SHAME ON YOU! A STUDY ON GHANAIAN TWITTER USERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE SHAMING

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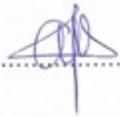**ALMA-LISA LARTEY**

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA, LEGON IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER OF ARTS (MA) DEGREE IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

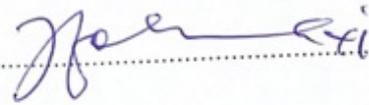**MARCH 2020**

DECLARATION

I, **ALMA-LISA LARTEY**, hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my research work carried out at the School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. No part of this study has been submitted either in whole or in part for another degree elsewhere. All references cited have been duly acknowledged.

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Date. 03/01/2021   Date. 03/01/2021

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family and friends: Mr. Marshall Lartey, Mrs. Gifty Lartey,

Jeffrey Lartey, Khadija Lartey, JR Lartey, Malaika Torto, Nicola Allotey, Jasmin Awudu,

Gyasiwaa Asare, and Sena Kodjokuma.

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I also want to thank all participants who took part in the focus group discussions for all their insights and cooperation.

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ABSTRACT

The present qualitative study looked at the perceptions of online shaming among Ghanaian Twitter users, using Foucault's theory of panopticism. The theory states that people act and behave in a certain manner out of the fear caused by constant surveillance. Findings based on an analysis of views expressed by participants in three focus group discussion sessions showed that online shaming is prevalent among Ghanaian Twitter users for the following reasons: the desire to see others humiliated, using online shaming as a corrective tool to raise awareness on perceived social injustices, the anonymous nature of social media and the desire to gain more followers by using wit and humour to shame other people. Though a majority of participants had participated in online shaming, they viewed the phenomenon to be unethical as it often leads to harmful consequences. This study is relevant to communication studies scholarship because it adds to the growing body of knowledge on the ethical challenges caused by new media usage.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The Internet has become a platform for people to share information, voice viewpoints and participate in civic discourse (Shah, Cho, Eveland & Kwak, 2005). For example, millions of people communicate through social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram every day. Participation affords many wonderful opportunities, including providing a voice to the oppressed, rekindling distant friendships, and providing instant access to an expansive collection of global knowledge (Huffman, 2016). On the other hand, the Internet raises a number of social, psychological, and ethical challenges, including significant instances of personal data loss, Internet addiction, and recently acts of cyber-harassment, cyber-bullying, and online shaming (Cowie, 2013; Freis & Gurung, 2013; Fire, Goldschmidt, & Elovicki, 2014). According to Ronson (2015), on a daily basis, individuals transgressing a social norm or revealing perceived immorality online are subjected to humiliating remarks, cruel taunting, and even death threats. This practice is known as online shaming.

De Vries (2015) defines online shaming as the process whereby a person uploads material onto popular social media sites usually consisting of some behaviour that he or she has captured of someone behaving in a particular way that people may disapprove of, or believe to be contravening some form of an expected social norm. This practice results in the behaviour being exposed and judged by the wider public.

According to Krim (2005), the Internet's ability to name and shame first caught the attention of the press in 2005, when a South Korean woman refused to clean her dog's mess on a public train. Other commuters captured the incident, using their mobile phones and proceeded to post the video on popular blogs. Within a short span of time, the woman's

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personal information was disseminated all over the Internet as *netizens* (that is, Internet citizens) around the world criticized her actions (Krim, 2005).

Naming and shaming people for their social infractions is increasing among Twitter users in Ghana especially in this second decade of the twenty-first century. For example, between 2011 and 2012, a Twitter account by the handle *@classtalkative* often named and shamed Ghanaian celebrities and popular Twitter users by sharing humiliating stories of them allegedly committing acts contrary to societal expectations. By releasing this information, the handle provided other users the opportunity to cast judgment on the alleged culprits regardless of whether the information was true or not. The page has since been deactivated.

The practice, however, continues. In 2016, for instance, Ghanaian rapper, "XO Senavoe", was accused of allegedly getting women drunk and proceeding to have sexual intercourse with them (Quashie, 2016). Screenshots of conversations between the rapper and one of his victims went viral[1]. XO Senavoe was subsequently identified, shamed, and has not returned to Twitter since the incident.

Similarly, some brands in Ghana, have suffered from public backlash on the Internet. UK-based Ghanaian rapper Fuse ODG in 2017 called out German brand Nivea whose message in a billboard advertisement read, *"for visibly fairer skin"* as part of their Natural Fairness Body Lotion Campaign (Dadson, 2017). He started a social media movement on Twitter called #PULLITDOWNNOW, insisting that the company remove such ads across Accra because they were racially insensitive. After a week of ridicule and shaming, the company removed all billboards.

These stories involve individuals from different walks of life coming together on a communication platform to right a wrong by condemning what they think is an infraction on

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[1] The word "viral' is used to describe any content or media that becomes widely shared through social networks and online.

the moral framework of communities and societies because they all share one thing in common: social values. In the context of online shaming, the offender is exposed to the cybersphere and the virtual public is enlisted to humiliate and punish the offender. According to Whitman (1988), the inevitable consequence is exclusion from joining and participating on social media, as seen in some of the given examples above (XO Senavoe is a case in point). Indeed, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter or Instagram) have become an all-pervasive factor in the way we relate to others (Wang, Lee & Hua, 2014).

Social media is defined as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In 2018, 5.6 million Ghanaians were active social media users with Facebook being the 2nd highest social media site in use (Hootsuite, 2018) with Whatsapp being the first. Although Twitter was ranked 9th out of 12 in terms of usage, it remains the preferred choice for this study. In a study conducted by Alhabash and Ma (2017), participants were motivated to use Twitter because apart from its entertainment value, the medium gave them the chance to express themselves, share information and interact. Again, in comparing the features that both social networking sites have, Twitter allows for quicker connectivity unlike Facebook where both parties have to agree to be "friends" before being allowed to see each other's feeds. Twitter has the Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feature, which ensures that users do not miss out on vital information whereas Facebook does not. Also, Twitter's use of the hash tag allows users to quickly engage on a trending topic. But most importantly, Twitter appeals to a younger demographic. In the United States alone, about 40% of Twitter users are between the ages of 18-29 (Forsey, 2020). With Twitter gaining popularity among younger demographics in Ghana as well, it makes it the perfect site to gain insight into online shaming.

The practice of online naming and shaming also raises some ethical implications when it comes to its practice. What social media has done is that it has given everybody a voice (Beard, 2016) where individuals and groups can call out others and shame them in order to effect change. But this could be done at the risk of unleashing a mob on the offender thereby losing sight of what the shaming was intended for. Krim's (2005) example of the South Korean woman's private information being leaked after she was captured online committing an offence shows how dangerous and out of scope online shaming can become.

1.2 Problem Statement

Even though earlier scholarship in communication studies with regard to online shaming has focused on social media participation (Huffman, 2016), panic-driven cultures (Ingraham & Reeves, 2018) and student shaming (Lauricella, 2019), little to no attention has been given to show how people feel about online shaming.

The practice of using social media as a tool to engage in shaming people on the Internet has not been thoroughly researched by communication scholars, thereby creating a gap (De Vries, 2015). Therefore, in order to bridge this gap in communication research, this study sought to investigate and understand the perceptions Ghanaian Twitter users have of online shaming.

1.3 Research Objectives

The following are the objectives the research aimed to achieve:

1. To identify how Ghanaian Twitter users perceive online shaming.

2. To gain insight into why people engage in online shaming.

3. To gain insight into the ethicalities of online shaming.

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1.4 Research Questions

The study aimed at gaining insight into the perceptions that Ghanaian Twitter users have of online shaming. The research questions listed below sought to achieve the study's purpose.

1. How do Ghanaian Twitter users perceive online shaming?
2. Why do people engage in online shaming?
3. What are the ethical issues arriving from online shaming?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This section of the study contains the benefits of this study. According to Huffman (2016), a growing body of research has explored the link between social media participation and young adults' perceptions about topics including Internet addiction, social capital development, and personal privacy (Boyd, 2006; Mazzoni & Iannone, 2014; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012; Ryan, Chester, Reece, & Xenos, 2014). This study will add to the list of extensive research that has explored the connection between social media and the perceptions that its users have on cyber-related phenomena.

Academic studies on online shaming are prevalent in other fields of study (Dunsby & Howes, 2018); Goldman (2015); Klonick (2016) and are gradually gaining interest in communication studies. Some of the Communication-based studies have been researched in the United States and in some Asian countries; however, very little to no studies on online shaming have been conducted in Africa and more particularly in Ghana. Therefore, this study will enable other researchers, students, and social media users to learn and understand the varying perceptions people have of online shaming across the world including the ethics, consequences and limitations of the practice.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study aimed at understanding how Ghanaian Twitter users perceived online shaming. Other users who were not Ghanaians were not allowed to partake in this study. This study focused on one social networking site, Twitter. Participants' views and opinions reflected their experiences on Twitter only and not on other social networking sites.

