Connected: Polarization in Online Environments

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Abstract

This case study will analyze research surrounding the rhetoric of polarization in online environments and how it can influence behavior and emotion. Through the analysis and review of three socialites who were vocal on Twitter regarding polarized ideas three groups, hate groups, fandom groups, and political parties, are cross analyzed to see how individuals who identify with these groups show trends in rhetoric. This text will highlight connections and differences in the rhetorical styles used by each group and how they potentially inspired behavior from March through October of 2020 in United States based online environments during a number of Black Lives Matter and Make America Great Again protests. Polarization is defined and applied to each public figures' tweets within the time frame are examined for potential ability to influence behavior. The purpose of this research is to examine how each group showed differences or similarities in outgroup versus ingroup rhetoric and better understand how such rhetoric can be increasingly impactful when introduced or reinforced in online settings as social media use rises worldwide.

Keywords: communication, fandom, polarization, outgroup, rhetoric, politics, social media, Black Lives Matter

Connected: Polarization in Online Environments

Human phenomena has been analyzed through language, personality, behavior and a number of other mediums of self-expression over time as individuals and institutions have developed deeper understandings of how interpersonal relationships relate to behavior. The history of communication studies in particular has been influential in determining how interpersonal language or behavior can be deemed harmful to an individual's overall health, whether it be physical, social or mental. Such use of language or expressions of behavior can be harder to monitor in online environments, and the socially set rules that guide interactions within these settings can be difficult to analyze through numerical data. Qualitative case study research provides the contextual guidance to behavioral phenomena that can be cross analyzed through the lens of communication theory. The purpose of this analysis was to gain a better understanding of how language can influence individuals' ideologies or behavior in internet-based environments to the point of individual polarization. This polarization process can initially be introduced through passive language use and later turn relatively harmful, by encouraging regular expression of extreme emotions, hate speech or violent language. Passive polarization can potentially evolve towards active polarization via forms of aggression or violence when continuously directed at dissenting opinions or perceived oppositional groups. In turn, this can lead to the development of ineffective interpersonal communication skills and a greater number of negative interactions overall. Through research, the source of this change can be examined under the frame of rhetoric, which has been key in online settings as many are now communicating through instant messaging and content-sharing platforms. As a result, research in this area is vital to developing a greater understanding of how to analyze and curb polarization of individuals towards emotional deregulation in online settings, specifically social media

applications. With increased social media use correlating to mental health struggles as of 2019, this area of research is in need of theoretical analysis to provide the very context needed to explain the influence of language use in online settings on behavior (Riehm, Feder, Tormohlen, Crum, Young, Green, and Mojtabai, 2019).

The Summer of 2020

In the summer of 2020, while under a federally mandated stay-at-home order due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a video circulated on social media of George Floyd as he was actively being killed by a police officer. This video was extremely emotionally triggering, thus catalyzing Black Lives Matter protests worldwide to raise awareness of rampant misconduct and racial aggression displayed by police and larger federal, state and local social systems (Patnaude, Lomakina, Patel and Bizel, 2021). The aim of the protests was to educate individuals—and encourage them to further educate others--on how systemic racism has impacted and inhibited the livelihood of millions of Black Americans in different ways throughout history, as well as in present day (Ralph, 2020). Social media and general internet use rose during this time, as the world attempted to rapidly adapt to the pandemic, forcing many to interact interpersonally in online spaces and platforms more than they had before. Many well-known universities and companies showed support for Black Lives Matter (BLM) on social media, further ramping up divisions and making individuals on both the political right, who are more likely to oppose the BLM Movement, feel as though their voices were unheard, cancelled or silenced. This coincided with a presidential election year, where two polarized candidates competed to win the majority of electoral college votes and the hearts of Americans. Divisive language was the theme of social rhetoric at the time, as cancel culture was increasingly relevant and individuals feared being blacklisted in their respective career fields for holding certain ideologies. Donald Trump and

Joseph Biden ran on opposite ends of both the ideological and political spectrum with Trump siding with more conservative right-oriented ideas and Biden representing more progressive left-orientated ideas. This created division between individuals of opposing votes and instilled a stronger culture of outgroup opposition, avoidance and even violence both in large and small communities across the nation (Bolsover, 2020; Price, Jones and Scott, 2020).

