Socioeconomic status and online shaming: The mediating role of belief in a just world

Yubo Hou a,**, 1, Tonglin Jiang a, c, 1, Qi Wang b, *

a Peking University, China
b Cornell University, USA
c The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

This study examined individual factors contributing to online shaming, a recent phenomenon where people engage in social policing by shaming transgressions using the Internet technology. It focused on the effects of socioeconomic status (SES) and the belief in a just world (BJW). A sample of 245 city employees in Nanjing, China participated in the study. Participants read an online post about a real-life transgression and reported their willingness to engage in online shaming. Their subjective SES and BJW were assessed. Participants with higher SES exhibited a greater tendency to engage in online shaming than those with lower SES, and participants with stronger BJW were more likely to engage in online shaming. BJW further mediated the relationship between SES and online shaming. The findings have important practical implications in the Internet era.

Keywords:
Online shaming
Socioeconomic status
Belief in a just world
Social media
Internet

1. Socioeconomic status and online shaming: the mediating role of belief in a just world

The fast development of Web-based technology has greatly changed people’s lives. In particular, Internet has become a platform for people to share information, voice viewpoint, and participate in civic discourse (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). On the other hand, online shaming, where people engage in social policing by shaming transgressions using the Internet technology, has quickly proliferated (Cheung, 2014; Wall & Williams, 2007). Internet has become a battlefield for people to call for punishment for those who have violated social norms. Across many countries, the past decade has witnessed increasing online shaming, where numerous angry and abusive comments swarm into the targets’ personal webpages for the purpose of humiliation and social condemnation. Serious disruptions of personal lives and social orders often occur as a result (Cheung, 2014; Ronson, 2016). Given the personal and social impact of online shaming, it is important to ask who are the anonymous “Internet police” and why they conduct online shaming. Our study intended to address these questions by examining the effects of subjective socioeconomic status and belief in a just world.

1.1. The dark side of online shaming

Shaming is generally defined as a “process by which citizens publicly and self-consciously draw attention to the bad dispositions or actions of an offender, as a way of punishing him or her for having those dispositions or engaging in those actions” (Kahan & Posner, 1999). It reflects vigilantism in which people exercise social control when an established order is under threat from a transgression, a potential transgression, or an imputed transgression against institutionalized norms (Johnston, 1996). Thus, people publicly shame others to defend their social norms (Cheung, 2014). According to the rational choice theory, perceived external sanctions often serve as a component in the cost evaluation of offenses and are therefore effective in deterring the offenses (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). Previous research has shown that expected shame states can significantly inhibit the offending motivations (Bachman, Paternoster, & Ward, 1992; Grasmick & Bursik; Jr, 1990;
Nagin & Paternoster, 1993) and compel individuals to improve behaviors so as to avoid shame in the future (Lindsay-Hartz, De Rivera, & Mascolo, 1995).

The use of shaming as a way to deter deviant behaviors has been observed since the first day of the cyber world (Goldman, 2015; Skoric, Chua, Liew, Wong, & Yeo, 2010). Online shaming can be considered to be a type of vigilantism where people exert external sanctions via Internet (Cheung, 2014; Wall & Williams, 2007). People who conduct online shaming wish to reinforce social norms and keep society operating in an orderly fashion (Wehmhoener, 2010). Indeed, online exposure of perpetrators has boosted changes in institutional transparency, facilitated prosecution of corruption and abuse of power by politicians or local authorities, and contributed to political reform and democracy (e.g., Aman & Jayroe, 2013). However, online shaming, and shaming more generally, has its dark side and can in fact disrupt social control and make things more anarchic (Laidlaw, 2016; Solove, 2007). Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Specifically, the use of the Internet to call for others to punish social infractions can be far-reaching, without geographical or locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy (Wehmhoener, 2010). Thus, one motive for online shaming is to ensure conformity to the offender as well as others from committing the offense again. Moreover, online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing locational constraints, and take place with great immediacy. Online shaming can be particularly pervasive.

