Discarding the Veil of Anonymity – Does Flaming No Longer Need the Protection of Anonymity as Society Becomes Increasingly Desensitised?

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Summary

As society continues to become increasingly dependent on the internet, we regularly see shifts in how we use it. Today, we are increasingly progressing towards a place where cyber users are frequenting less anonymous platforms. This, coupled with the fact that the online world can disinhibit us and make us numb to the aggressive acts we perform online, such as flaming, raises the question: does the removal of anonymity as a protection have an effect on the flaming behaviour witnessed throughout cyberspace?

This paper aims to explore how hostile expressions of flaming remain higher on computer mediated communications compared to their face-to-face counterparts through the exploration of the online disinhibition effect. This theorises why online users behave differently online to their offline lives and appear to be less concerned with how their messages will be received when communicating online. However, as we have moved to more open, less anonymous platforms, where our identities are readily accessible it cannot be said that anonymity remains the primary factor causing flaming in the online disinhibition effect. Although, anonymity affords some protection, therefore allowing people to be disinhibited in cyberspace, as users now appear to use less anonymised social networking sites, this disinhibition is becoming normalised which has led to a type of flaming activity that is easily traced back to our offline personas

The purpose of this paper is to offer insight as to why people flame when online, even when their identities are much more visible on participatory social networking sites. The aim is to address the increased levels of flaming now that cyber users are preforming these acts without the guise of anonymity.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations

CMC   -   Computer Mediated Communication

FTF   -   Face to Face

ODE   -   Online Disinhibition Effect

POC   -   People of Colour

SNS   -   Social Networking Sites

List of Figures

Chapter 1

<u>**Introduction**</u>

This paper examines what many consider to be a rise of flaming behaviours within online platforms. It seeks to understand the primary underlying causes for such deviant behaviours and to examine if those underlying causes are shifting over time as a result of an ongoing exposure and acceptance of these behaviours. The rapid acceleration and adoption of social media and computer mediated communication (CMC), together with the advancement of modern technology, is thought to have led to increasing disruption in the levels of empathy within digital conversations. The ability to post, comment and share with anybody, anywhere "often without the empathetic social filter that accompanies traditional communications" (Terry & Cain, 2016, p. 1) has led to a rise in deviant online behaviours.

Deviant behaviour is rampant within cyberspace; "almost from its first days, CMC became a fertile ground for misbehaviour and crime" (Hardaker, 2017, p.496). These behaviours include seemingly minor offensive acts, including online plagiarism, unauthorised downloading and rumour spreading as some examples. More serious actions range from hacking, seeking illegal online content such as child abuse imagery or narcotics, the creation or spreading of content advocating violence or terrorism, etc. One of the most common, pervasive and offensive online activities is 'flaming'. Flaming can be classified as the misbehaviour that occurs online through the hostile expression of opinions or comments containing threats, insults or cruel language.

As forms of communication are becoming increasingly digital, so too is the concept and acceptance of flaming as a part of online practice. The notion of flaming will be discussed heavily throughout this paper, which seeks to understand the reason why this behaviour occurs. To do this, we must consider the online disinhibition effect (ODE). The ODE is one of the main theories explaining why users appear to be less inhibited online and why people act differently in cyberspace compared to their real lives. This paper discusses the six main categories of the ODE; invisibility, minimisation of authority, asynchronicity, dissociative imagination, solipsistic introjection and anonymity. However, a heavy focus is placed on anonymity in explaining the occurrence of flaming in cyberspace and questions the established theory that anonymity is the primary factor giving rise to ODE.

It is intended that this paper will challenge the long-established theory that anonymity is the main cause for disinhibited behaviours online. It will look at the entirety of the ODE and all six of its factors when reviewing the more recent trend to use less-anonymous social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat and Instagram, where commonly our online identities inextricably link us to our offline personas.

As our lives have become much more online in recent times, it cannot be denied that the cyber environment is a breeding ground for deviant behaviours, from minor offences to vindictive practices. Although the internet, social networking sites (SNS) and social media have become a substantial aspect of everyday life and have contributed significantly to our ability to connect, learn and build, the pervasive and aggressive flaming behaviour that is seemingly unique to cyberspace must be recognised as a consequence that continues to grow and spread. The purpose of this paper is to seek to address and answer the question: is the increasing instance of flaming as a disinhibited online behaviour a consequence of the anonymous cyber platforms we frequent on a daily basis or does it no longer need the protection of anonymity as society becomes increasingly desensitised?