1.7 Organization of the Study

This work is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction, looks at the background of the problem, statement of the problem, objectives and research questions, significance of the study and its organization. The second chapter reviews existing academic literature presenting findings from various studies on online naming and shaming as well as the theoretical framework that guided the study. Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the study, its empirical setting and population, the sampling method applied, and how the data will be analysed. The fourth chapter discusses the findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides a full summary of the study and then discusses the study's limitations, and offers suggestions for future studies.

1.8 Summary

Online shaming arises from peer surveillance and relies on the ease and widespread use of new Internet applications (open forums, online news portals, blogs) and communication devices with recording capabilities (camera/video-enabled mobile phones, digital recording devices) (Skoric et. al., 2010). It has created the platform to correct infractions and restore order. However, the rampant toxicity of today's Internet dialogue, including acts of online shaming on social media, may be creating a more oppressive society where the "smartest way to survive is to be bland" (Ronson, 2015b, p. 266), and where users enforce conformity by tearing apart anyone who steps outside the boundaries of normality (Huffman, 2016).

The increasing frequency of online naming and shaming could potentially indicate that within the Ghanaian context, it is becoming a normal practice. There may be reasons or justifications as to why naming and shaming online has gained popularity. That is why this study sought to understand the perceptions that Ghanaian Twitter users have of online shaming, why people engaged in the practice, and if online shaming presented any ethical challenges.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Social media has modernized the way humans communicate with each other. From simple text-oriented messages through extended forms of writing to visual communication, the advent of social media has changed the way we share information and interact with each other. Not only has the shape of communication changed but also the speed of communication has changed (Armfield, Armfield & Franklin, 2016). This transformation of the speed of human communication via social media has increased the rate of reactions and responses online. For example, a post on Twitter may receive hundreds of reactions and responses within seconds. This form of communication easily transcends into higher occurrences of online shaming, as people are quick to judge and shame others on posts that they come across.

According to Armfield, Armfield, and Franklin (2016), online shaming also occurs frequently because of the homogeneity of most users' feeds. On Twitter, users tend to follow accounts that either interests them or share the same views that they have. This notion means that many social media users may make assumptions that their followers are just like them and would expect them to share the same values they hold. Therefore, it may be possible that in a situation where there is a point of digression, online shaming is more likely going to occur.

This study focused on Ghanaian Twitter users' perceptions of online shaming. It sought to find out how they felt about online shaming, the reasons behind the practice as well as the ethical challenges online naming and shaming presented.

This chapter will present a timeline of shaming practices across cultures from the 18th century to the current practice of social and public shaming in the digital era. It will also cover

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its potential causes and the arguments surrounding the phenomenon. The chapter will examine what scholars have said about online shaming and will locate a gap in the research that this study will hope to fill.

2.2 Concept of Shame and Shaming

Many scholars have different definitions of shame (Lewis, 2000; Kasabova, 2017; Stuewig & McClosky, 2005). Lewis (2000) defines shame as a self-conscious emotion that requires cognition of self and the ability to evaluate one's behaviour against a standard and recognize one's failure. Similarly, Kasabova (2017) defines shame as an emotion involving the self, and, more precisely, a negative self-evaluation, either reflectively by the individual or by others. Stuewig and McCloskey (2005) also refer to shame as a negative emotion focusing on evaluation of the entire self against internalized standards. Despite the various definitions, scholars do agree that shame is an emotion and that the process of feeling shame involves elements of self-reflection and evaluation.

Braithwaite (1989) defined shaming as the "societal processes of expressing social disapproval" (p.100) and further identified two forms of shame and shaming practices throughout history. He maintained that previous and current shaming practices are either re-integrative or disintegrative (stigmatizing). According to him, re-integrative shaming focuses on ceremonies whereby the deviant is offered the opportunity to denounce his or her behaviours or the crime he or she has committed. In this model of shaming, the community as a whole is presented with the opportunity to express its displeasure with the crime (pp.100-101). Under this form of shaming, deviant citizens are given the chance to re-socialize back into their communities with a clean slate. Disintegrative shaming (stigmatization), in contrast, divides the community by creating a class of outcasts (Braithwaite, 1989). Under the disintegrative shaming model, the deviant is shunned, sequestered, and disgraced. The goal of this model is to punish the person by instilling feelings similar to what would be considered shame

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(Tangney, Tuewing & Hafex, 2012). The main aim of this model is to ensure that deviants are reprimanded regardless of the social and psychological effects on the individual and their family members.

2.3 History of Shaming

Public shaming has played a powerful role in crime and punishment throughout history and across cultures and has deep roots in Western societies (Hess & Waller, 2014) and according to Russell (2016), it was a popular way to expose and punish individuals who had committed crimes, even some relatively minor violations. In biblical times, there were many instances of public shaming. People were usually publicly shamed because they had opposing beliefs. Cilliers (2003) defines crucifixion as a method of execution by which a person was hanged, usually by his arms, from a cross or similar structure until he died. Originating from Mesopotamia and Persia, crucifixion was perfected by the Romans who saw it as a shameful form of death (Cicero, 1927). For example, Jesus Christ was crucified for declaring that he was the Messiah or the King of the Jews, an act that was regarded as treason because the Jews were under Roman rule (Matthew 27:27-44; Mark 15:16-32; Luke 23:26-43; John 19:16-27, New International Version).

In pre and post-colonial America, shaming punishments were among the most popular methods of criminal sanctioning (Friedman, 1993). According to Hess and Waller (2014), stocks were often placed at the entrance to a town where criminals could be pelted with rubbish and stones; mothers of illegitimate children had scarlet letters pinned to their clothes declaring their sins, and drunks were ordered to wear signs around their necks bearing the letter "D". Andrews (1890) writes that it was a common custom to put offenders in the pillory (a wooden frame which locked the wrists and neck of offenders) at public markets (p. 175), thereby exposing them to public mockery and shaming. In colonial America, these types of

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punishments were extremely common, and the public usually participated in their administration.

In the East, for centuries in China, criminals were placed in cages or were made to wear a cangue (a rectangular collar, made of heavy blocks of wood). The criminals were displayed in front of the local magistrates or at the city gates with the purpose of publicly shaming them and educating onlookers about the consequences of immorality (Mülhahn, 2010).

In indigenous African societies, social control was rooted in various traditions, customs and native laws (Okafo, 2007). Among the Bantu people of Kenya, the townspeople were called to witness corporal punishments. This act was done to feed on their fear in order to prevent them from committing similar crimes and suffering such a penalty. In Yoruba culture, social crimes attracted corporal punishment such as flogging, whipping, tying, stocks, castration or emasculation. In Ghanaian history, before the advent of the British, the people were governed by traditional laws that were aimed at ensuring stability and communal solidarity and improving social relations among people (Ackom-Gyeedu, 2015). In the Akan culture, Ackom-Gyeedu (2015) further states that individuals found guilty were sentenced to paying compensation to victims and also made to atone for their misdeeds by being asked to perform the requisite animal sacrifice. This act led to equity (fairness), communal peace, and survival. Oduro-Sarpong (2003) shares more insight into Akan shaming practices. A child could be punished by a member of a community without approval from parents. Young women who got pregnant without puberty rites were banished to live in huts in the bush along with their husbands until the birth of their child and the proper customary rites were performed (Oduro-Sarpong, 2003). The Ubuntu tribe of South Africa, however, take a much different route when it comes to punishing offenders. The wrongdoer is taken to the centre of the community by other members of the tribe. Instead of some form of corporal punishment, members of the tribe speak only good things of the offender. The Ubuntu tribe believe that

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each person is good yet may be susceptible to committing mistakes, which is seen as a cry for help. Therefore, the members of the tribe take it upon themselves to remind the offender of their goodness in order to restore them.

Many scholars have varying theories on why public shaming activities were so popular. For example, one of the theories posited that American societies during the pre-colonial era were small and that people knew each other very well; therefore, any sort of public display emanating from a criminal's offense was utterly humiliating to offenders who knew the majority of the watchful crowd (Hirsch, 1992). To some extent, this practice also applied to other cultures across the world. Consequently, community members would be aware of the offender's crime, spread this information to others, and criminals would thus feel the sting of shame (Garcia, 1999). By alluding to the fear of being publicly humiliated, these theories explain how public shaming can be effective.

By the late 18th century there was a decline in public shaming as various judges, preachers, and humanitarian writers spoke out against punishment by stocks, the whipping post, and the pillory (Ronson, 2015). In fact, earlier during the Enlightenment period, intellectuals pushed for penal reform so that criminals who had served their time could return to society and become productive citizens again (Russell, 2016). Punishment became more re-integrative than disintegrative. For example, in Ghana, while the objectives of the traditional system were not aimed at dissuasion or the reintegration of offenders, the creation of the Gold Coast reorganized the legal and penal system, thereby diminishing the application of traditional laws in dealing with criminal activities (Ackom-Gyeedu, 2015).