Furthermore, with the Internet-empowered rapid and broad information transmission, the negative effect of online shaming can be particularly pervasive.
those with lower SES.

1.4. The effect of belief in a just world

Belief in a just world (BJW) refers to the mental state in which people need to believe in a just world in order to maintain their subjective well-being and navigate in the complex social world (Lerner & Miller, 1978; Lerner, 1980, pp. 9–30). As a “positive illusion” towards the world (Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; Taylor & Brown, 1988), BJW is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can protect individuals from the harsh realities of the real world and thus promote mental health and subjective well-being (Dalbert, 1999, 2009; Furnham, 2003; Lerner, 1980, pp. 9–30). On the other hand, to preserve their just-world beliefs, individuals tend to blame and derogate those who disrupt the social order (Hafer, Begue, Choma, & Dempsey, 2005).

Lipkus et al. (1996) propose that there are two dimensions of BJW: the personal belief in just world (PBJW) and the general belief in just world (GBJW). PBJW refers to the belief that one’s life events are fair, whereas GBJW refers to the belief that the world is generally fair. BJW is closely related to pro-social behaviors, with PBJW and GBJW playing different roles (Dalbert, 1999, 2009; Sutton & Winnard, 2007). When GBJW is threatened, people tend to take actions such as to humiliate or derogate others to protect their just beliefs, which may make them antagonistic towards victims. Studies have shown that GBJW predicts indifference and harsh attitudes towards social miseries. For example, people with stronger GBJW show harsher attitudes towards refugees (Khera, Harvey, & Callan, 2014) and more prejudice toward the elderly and the poor (Sutton & Douglas, 2005), and they exhibit less altruistic behavior (Begue, Charmoillaux, Cochet, Cury, & De Suremain, 2008).

Unlike GBJW, PBJW is positively associated with various indexes of psychological adjustment, such as greater life satisfaction (Dalbert, 1999), lower depression (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2002), and greater purpose in life (Begue & Bastounis, 2003). As a valuable psychological capital, PBJW not only protects individuals from sufferings but also motivates them to behave benevolently. For example, Begue et al. (2008) found that the more people believed in a just world for themselves, the more they gave to a street beggar.

In summary, past research has provided evidence that strong general just-world belief is positively associated with punitive and harsh attitudes towards others, whereas strong personal just-world belief promotes voluntary prosocial behaviors. Thus, we expected that both forms of just-world beliefs would motivate online shaming, either through the intention of punishment or benevolence, for the purpose of restoring justice and social order. Furthermore, we expected just-world beliefs to mediate the effect of SES in predicting online shaming. Higher SES individuals, who are more concerned about individual rights and social justice (Greenberg et al., 1982; Kraus et al., 2012; Smith, 1994), would exhibit stronger just-world beliefs, which would in turn make them more inclined to engage in online shaming. PBJW and GBJW would further manifest for different reasons: As online shaming is closely related to voluntary social responsibility (Skoric et al., 2010), PBJW would mediate the effect of SES on online shaming. On the other hand, given that online shaming is characterized by social condemnation and aggression (Cheung, 2014; Ronson, 2016; Wehmhoener, 2010), GBJW would also mediate the effect of SES on online shaming (see Fig. 1).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants included 245 employees (111 males; mean age = 29.52 years; SD = 8.35) from the city of Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China. They provided informed consent and were each paid RMB10 for their participation. The participants were from a variety of professions, including laborers (7.4%), office clerks (18%), service professionals (22.1%), entrepreneurs (2.5%), technicians (24.2%), civil servants (17.2%), and self-employed (4.5%), and a few who were temporarily out of job (4.1%). Approximately half of the participants had a monthly income lower than the average income in Nanjing (i.e., RMB 3457; http://www.njtj.gov.cn/47448/47488/) and the other half had an above-average income. Out of the 243 participants who reported information about their education, 77% had a college education or beyond, 20% completed high school or professional school training, and 3% finished elementary school or middle school. The participants reported surfing on the Internet for an average of 2–3 h a day, browsing the News, watching videos, or chatting with others.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Online shaming

Research has shown that online shaming is expressed in a variety of ways, including aggressive anger, making abusive/negative comments, reposting the transgression post, and following the updates of the event (Laidlaw, 2016; Wehmhoener, 2010). Abusive comments are difficult to measure and quantify given people’s presentational concerns. Therefore, in our study, online shaming was captured by expression of anger, repost the transgression post or like others’ hostile comments, and willingness to follow the updates.