This paper will address this question over the course of five sections. Chapter 1 will give a short account of the research undertaken by introducing the concept of flaming and the ODE. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on the topics of flaming and the ODE and discusses the idea of anonymity as a primary factor disinhibiting online users. In Chapter 3, two case studies on these topics will be presented and discussed in terms of the above. Subsequently, Chapter 4 will analyse what has been learned from the case studies and why anonymity may not be the leading factor in contributing to disinhibition online. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with the findings and potential concerns of the paper.

<div align="center">**Chapter 2**</div>

<u>Literature review</u>

This chapter introduces the theoretical grounding for this paper's exploration of flaming, the online disinhibition effect and anonymity in detail. It seeks to understand the causes of online flaming, the reasons behind its prevalence and the factors that contribute to its rising prevalence in online communications. To do so, we must first consider what 'flaming' actually is.

<u>Understanding the notion of 'Flaming'</u>

As discussed in Chapter 1, flaming is the pervasive and disorderly behaviour committed by many online users. The etymology of the verb 'to flame' can be traced back to the 1500s, when it was used to describe "a violent, passionate outburst" (Hardaker, 2017, p. 499). Similar to the modern slang word 'burn', it is a term used to disrespect, mock or annoy others. Hardaker (2017) writes that flaming has been a constant presence within cyberspace and occurrences have increased rapidly since the turn of the millennium. Today, it is almost exclusively used to describe aggressive engagement in online communications.

Flaming in online communications is the occurrence of unruly misbehaviour, committed online in the form of posting insulting content, comments or messages. Millard (1997) defines these occurrences of online verbal abuse as a "personal verbal violence arising largely from the peculiar conditions of online writing". It is typically characterised by the "hostile expression of strong emotions such as swearing, insults, and name-calling" (Hangwoo, 2005, p. 385), with many perpetrators voicing opinions that are derogatory or violent in nature. These sentiments are often found to be racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic or misogynistic and usually include explicit or profane language. As one of the most common and recognised occurrences of online user interaction, examples of flaming can be found on all aspects of the web and are committed by all types of people (Hangwoo, 2005). In an article from 2016, Terry & Cain discussed how it is "not uncommon to read vitriol-filled remarks on social media applications or in the comments section of online news sites" (p. 2). Terry & Cain also believe that even "those of high moral judgment and character can subconsciously devolve into a more pernicious state" (Terry & Cain, 2016, p. 2) when using online platforms as a mode of communication.

Adolescents are the primary recreational internet users, and consequently, it is commonly accepted that they use the internet for social interaction much more than their adult counterparts (Valkenburg & Jochen Peter, 2009). However, although flaming is indeed popular amongst younger generations, such as teens and young adults, it has also been seen occurring in older groups of internet users. Faucher (2018) states that "even seemingly well-composed individuals can be baited into an online dispute that escalates to the point of making direct attacks and issuing threats" (p. 101). Furthermore, he also goes on to explain that even "public figures such as celebrities and politicians have been known to engage in impulsive speech acts on social media" (p. 101), that contain high levels of hostile criticism, cyberbullying and insensitive or malicious commentary.

An interesting question which is discussed by Hangwoo (2005) is why individuals freely engage in behaviour such as flaming in CMC but are less likely to do so in other modes of communication such as face to face (FTF) contact? According to Hangwoo (2005) the occurrence of flaming has been seen to remain much higher in CMC rather than in that of FTF contact. Interaction between users in cyberspace appears to be prone to these higher levels of hostility and this behaviour within online public discussions such as comment sections and public pages is now beginning to receive much more attention from the academic community (Coe et al., 2014).

In analysing this trend, Sheehan & Hoy (1999) found many links between users' online behaviours and their concerns towards their privacy. In their study, Sheehan and Hoy (1999) found that users were more likely to respond to unsolicited emails negatively and with hostility when they felt a breach or concern for their own privacy while online.