Twitter played a key role in this process, as rhetoric ramped up between individuals and even socialites, where seemingly everyone was in the mix. This led to many being forced to choose a side or put them in positions where they were encouraged to argue for or against certain ideologies on the political spectrum or certain political candidates directly. For example, research shows that many were calling for reformation of current police training and structures as a means to resolve the current problem of police violence, but there was still a great amount of discourse from either side sensationalized by popular media outlets to create the illusion of greater division than was actually occurring (Cosdon, 2020). While some argue the posts had no tangible effect on social change, others argued that they did, at least in terms of spreading awareness of the main concepts and issues (Codson, 2020; Michaels, 2020). George Floyd's death and COVID-19 dominated social conversations and media coverage during the time leading up to the 2020 presidential election, and social media applications such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter played a large role in the dishing out of both factual information and misinformation regarding the opposing parties and their followers (Spinner, 2020; Ellis, 2020). Twitter is unique in that the platform is text oriented, with supplementary images, videos or articles to support ideas and keep users engaged. In this type of setting rhetoric is increasingly relevant, especially when compared with the more visually dominant content platforms, Facebook and Instagram. Thus, the influence that socialites on Twitter had during this time is worth study, due to the intersection of their

influence, the push for picking a ideological side and the influential nature of social media platforms with large followings.

Literature Review

Since the creation of the world wide web, the way humans interact has changed exponentially in both measurable and immeasurable ways (Aririguzoh, Sobowale, Usaini and Amoka, 2017; Candrasari, 2020). This has greatly impacted the study of communication, as individuals and groups shifted into a new era of interpersonal interaction centered within virtual environments. As a result of this new era, new ways for behavior to be modified emerged as well, with the number of interactive mediums ever-expanding and connecting individuals from all corners of the globe that a decade ago would never have had the opportunity to cross paths. In these online social settings, rhetoric has been a common theme, with individuals carefully choosing how they describe themselves in online biographies, and through the messages, tweets or other forms of communication that can be sent, to personify themselves. As online identities form, connections, and eventually entire communities, develop and can feel just as real or intimate as face-to-face interactions, solidifying and reaffirming the identity created and displayed around that certain group (Bange, Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari, 2020; Bake and Chadwick, 2020). Thus, when an individual is made to feel comfortable in one particular group, they can begin to develop online interpersonal relationships and even trust towards the other online characters they interact with. This is where rhetoric rears its head, and the language style and idea structures frequently used or normalized by others in the community can similarly influence changes in the identities or ideologies of other community members, and potentially their individual behavioral tendencies during in-person interactions, with or without group members from the identified community.

Rhetoric has been long studied and practiced for centuries, with some of the earliest references originating in Ancient Greek schools and from world-renowned philosophers applying rhetorical learnings to their debates in order to argue for one theory or another (Delgado, 2020; Herrick, 2020). Presently, the applications of rhetoric are as integrated today as they were in everyday Greek life, but the ways that it can influence behavior have evolved with the times. Internet access has become increasingly common, and along with it the ways in which rhetoric impacts daily interactions through various forms of messaging such as advertisements, online chatroom settings and other virtually interactive environments. While these environments can promote positive thoughts and behavior, many can similarly incite cult-like behavior that can lead to a negative affect or even violence and aggression (Wahlström, Törnberg and Ekbrand, 2020). There are a number of groups that apply any range of rhetorical learnings as a means of coercion and influence in order to push an agenda to followers, from large marketing companies to smaller local networks. Three commonly known populations that exhibit these types of behavior are political groups, fandom groups and extremist hate groups. Each of the three has unique social and individual factors influencing its ability to develop a message and deliver it in a way that encourages polarization of ideas and potentially an increase in expression of violent behavior.

Populations of Study

These three populations have their unique differences, as well as their similarities in terms of application of rhetorical learnings for the purpose of swaying opinions towards polarization. Political groups are deemed socially acceptable and a necessary part of democracy making their existence normalized into culture on a larger scale than the other two groups. These political groups also highlight racial differences, as the democratic party is minority dominant

and the republican party is majority dominant, showing that cultural and racial divides are clear between groups (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018; Holman and Schneider, 2018). This differs from the other two groups in how politics can be deemed a social necessity, while white supremacist hate groups and fandom followings are not seen by the general public as a necessary element of a democratic society (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Fandom groups also deal heavily with popular culture, and with 67% of Americans using at least one social media application it is common for Americans to follow or engage with famous individuals' content on at minimal a casual basis (King, 2015). Extremist hate groups differ, in that they are vastly seen as negative and have even been deemed illegal emphasizing their taboo nature and encouraging them to remain hidden or anonymous (Iganski, 2001). Neither fandoms groups or political parties are vastly seen as unacceptable by the public due to their more passive nature of changing behavior. These three groups are similar though, in that they can each influence behavior through rhetoric and encourage individuals towards polarization in their ideals. Each group displays how through organization and application of language, more moderate individuals can be pushed towards extremes in terms of feelings about othered groups.