We used a scenario test to capture the participants’ tendency of online shaming in a controlled experiment. We adopted an online post of a real-life transgression and relevant hostile comments from Weibo, a social media site in China equivalent to Twitter. In this transgression event, a BMW driver illegally parked her car and verbally abused the policeman who came to solve the traffic accident caused by her. After reading the post and comments, participants were asked to report on 7-point Likert Scales their anger, their tendency to repost the transgression post or like others’ hostile comments, and willingness to follow the updates.

In summary, past research has provided evidence that strong general just-world belief is positively associated with punitive and harsh attitudes towards others, whereas strong personal just-world belief promotes voluntary prosocial behaviors. Thus, we expected that both forms of just-world beliefs would motivate online shaming, either through the intention of punishment or benevolence, for the purpose of restoring justice and social order. Furthermore, we expected just-world beliefs to mediate the effect of SES in predicting online shaming. Higher SES individuals, who are more concerned about individual rights and social justice (Greenberg et al., 1982; Kraus et al., 2012; Smith, 1994), would exhibit stronger just-world beliefs, which would in turn make them more inclined to engage in online shaming. PBJW and GBJW would further manifest for different reasons: As online shaming is closely related to voluntary social responsibility (Skoric et al., 2010), PBJW would mediate the effect of SES on online shaming. On the other hand, given that online shaming is characterized by social condemnation and aggression (Cheung, 2014; Ronson, 2016; Wehmhoener, 2010), GBJW would also mediate the effect of SES on online shaming (see Fig. 1).
asking participants to choose their SES from the bottom level 1 to the top level 5.

2.2.3. Belief in a just world

The Scale of Belief in a Just World (Dalbert, 1999) consists of 13 items, with 7 items measuring PBJW (e.g., I believe that I usually get what I deserve) and 6 items measuring GBJW (e.g., I think basically what I deserve). The participants rated the items on 6-point scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The coefficient of internal consistency of PBJW and GBJW was 0.88 and 0.80, respectively.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations of all measures are shown in Table 1. The participants’ anger, willingness to repost or like the hostile comments, and willingness to keep abreast of the event were all positively correlated. In other words, individuals who felt angrier about an online event of social transgression would also be more likely to repost or like the hostile comments and to follow the updates on the event.

Furthermore, participants with higher SES tended to repost or like more the hostile comments and showed more willingness to keep abreast of the event, although they reported feeling no more anger than participants with lower SES. PBJW and GBJW were both positively correlated with the three measures of online shaming, indicating that people with stronger beliefs in a just world were more likely to engage in online shaming. In addition, higher SES individuals exhibited stronger PBJW and GBJW.

In the following analyses, we tested the mediating roles of PBJW and GBJW in the relationship between SES and the three online shaming variables (i.e. anger, repost/like and follow-up), respectively. To perform the mediation analyses, we first regressed PBJW and GBJW on SES, respectively. SES significantly predicted both PBJW, \(B = 2.65, SE = 0.53, t = 4.98, p < 0.001)\, and GBJW, \(B = 2.03, SE = 0.52, t = 3.90, p < 0.001)\.

Then in the model for anger expression, we regressed anger on PBJW and GBJW, respectively. Results showed that both PBJW, \(B = 0.06, SE = 0.01, t = 4.40, p < 0.001)\, and GBJW, \(B = 0.06, SE = 0.01, t = 4.13, p < 0.001)\, significantly predicted anger towards the online transgression. We further regressed anger on SES, which showed that SES did not significantly predict anger, \(B = -0.02, SE = 0.13, t = -0.17, p = 0.86)\.

