Research Article

Opinions on Social Media: The New Age Challenge for Individuals and Organisations

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The advent of social media has changed the way human beings communicated. The initial euphoria of everyone having access to knowledge and news and everyone having a medium of expressing their opinions have now given way to people withdrawing from it. With no minimum qualifying criteria of selection of who can give an opinion, it has become a place where everyone who has access to bandwidth and a smart device is an expert on matters of the world. This paper seeks to understand who gives the opinions and how do the receivers perceive the opinions. It also tries to understand the trolls and why they troll others. The paper tries to delve deep into the workings on opinion seeking and opinion giving activities of people and understand whether this encourages or discourages people from participating in the discussion forums and instant messaging platforms. **Keywords**: Trolling, social media, online opinion, social media participation

INTRODUCTION

Every time a new medium or method of communication has emerged, the social structure and culture of human beings changed. One such change that this generation has witnessed is the one brought about by the social media. The emergence and growth of internet and social media has been very fast. It has been much faster than any of the previous new mediums of communication. The initial days of internet and social media were filled with optimism and everyone was happy that knowledge will not be under the restriction of a selected few and everyone will have free access to it. Social media was hailed as the new medium where everyone will be accessible and people can connect across geographical boundaries. Suddenly everyone started discovering forgotten friends and long-lost relatives. Through their continuous up-dation of posts and pictures, everyone was a part of everyone else's lives.

Politicians and celebrities also jumped on to this new vehicle and used it to communicate with their followers and fans. Political parties used it for their canvassing and devised new strategies to communicate with the young people and used it to build their follower base. There were people's movements being organised and coordinated using social media. Initially, everything seemed to be working fine. Though some people were skeptical about celebrities' losing their enigma because of their daily posts, things were still ok. And then emerged the new breed of people who started posting negative comments, resorted to cyber bullying and also started "trolling" people.

According to Wikipedia, "a troll is a person who sows discord on the internet by starting arguments or upsetting people, by posting inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community (such as a newsgroup forum, chat room or blog) with intent of provoking readers into an emotional response of otherwise disrupting normal, on-topic discussion, often for the troll's amusement." Trolling is now widespread and no one from commoners to celebrities and politicians, no one is spared by the trolls.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Shirkey (2011) is of the view that as the communication world is becoming more networked, close, participatory and complicated, people are getting more access to information and chances to contribute in a dialogue and participate in action. He believes that social media can enhance the chances of getting involved in a public debate and collective actions. He says that in case of systematic changes in political sphere, mobilization of people happens before the change happens. This theory is also approved by the two-step theory of communication which says that mass media can influence people only if the message is passed on by credible opinion makers whom they trust. This theory is applicable to social media as well. However, there is a fundamental difference between traditional media and social media. In social media, both content production and content consumption is done by the public. The opinion formed by the public is influenced both by the content and the conversation that follows it.

Social media affects the opinion formation in another way. When governments and political party use it for mobilizing public opinion, they form a well-developed strategy and they organize people towards a certain ideology. But even unorganized and uncoordinated people's movements have also been organized using social media (Shirky, 2011). In social media, opinions are first given by the media and then get echoed by followers, their friends and family. In this second step, opinions are formed and strengthened.

Also, in the given scenario, it can be said that the social media has played a very positive role in the spread of information and has encouraged people to share their opinions and views and to coordinate between large groups of people (Gladwell & Shirky, 2011). The digital age greatly enhances the opportunities and supports the necessity for "making learning a part of life". Fischer et al (2023).

Ball-Rokeach (1974) also realized this and also that because of the dependence of people on media for information, the latter ends up playing a far greater role in their lives other than being a medium of information. He says that media plays an active role in setting agendas for opinion formation. These media reports create a sense of uneasiness in the minds of the readers who then try to ease that feeling through action. The media then carries reports of how the public took action against the issues it felt uneasy about.

The media plays multiple roles while disseminating information. While it does provide information in the simple way, it also decides which information is more important than the other. It decides the order of importance of information. This order can be decided both on the basis of the value that is being threatened by the information or the consequences of the information. Also, something that occurs too frequently might not be considered as an important problem. One can see here that media can form and colour opinions about a certain event but will not always form an impression in the mind of the readers regarding which incident is more prevalent than the other. Since media works like any other business, news that grabs more attention is given more importance (Hubbard, DeFleur & DeFleur, 1975).