Political Parties

First, political groups can be inclined to exhibit this behavior through marketing and the goals, values and even slogans chosen by either party as their primary platform or political identity that they want to portray. This can be seen most noticeably on popular networks such as Fox News and CNN, which are recognized as two media companies who appeal to emotionality as a means of convincing viewers of something or capturing their attention via sensationalizing of stories and ideologies (Simonov, Sacher, Dubé and Biswas, 2020; Eskandarian, 2020). These

two examples both apply rhetorical learnings to their presentation of content and stories as a

means of concretely distinguishing the political parties and reinforcing latent us-versus-them

ideologies many American voters have (Church, 2020; Jardina, 2020). In addition to media

companies, online chat rooms can apply suggestive social pressure to individuals to change their

views or bring the ones they already identify with to a more extreme level, leading to a greater

amount of aggression and discontent towards opposing political parties (Dwyer, 2019). As

political parties can affect personality, this provides an easy way to divide groups and highlight

differences between groups rather than similarities (Egan, 2020). This dialogue online can lead

some members to act out in public as well, committing violent acts amongst other individuals

(Gallacher, Heerdink and Hewstone, 2021). This expresses the power of the content produced by

such influential news channels, such as CNN and Fox News, has over the behavior of people on

the individual level. The effects of this echo in elections past along with upward trends of

political aggression or polarization over time, suggesting that the internet can be a potential

catalyst for larger social and interpersonal issues on a national level (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020).

Fandom Groups

Similarly, fandom groups' tendencies towards obsessive behavior can be incited by online

presentation of groups whose leaders and members intentionally tried to trigger emotional

reactions out of potential members or followers. A well-known example in this category is that of

the Beatles, and how their rise to fame and iconization led to a never-before-seen base of fans

that obsessed over the personalities, music and overall lives of each member of the band (Duffett,

2017). There are many more current examples as a result of the internet's expansion, from

smaller scaled YouTube stars to internationally known famous athletes, and parallel to this

growth has been the access that regular individuals have into these individuals' lives (Barritt,

2020). Paparazzi and social media hackers have made it difficult for high status individuals to maintain their privacy resulting in more content for followers to consume and converse about within their relative fandom communities. Intimate content such as reality television has gained steam over the last decade or so, with popular shows like The Kardashians making watchers feel as though they really know the family personally (Roos, 2020; Paquette, 2020). This breeds obsessive and stan-like behavior as people feel the need to constant follow and even defend the name of the reality star or other widely recognized person.

Hate Groups

The third and final group, extremist hate groups, also use tactics to trigger emotions in group members that makes them feel both closer to the group and more distant from the ideas presented by opposing ideological groups (Wahl, 2020; Bouko, Naderer, Rieger, Van Ostaeyen and Voué, 2021). Commonly known groups that are active in America and fall into this category would be Nazi's, white supremacists, the Ku Klux Klan, and other xenophobic groups (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Each of these groups is backed with years' worth of dedication to the causes they fight for, adding to the community that later influences individuals towards joining the group or holding onto the agendas they advocate for as an organized group (Kaplan and Inguanzo, 2020). Extremist groups have common structures, with many highlighting passive or direct intolerances of othered groups, and exhibit aggression towards, those that they view in opposition to or as a threat to them (Homola, Pereira and Tavits, 2020). This opposition is often expressed most directly and overtly through hate crimes, which have been on the rise in America since 2015 (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Most recently, an increasing number xenophobic attacks have occurred around the United States and abroad as a result of generalization and misinformation surrounding Asian countries and COVID-19 (Zhang, Zhang

and Benton, 2021; Tessler, Choi and Kao, 2020). Since the pandemic restrictions have forced

many to stay at home for longer periods of time, virtual environments have becoming

increasingly relevant in the role of spreading hateful or oppressive ideologies to those who were

less polarized in ideas prior (Parent, 2020).

Theories of Analysis

Ingroup-Outgroup Theory

Ingroup-outgroup theory can be defined by the following quote, "ingroups imply

outgroups… ingroup formation involves differentiation of the social landscape into those that are

acknowledged to be "us" and those that fall outside that boundary," (Brewer, 1999). Here

Brewer (1999), lays groundwork for this theory to develop further, along with the evolutional

steps made in technology and overall communication mediums such as seen on social media

applications (brewer, 1999; Appiah, Knobloch-Westerwick and Alter, 2013). These mediums

intensify hate, such as seen in research on the correlation between social media use and political

polarization personalities, domestic terrorism such as seen performed by hate groups over

centuries in the United States, and Kpop (Korean Pop) fandom cultures ability to assist young

Asian-Americans with their sexual identity development (Bail, Argyle, Brown, Bumpus, Chen,

Hunzaker, and Volfovsky, 2018; Relia, Li, Cook and Chunara, 2019; July, 2020). This

polarization leads to negative outcomes in terms of mental and physical health and has been

increasingly seen in individuals' personality types (Young, 2019; Schønning, Hjetland, Aarø and

Skogen, 2020; Udanor and Anyanwu, 2019).