Recent technical literature on mediation has suggested that there need not be a significant effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable to establish mediation (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010). Hence, although the effect of SES on anger expression was not significant, we went further to test the mediation.

A multiple mediation analysis (model 4 in PROCESS) was conducted with bootstrapping methods to examine the proposed two-mediator model. PBJW and GBJW were simultaneously entered as mediators. There was a significant total indirect effect of SES on anger, \(B = 0.18, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI [0.0866, 0.3351])\. PBJW significantly mediated the effect of SES on anger, \(B = 0.13, SE = 0.07, 95\% CI [0.0012, 0.2858])\. However, the mediating effect of GBJW was not significant, \(B = 0.06, SE = 0.05, 95\% CI [-0.0290, 0.1970])\ (see Fig. 2).

Next, we tested the mediation model for the tendency to repost or like the hostile comments. We regressed repost on PBJW and GBJW, respectively, and found that both PBJW, \(B = 0.05, SE = 0.01, t = 3.23, p < 0.01)\, and GBJW, \(B = 0.08, SE = 0.01, t = 5.22, p < 0.001)\, significantly predicted repost. We further regressed repost on SES and found that SES significantly predicted repost, \(B = 0.26, SE = 0.13, t = 2.05, p = 0.04)\.

Further multiple mediation analysis (model 4 in PROCESS) showed a significant total indirect effect of SES on repost, \(B = 0.12, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI [0.0142, 0.2599])\. Whereas GBJW significantly mediated the effect of SES on repost, \(B = 0.18, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI [0.0755, 0.3324])\, the mediating effect of PBJW was not significant, \(B = -0.06, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI [-0.2112, 0.0516])\ (see Fig. 3).

Finally, we tested the mediation model for the willingness to follow the event updates. We regressed online follow-up on PBJW and GBJW, respectively, which showed that both PBJW, \(B = 0.06, SE = 0.01, t = 3.92, p < 0.001)\, and GBJW, \(B = 0.08, SE = 0.01, t = 5.56, p < 0.001)\, significantly predicted follow-up behaviors. We further regressed follow-up on SES and found a significant effect, \(B = 0.25, SE = 0.13, t = 1.98, p = 0.05)\.

Further multiple mediation analysis (model 4 in PROCESS) showed a significant total indirect effect of SES on follow-up, \(B = 0.16, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI [0.0491, 0.2088])\. GBJW significantly mediated the effect of SES on follow-up, \(B = 0.17, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI [0.0741, 0.3129])\, but the mediating effect of PBJW was not significant, \(B = -0.02, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI [-0.1473, 0.0916])\ (see Fig. 4).

4. Discussion

The emergence of Internet technology and the associated social
media have dramatically changed people's lives. Online shaming can be regarded as a new form of social control exercised via Internet. Although it may be intended for reestablishing the disrupted social order, its aggressive and hostile tactics to defend social norms can bring about detrimental effects (Skoric et al., 2010). By examining online shaming from the perspectives of socioeconomic status and belief in a just world, we aimed to delineate individual factors that motivate people to engage in online shaming.

4.1. SES effect on online shaming

As expected, the SES level was positively correlated with online shaming, whereby those with higher SES were more inclined to conduct online shaming than those with lower SES. Intuitively, one may think that lower SES individuals would behave more aggressively towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online.

4.2. The mediating role of BJW

We found that both personal and general beliefs in a just world were positively associated with online shaming behavior, which was mainly to defend against injustice rather than to vent their anger. Nevertheless, those who expressed strong anger about the transgression were also more likely to repost or like the hostile comments and to follow the updates on the event.

4.1. SES effect on online shaming

As expected, the SES level was positively correlated with online shaming, whereby those with higher SES were more inclined to conduct online shaming than those with lower SES. Intuitively, one may think that lower SES individuals would behave more aggressively towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online. It is a common perception that the decentralized feature of Internet is conductive towards transgressions posted online.