In the current digital era, new media technologies and the advent of social media have created a new shaming culture. The impact of social media sites has been influential in human life and individuals from different nations are now able to communicate with just one click of

an application (Motril, 2018). The dissemination and exchange of information has become easier and more convenient for people. It is common to see certain aspects that are part of the makeup of physical communities manifest online and one of these aspects is the use of public shaming which is known as "online shaming."

2.4 Online Shaming

According to De Vries (2015), it is not clear how online shaming is defined despite its appearance in popular media from the mid 2000s till date. Packiarajah (2016) agrees, saying that there is no conclusive definition of online shaming in academic literature. The phenomenon has often been used interchangeably with other concepts such as cyber-harassment, cyber-bullying and trolling (Packiarajah, 2016). In Skoric, Chua, Liew, Wong, and Yeo's (2010) study, they are of the view that citizens use technology to socially police transgressors and call them out on their infractions. De Vries (2015) accordingly operationalizes online shaming and defines it

> as the process in which a person uploads material (e.g. screen shot, photo, video footage, texts') to popular social media sites (e.g. YouTube, Facebook) of some behaviour they have captured (or identified through other means) of someone behaving in a particular way that they disapprove of, or perhaps is deemed (by the person who uploads the material) to be contravening some form of expected social norm (p. 2055).

Skoric et al (2010) also define online shaming as individuals engaging in "social policing" by shaming "transgressions" via the Internet.

One way to separate the concept of online shaming from cyber-harassment/bullying or trolling is the notion of social norms. According to Chandler and Munday (2011), social norms are common standards within a social group regarding socially acceptable or appropriate behaviour in particular social situations, the breach of which has social consequences with the

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strength of these norms varying from loose expectations to unwritten rules. What this definition implies is that what makes something a norm is usually agreed and known by two or more people and that social norms exist to control human behaviour.

2.4.1 Causes of Online Shaming

Why then do people feel the need to shame perpetrators online? In her article for the Harvard Business Review, Gavett (2015) suggests that perhaps it is because people tend to feel as though they were the "silenced underdogs", fighting the system for a good cause. Similar to Gavett (2015), Malloy (2015) also says that online shaming is thriving because politics has left people disempowered and due to this disempowerment, they want to feel like they are fighting bad behaviour and injustice. A study conducted by Ingraham and Reeves (2016) support Malloy (2015) and Gavett's (2015) views. Ingraham and Reeves (2016) contend that the current climate of shaming culture is as a result of deep political disenfranchisement that leaves individuals with the need to do something. The introduction of new media has, in fact, given citizens the avenue to often pass judgment at their own moral discretion. This need to do something, as stated by Ingraham and Reeves (2016), is similar to the study of Skoric et al (2010) where the researchers reveal that people engage in online shaming to raise awareness about social violations in society. Perhaps then it could be said that the disenfranchised resort to online shaming to restore order and have some power over the feeling of being disenfranchised. The findings of Skoric et al (2010) also suggest that individuals who are more likely to contribute to online shaming are more socially responsible and open to new experiences.

However, in a study conducted by Hou, Jiang and Wang (2017), the researchers find that people with higher levels of socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to engage in online shaming than those with lower levels. The researchers sampled 245 city employees from Nanjing, China to answer questionnaires on online shaming. Their findings go against the

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assumption that people of lower SES would behave more aggressively because of the role the Internet plays in giving the marginalized or grassroots the platform to voice out their opinions. What this study, however, finds is that access to the Internet and participating in online discourses is available to those in the middle to upper classes. Therefore, people of lower SES in actuality have a high tolerance for social injustices because it is their social reality and have grown accustomed to it. People of higher SES are more likely to take on social responsibilities and volunteering activities than those with lower levels and are more aggressive in shaming because of their desire to be in control when distressed. Therefore, when faced with social injustices, they are more likely to shame the culprit.

People also have darker motivations for online shaming such as the pleasure of seeing someone else brought low and humiliated. A study by Takahashi et al (2009) conducted in Japan supports this claim. Under this study, participants underwent image studies where they read information on target persons. The researchers found that people gain pleasant feelings of reward when a person they acknowledge as advantaged or privileged compared to them suffers a misfortune (Takahashi et al, 2009). For example, in the United States, in situations where a white person (regarded as a person of privilege) is captured to have offended a person of a racial minority, there is an extra sense of satisfaction and glee when the offender is called out and shamed on social media (Takahashi et al., 2009). The results of the shaming in some of these instances have led to job losses and being socially ostracized.

A study conducted by Basak, Sural, Ganguly, and Ghosh (2016) in India reveals that the potential motives of users such as one-upmanship, showing off righteousness, and the rewards they may receive explain why they engage in online shaming. These rewards could either be in the form of increasing followers or more retweets. These findings counter other studies that have found that people are motivated to engage in online shaming because they feel it is their social responsibility.

Packiarajah (2016) says that one of the defining features of the Internet landscape is the apparent anonymity it offers to the user. The introduction of social media has seen an increase in the use of insulting or degrading language and visuals and the type of shaming seen online is different from a face-to-face shaming interaction. Armfield, Armfield, and Franklin (2016) argue that those that engage in online shaming have the option of hiding behind the cloak of anonymity. One of the features or nuances of Twitter is that it doesn't necessarily require that its users use their real names when signing up or registering. Therefore, a user can stay hidden should they choose to. As such, it is much easier to be anonymous on the social networking site. Another interesting and quite recent development is the creation of anonymous accounts known as "burner accounts", which can be run simultaneously with a person's original account. People create burner accounts to make it more difficult for them to be traced.

2.4.2 Effects of Online Shaming

Online shaming has its many effects, which may either be positive or negative. Some of its positive effects include the fact that:

1. it exposes questionable acts (Solove, 2007; Packiarajah, 2016), and

2. encourages the reinforcement of social norms (Wehmhoener, 2010).

According to Packiarajah (2016), there are people who get away with annoying horrible acts on a daily basis. For example, it could be someone assaulting another or someone being verbally abusive towards another person. Solove (2007) says that these acts often go unpunished. In this digital era, new media technologies with their audio/video recording features have made it possible to capture these injustices. Social media has provided the platform for users to identify perpetrators. Furthermore, certain individuals may present one persona to the outside world, whilst engaging in questionable activities in secret (Solove, 2007). The role that online shaming plays is that it can expose these questionable activities to

the benefit of the public interest. Whilst a single person may have little power, the accumulation of power from multiple individuals can now have a real impact through the rapid spread and impact of their information (Solove, 2007).

Online shaming also leads to the reinforcement of social norms (Wehmhoener, 2010). People who conduct online shaming wish to reinforce social norms and keep society operating in an orderly fashion (Wehmhoener, 2010). Online exposure of perpetrators has boosted changes in institutional transparency, facilitated the prosecution of corruption and abuse of power by politicians or local authorities, and contributed to political reform and democracy (e.g. Aman & Jayroe, 2013).

Online shaming also presents instances that put the practice into question especially when it tends to create a problem rather than a solution. Some of these effects include:

1. social media participation (Huffman, 2016),

2. privacy (Cheung, 2014; Laidlaw, 2016),

3. lack of scope and control (Posner & Rasmussen, 1999), and

4. leads to harassment online (Cheung, 2014; Solove, 2007)

A study by Huffman (2016) finds that young social media users are worried that the content they post online will be subject to verbal attacks; therefore, they reduce the frequency of their posts especially after witnessing or experiencing acts of online shaming. Incidents like this example often lead to the victims of online shaming wanting to retreat from the Internet.

According to Cheung (2014), online shaming often comes with the exposure of personal identifiable information of the offenders for the purpose of humiliation, social condemnation and punishment. Laidlaw (2016), on the other hand, does not limit privacy to the invasion or the revealing of humiliating information but more on the inability of the shamed person to rejoin online communities without being constantly reminded of their past actions.

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Posner and Rasmussen (1999) question the scope of online shaming. If someone does not shame an individual who is being targeted by their social group online that person could then become a target of online shaming (Packiarajah, 2016). Those close to a victim of online shaming (for example family or friends) are sometimes punished together with the intended target (Klonick, 2015).

Online shaming often involves outburst of anger and aggression, exposing and sharing the transgression post, using or threatening the use of force, and so forth (Laidlaw, 2016; Wehmhoener, 2010). Empowered by the Internet, these online aggressive behaviours can easily escalate into a form of online mob trial and further extend to offline harassment (Cheung, 2014; Solove, 2007). As a result, people who initially violate social norms may later turn into the victims of online shaming (Hou, Jiang & Wang, 2017).