This theory applies to all three groups, as each group is made to feel like a community

through rhetoric, and with group cohesion, those who are group members are favored over those

without and such favoritism has increased over American generations (Weeks, Weeks and Long,

2017). This behavior has been proven innate to humans (Weeks, Weeks and Long, 2017), so when layered with ingroup rhetoric that incites bias towards those with status in said group it can create echo chambers where interaction with opposing opinions is limited and group members defend the groups ideals at all costs. This can be seen in extremist hate groups and political groups in the analysis of rhetoric usage on Twitter performed in 2019, where 10,000 political extremists were studied, with results showing that such groups expressed higher negative emotionality, ingroup favoritism, and lower anxiety through their use of language relative to their respective counterparts (Alizadeh, Weber, Cioffi-Revilla, Fortunato and Macy, 2019). Such behavior effects new group members by setting the norm, and conformity is encouraged through ingroup rhetoric. As for fandom groups, this can be seen in a study where Disney fans were questioned about their feelings towards Universal's park, which is often seen as both a rivaling theme park and company (Havard, Wann, Grieve and Collins, 2020). Disney's fandom group members were more likely to have positive emotional attitudes towards the Disney theme park and greater negative impressions of the Universal park and their fandom base as well (Havard, Wann, Grieve and Collins, 2020). Just as hate groups and political extremists had, fandom groups defined an othered group and showed ingroup favoritism and greater discontent with the outlying group and a number of other studies experienced similar results in behavior of fandom groups (Reysen, Plante, Roberts and Gerbasi, 2017; Reysen, Plante, Packard, Siotos, 2019). A distinction between the strength of ingroup versus outgroup bias seen in each group likely varies, as the zeitgeist may have an effect on the strength of opposition that individuals feel, for example when a new Disney movie is released, during election season or when a hate crime has been committed as each raise's media coverage, and overall social awareness, of the distinctions between ingroups versus outgroups. These perceived groups can also intersect relative to race,

gender and social class as such factors influence behavior of ingroups and outgroups. This bleeds into the theory of ethics, as group sharing of ideologies and emotions can impact what is deemed good or bad behavior.

Ethics

Ethical theory debates the morality of individuals behavior, as a means of guiding what is generally considered to be socially acceptable behavior (Geeling and Brown, 2020). This social agreement helps guide individuals towards a life of peace and commonality with others rather than only seeing others for their dissenting opinions. Cancel culture has been a reflection of this, as followers of hate, fandom or political groups attempt to boycott and shame individuals for their perception of their behaviors. Racially motivated extremists have also been on the receiving end of cancel culture, as seen in research by Bouvier (2020) highlighting this occurrence on Twitter and how the platforms' ability to detect instances on the application (Bouvier, 2020). Anime fandom and political aggression are similarly socially bound by ethics in the way that communally set ideologies often trump personal identity as dissent or taboo behaviors can lead to ostracization, when dissent is necessary for social balance (Spoelma, Chawla and Ellis, 2020; Binder, 2018; Yergin, 2017; Schmidt-Hellerau, 2020).

Ethical theory is relevant to the three aforementioned groups as ethics, or a lack thereof, tend to guide behavior, and even more so in online environments such as social media sites (Meiselwitz, 2020). These online environments help set behavioral and therefore ethical expectations of group members and encourage either more generally accepted behaviors or fringe behaviors. Sports fandom is notoriously known for ethical impact, with some football fans rioting and even fighting on behalf of their ingroups honor. Research showed that only factions of sports fans found aggravated behaviors towards officials, opposing teams and teammates to be

unethical, although the average person may find otherwise untriggered aggression to be unethical and thus unacceptable behavior (Smith and Lord, 2018). Similarly, the cultures fostered by political groups and hate groups foster change to individual ethics and they reproduce media framing one group versus the other and reinforcing biases between the two. Haller, Holt and de La Brosse (2019), argued that, "far-right media strategically produce(s) an ethically exclusive collective memory as a counterpart to a United States-American mainstream collective memory by using left-wing language," showing how ethics has and will likely continue to play a role in political party affiliation or identity (Haller, Holt and de La Brosse, 2019). For hate groups, ethical analysis may be of the most relevant, as ethical views guide how they view and treat people relative to demographic. Hate speech can be defined as, "language that attacks or diminishes, that incites violence or hate against groups, based on specific characteristics such as physical appearance, religion, descent, national or ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or other, and it can occur with different linguistic styles, even in subtle forms or when humour is used," thus highlighting how passive rhetoric used by groups can promote higher ethical standards toward ingroup members and less toward outgroups, justifying unethical behavior towards outgroups (Fortuna and Nunes, 2018). This lack of ethics towards the other can be seen as the resulting effect of the normalization of and emphasis on ingroup versus outgroup ideologies on personality and behavior, and potentially harmful to average individuals.