Furthermore, online shaming is an autonomous behavior with the purpose of defending social norms and preventing future deviance. People with higher SES tend to have higher income, better functional health, and higher education. They are more willing to take social responsibilities and participate in voluntary work than those with lower SES (Smith, 1994). Therefore, when higher SES individuals are confronted with social transgression events, they are more likely to take actions against the transgressor. Our finding is consistent with previous observations that individuals who more frequently contribute on online shaming websites tend to be more socially responsible and have a higher level of openness (Skoric et al., 2010).

In addition, online shaming calls for public humiliation, with the expression of anger and contempt towards the offender. It is essentially a form of aggression. Research has shown that aggression often results from the urge to take control of a situation that elicits distress (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001). People in higher SES groups are characterized by a high demand for control and tend to feel that they deserve more than others (Piff, 2014). They are also more likely to endorse punishment over rehabilitation for criminal offenders (Kraus & Keltner, 2013). Online shaming takes place in service of gaining control over the transgressions. Hence, people with higher SES engaged more in this form of aggressive behavior than those with lower SES.

Notably, our findings showed that SES was significantly associated with the tendency to repost or like the hostile comments and the willingness to follow the event updates, but was not directly related to the expression of anger. This suggests that participants felt equally angry about the online transgression regardless of SES. On the other hand, SES had a significant indirect effect on anger via PBJW, which we discuss in the next section. In addition, when asked to explicitly express how angry they felt about the event, participants might restrain their reports due to a social desirability effect. This is reflected in the participants' reported reasons for their online shaming behavior, which was mainly to defend against injustice rather than to vent their anger. Nevertheless, those who expressed strong anger about the transgression were also more likely to repost or like the hostile comments and to follow the updates on the event.
higher SES individuals with strong GBJW may adopt punitive actions to deter transgressions and protect their just beliefs.

As an emerging form of informal social control, online shaming is exercised for the purpose of justice and behavioral control. Informal social control is often considered to be a way of reducing crime and deviance but not being a deviant action itself. However, when it is exercised online, individuals often adopt antisocial and abusive behaviors that are vastly different from how they usually act in the real world (Solove, 2007). Our findings further suggest that the dilemma of online shaming between “good intention” and “bad behavior” may indeed be understood by different mechanisms concerning individuals’ beliefs in excising benevolence versus punishment to maintain a just world.

4.3. Theoretical and practical implications

Although much work has been done on socioeconomic status, many issues have not yet been fully understood in terms of how SES shapes psychological experiences (Kraus & Stephens, 2012). Studies on the relation between SES and aggression have not always yielded consistent results (Greitemeyer & Sagiotoglou, 2016; Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Kelner, 2011). Our study is the first to examine the effect of SES on the aggressive behavior of online shaming. The findings suggest that the motives behind online shaming are a key factor to be taken into consideration in order to understand the impact of SES. Online shaming typically aims at defending social norms, although it often manifests in the way of aggression. People with higher SES exhibit stronger just-world beliefs and greater motivations to intervene and, consequently, show greater engagement in online shaming. Intervention programs that are designed to mitigate the negative impact of online shaming should focus on this population.

Our findings also have implications for the theory of belief in a just world. Unlike previous studies showing effects of PBJW on a variety of positive outcomes, we found that people with strong PBJW, just like those with strong GBJW, were more inclined to engage in online shaming, although they may be less action-oriented than those with strong GBJW. GBJW, on the other hand, may motivate more harmful behaviors in cyberspace. The different motivations for people with strong PBJW and those with strong GBJW to engage in online shaming require further investigation.

Shaming as a way of crime prevention has been widely discussed in criminalology and sociology. However, there have been very few psychological studies examining its causes, processes, and consequences. Furthermore, online shaming is a fast-growing phenomenon with the emergence of the Internet technology and it warrants attention from researchers and practitioners. Our study took the first step and revealed the influences of socioeconomic status and belief in a just world. Further studies are called for to examine online shaming and provide empirical basis for intervention programs to reduce or even eliminate its disruptive effects.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by a grant from the Chinese National Natural Science Foundation (31528014) to Qi Wang and Yubo Hou.

References