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theory that guides this study and will help to answer the questions that this study asks.

2.5.1 Foucault's Theory of Panopticism

Michel Foucault propounded panopticism in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1997). Foucault (1975) modelled the theory after the English philosopher Jeremy's Bentham's proposal of a panopticon in the 18th century. Bentham (1843) described the panopticon as a circular building with a tower in its centre, surrounded by an outer wall that housed occupants. The occupants were not able to see the guards, but the guards could see them. In effect, this design caused occupants to become more self-aware of their surroundings and thus self-regulate. This illustration has since been adopted in many modern prison systems. Simply put, panopticism is the idea that human beings act and behave in the manner in which they do out of fear due to constant surveillance. Foucault (1975) adopted the illustration of the panopticon

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to fully explore the connections between social control systems and people in a disciplinary situation as well as the concept of power-knowledge. In its original Foucauldian definition, the panopticon serves as an apparatus of control used to impose discipline on various individuals, (Motril, 2018). According to Motril (2018), Foucault's conceptualization of the panopticon is usually applied within the context of law, politics, and government. She, however, argues that all aspects of human life is already considered politics in themselves and therefore human beings are subject to manifestations of the panopticon at any time and in any place, from parents and teachers monitoring their child or student's behaviour to even allowing one's romantic partner access to private messages on social media platforms when doubtful of the other's activities. Motril (2018) says that these everyday examples of the panopticon are instances that human beings regard as simply being part of the routine.

Foucault's writings on panopticism continuously put emphasis on the idea of an all-watching system. While establishing the link between social systems and discipline using the illustration of the panopticon, he adds that the gaze alert is everywhere, meaning that in some way, human beings cannot avoid being watched or being under surveillance. In her study of *Foucault's Gaze and Panopticism on Facebook Shaming Posts*, Motril (2018) refers to the gaze alert and posits that surveillance bodies have become normalized in modern times as evident in the use of closed-circuit televisions in private and public establishments. These rules and regulations imposed by institutions further theorize that a new emergence for the platform for panopticism is evident in the use of social media sites. Online shaming posts, more specifically those on Twitter are manifestations of modern-day panopticism as they enforce the gaze alert that Foucault (1975) describes in his book by watching and disciplining individuals who have committed an offence or have deviated from the accepted social norms. Indeed, panopticism has found a breeding ground on the Internet and in social media studies (Fuchs, Albrechtslund & Sandoval, 2012). However, according to Romele, Gallino, Emmenegger, and

Gorgone (2017), in social media, the panopticon is reversed because the controlled (the user) is alone in the middle of the prison and controllers (other users) are all around her or him. Interpreters named the phenomenon "lateral surveillance" (Andrejevic 2005, p481), "social searching" (Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield, 2006, p167), "social surveillance" (Joinson 2008; Tokunaga, 2011, p.706), and "liquid surveillance" (Baumann & Lyon, 2013, p6). Marwick (2012) contends with the idea that social media are instruments of social surveillance, but insists that these new forms of control are classical in their effects, meaning that these forms of social surveillance are just a modernized way of an old practice and would yield the same results when compared to other eras in public shaming history.

Foucault's (1975) panopticism is a fitting theory for this study. This is because the emergence of panopticism is evident in social media. There are no guards and no prisoners in the virtual panopticon. Social media users are both guards and prisoners, watching and judging each another as they share content. Online shaming posts, more specifically on Twitter, are manifestations of panopticism, as these posts enforce the gaze alert by monitoring and chastising individuals who commit offences or deviate from accepted social norms. The theory will help in determining how Twitter as a surveillance body makes it possible for the reproduction of the gaze alert that is happening in the cyber world.

2.5.2 Ethics of Online Shaming

Shaming, it seems, has become a core competency of the Internet, and it's one that can destroy both lives and livelihoods (Hudson, 2013). According to Hudson (2013), at its best, social media has given a voice to the disenfranchised, allowing them to bypass the gatekeepers of power and publicize injustices that might otherwise remain invisible. Yet at its worst, it is a weapon of mass reputation destruction, capable of amplifying slander, bullying, and casual idiocy on a scale never before possible. Raicu (2016) is of the view that people are possibly

struggling with fully understanding online shaming because it presents an ethical dilemma in which justice arguments are made on both sides. Some people may see online shaming as a way of standing up for justice and fairness whereas others may see the phenomenon as unethical because the shamer has no control over the proportionality of the response as it may not match the offense committed.

According to Raicu (2016) online shaming may also pose a conflict between justice concerns and virtue ethics. While some people may feel duty-bound to ensure justice, they run the risk of potentially being unfair in meting out disproportionate justice. In certain instances, online shaming works as shown in Fuse ODG's campaign against skincare company Nivea for promoting skin bleaching. The company then pulled down its billboards in response. On the other hand, it may create the avenue for more dangerous Internet practices such as doxing. Krim's (2005) account of the South Korean woman failing to clean after her dog in public transport shows how wildly disproportionate online shaming can be. After having the video uploaded on the Internet, other information such as her workplace and home addresses were leaked, endangering the life of the woman. Aside the inequalities that online shaming presents, the practice also lacks context (Raicu, 2016). People are not given the opportunity to explain themselves and when they do, it does not circulate as much as the shaming does.

For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on normative ethics, which involves arriving at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. Butts and Rich (2013) define normative ethics as the attempt to decide or prescribe values, behaviors, and ways of being that are right or wrong, good or bad, admirable or deplorable. According to Quentelier, Spyebroeck and Braeckman (2009), normative ethics is not about how the world is but how the world should be. What makes normative ethics different from meta-ethics is that whereas the latter is concerned with questions like what it means to say something is "good" or "bad", normative ethics is concerned with questions that ask what things are exactly good or bad, what people

ought to do and why they ought to do it (Schroeder, 2015). According to Von der Pfordten (2011), many theories are proposed under normative ethics but most prominent in discussions include:

1. Consequentialism: The view that the rightness or wrongness of actions depends largely on their consequences (Driver, 2012).

2. Deontological ethics: Sometimes known as duty/obligation/rule-based ethics (Waller, 2005), deontological ethics looks at whether the morality of an action should be right or wrong based on a set of rules.

3. Virtue ethics: According to Hursthouse (2013), virtue ethics is concerned with being agent-centred rather than act-centred. Simply put, it focuses on the character of a person than a person's actions.

Online shaming as a research topic is fairly new and has not been thoroughly researched on especially in Communications. The literature reviewed from different studies show that the majority of the studies are conducted within the American and Asian contexts. There are no research studies regarding the phenomenon of online shaming within the African context, even more specifically within the Ghanaian context. That is why this study intends on ensuring that the gap is filled in order gain more insight on online shaming from a different worldview.

2.6 Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter has provided information on the concepts of public shaming (its dual nature of being integrative or disintegrative) and the history of public shaming across various world cultures in an attempt to understand the roots of online shaming. Literature reviewed reveals that people engage in online shaming because they feel disempowered by the system in which they live in and use it as a means to right the wrongs in society. However, other studies also question the motives that people have when they engage in online naming and shaming (increase in the number of social media followers, pleasure of

seeing someone brought low and humiliated, etc.). Online shaming may reinforce social norms, but it also has its effects. It affects how people participate on social media; it may affect users' privacy; and in very extreme situations, its lack of scope and control may affect innocent individuals, and could lead to cyber-harassment. The theoretical framework that guides this study is Foucault's panopticon theory, which will help in determining how Twitter as a surveillance tool makes it possible for the reproduction of the gaze alert that is happening in the physical world into the online world.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the methodology used in the study. It identifies the research approach and the method as well as the justifications for those choices. It also covers details such as the population of the study, the sample and sampling technique, the data collection procedure, instrumentation and analysis, and ethical considerations. This study explores the perceptions of Ghanaian Twitter users on online shaming.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), research methodology or strategy is determined by the nature of the research question and the subject being investigated. The type of methodology used should provide the answers this study seeks to answer. This dissertation sought to understand the perceptions that Ghanaian Twitter users have of online shaming. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do Ghanaian Twitter users perceive online shaming?
- Why do people engage in online shaming?
- How ethical is online shaming?

3.2 Research Approach

This study used a qualitative research approach. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), this approach aims at gaining insight, exploring in-depth a phenomenon, and understanding the richness and complexity inherent in human behaviours. Also, this approach of research seeks to explore the meaning people construct around their world in terms of perception, feelings, experiences, and other intangible characteristics of the world around the subject of study (Merriam, 2009).