Romero, Galuba, Asur, & Huberman (2010) say that the world has become very connected with the advent of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Digg, Instagram and so on. And in such a case, people share their opinions and thoughts with others who are well-connected so that they can spread the word. However, in spite of all this there are certain discussions that grab the attention of people. When opinions become popular in the internet, then two parameters become very important in analyzing the degree of popularity. The first parameter is the number of followers and status of the people who are a part of the network. The second parameter is the influence that these people have over others. The influence can be gauged through the newness and relevance of the message and the quality and frequency of the content. One roadblock to popularity is high degree of passive people in the network. So to spread the message through social media fast, one needs to target the influential people and avoid passive people.

The issues, hazards, and negative effects of the social media phenomena are becoming more widely recognized, despite the fact that social media has greatly helped people, organizations, and societies (Fox and Moreland 2015; Mäntymäki and Islam 2016). Given the seemingly limitless advantages of social media, it is simple to ignore its drawbacks, which should be taken into account as social media platforms continue to grow in popularity (Krasnova et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2016).

Twitter is a micro blogging website where one can share one's thoughts and opinions using 140 characters. One can also post pictures, videos and news links. A retweet is a tweet that has been reposted by someone who follows the

original user. Retweeting is a very effective way of propagating a message or information (Romero et al., 2010). The popularity of messages on Twitter can be measured on the basis of indegree, retweets and username mentions (Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, & Gummadi, 2010). In this study, it was found out that while retweets and mentions were reliable parameters to measure the spread of a message, the number of followers is not an ideal parameter.

The study by Romero et al. (2010) also suggested that there is a very weak relationship between popularity and influence. So while content generators keep on targeting people who have large number of followers but it always does not result in large number of people reading or sharing that opinion. Their reason is that to share an opinion one needs to be actively engaged in the sharing but most people just remain passive and so the spread of opinion gets halted. This happens because the same influential person on any one social media platform might not be very popular or influential on other platforms.

Correa, Hinsley, & Zúñiga (2010) quote previous researches which according to them have finalized three personality types who use social media the most. They are extroverts, neurotics and people who are open to experience. People who have very high degree of neurotism tend to be open to new experiences and so are very active on social media. Also, extrovert people use messaging services of social media platforms more than others (Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008).

Scholars in this field have also identified the Big Five Framework which is a model of personality that consists of five factors of personality. They are extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experiences, agreeableness and conscientiousness. Each factor has two extremes like extrovert and introvert. The model says that majority of individual differences in personality can be classified in the categories defined by this model.

Numerous studies have been done to find out more about the personalities of people who are active on the internet. The early studies found that people who were less neurotic and extrovert were not very active online than people who are introverts and very neurotic (Amichai-hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002). Based on their finding, they found that people who were lonely and had problems connecting to people in real life were more active on internet. One reason behind could be that internet provided them with the anonymity to connect with people which is absent in real life. Out of the five personality traits, extroverts, high degree of neuroticism and openness to new experiences are the most relevant traits that determine who is more active online. Another study (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) found that the social media site Facebook gave a higher sense of satisfaction to people about their lives and helped them overcome sense of low self-esteem and self-confidence. But the condition of anonymity does not hold much ground now because the new social media platforms do not let the user remain anonymous. Hence, nowadays, more extroverted people engage on social media platforms compared to introverted people.

Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis means to analyse the opinions, sentiments, attitudes, feelings and so on towards products, people, brands and organizations. There is a large amount of opinions and data lying in the social media that cannot be ignore because without knowing and understanding them one will be bereft of a lot of information. Opinions are very important because our opinions go a long way in influencing people around us. Opinions are sought by people before taking any decision. And hence it is important for people, organizations and brands to know what opinion people have about them. With so much opinion found on the internet, companies are no longer commissioning surveys to gauge people's opinions.

Opinions can be classified into various categories. They are:

• Regular opinion: A general and simple opinion is referred to as a regular opinion. It has further two types.
o Direct opinion: Any opinion that is direct and explicitly expressed for any object or any characteristic of an object is called a direct opinion.
o Indirect opinion: Any opinion that is expressed indirectly for an object or any characteristic of an object is called an indirect opinion. These kinds of opinions are prevalent in the discipline of medical science.
• Comparative Opinion: A comparative opinion compares similarities or dissimilarities between two or more objects or for an opinion leader who has shared a preference for or against an object (Jindal & Liu, 2006). A comparative opinion usually uses comparative or superlative forms of adjectives to express the comparison.

• Explicit and Implicit Opinions: An explicit opinion is a subjective and it can be both comparative and/or regular in nature. An implicit opinion, on the other hand, is an objective opinion that can also be comparative and/or regular in nature. While scanning opinions, it is easier to identify explicit opinions compared to implicit ones.