Uncertainty Reduction

Uncertainty reeducation theory is concerned with the phenomena of aversion to new or unknown situations due to a number of factors such as feelings of closeness, trust and resistance in terms of being open-minded (Lee and Yu, 2020; Knapp and Daly, 2011). This is reflected in all three groups as each develops an 'us', and by default a 'them' as well, to direct their

discontent with the opinions held by their opposition. For fandom culture stans this would look like those who dislike or try to spread rumors that show the famous person being seen as an enemy of the fan base by the fan base in question. For political groups, it would be the opposing political party or ideologies, and for extremist hate groups this would be the group they organize to harass or commit hate crimes against. As a way of reducing uncertainty in interpersonal settings, these othered groups will be avoided since they are seen as a form of opposition to the polarized individual. Such tensions can lead to stress, and under stressful conditions emotions and tensions run higher and can lead to deeper feelings of difference between the two groups (von Specht, Heidbach, Cotton and Zang, 2018).

Another offset of ingroup formation is the reduction of uncertainty through ingroup identity. Research by Alizadeh, Weber, Cioffi-Revilla, Fortunato and Macy (2019), noted the correlation between political extremism and higher uncertainty tolerance, but noted that having a president of the same party may has affected the data and created greater satisfaction with policy (Alizadeh, Weber, Cioffi-Revilla, Fortunato and Macy, 2019). This shows that while uncertainty reduction theory may suggest that ingroup membership reduced uncertainty, other factors can affect tolerance of the uncertainty of opposing groups. While in some cases social coherence can lead to the opposite, or greater intolerance of uncertainty, research shows that this is not always the case and there are a range of individuals within a group will not always be affected the same way by uncertainty theory. This can potentially be explained by individual differences in personality that encourage or discourage general anxiety towards othered groups, as can be seen in more left-leaning political groups, or even by the culture of tolerance upheld within smaller communally based groups. In fandom group culture, research showed similar results in that group cohesion correlated with generally greater uncertainty reduction, but with a lesser

emphasis on tolerance or intolerance of uncertainty in interpersonal interactions (Ray, Plante, Reysen, Roberts and Gerbasi, 2017). The differences seen here likely speak to the group's opposition in form of verbal negative views of the other, such as seen in the research on Disney fans, rather than a more physical aggression towards opposition such as seen in hate crimes performed by extremist hate groups.

Socialites, Politicians and Hate Group Leaders

James Edwards

James is a known far right and conservative white nationalist, who is also the host of a three-hour radio program created in 2004 and based in Tennessee, USA, titled, "The Political Cesspool", which features Nazi's and Nazi sympathizers, and other social or political extremists, such as previous Ku Klux Klan head, David Duke, and a denier of the Holocaust's occurrence, Willis Carto. A quote of his is, "they hate what we call the WASP establishment… and they're using pornography as a subversive tool against us. Jews are by and large dominant in the porn industry… You know, connect the dots and look and the names of people controlling our media, and you find out what the common denominator is," (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021; Edwards, 2021). His anti-Semitic comments are shared widespread as his radio show is public, he has done interviews with famous news outlets such as CNN, and through his Twitter which has 5,387 followers as of April 2021. Additionally, he has made comments in support of oppressive practices, by stating, "I am a firmly of the belief that race relations were better during Jim Crow, and even better in the antebellum south, than they are now," alluring to slavery and times when Black Americans had few to no rights (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). In October of 2020, James retweeted—or reshared—tweets questioning the validity of the COVID-19 restrictions and alluding to the fact that Black Lives Matter protesters were somehow favored

by police and thus allowed to break mandate for the purpose of protesting as well as tweets encouraging religious and gender roles common to conservative communities. He also retweeted VDARE, another well-known anti-immigration group with a heavy online presence to share their oppressive and othering ideologies. James later tweeted, "Forget about the BLM terrorists and their allies who have been burning down cities all year. Proud Cucks and Imaginary "Neo Nazis" are the *real* threats. Who are you going to believe? The media or your lying eyes?" and beneath this quote was a link to an article about two extremist groups, the Proud Boys and Neo Nazis, and fear of threats of violence at the polls (Twitter, 2020, Edwards, 2020). Throughout October, Edwards tweeted repeatedly in support of Trump and defaming Biden, and repeatedly used polarized topics such as segregation, anti-LGBTQ ideas, Hitler, media distrust and even Black privilege to promote his social ideologies and gaslight oppositional ones. One retweet even encourages retaliation through violence, "cop intimidated by antifa breaking windows of his squad car. Just lets it happen. Outrageous," (Twitter, 2021).