3.3 Population of the Study

For this study, Ghanaian Twitter users formed the population. The reason for the decision was the context in which the study was based. What this study aimed to do was to gain insight into how Ghanaian Twitter users perceived online shaming. It therefore only made sense to select individuals who had active Twitter accounts, as they might have likely witnessed, participated in, or might have been on the receiving end of online shaming. The reasoning behind the selection of active Twitter users was because the researcher felt that while they might not post daily, there were more abreast with trending stories and updates. Individual Ghanaian Twitter users formed the unit of analysis. This choice was because the nature of this study aimed at gathering perceptions and so it was thought that each person's understanding might be different from the other.

3.4 Sampling

In this study, the snowball sampling method was used. In snowball sampling, research participants recruit other participants for the study. It is important to note that this sampling technique may lead to sampling bias since people refer others they know and possibly share similar traits with. Due to the short time period of the study, snowball sampling was used because it saved time and it was quicker to find samples through referrals, as it was difficult finding potential participants. The first two points of contact (to be called the "lead participant") were contacted via direct messaging on Twitter and the third lead participant was contacted via text message. They were then able to introduce potential participants to the researcher. Through this method, it was possible to obtain a sample size capable of answering the research questions. In implementing the sampling method, I got in touch with a Twitter user who could suggest participants for this study. In order to not have low participation rates and to save time, I asked participants to recommend others who qualified to take part in the focus group discussion. Potential participants were asked a screener question to determine how

active they were on Twitter before being selected. Through this sampling method, I was able to obtain a sample size of twenty participants.

3.5 Data collection

The method of data collection was focus group discussions. The rationale behind selecting focus group discussions was largely dependent on the researcher's desire to get a more in-depth of the issue as opposed to conducting a survey. Another reason behind this selection was that the researcher wanted to gather various insights from participants within a short timeframe instead of individually interviewing participants. Exploring Twitter users' experiences and perceptions of online shaming—whether they had been victims or had simply witnessed it—in Ghana through focus group discussions provided the opportunity to understand the phenomenon from the perspectives of the accuser and the shamed. Focus groups were also used because of their similarities to informal everyday discussions that take place between groups of people. The nature of the group discussions allowed participants to feel comfortable and share their perceptions of online shaming. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and used for the study. The questions designed in the guide were open-ended allowing for a discussion with the participants instead of a direct question and answer format. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The interview guide of the study considered the experiences, thoughts, feelings, and awareness levels of the participants in designing the questions. Questions were developed ranging from how participants felt about online shaming, its causes and its effects to their experiences with online shaming and the ethical dilemmas the practice raised. Follow-up questions were asked to probe further.

Twenty participants were divided into groups of three for the focus group discussions. Each group has a lead participant who could be described as the first point of contact. The lead participant then referred other potential participants to the researcher. The participants in each

group fell between the ages of 22-30 years thereby making them excellent candidates as Twitter mostly appeals to a much younger crowd. The participants all lived in Accra as at the time the discussions took place. Group discussions took place in Accra and lasted between 1-1½ hours and were recorded for transcription. Notes taken served as backup to the audio recordings that were made. All discussions were recorded in English and transcribed by the researcher.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data was audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed to generate themes in order to bring out findings from the study. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes the data set in detail. It also often goes further and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes based on the patterns in the data that are important or interesting (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Themes capture important ideas that emerge from the data relative to the research questions and represent some level of patterned responses within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, themes were analyzed inductively. Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Under the inductive approach, data for any themes related to online shaming were read thoroughly without focusing on themes generated from previous research studies.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, the researcher ensured the following:

1. Informed consent was sought from participants.

2. Respondents' confidentialities and identities were respected.

3. Participants were asked to volunteer and not compelled.

4. No respondent was harmed.

5. The research was conducted independently and impartially.

3.8 Summary

This study used a qualitative research approach to answer its questions. Ghanaian Twitter users with active accounts formed the population for this study. The snowball sampling technique was used in order to obtain the desired sample as quickly as possible given the timeframe for this study. Data was then collected through focus group discussions and analysed thematically.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION & DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to understand Twitter users' perception of online shaming. Online shaming, as a research topic, is a fairly new topic that has not been thoroughly research. The literature reviewed showed that the majority of the studies conducted on this topic are within American and Asian contexts. By listening to and documenting the views of Ghanaian Twitter users, this study examined how they perceived online shaming, why they thought people engaged in online shaming, and whether they viewed online shaming to be ethical or otherwise.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Ghanaian Twitter users perceive online shaming?

2. Why do people engage in online shaming?

3. How ethical is online shaming?

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows: Section 4.2 explains the nature of data collection used in the research, Section 4.3 presents and discusses findings, and Section 4.4 summarizes the entire chapter.

4.1.1 Thematic Analysis

During the course of the three focus group discussions, participants shared their perceptions of online shaming, their experiences with online shaming (from being shamed online or doing the shaming), and what they perceived to be the factors that motivated people to engage in online shaming. Participants also discussed the phenomenon from an ethical perspective. They discussed the effects of online shaming, its advantages and disadvantages,

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and how online shaming had influenced their social media habits and participation. The next section discussed how the participants identified posts on Twitter that were intended to shame.

4.2 Online Shaming

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study by analyzing important themes that emerged from the data collected.

4.2.1 Meaning of Online Shaming

Based on the meaning of online shaming, the study was interested in finding out how participants understood the concept. Some of the participants defined online shaming as calling out offenders on social media and chastising them for their misdeeds. Usually, the person doing the shaming would post videos or pictures of the offender committing the act. They might also post screenshots of messages or a social media post that involves the offender, which in turn might reveal the offender's name or social media handle. The offender is then exposed and subjected to shame. The 'Retweet'[2] and 'Like'[3] features on Twitter also make it easier for information to spread quickly especially depending on the gravity of the offender's action.

One respondent in Focus Group 3 said:

Online shaming is the act of taking videos of what is going on in the physical world and putting it online, things that people do online that warrant them to be shamed, chastising them for things that you think are wrong either by what they post or what you find them doing and post on social media.

This definition is similar to that of De Vries' (2015). Both definitions agree that for online shaming to take place, it must involve using modern communication technology to capture a

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[2] A retweet is a reposted or forwarded message on Twitter.
[3] Likes are represented by a small heart and are used to show appreciation for a Tweet.

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physical act and putting it online. Both definitions also agree that for online shaming to happen, an offence must be committed by the perpetrator.

Shaming also occurs online through body shaming. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, body shaming is known as the practice of expressing mockery about another individual's body shape or size. Some of the participants felt that people could be shamed for trivial reasons such as for their body. For example, one respondent in Focus Group 2 said, "When we say online shaming, the first thing my mind draws to is body shaming." This assertion made by the respondent questions the scope of online shaming as well as the definition and purpose of online shaming.

In other instances, people are shamed because their personal views do not reflect those of others. One respondent in Focus Group two said:

> People post stuff and you will be surprised that someone will come and post a video of their child at home, and someone will just notice that the child's hair has been braided and you see people complaining about the child's hairstyle because they feel that the child is too young to be in braids. So, I think people shame you because; they don't believe or agree with a person's way of life or an idea or opinion.

Sometimes, online shaming takes place not because a norm or the law has been broken but because of differences in ideas, cultures, and beliefs. What may be normal to one person may be foreign to another. The next Sub-section discusses how the participants identified posts on Twitter that were intended to shame.

4.2.2 Identifying Shaming Posts

This sub-section examines how participants in the three group discussions identified posts that were intended to shame offenders on their Twitter timelines. Participants said that most online shaming posts they typically came across on their personal Twitter timelines

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contained elements of humour. For example, in Focus Group One, a participant felt that, people shamed others by laughing at them. Other participants also said that the fact that other users directly named and shamed the offenders and insulted them for their behaviours and actions was a clear indication that the post was intended for online shaming. The posts they came across also contained hurtful, negative comments. One example a respondent gave in Focus Group One was, "You're fat. You're ugly. Why is he dumb?" Such findings are similar to a study conducted by Basak, Ganguly, Sural, & Ghosh (2016) who compared trends in the rhetoric of online shaming. In the study, the authors identified three types of interactions that predominated online shaming: sarcasm or jokes, passing judgment and abuses (Basak et al, 2016).

The next Sub-section discusses participants' experiences with online shaming indicating whether they were victims of online shaming or whether they themselves participated in online shaming.

4.2.3 Online Shaming Experiences

Although many of the participants across all group discussions said that they personally had not been targets of online shaming, there were a few who mentioned that they had been victims.

Some of the respondents did share that they had participated in online shaming in one way or the other by re-tweeting, commenting and laughing at the shamed person's post. For example, in Focus Group Two, all the participants admitted that they had participated in online shaming. A respondent said, "All of us have participated and it felt great. I did not feel like I was shaming, I felt like I was putting her in her place." This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Norlock (2017), who says that the shamer desires to "take down" the target of the shame. While the respondent did not mention whom he had shamed or whether that person

was in a position of power or at least held a higher position over him, it felt good that he was able to tell that perpetrator to more or less get off his high horse.

