perceived Emergency; PR = Perceived Responsibility; EA = Evaluation Apprehension; PEU = Perceived Ease of Use; PU = Perceived Usefulness; RI = Reporting Intention

Note 2: Bolded diagonal elements are the square root of AVE for each construct. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs.

Table 3. Loading and Cross-Loading of Measures of Reflective Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PE</th>
<th>PR</th>
<th>EA</th>
<th>PEU</th>
<th>PU</th>
<th>RI</th>
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<td>PE2</td>
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<tr>
<td>PU3</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.27</td>
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<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RI1</td>
<td>0.12</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PE = Perceived Emergency; PR = Perceived Responsibility; EA = Evaluation Apprehension; PEU = Perceived Ease of Use; PU = Perceived Usefulness; RI = Reporting Intention

5.2. Structural Model

Figure 2 illustrates the results of the test of the structural model, including the overall explanatory power, and estimated path coefficients. All the significant paths are marked with asterisks.

The model accounts for 43 percent of the variation in reporting intention. Users’ perceived responsibility (β = 0.28; p < 0.01) is an important factor driving users’ intention to report online abuse (H2). Perceived emergency (β = 0.30; p < 0.01) and perceived ease of use (β = 0.46; p < 0.01) exert significant positive effect on perceived responsibility (H3) and perceived usefulness (H5), respectively. While perceived usefulness (β = 0.47; p < 0.01) is a significant factor related to users’ reporting intention (H4), evaluation apprehension (β = -0.23; p < 0.1) is hinder users’ intention to report (H7). However, perceived emergency (H1) and perceived ease of use (H6) are found to exert no significant influence on users’ reporting intention. In sum, the results of our study provide support to most of the hypotheses.
Figure 2. PLS Results of the Structural Model

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The main purpose of this study is to identify the factors driving people to use online reporting functions on SNSs. Drawing upon Theory of Cognitive Appraisal and the literature of social appraisal, we identified three major appraisal processes related to the use of online reporting functions on SNSs. The model was empirically tested with existing Facebook users. Our results showed that perceived responsibility, perceived usefulness, and evaluation apprehension have significant impacts on individuals’ reporting intention, while perceived emergency and perceived ease of use do not have any significant effect on individuals’ reporting intention.

One possible explanation for the insignificant effect of perceived emergency is that the online abuse incident remains ambitious for most users, particularly for those who have not been victims of online abuse. They do not feel the emergency of the incident and thus do not recognize any follow up action. While the insignificant effect of perceived ease of use is rather expected as it is consistent with most prior studies on technology adoption and use [67, 68], perceived ease of use becomes less important, especially for the young generation.

6.1. Implications for Research

We expect that this study contributes to the advancement of knowledge in online abuse and reporting literature. First, this study is one of the few attempts to investigate individuals’ reporting intention in the context of SNSs. In response to the call for theoretical and empirical evaluation of anti-online abuse strategies, we drew upon Theory of Cognitive Appraisal and the literature of social appraisal and developed a research model to explain individuals’ reporting intention on the social networking platform. Second, we present new insights to prior reporting studies by extending the theoretical lens of cognitive appraisal to the context of individuals’ online reporting decision. We incorporate both social evaluation and system appraisal as the critical determinants in reporting decision. This finding is vital because past research has predominantly examined the individuals’ characteristics in reporting behaviors. Third, we recognize the different effects of perceived emergency and perceived responsibility in reporting intention. Based on our study, perceived emergency plays a role to trigger individuals’ perceived responsibility to online abuse incidents, whereas perceived responsibility has a direct impact on reporting intention.

6.2. Implications for Practice

The results of this study also provide insights to practitioners, particularly to the SNS providers, school counselors, and government agencies. If online abuses become a major issue on SNSs, the platforms could lose their users because of the unhealthy online environment. Thus, understanding how primary, secondary and social appraisals affect individuals’ reporting decisions become vitally important to SNS providers. Particularly, our results show that perceived usefulness of the reporting system is one of the major factors driving them to use it. SNS providers may illustrate some showcases of how they successfully combat online abuses through engaging users to use the online reporting functions. Second, perceived responsibility and evaluation apprehension are important appraising criteria in the decision of reporting. To encourage moral responsibility and discourage the negative social evaluation, educational campaigns that raise awareness among general public of Internet etiquette, advanced moral development, acceptable online behavior, Internet safety and cyberspace offenses should be introduced and reinforced. This may help preventing and intervening online abuses on SNSs.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge some limitations in this study. First, despite our research model demonstrating the measure’s relationship to other constructs of interest with robust theoretical foundation and explains about 43% of the variance, much of the variance has not yet
Generally, online abuse is an emergent global societal issue that has received attention in research and practice. We believe all these issues deserve special attention in future research and our proposed research model can serve as a foundation for these potential studies on online abuse.

7. References