A study conducted by Moor et al. (2010) found a significant correlation between flaming comments and negative behaviours seen on YouTube and a reduced "awareness of people's feelings" (p. 1536) in the users of the platform. They deduced that this lowered awareness is due to the effects of the online world and portable devices on human interactions, e.g. a lowered sense of feelings such as embarrassment, guilt and consequence leading users to become disinhibited.

The study by Moor et al. (2010) further highlighted that over 44% of users that comment on YouTube believed that some of their remarks could be considered flaming in nature. This can be contrasted to the views of over 60% of the receivers of the comments who believed that they were being flamed. Similarly, Moor et al. (2010) found that there is a clear divide between those who send comments believing that their actions are funny in nature, and the receiving users who were more inclined to perceive the comments as hateful.

Coe et al.'s (2014) study discovered that up to 22% of the public comments on an online news site contained some kind of 'uncivility', including the attributes that make up flaming - mean spirited name-calling, use of vulgar language, hatred towards an idea and also lying. In addition to this, their study also deduced that 55.5% of article discussions on the news site contained flaming.

What is also interesting to note is that Sheehan & Hoy (1999) argue that due to the often-hateful outlook and the general "socially undesirable" (p. 46) attitudes towards flaming, many test subjects may not be forthcoming and are potentially very hesitant to admit to having performed acts of flaming at some time in the past. Therefore, the number of people who perform flaming online may be much higher than we know. Additionally, what is also noteworthy is that many of those people who engage in flaming behaviour online do not freely admit to that behaviour, leading one to deduce that they do appreciate that their behaviour is not entirely socially acceptable. If this is the case and individuals appreciate the consequences that may ensue from online flaming, the question becomes why do they continue to behave in this way online when they know that such behaviour is not acceptable offline? In his research on the idea of flaming and the reasoning behind it, Moor et al. (2010) determined that it "is more often intended to express disagreement or as a response to a perceived offense by others" (p. 1536) rather than to directly harm or insult others. By way of contrast, Terry & Cain (2016) believe that in most instances "those unsavoury comments are unprovoked and unwarranted" (p. 2). Here we have a clear disparity amongst opinions; with some academics arguing that flaming occurs as a response to a perceived offence rather than occurring unprovoked.

Moor et al. (2010) have also found that the prevalent nature of flaming may be acting as a deterrent to people uploading videos to YouTube because they fear the negative criticism or abuse that they will receive. Certain news sites have gone so far as to remove the comment

feature on their site due to "excessive forms of hostility, flaming and spamming" (Faucher, 2018, p. 102).

Another theory explaining flaming is that the deviant behaviour seen in online users (criticising, attacking or just being generally aggressive) may occur for no reason other than to prevent the prospect of this type of behaviour being directed at themselves. Aggression has established itself in deviant behaviours that have been a part of human interaction since our beginning; fighting off predators, defending property and hunting for food. Hangwoo (2005) states that "conflict…is a quite natural part of human relationships" (p.387) and so acting out and showing aggression is not out of the ordinary. However, today, we live in a much more civilised society with different views and expectations relating to social norms. Despite this, aggressive behaviours are still occurring in new and modern ways. The arrival of the internet has undoubtedly facilitated this and has provided humans with a new way to act with hostility towards each other. As aggression can manifest itself in many ways, McNeil (1959) deduces that humans act out aggressively for a number of reasons, as a form of catharsis, frustration, family influence or defence. Like apes, humans have been known to "fight in response to [an] attack by others" (McNeil, 1959, p. 196) and so if feeling threatened online, users may react in a hostile manner. This reinforces the idea that flaming can occur as a direct result of the mere prospect of flaming being directed towards them.

While the behaviours witnessed online today are not all that different to the behaviours of our ancestors in terms of reasoning, as humans have always acted aggressively toward each other but "social media has changed how it operates" (Marwick & Boyd, 2014, p. 1202). The change that we are seeing today is that ordinary acts of aggression are now being played out online; Marwick & Boyd (2014) believe that young people have moved their aggressive behaviours and conflicts "from the schoolyard to online environments" (p. 1187). The mode in which individuals are preforming these aggressive acts has changed and as "CMC, by its very nature, is both relatively new and changing extremely quickly" (Hardaker, 2017, p. 494) we must explore this behaviour and the lack of inhibition that is seemingly causing it.