For the few participants who said they had been shamed online, it was not because they had broken the law but for more non-legal actions. One respondent in Focus Group One detailed a time when he was shamed for posting a picture while on holiday. He was accused of being a store worker on break. He got angry that another user was shaming him for using his "work hours" to take pictures. Another respondent in Focus Group Three personally closed his Twitter account because of some comments he received on a post he shared.

A respondent in Focus Group One said the fear of being shamed just for having an opinion prevented her from being an active commenter on Twitter. She was more comfortable reading other people's posts and staying out of trouble. Members in her discussion seemed to agree with that statement. This finding is similar to that of Huffman's (2016), who found that social media users reduced the frequency of their posts especially after witnessing or being victims of online shaming.

4.2.4 Perceptions of Online Shaming

In Focus Group One, participants felt that online shaming was harmful. A respondent said:

It's far more harmful. As you said, day-by-day, minute-by-minute people are being trolled negatively online and it's very…you don't see it so often that people are being shamed positively. Most of the attacks are very negative… It's funny; human beings tend to draw towards negativity than positivity. Looking down on someone, trying to feel better than someone, that's the main issue here. Trying to seem superior to someone else. It's not something you can stop because that is the mentality of a

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human being. It's not something you can stop but it's something that you can try and push aside.

In this group, one participant shared that he had been shamed online and that the entire process angered him. The other participants who had witnessed online shaming shared that it made them sad. One respondent said:

> I just remembered a celebrity just posted a picture of her baby. Obviously, you can't say this baby is ugly, yeah, so she posted the picture and had people saying this baby was an alien, this baby was ugly, why didn't she give birth to this baby by herself and why did she use a surrogate? It's just a baby, not even a month-old baby or something. When you read such comments, you feel sad. You can't be happy about it.

According to According to Scheff (2018), there has been a slow corrosion of online civility among humans. Scheff (2018) believes that by employing this form of public shaming to shift our beliefs rather than engage in constructive discussions has blurred the lines between activism, cyber bullying and humiliation. Online shaming may jeopardize individuals' well being physically and emotionally, stir up feelings of distrust and kill privacy (Scheff, 2018).

The participants felt that people who broke laws deserved to be shamed, but they also felt that online shaming had lost its meaning or purpose. This is because they felt that online shaming was not just limited to those who broke laws but that everyone was at risk of getting shamed simply by being himself or herself. The participants felt that once people were active on Twitter, they were susceptible to online shaming as other users were most likely watching them further reinforces the idea of Twitter being a breeding ground for surveillance. One participant, who had been a victim of online shaming (although it wasn't on Twitter) said that he was shamed for taking a picture in a shoe shop while on holiday in London. He received a comment from a person he did not know chastising him to get back to work in the shop instead

of playing around. Even though this comment came from one person, the participant felt bad and took down the picture. While he sparingly posts pictures onto his social media account today, he now prefers to just observe. One of the reasons that could explain why the participants felt online shaming was harmful is the fact that one member had experienced online shaming and the other participants mentioned directly witnessing online shaming.

In Focus Group Two, participants felt that online shaming was good as it served as a means of checking misbehavior. The participants also felt that people who were usually shamed online deserved it because they had broken social norms or rules. They did not feel that capturing someone breaking rules was an invasion of privacy. They were also of the view that if people wanted privacy then those people should stay off social media. A participant, for example, said, "We are always observing so if you want to be private then don't put it there." Another respondent felt that once a post was put up on Twitter, it was subject to the scrutiny from other members. This perception supports the idea of reversed panopticism in social media as proposed by Romele et al. (2017). In this form of panopticism, the panopticon is reversed because the controlled (the user) is alone in the middle of the prison and the controllers (other users) are all around him or her. This form of panopticism is also known as lateral surveillance (Andrejevic, 2015). Human beings cannot avoid being watched whether physically or online. In this group discussion, none of the participants had been on the receiving end of online shaming, but all of them had shamed others. When asked how it felt when shaming another, a participant said, "It felt great!" The participants in the group also did seem to take online shaming as seriously unlike those in Focus Group One. It could be that the reason behind their casual attitude towards online shaming was that none of them had actually been a victim of the phenomenon but had at some point shamed others online. One participant recalled when he and his friends shamed a girl on Twitter for cheating on and dumping another friend of theirs. While they did not mention her name, they posted subliminal messages on Twitter calling her

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out on what she had done, leaving their followers to figure out who they were talking about. As at the time of the group discussion, he said he was not on speaking terms with the girl but that she ended up apologizing to his friend.

Unlike the participants in the previous group discussions, participants in Focus Group Three had a unique and different perspective. They felt that online shaming posed no threat and was not a phenomenon to be taken seriously although they did acknowledge its power to check and monitor misbehaviours despite some of them being on the receiving end of online shaming. The reason for this perception was that people who participated in shaming did so not because of their desire to restore social order but for their own personal gains such as more followers. One respondent said:

> It's actually a whole business. People just hype accounts and get about 20K [twenty thousand] followers and sell it. So, the way to get followers is to bash people and then they get the followers and later sell their profiles to other people.

They also felt that everyone at some point in time had been a participant in online shaming either by liking, laughing at, commenting on or retweeting shaming tweets on Twitter. A participant said, "This means that there's a bigger third party too. It's not just the recipient and a participant there's another party that contributes so much to the thing. They go and call others to come and read messages." It is very common to see Twitter users tag their friends when they stumble upon shaming tweets. Sometimes, these users may not directly be involved in the discourse but may find it relevant enough to share amongst their followers. These Twitter users use tagging as a way to alert their friends in order for them to not miss out on the chance to either observe or participate in shaming. Additionally, they also felt that everyone at some point was going to be shamed for whatever reason and as such should just learn to 'deal with it' since everyone participated in one way or the other. One participant said he had been shamed for wearing a fake designer outfit but he fought back, blocked the people mocking him and refused

to delete the photo. Another participant, however, said that he deactivated his Twitter account out of the fear of being shamed during a period in 2011 where an anonymous account was revealing people's secrets. At the time of the group discussion, he had been back for a couple of years and while he didn't openly shame people, he had liked and retweeted a number of shaming tweets.

The next section examines the reasons for online shaming and also how the participants felt about the phenomenon.

4.3 Reasons for Online Shaming

This section seeks to find out reasons why people engage in online shaming. Across all three discussions, one of the first reasons people participated in online shaming was people's general tendency to be insensitive towards others. A respondent in Focus Group One said, "But I think some people do it because at the end of the day that's who they are. They are not positive. They don't like to see or say good things to others." This finding is consistent with that of a study conducted by Takahashi et al. (2009). In that study, Takahashi et al. (2009) found that people tended to have darker motivations such as the pleasure of seeing someone else brought low and humiliated. Takahashi et al. (2009) found that people felt pleasant feelings of reward when a person they acknowledged as privileged or advantaged suffered a misfortune. While participants did not explicitly say that they enjoyed seeing more privileged people's misfortunes, it is important to note that in the discussion with Focus Group Two, one participant felt that online shaming tended to happen to a lot of celebrities and public figures than the average Joe. He said, "I think shaming is targeted towards celebrities more." Celebrities may often be the targets of online shaming because they are widely known and tend live their lives in the public eye. Therefore, they are most likely going to be subjected to more public scrutiny.

Another reason for online shaming participation was the desire to raise awareness, correct and bring about positive change. By using examples such as the Citi TV War Against Indiscipline[4] in which the police and media accost road traffic violators, participants were able to explain why people engaged in online shaming. By commending the police and the media for their efforts, participants showed their support for being socially responsible. Such a finding is consistent with a study conducted by Skoric et al (2010), which revealed that people engaged in online shaming to raise awareness about social violations.

Also, another reason mentioned in Focus Group One was the anonymous nature of social media in general. Many of the participants felt that the interactions on Twitter would be much different if the people involved met face-to-face. One participant said:

> The fact that you can do something anonymously, it gives it some sort of thrill like
> yeah, I can get away with this. It plays a huge role in why there are so many online
> trolls. You can create so many dummy accounts and use them to troll people.

According to Gallardo (2017), online anonymity and few cost barriers have contributed to the surge in online public shaming. This perceived anonymity, in turn, has enabled individuals to escape from being held responsible for any scathing statements they make about other individuals online. Again, Gallardo (2017) says that the inexpensive nature of engaging in online shaming has led to an increase in "drive-by relationships" (p.728), which she describes as a user's ability to anonymously and cheaply post ad hominem attacks and then quickly ducking out of the situation. When these attacks happen, the victim of online shaming is stuck with the unpleasant and shaming comments and has little to no information on how to identify the shamer. This study's findings are consistent with Gallardo's (2017) and provide an

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[4] Citi TV is a television channel in Ghana. The station, in 2019, teamed up with the Ghana Police Service to arrest drivers who committed various driving offences.

explanation as to why people engage in online shaming and why the practice has increased in a short period of time. While the researcher did not ask participants if they had tried to hide behind a clock of anonymity, it is important to note that some participants admitted to using their original accounts to send subliminal messages with little clues/identifiers and leaving it up to their followers to figure out who they are talking about.