Ted Cruz

Ted Cruz is a United States Republican senator from the State of Texas who is known for his right-wing conservative ideologies. He is vocal on Twitter about politics and the policies he feels strongly about such as gun rights and abortion, and his page has 4.4 million followers as of April 2021. In July of 2020, Ted argued with socialite, billionaire and Television star, Mark Cuban, in regard to Black Lives Matter protests during the national anthem in the NBA and defended his belief that it was not just and should be prohibited while Cuban vehemently disagreed creating a twitter thread where the two went back and forth and devolved into cursing and personal attacks (Bieler, 2020). In August of 2020, Cruz criticized Joe Biden and Kamala Harris's energy policy that was based on the one implemented by the state of California and

mocked the idea by saying "hope you don't like air conditioning", and later tweeted a turkey

meme as a way of mocking COVID-19 restrictions mandated by the Federal government in

earlier 2020 (Twitter, 2021). In August, he tweeted again mocking COVID-19 stimulus check

discussions as his states lower class crumbled under the burden of the coronavirus and just as

photograph of him maskless in public had circled around Twitter and other social media sites in

July. In September, he tweeted, "pregnancy is non-life threatening", as a way of gaslighting

statics surrounding infant mortality and maternal morality during pregnancy in African American

communities, and high abortion rates in Texas (Twitter, 2021). Ted is also known for deleting

problematic tweets later on, as can be seen on the regularly updated site "Deleted Tweets From

Ted Cruz, R-Texas" (Pro Publica, 2021).

Kirstie Alley

Kirstie Alley is a famous actress, known mostly for her appearances in American

television and movies over the past 20 years, but also for her modeling work and her presence

within the scientology community. She has been nominated for and successfully won a number

of awards, reinforcing the influence she has and the fandom of loyal followers who by which she

is well revered. As of April 2021, Kristie has 1.5 million followers on Twitter, and has been on

the platform since 2009. She has historically tweeted her affiliation as a Republican, as she did in

2015 when she announced that she was in support of Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton

(Washington Examiner, 2015), and kept true to that again in October of 2020 when she Tweeted

that she would be voting for Trump in 2020 as well as another Republican senator in her home

state (@kirstiealley, 2020). She also tweeted in October and September of 202 about the

Democratic party and its followers, stating, "Dems have spent 4 years RESISTING,making false

accusations and trying to impeach instead of doing what they are paid good money to do," and

other repetitive commentary that reinforced that she would be voting Republican in all elections, both presidential and local (@kirstiealley, 2020). Kirstie tweets almost daily regarding a range of topics from funny videos and popular culture to political parties and ideologies. A few days later in October she tweeted, "The trick is to ALWAYS divert your attention. "Well he doesn't talk nice.Russia collusion. Must impeach.blah blah blah" Look past the SYSTEM. They hate trump because he's pulling back the curtain on the Wizards & exposing the DIRTY SYSTEM. VOTE AGAINST THE SYSTEM #Trump2020," (@kirstiealley, 2020), and paired her words with a GIF from the Wizard of Oz where the green curtain is being pulled to cover the wizard's technology that created the illusion of an all-powerful entity. Still in October, she was also in an altercation on the site with CNN in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, where she stated, "I now Know why my personal friends who walk around in SHEER TERROR of contracting Covid are simply CNN viewers! I decided to watch CNN myself to get a their viewpoint and oh my God DID I EVER!!!! IF YOU TOO WANT TO LIVE IN TERROR WATCH CNN!! FEAR OF DYING IS THEIR MANTRA! OMG!" (@kirstiealley, 2020). Kirstie tweeted daily during the summer of 2020 with the theme of her tweets being skewed towards conservativism, freedom of speech and a number of other politically right ideologies.

Research Goal

From studying the similarities and differences in rhetoric used by these three groups, this research aims to analyze how past behavioral reactions to social change can help develop a deeper understanding of current ones and ones that may result in the future. Theories of relevance to these ideas that can benefit from furthering research are those that analyze interpersonal communication and nonverbal communication theories such as ethics, ingroup outgroup theory, and uncertainty reduction to examine the effect of virtual settings on behavior.

By applying these theories to the case study samples cited, this analysis will focus on how hate groups, fandom culture and political parties use of rhetoric played on social power structures and encouraged or normalized polarized individual behavior (Blessing and Roberts, 2018). Arguably, the social and behavioral changes that resulted from the heavy integration of virtual communication into everyday life can affect a community's instances of in group versus out group violence (Gallacher, Heerdink and Hewstone, 2021). While each of the three cases has unique qualities and behavior, analyzing them in a parallel way would satiate a growing need for research surrounding the effects of the current pandemic restrictions and lockdowns on individual and group communication methods and behaviors. Investigating how tangible each theory is and how generalizable it is to current phenomena and crises, or for the purpose of, "defining the case and bounding the case," (Yin, p. 28, 2017) this research will highlight how persuasion is used as a means to change and even control the behavior of. This can benefit future researchers by further studying the effects of such individual-focused polarizing behaviors on large scale societal problems, as well as how to curb the negative outcomes of such behavioral changes (Windisch, Wiedlitzka and Olaghere, 2021).

