**Multidisciplinary**

(marketing, communications, economics, consumer affairs, law, public policy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy)

**Sound and Fury: Digital Vigilantism as a Form of Consumer Voice**

**Introduction**

When voicing their dissatisfaction, consumers increasingly use social media and cite evidence, whether true or false, to support their opinions. In doing so, they may weaponize the personal information accessible on the internet for shaming behavior, sometimes referred to as doxxing, with a negative intent to “humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual” (Douglas 2016, p. 199). Personally identifiable information (PII) about an individual is sometimes leaked or intentionally released to others (Coleman 2012) with the intention of being helpful or causing harm. While consumers act out online in many ways that may affect marketing and public policy, doxxing (also “doxing”) is an emerging issue. In 2019, the Kentucky Senate proposed a bill to ban the doxxing of children after a teen male and a Native American activist confronted each other at a rally in Washington D.C. and both parties were the subject of sensational media coverage and intense social media conversations. In this study, we aim to understand consumer digital responses to an event that elicited similar public sentiment during and after a perceived failure by a public service provider: the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Focusing on understanding the power of voice for digital consumers enables us to explore how citizen activists handle these kinds of situations. We employ Kucuk’s (2008) view of voice and power: “Consumer voice is not just a preference-expressing mechanism on the internet, but also a way for responsible and ethical individuals dedicated to society’s collective value system to express themselves” (p. 6). This is an important marketing and public policy issue because, as Kucuk states, “An increase in consumer involvement on a collective level may signal to law makers and agencies a need for greater regulation in the market” (p. 2). Our study offers a significant contribution for public service providers, who “increasingly must use resources to monitor contributions by and exchanges among various sources and decide whether and how to modify their actions to influence other echoverse components, including business outcomes” (Hewett et al. 2016, p. 2).

Hirschman (1970b) described society as existing “with a certain amount of such dysfunctional or mis-behavior,” but “society must be able to marshal from within itself forces which will make as many of the faltering actors as possible revert to the behavior required for its proper functioning” (p. 1). He describes two routes to addressing this as (1) exit, an economic solution in which customers stop buying the organization’s products, thus leaving the exchange, and (2) voice, a political solution in which dissatisfaction is expressed to some authority. Kucuk (2008) expanded on Hirschman’s view of exit and voice, applying them as two forms of consumer empowerment on the internet: exit-based and voice-based. Connecting exit and voice to power, he explains, “Economically, exit has never been easier than it is currently on the internet” (p. 4). When voices are used collectively online, their use represents consumer dissatisfaction in a larger “echoverse” of consumers, firms, and news media (Hewett et al. 2016).

Huefner and Hunt (2000) described one form of dysfunctional consumer behavior in a service encounter as retaliation, where consumers are “aggressive” with an “intention to get even” (p. 62). In the context of consumer retaliation to company wrongdoing, Loureiro, Haws, and Bearden (2018) assert that “when consumers sense a moral violation, their sense of fairness and justice is disturbed and they seek to regain it” (p. 187). Dysfunctionality associated with retaliation is described as consumer vigilantism (McGregor 2008). This behavior is increasingly taken online, leading to consumers’ digital vigilantism. Trottier (2017, p. 56) defines digital vigilantism as a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and coordinate retaliation on mobile devices and social platforms. The offending acts range from mild breaches of social protocol to terrorist acts and participation in riots. The vigilantism includes, but is not limited to a “naming and shaming” type of visibility, where the target’s home address, work details and other highly sensitive details are published on a public site (“doxing”), followed by online as well as embodied harassment.

To understand how digital consumer voices are represented in a perceived failure by a service provider, we examine them in the context of a major incident involving a public service provider and consumers (citizens): the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the online conversations that ensued. More specifically, we explore digital vigilantism through consumers’ use of Twitter in response to the rally. As individuals became increasingly dissatisfied with the public service response to rally misbehavior and violence, they used Twitter to express their dissatisfaction with community public services’ failure to fulfill consumer needs—that is, to prevent harm and/or to respond quickly once harm occurs.

Digital vigilantism as a type of consumer voice has yet to be explored in marketing and public policy even though it has significant implications for privacy and other basic rights. Our research highlights a looming gap in consumers’ use of social media to communicate with public service providers. We examine the nature of digital vigilantism and the degree to which it demonstrates a range of voices, such as functional/dysfunctional, solution-seeking/retaliatory, and helpful/harmful consumer behavior online. The Unite the Right rally sparked a range of emotions that involved helpful and harmful consumer voice, sometimes making it confusing to distinguish between sound and fury. During and after the rally in Charlottesville, citizens used their voices and weaponized information on social media when they deemed that the city government or police failed to act, protect, and regulate the attendees’ actions/behaviors. This study will help us understand how the agency and power of consumer citizen voice may have unintended marketing and public policy consequences affecting individuals (privacy, discrimination, and harassment), organizations (firms and public services), and brands (support for or against various organizations and collective value systems).

Paragraphs extracted from Legocki, Walker, and Kiesler (2020)

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**Questions**

1. What does the *first* sentence of the first paragraph **do**? (Do not answer 'topic sentence' 😒. Identify the *function* of the sentence.)

The *first* sentence of the first paragraph points out a phenomenon in life. The aim is to draw out the issues behind the phenomenon. And this is the problem this article focuses.

1. What does the *first* sentence of the second paragraph **do**?

Introduce a method to handle the problem.

1. How quickly does the text get to the problem or opportunity? (See your answer above to 2.)

The first paragraph tells the background of the problem, and soon points out the problem focus of the article in the end of the first paragraph.

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