Finally, many participants also felt that people engage in online shaming for attention and humour with the aim of increasing the number of followers they have on Twitter. A respondent in Focus Group Three said, "They know if they do it, they will get attention, they will get retweets. They will do it and they don't care who gets hurt." This finding shows that not everybody who participates in online shaming does so with the intention of actually correcting people for their own good. Another participant in Focus Group Three also said, "It's a business. People hype accounts, get 20 thousand followers and sell the account…people bash others to get followers." One of the quickest ways a person can get followers is by using humour and jokes to shame others. This finding is consistent with a study by Basak et al. (2016), in which they found that sarcasm/jokes, passing judgment and abuses were the three types of Twitter interactions. Like the study of Basak et al. (2016), the present study found rewards in the forms of increased followership and more retweets as some of the motives behind people's justifications of online shaming. This motivation questions the true intent of shamers.

The motivations for engaging in online shaming discussed above has explained the reason why participants felt people engage in online shaming.

4.4 Effects of Online Shaming

This section explores the two sides of online shaming by looking at its positive and negative effects. Participants mentioned using online shaming as a correcting tool to raise

awareness and gain followers on Twitter as its positive effects. They also mentioned suicide and the fear of stating their opinions on Twitter as some of its negative effects.

4.4.1 Positive Effects of Online Shaming

Focus group participants were of the view that online shaming had the power to correct individuals by pointing out where they had gone wrong which in turn, caused them to acknowledge their misdeeds. Participants also felt that when other Twitter users experienced or witnessed online shaming, it also served as a deterrent and prevented them from committing the same infractions. Therefore, people would be more likely to conduct themselves in public, whether in the real world or online because they would not know if they were being watched. Participants acknowledged that online shaming, when done responsibly and with a genuine desire to effect positive change, could restore order. One participant from Focus Group One said, "I think for shaming to end up with a good result, the target of the shame needs to understand what he's done is the wrong thing. He also needs to feel the shame himself." This statement means that for shaming to be successful, the culprit or target of the shame must also reflect on his or her past misdeed and see where he or she went wrong.

Participants also felt that online shaming, when done right, could raise awareness and promote activism. In Focus Group One's discussion, a participant said:

> For example, Drop that Chamber[5]. The fact that people got on board and involved and brought the government to know that what they were doing was wrong and put certain examples before them. I think that is an example of online shaming doing the right thing.

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[5] "Drop that Chamber" was a campaign that some Ghanaian citizens embarked on to protest against the building of a $200 million dollar chamber for Ghanaian parliamentarians under the belief that many citizens were suffering.

Social media's convenience has given people the platform to raise awareness on important issues. It has led to the creation of online petitions and movements that seek to expand people's knowledge of the societies they find themselves in thereby making them curious about the things around them.

Another point to note was that participants considered having a large following on Twitter as a positive effect of online shaming. Some of the participants felt that other Twitter users were quick to jump on the shaming bandwagon by using humour to shame victims with the hope that their tweets would go viral (quickly spread) and earn them more followers. In Focus Group Two, one participant said:

> Publicity in the sense that you gain followers and the more followers you have, the more profit you gain for advertising. You can get businesses to represent you. So people want to be funny, make sarcastic comments because they want people to say they are funny.

According to the participants in Focus Group Three, users with large followings usually sold their Twitter profiles to others who were in need of more followers or were more likely to be paid by companies for advertising their products. While this point may be a positive effect of online shaming, it seems to benefit only the shamer and questions the motives that people may have when shaming others online. Such a finding is again consistent with that of Basak et al. (2019) who found that shamers acquired more followers per month than the non-shamers. The next sub-section explores the negative effects of online shaming.

4.4.2 Negative Effects of Online Shaming

While online shaming may have its advantages, when not controlled or done irresponsibly, it may lead to devastating effects. Participants felt that online shaming had the

potential to have devastating effects. This view was supported with the following account by a participant in Focus Group One:

> There was an instance on Twitter where somebody, a lady, came to post that someone had raped her. The lady posted the Twitter handle and accused the person of rape and everyone started insulting the guy, saying 'you're a rapist'. Other girls also came out to confirm. This guy tried to defend himself, but he couldn't. He later ended up committing suicide.

This statement also sheds light on the fact that little to no fact checking is involved when it comes to online shaming. For example, in Focus Group Three, when participants were asked how they determined if shaming posts were factual, one respondent said, "People don't even care about the truth." Another respondent added, "We know they are lies and we know it is out of place and it is being taken out of context but that is where the fun is." These statements reveal a dangerous side of online shaming where victims of online shaming, in extreme cases, could harm themselves because those shaming them have chosen to believe what they want to believe.

Participants also felt that the fear of being shamed online stopped them from posting so much information online in case one of their posts offended somebody else. One participant in Focus Group One said, "I don't post on Twitter because of these things. I don't want to involve myself because the way Twitter works, it will turn and come back at you." Another participant in Focus Group Three said he deactivated his Twitter account out of the fear that he could find himself being exposed around the time a gossip page started to reveal secrets about some of the users. He said, "It's fun when you are on the other end and not being shamed or exposed." These views from participants support Huffman's (2016) study. In his research, he found that young social media users were reported to worry about their social media content, which led

to them reducing the frequency of their posts especially after witnessing or experiencing online shaming. The statements made by the participants as well as the findings in Huffman's (2016) show evidence of Foucault's panopticism in the social media sphere. Panopticism is the idea that due to constant surveillance human beings act and behave in the manner in which they do out of fear. A participant in Focus Group One posted infrequently on Twitter out of fear. The other participant went as far as deactivating his account. His statement of finding online shaming fun when not being the recipient shows how with social media, users can be both guards and prisoners. These findings also reinforce Foucault's (1975) idea of the gaze alert being everywhere even on social media.

Section 4.7 investigates the ethics of online shaming and the results gathered from participants in the group discussions.

4.5 The Ethics of Online Shaming

The study was interested in finding out from them their ethical judgment of the phenomenon. In other words, is online shaming ethical or unethical? Participants' responses to such a question, it was hoped, would help construct a richer and deeper view of their perceptions of online shaming.

Majority of the respondents in the study exhibited traits of consequentialism across all three discussions. They were of the view that online shaming's purpose was to correct and raise awareness. By correcting people and thereby raising awareness, in their own way they were making a positive difference for the good of everyone. This result is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Hou, Jiang and Wang (2017). In their study they found that individuals with higher socio-economic status were more likely to take on social responsibilities than those who were of lower socio-economic status. Therefore, they were more likely to engage in online shaming because of their desire to be in control and make the world a better place. Though the

study did not attempt to establish a relationship between socio-economic status and the likelihood to engage in online shaming, it argues that the participants might have access to some benefits that others of lower socio-economic status might not have access to. One of the requirements during the selection of participants in this study was that they had to be active users of Twitter, which meant that they regularly purchased Internet data in order to keep them connected. By so doing, they were able to observe, monitor and regulate on Twitter in order to call out bad behaviour when necessary. This response by participants implicates Foucault and his panopticism theory by showing how Twitter has become a breeding ground for surveillance. It also reinforces Foucault's idea of the gaze alert being everywhere (humans being watched), not just physically but even in cyberspace.

In fact, a participant in Focus Group One felt that shaming could also be used as a preventative measure:

> It's like catching a thief or somebody that is wanted…Let's take maybe the banking sector, a worker defrauds customers and the bank, or the institution posts a picture. This staff has been dismissed. They are using it to caution the public to not do business [with them]. They are not thinking about embarrassing him. It is a preventive measure.

A consequentialist will take into consideration the good of others as well as their own good. Based on the participant's example, once people have been made aware and cautioned not to work with the dismissed worker, then it makes shaming a right conduct because it saves a lot of people from getting defrauded. This analogy is similar to the practice of shaming people online in that they deserve to be shamed because it may dissuade other users from committing the same offence. A large number of the participants felt that online shaming was necessary only if it was for the greater good and that the result would be beneficial to a larger group of

people despite some of its devastating consequences. It is important to note that, for the majority of participants who felt this way towards online shaming, they had not been on the receiving end of the practice. They had only either witnessed or participated in online shaming.

On the other hand, other participants who had been on the receiving end of online shaming held a much different view of the practice as they felt that its outcomes were generally not positive and so shouldn't be encouraged. When asked if online shaming had helped in raising awareness for the greater good, a respondent from Focus Group One said, "It's been more harmful. People say they use because it gives them a voice but I think it is some of bullying disguised as activism." Victims of online shaming are not given the chance to explain their sides of the story because of how people are quick to jump on the bandwagon and judge them.