Methods

This case study will be focused on the passive process of inciting polarized behavioral reactions in individuals, toward group-relative ideals, emotions and behaviors via the analysis of tweets of United States-based socialites from either fandom, hate or political groups in May through October of 2020 who showed support for Donald Trump or his right-wing ideologies. This occurred during the summer leading up to the 2020 presidential election, where social rhetoric was heavily polarized as a result of the zeitgeist of intersecting events affecting interpersonal relationships in America. Elements of this zeitgeist to note are that of the Black

Lives Matter movement nationwide, the death of George Floyd, the 2020 presidential election and social media-based interactions rising due to the COVID-19 pandemic stay-home orders. The three specific users in question were all Trump supporters, who expressed support for Trump or the ideas he campaigned on via Twitter platforms. Their tweets will be analyzed for how they potentially encourage or normalize emotional extremism, hate speech or othering ideologies through their statements or group-specific terminologies used. Each tweet will be cross-examined through the lens of ingroup-outgroup theory, ethics theory or uncertainty reduction theory to examine underlying themes and ideologies behind language. This is a beneficial way to examine this behavior as qualitative analyses provide contextual information needed to compliment quantitative research (Yin, 2017).

The purpose of this methodology is to breakdown how behavior was potentially influenced by individuals with higher-than-average social statuses, group-specific language and interpersonal communication tactics. Such instigation can lead to direct negative outcomes for both the individuals and their respective groups, as well as those they oppose, and therefore should be studied to examine the context of such phenomena as to better guide future research (Yin, 2017). The following exploratory study will bring forth correlating and differentiating behaviors as displayed by the three aforementioned groups which each make up growing portions of the American population (Bougher, 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021; Butt, and Khalid, 2018; Toder-Alon, Icekson and Shuv-Ami, 2019).

Step 1

The initial step of this review will to be to apply one of the aforementioned theories to language structures used by the three socialites and the ideologies they allude to. The first theory to be applied will be ingroup-outgroup theory, and this will be applied to James Edwards tweets.

The second is ethical theory, which will be applied to Kirstie Alleys tweets. Finally, uncertainty

reduction theory will be applied to tweets from Ted Cruz during the given time period. Here the

tweets will be analyzed through the lens of their respective theories to see how they similarly or

differently the rhetoric usage can be explained by the theory in question.

Step 2

Second, each individual will be accessed for sphere of influence. This will be assessed by

addressing metrics such as follower count and how much interaction certain polarized tweets had

by platform-specific provided measures such as quote tweet, retweet and like counts. These are

each ways that spread influence, and thus will show how much influence each individual

potentially had to spread and encourage ideologies, misinformation or theories about social

phenomena and the greater social world.

<div align="center">

Analysis

</div>

Theoretical Applications

James Edwards tweets were arguably representative of outgroup-ingroup theory, in that

his tweets in October regarding pornography, the Black Lives Matter Movement and Jewish

persons made a clear reference to outgroups in a negative way which showed a passive bias

toward ingroup favoritism see in polarized settings where ingroups and outgroups are

emphasized for their differences with little note given to their similarities. In calling the BLM

movement that of a terrorist organization, he incited a distrust of media commonly seen in not

only republican party members but hate group extremists (Bhat and Chadha, 2020; Fawzi, 2020).

Kirstie Alley showed a trend of emphasis on using emotion as a way of emphasizing her

ideas and show that she felt passionate about where she stood on various issues. She used this

emotionality to display how she felt regarding the Democratic Party, liberal ideologies and

Donald Trump multiple times throughout the summer, and similarly applied sarcasm and wit to her rhetoric as a way of passively shaming others who disagreed with her online and offline. This behavior could be seen in any number of the replies to her polarized tweets where she tried to discredit opposing ideas and even makes fun of naysayers. Her behavioral trend during this time could arguably described as not only harmful bullying but also unethical, as her self-perceived moral high ground was used as justification for her rude and condescending retorts to followers underneath her politically or ideologically charged tweets.

Ted Cruz's twitter rhetoric used more logic-based means of expressing his political views, with occasional humor as a method of passively or directly mocking the views of his opposition. This could be seen in his tweets where he joked about an energy policy proposed by the Biden administration with a turkey meme, and when he argued with Mark Cuban on Twitter regarding Black Lives Matter protests by players during sporting events (Bieler, 2020; Twitter, 2020). This showed tendencies theorized by uncertainty reduction theory, such as intolerance towards others groups as a way of avoiding the uncertainty that came with moderacy when conversing with perceived oppositional forces. This aligned with the aforementioned research by Alizadeh, Weber, Cioffi-Revilla, Fortunato and Macy (2019), where politically extremism was correlated with a greater instance of uncertainty intolerance.