Subjectivity and Emotions

Subjectivity can be defined as something that is very personal. It can be a view, opinion or feeling of a person. Objectivity is anything that is based on facts and is true for anyone. It does not vary from person to person. All types of expressions like allegations, praises, desires, beliefs can be considered under the umbrella of subjective opinions (Riloff, Patwardhan, & Wiebe, 2006). All opinions are not always positive. Subjective opinions can be positive and negative. At times, a subjective expression might not have neither positive nor negative feelings. Objective feelings can also be both positive and negative but it has to be based on facts (Zhang and Liu, 2011b).

"Emotions are subjective feelings and thoughts (Liu, 2012)." Human beings are said to have six primary emotions, namely, anger, surprise, sorrow, happiness, fear and love (Parott, 2001). Each of these emotions can have varying degrees of intensities. Emotions and sentiments are highly linked to each other. High degrees of emotions give rise to high sentiments and opinions.

While trying to analyse and understand emotions, one comes across comments that are sarcastic in nature. Sarcasm is a high level art where the speaker intends to say something but says or write something which is completely opposite of what they want to communicate. In other words, the speaker says something positive when s/he intends to say something negative.

Because the internet is full of opinions of all kinds, a prospective customer does an online search before making a purchase of a particular product. A positive opinion helps the company get customers and a negative comment causes loss of revenue. And since the power of opinion is so apparent, there is now a problem of fake reviews. Fake reviews are posted by people who go around posting fake reviews and opinions without disclosing their true identities or the organizations that they support or endorse. They are also known as spammers and this act is known as opinion spamming (Jindal & Liu, 2007, 2008). Opinion spamming operates in a very grey area because they can completely alter public opinion and sentiment about a particular product or organization or person. While for commercial products opinion spamming can only cause loss of revenue but it can be more harmful when it targets political thoughts and mobilize mass to unite against a false cause (Liu, 2012).

There are three types of fake reviews. The first one comprises of fake reviews that are written without any first-hand experience of using the product and there are other hidden motives behind writing them. They either are very positive reviews about a product or highly negative reviews about one. So they are promote or tarnish the reputation of a product.

The second type of review targets the manufacturer or producer of the product. They do not speak about their products or brands. There is always a chance that they are biased but they are considered to be fake as they don't target any specific product and are usually biased.

The third type of reviews are not reviews in a strictly technical sense. They are either advertisements or irrelevant text containing question answers and other random texts. They are not considered as opinion spam as they do not give any opinion. For a company trying to find out what people think about them or their product, the second and third type of reviews are usually easy to detect. The first type is more important and difficult to detect.

Trolling

Many studies have been done to study the impact of trolling on netizens, especially women. The special focus on women was caused by the increased threats and references that were sexual in nature. More and more women are now becoming cautious while posting their views and opinions on the internet because of the fear of getting threats of rape not only for them but in some cases for their daughters as well.

But the trolls do not spare men as well. They attack anyone who catches their fancy. One statistic says that Twitter has the maximum number of trolls while Facebook does not have the problem to that extent (Edwards, 2015). Another study on 1, 34,000 online abuse found that 88 per cent of them were on Twitter.

There is another trend that is catching up. It is trolls coming together and forming a troll army who coordinate their attacks on either an individual or an organization. If someone dares to defy them or have different opinion then they attack that person as well. All this leads to an environment of fear and hatred where people are issued threats of death and rape, usage of foul language, fake information, half-truths and mental abuse. Trolling now is not just individuals who decide to have fun at the expense of others. Trolling is a part of a well-thought of plan by many individuals and organizations who do not want people to oppose the ideology that the former stands for.

According to a news portal, www.thelogicalindian.com (Sudhanva, 2016), there are over 50 million users of Whatsapp, 200 million users of Facebook and 153 million users of social media in India. Also, the victims of trolling has been largely found to be within the age group of 18-29 years. In a study conducted by PEW research (Duggan & Brenner, 2013), around 40 per cent of the internet users reported to have personally faced online abuse, 73 per cent have seen it happen to others and 24 per cents have witnessed someone being harassed for a substantial duration of time.

Studies have been done to understand how trolling affects men and women. In a study done by a British organization named Demos, it was found that men received more online abuses and also were responsible for sending 75 per cent of the online abuses. Another finding of the study was that women who were into active politics or journalism, faced a higher degree of abuse. Also, 25 per cent women in the age group 18-24 years reported to have faced sexual harassment or stalking, a rate that is thrice more than what men of the same age group reported.