4.6 Summary

This study attempted to understand how Ghanaian Twitter users perceive online shaming. The data gathered from the focus groups suggest that participants did not necessarily view online shaming to be chastising others for their wrongdoings but also just calling out people for trivial issues, sometimes issues that are beyond the shamed person's control (body, weight, and hair). Many of the participants also shared their experiences with online shaming as victims of online shaming or witnesses and participants in online shaming. For participants that had found themselves as victims of online shaming, they recounted feeling angry which led to either lashing out or deactivating their accounts even if for a short period of time. For those that said they had participated in online shaming, they expressed feeling good about their behaviour because they were trying to right the wrongs in society. Some also said they found online shaming entertaining and the phenomenon provided humour. The information gathered also highlighted the motivations or justifications for online shaming. These findings, for the most part, replicated the findings of studies done elsewhere indicating that people from the

United States and Asia share similar online habits with those in Africa in general and Ghana in particular. Some of the participants, especially those that had not been on the receiving end of online shaming, felt that while online shaming had its negative effects, it was still necessary for the greater good. However, for the few respondents who had been shamed online before, they felt that the outcomes of online shaming had been more harmful than good to society.

Furthermore, the findings of this study reinforced the existence of Foucault's idea of the panopticism on social media. Because of the watchful eyes of other users, some of discussants chose to either refrain from Tweeting or went ahead to deactivate their Twitter accounts out of the fear of being shamed online.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the summary of findings, conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for future research. The first chapter of this study provided a general background to online shaming, laid out objectives, and significance of this study. This study had three questions:

1. How do Ghanaian Twitter users perceive online shaming?

2. Why do people engage in online shaming?

3. How ethical is online shaming?

The overview of online shaming focused on online shaming examples that occurred globally and then narrowed it down to examples in Ghana, showing how the phenomenon had gradually increased in Ghana. The need to explore further into the developing trend of online shaming in Ghana was highlighted in order to understand how social media users, especially Twitter users, perceived online shaming, the reasons why people engaged in the practice, and the ethical questions the practice raised. Chapter Two provided a review of literature in five thematic areas related to the study. The chapter then went ahead to articulate Michel Foucault's Theory of Panopticism. Chapter Three described the approach used to answer the research questions posed in Chapter One. The total sample of the study comprised of Ghanaian Twitter users between the ages of 25-30 years old. The entire study consisted of 20 participants (13 males and 7 females). Participants were placed into three focus groups of 6-8 members. Data obtained from the focus group discussions were analyzed thematically; they were first transcribed from audio recordings and then thoroughly analyzed for similar themes and trends. Chapter Four presented the findings and discussion of the study.

From the study, 5 primary themes emerged in relation to the original research questions. In terms of what meanings Ghanaian Twitter users associated with online shaming, it was most commonly referred to as a method of chastising socially unacceptable behaviours. This finding supported historical literature on the function of public shaming and was consistent with results from studies conducted elsewhere. However, further discussions into the concept of online shaming also revealed that offenders were not only shamed for committing wrongful acts but also for 'trivial' matters such as their hairstyles, bodies and personal opinions on topical issues. In this vein, perhaps it could be said that the purpose of publicly shaming an offender has changed over the course of history. While participants felt that online shaming served as a deterrent, they also felt that people engaged in online shaming with their own motives (e.g. more Twitter followers as having a large following could generate revenue through advertising for businesses).

Initially, during earlier discussion times, participants used the words "trolling", "bullying" and "ridiculing" interchangeably with online shaming. However, in further discussions with them, they acknowledged that those terms, although very similar, were also mutually exclusive. Participants felt that online shaming was the gateway to these other social media practices. Interestingly, across all three focus groups, the participants called the offender "victim", perhaps indicating just how unpleasant the experience of online shaming is and the effects that it could have on a person. One participant said the fear of being shamed for even just sharing an opinion prevented her from actively participating in social media activities. Others simply deleted their profiles at certain points for fear of being shamed online. These examples show how Foucault's theory of panopticism appears in social media. Because of the fear of online shaming, some of the participants were more inclined to self-regulate. Most of them reduced or deleted their posts out of fear of being publicly ridiculed or called out in front of their family and friends.

In all three focus group discussions, participants weighed the ethics of online shaming by examining its effects. The common theme identified in all three groups showed that while they recognized online shaming as being dangerous or harmful, they felt that online shaming was acceptable once it served the greater good and was beneficial to a larger group of people. Interestingly, participants seemed to be in the middle of two extremes, recognizing that online shaming is very harmful, and, yet finding it to be a very important tool in correcting offenders.

Throughout the discussions, the main reason given by participants for online shaming was that it served as a deterrent in curbing socially unacceptable behaviours and that the offenders deserved to be called out for their actions. However, the phenomenon raised the issue of how to shame responsibly in order to reduce the destructive consequences of online shaming as well as the scope of online shaming. Even observing how participants initially used other words such as bullying interchangeably with online shaming before attempting to establish differences, it showed how online shaming generally has no scope.

According to De Vries (2015), citizens must not only fear surveillance from governments and organizations; they must also be conscious of surveillance by peers and strangers. Through the group discussions, it was established that online shaming went beyond looking out for criminal offences but that online shaming by peers and strangers had the tendency to find and judge everyday actions thereby reinforcing Foucault's idea of the "gaze alert."

5.2 Conclusion

This study set out to understand the perceptions that Ghanaian Twitter users have of online shaming and found that, for the most part, online shaming had lost its purpose and was the gateway to cyber bullying. This is because, participants felt that not only was the practice no longer used to correct wrong behaviour but that it was also used as a means to mock

others on other matters beyond their control such as their appearance. The findings from the research generally agreed with previous literature on the reasons why people shamed others online. However, during discussions, participants also highlighted the complex nature of online shaming and the ethical dilemmas involved in deciding to participate in the practice. The study also discovered that participants who had witnessed online shaming or had been victims of the practice had negative perceptions of the practice as they were more hesitant to participate on Twitter and constantly self-regulated. On the other hand, those that had participated in online shaming had more positive perceptions of the practice and they admitted to regularly monitoring other users' feeds in order to weed out misbehaviour from other users. This study provided qualitative insight into understanding Ghanaian Twitter users' perceptions of online shaming and identified other interesting phenomenon during the study that require further investigation.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Communication Research

The study looked at understanding Ghanaian Twitter users' perceptions of online shaming. One of the limitations of this study was that it was only narrowed to Ghanaian Twitter users whose views might vary from those of other geographical regions; therefore, the findings may not necessarily be generalized to other Twitter users. It is recommended that future studies be conducted in other geographical areas in order to identify any similarities or differences in perceptions.

This study was limited to just one social networking site, Twitter. It is further recommended that future studies also explore other users' perceptions on online shaming on other social networks such as Facebook and Instagram as they might have differing views.

This study had more respondents who had participated in online shaming either by commenting or re-tweeting than those who had actually been victims of online shaming. A

more in-depth case study into both of these parties could provide insights into alternative perspectives of the phenomenon.

Findings obtained from this study are largely representative of the perspectives of males as the sample size of 20 comprised of 13 males and 7 females. Future studies could also investigate whether perceptions of online shaming vary between genders.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Department of Communication Studies, University of Ghana

Topic: Shame on You! A Study on Ghanaian Twitter Users' Perceptions of Online Shaming

The aim of this research is to gain understanding of how Twitter users perceive the online shaming phenomenon to be as well as to gain insight into why people engage in online shaming. The study will also explore the ethicalities of online shaming.

1. How would you define the concept of online shaming?
2. How do you see online shaming manifest itself on Twitter?
3. What are your experiences with online shaming? Have you been the recipient or a participant of online shaming?
4. How do you feel when you participate in online shaming or read shaming posts?
5. What are some of the examples of deviant behaviour that warrant online shaming?
6. Studies have shown that shaming could either be integrative or disintegrative. Based on your understanding and experience with online shaming, is it integrative or disintegrative? Why?
7. Why would you or other people feel the need to engage in online shaming?
8. What are some of the examples that would justify yours or others decision to engage in online shaming?
9. How would you differentiate online shaming from other social media phenomena such as trolling, cyber-bullying or cyber-harassment?
10. What are the advantages of online shaming?
11. What are the disadvantages of online shaming?
12. How do you determine whether a Twitter shaming post is factual and not taken out of context?
13. New media technologies (e.g. smart phones) have the ability to record and capture real world scenarios that can be easily transferred to the cyber world. What do you think about the use of smart phones for recording public behaviours?
14. What are some of the ethical challenges involved with online shaming?
15. What has been the overall impact of online shaming? Why do you think it has either been harmful or useful?