The Effect of Subjective Knowledge of Sport, Perceived Anonymity, and Neutralization on the Willingness to Write Malicious Comments

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Despite the many advantages of social media, many teams and athletes are increasingly facing the negative consequences of abusive online behavior (Pfeffer et al., 2014). A single negative comment can divide sides making individuals quarrel and might end up harming one of the values of sport, unity. Thus, it is important to understand why individuals leave malicious comments online.

In the modern era, sports fans often watch sports in the comfort of their homes while simultaneously communicating with others using second screen devices to express their knowledge of sport. Subjective knowledge influences the formation of attitudes, and subsequent behaviors. When one feels knowledgeable about a certain matter, they tend to discuss this with others (Schafer, 2020). Those who perceive themselves to be more knowledgeable than others try to maintain a sense of superiority and often ridicule people who have less knowledge about a sport (Davis & Duncan, 2006). Meanwhile, neutralization, a sub-factor of social learning theory, refers to the degree to which an individual perceives a deviant behavior as justifiable (Lowry, 2016). As people connect sport with play it creates an illusion that sport is isolated with the real world leading to higher neutralization. It decouples deviant behavior with reality giving fans the perceptions that it is all part of the game (Matthews & Channon, 2016). We expected that this aspect of neutralization will influence the willingness to write malicious comments related to sports. Furthermore, anonymity has often been used to explain deviant online behaviors (Kim, 2018), and we theorize that higher perceived anonymity will exacerbate the effects of perceived neutralization. Overall, the purpose of this research is to explore whether subjective knowledge, anonymity and neutralization influences the willingness to write malicious comments.

A total of 223 participants were recruited online. The independent variables were subjective knowledge of sports in general, the perceived anonymity of the social media platform as perceived by the participants, and neutralization. To test the effects of subjective knowledge, perceived anonymity and neutralization, each variable was divided into two groups (High vs Low) through median split. The dependent variable was the willingness to write malicious comments within a sport context.

The results revealed that anonymity [F(1,215)=5.28, p<.05] and neutralization [F(1,215)=44.27, p<.05] had significant influences on willingness to write malicious comments while subjective knowledge did not. Those who perceived high anonymity (M=3.06, SD=.14) had more intention to write malicious comments than those who perceived low anonymity (M=2.59, SD=.15). Also those who had high neutralization intentions (M=3.51, SD=.15) displayed higher intention to write malicious comments compared to those who had low neutralization intentions (M=2.14, SD=.15). Finally, there was a significant interaction effect between subjective knowledge and neutralization [F(1,215)=4.19, p<.05].

Preliminary results indicate that anonymity and neutralization are factors that trigger deviant behavior and are in line with previous research. Although subjective knowledge had no main effect it had a significant interaction effect with neutralization showing that individuals use their knowledge to neutralize their feelings of guilt when leaving malicious comments. Additional regression-based analyses to be conducted and presented.