While Ted and Kirstie's tweets used more emotional language, via capitalization or exaggerated punctuation use in text, to add emotion and thus rigor to their statements, James used more explicit and simpler language to tweet his views and valued ideologies. This rigor tended to have a greater number of follower interactions overall due to their inherently polarized, mocking and triggering nature, and arguably incited a greater public rection both on and off of Twitter's platform.

Sphere of Impact

In review of sphere of influence, the individual with the greatest sphere of influence on Twitter was Senator Ted Cruz, followed by Kirstie Alley and James Edwards respectively by measure of follower count. As a result, Ted and Kirstie almost always had retweets, quote tweets or likes with multiple responses as well, furthering the spread of her influence. Additionally, their tweets during this time that were not relevant to bipartisan ideas had less interaction overall, suggesting that polarized tweets, especially those of well-known socialites, were more likely to receive reactions and thus expanded the number of individuals who interacted in some way with their content. With James having the least followers of the three, he still had 5,387 followers who were presented his tweets on their feeds, showing similarly that even within his smaller sphere of influence there was a trend of greater interaction with polarized tweets. This trend led to a greater spread of their polarized rhetoric across the platform and thus introduced a degree of normalization via repeated presentations of their extreme means of expressing ideas to thousands across the United States.

Rival Explanations

Although the three individuals have features of the three main groups, fandom, hate and political groups, it can be argued that the correlations between the three communities cannot be compared due to the differences between the three groups that make them unique from one another. Furthermore, it can be proclaimed that the time frame in question is not generalizable due to the number of unique zeitgeist events that influenced the polarization of the American public at this time such as BLM, COVID-19 and the presidential election. Finally, the intent of the socialites cannot be determined, as they may have tweeted polarizing commentary for the purpose of gaining clout via reactionary responses and increased interactions that coincide.

Recommendations

Each study provides insight into how behavior is changed once an individual is considered to be a part of the identified ingroup. This research from within the past ten years expresses the current relevance of these phenomena as well, showing that this trend may likely continue into the future as individuals develop an increased reliance on social media for socialization, identity development and emotional expression. While radicalization is not always a negative and can have positive outcomes, radicalization by the three aforementioned groups has shown to have negative effects on interpersonal behavior and emotionality by encouraging the normalization of particular extreme behaviors. Such behaviors were reinforced with each retweet as polarized topics were seemingly rewarded with a greater number of interactions by both those who agreed and dissented ultimately leading to more screen time for the socialites. As a result of such outcomes potential negative effect on opposing groups mental or physical health, there was an apparent need for greater research on specific terminology and sentence structures used by such groups to better understand similarities and differences in rhetoric that passively influence individuals over time leading to changes in identity or correlated behavior. For the case of studying this, this study suggests that future researchers seek to find greater samples of such groups to provide a greater amount of data to reference and analyze such interactions. Additionally, focusing on specific sites such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter, future researchers could potentially gain from performing longitudinal studies on individuals who are a part of such groups to see how exactly they are being swayed over time across media rather than solely on one platform. This would also allow for a better cross-analysis of the three groups to highlight the similarities in rhetorical use for the purpose of polarizing individuals and better prepare such social sites for flagging and halting online behavior from organizing into real life

negative physical or verbal interactions. While perceived differences may deepen as the internet and human behavior grows more layered and complex, the individualism expressed by the American population will likely continue to encourage the development of ingroups and outgroups, thus influencing individuals' ethical practices and behaviors resulting from the positive effects of uncertainty reduction.

A potential solution to this occurrence could be an additional disclaimer provided by Twitter's platform where tweets are filtered for extremist, hateful or polarized ideas and then a disclaimer is provided to the user regarding the polarizing nature of the tweet, regardless of intention. This could help the average user filter out extremist rhetoric and avoid repeatedly being exposed to polarized language on their feed. Additionally, this could raise awareness surrounding polarization and how individuals can be influenced over time by popular figures use of misinformation, emotion and mockery to support their beliefs. This could be easily implemented, as there are already similar structures that censor potentially vulgar, violent or nude content on the site.

Social media use is likely to continue to rise into the future along with increased accessibility to smart phones and the internet, thus proving the inherent need for more research surrounding the use of rhetoric as a means of encouraging, influencings or changing behavior and behavioral expectations in social settings. Socialites will always have influence, and as a result will need increased accountability on social media platforms as a way of balancing out their greater-than-average impact on individuals and communities. Forms of social accountability will evolve, and will need to evolve at the speed in which social media is spreading in order to research, analyze and negate the negative effects of polarized language use in online settings.

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