In a book "Cyber Crime Against Women in India," Debarati Haldar and K. Jaishankar opine that India being a patriarchal society, trolling is an easy way to put women in their place and deny them their place in the virtual world. There is a lot of gender-based bullying also that is being done. According to Haldar and Jaikrishnan, there is a very thin difference between bullying and trolling. The latter does not get affected directly or indirectly by the speech or action of their targets. Trolls are people whose main motive is to divert the focus from the main publication which can be a post or a comment to their own opinion and thoughts about their target. According to (Donath, 1995), trolling is largely an activity wherein the perpetrator disguises his/her identity and uses improper language (Hardaker, 2010).

But researchers feel that trolls are becoming more and more innovative day by day. They have stretched the concept of freedom of expression to the point that they disrupt discussions in various social media platforms and also insult people and their ideologies like feminism, secularism. They post comments on people's dashboard and respond to their status (Halder, 2013). The concept of hashtag (#) has made data mining much simpler as the trolls can now search for information based on the hashtag that the user has put.

Women have found their own way dealing with trolls. In the report made by (Halder & Jaikrishnan,2013) women responded to trolling by "ignoring the abuse and the abuser, mediating comments on forums that allow this, blocked abusers, reporting abusers, looking for and finding support, naming and shaming, self-censorship."

Campaigns against Trolls

#PositionOf Strength

The campaign #PositionOfStrength was initiated by Twitter to address the issue of women getting trolled on the internet. In India women comprise on 29 per cent of the internet users and among them a fewer number are on social media (www.blog.twitter.com). In partnership with Observer Research Foundation and FICCI Ladies Organization and other partners, Twitter plans to empower Indian women to come online, give their opinions and views without feeling threatened and network with other women in India and outside. The campaign which is still on wishes to organize seminars and workshops with women to find out new ways of empowering them.

#DigitalHifazat

The #DigitalHifazat campaign was run by a web portal called www.FeminisminIndia.com. The main objective of the campaign was to fight cyber violence and was initiated in November, 2016. This campaign has been viewed by 1033 people till now and won the Social Media Empowerment Award, 2017, given by the Digital Empowerment Foundation.

Let's Talk About Trolls

The leading newspaper of India, Hindustan Times, came up with the campaign named "Let's Talk about Trolls" in 2017. As a part of the campaign, the newspaper came up with seven firsthand accounts of people who have been trolled on the social media. This included film actor Sonam Kapoor, journalist Barkha Dutt and writer Madhu Kishwar, among others. Three videos were made and uploaded on their website to create awareness about the issue. April 26th was marked as #AntiTrollingDay. The newspaper quoted a report on cyber bullying in April, 2016 which was based on responses received from 500 social media users. The key findings of the report were that 36 per cent of people who were harassed online did not take any action at all. Out of the ones who faced harassment, 30 per cent respondents were very upset after it and 15 per cent said that they suffered from psychological problems like depression, stress and insomnia. The most alarming part of the report was that 38 per cent respondents who reported the matter to the police did not find the process to be helpful.

Trolling and Brands

In practice, social media is a popular and widely-used tool for building customer-brand relationships. Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitter are among the social media that brands commonly use to engage with their customers (Arora et al., 2019). While brands are also increasingly facing the heat of trolls there is a dearth of research done on impact of trolling on brands. But it is a well-known phenomenon that today even the strongest of the brands face the wrath of the trolls. In an article published in www.prmoment.in, it is discussed that there is a very fine line differentiating between trolls and dissatisfied customers and in today's age it is very important for brand managers to identify between the two. If the customer grievance handling cell of a company is not very active then the customer is most likely to choose an online platform to vent his/her frustration and will spread the word among existing and potential customers. Literature review also revealed that the knowledge on how organizations or brands can manage trolling in social media is not concentrated upon. Studies are done either focus on user responses to trolling behaviors (i.e. a micro-level perspective) or how the trolling infrastructure is governed by platforms (i.e. a macro-level perspective). With more organizations are not relying on social media networks, the current understanding of trolling management practices is not sufficiently studied or researched. Given the commercial and social damage caused by trolling behaviors, it is important to understand how these can be best managed (Dineva and Breitsohl (2022).

CONCLUSION

Access to internet has indeed changed the entire communication pattern of people. It has also made life tough for organizations and dissatisfied customers can now share their grievances with the whole world and not just to their customer care executive. These opinions have to be taken seriously by brands and organizations because internet is the first place people turn to before buying any product, service or even before accepting a recruitment offer. This means that organizations have to be on their toes 24*7 and always be ready to address any issue that may arise. Individuals also face the brunt of it because they are also under constant vigil and any opinion about a person, brand or organization that does not fall in line with what the dominant people think leads to trolling.

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