Rösner and Krämer (2016) have examined the psychology behind this disinhibited behaviour and argue that it is caused when people in a "deindividuated state feel less inhibited and less

responsible for their behaviours, and, as a result, act more antisocially and aggressively" (p.2). A lack of inhibition leads users to act in a much more disruptive, antagonistic or aggressive way. Deviant behaviours, including flaming, have been studied and speculated upon since their initial occurrence within the online world. Although the act of flaming is widely carried out via the internet, it is just as hated and frowned upon as any other unsavoury behaviour (Millard, 1997). People with a desire to act in these ways often tend to rationalise their aggressive acts to themselves (James & LeBreton, 2010). The occurrence of this corrupt behaviour has been explained and justified in numerous ways. However, I believe that the ODE is the most in-depth theory to understanding online users' behaviours and desire to act out in this way.

Understanding the Online Disinhibition Effect

The internet allows users to act in ways that would ordinarily be considered unconventional, prohibited or socially unacceptable in the real world. Often, this is due to the online world being viewed as somewhat of a 'safe space', where bad or explicit behaviour is tolerated. Much research and studies (Joinson, 2007; Suler, 2004) have looked at and explained this online occurrence and scholars have dubbed it the 'Online Disinhibition Effect', which refers to users' apparent disinhibition or lack of self-consciousness while interacting online. The ODE explores the basis of this phenomenon and attempts to reason why it occurs.

The ODE is one of the primary theoretical approaches used to analyse why online users' social behaviour is different to that which we see in real life. Most academics agree that flaming is a result of the ODE, so in order to fully understand flaming as a deviant behaviour in online users it is important to first analyse the ODE. According to Terry and Cain (2016), the ODE "describes several subtle, but powerful underlying factors that contribute to the nature of communication via digital devices" (p. 2). In recent years, online users have increasingly developed a tendency to exhibit behaviour online that they would not ordinarily enact in their real, day–to–day lives in equivalent or similar situations. This is due to feeling "less inhibited and less concern with the consequences of [their] actions" (Wright et al., 2019, p. 43) whilst online. Terry & Cain (2016) believe that the ODE "applies to all individuals regardless of ethical and moral character" (p. 2) and so those that act differently online compared to their offline personalities are not necessarily exhibiting some innate character or moral flaw but rather experiencing the disinhibiting effects of

the online world. As Wallace (2014) stated, the "nature of many online environments easily leads to more disinhibited behaviour" (p.12).

This disinhibited behaviour can be both good and bad. The term for good behaviour, which is usually displayed via cyberspace, has been coined as 'benign disinhibition'. The benign disinhibition effect is often understood as the positive ramifications that come with cyberspace; advice lending, charitable donations and emotional support (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Self-disclosure is viewed as one of the major traits witnessed within benign disinhibition. Self-disclosure appears to "[occur] sooner and is often more intimate than it would be in similar, first-time FTF encounters" (Lapidot-Lefler, & Barak, 2015) and is ultimately due to the lack of boundaries or lowered inhibitions within cyberspace. However, it is the same liberating effects that caused disinhibited positive outcomes to also have negative outcomes within online communications (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

In contrast to the benign disinhibition effect there is also the toxic online disinhibition; which seeks to understand the misbehaviour that occurs online. Typically, behaviour that one would not consider doing in one's offline life, due to negative ramifications, but deemed to be acceptable online is viewed as a form of toxic disinhibition. This includes, but is not limited to, online plagiarism, posting defamatory content, bad language, enacting violence, seeking out pornography or illegal content, trolling and of course flaming.

Suler (2004) and Joinson (2007) argue that there are six aspects to the online disinhibition effect; invisibility, asynchronicity, a minimisation of authority, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and anonymity. All of these features are characteristics of the online world that arguably enable antisocial and deviant behaviours.

The invisibility factor plays an important part of the ODE. By being shielded behind a screen, users are given the perception of being invisible as others are unable to hear or see them (Joinson, 2007). Although other users may know their identity, "background, habits or other details" (Suler, 2004, p. 322), whether through real world interactions or by an online username, the physical invisibility of being hidden by their device's screen can cause the disinhibition effect (Suler, 2005).

The lack of physical cues like facial expression, body language and tone help to lower inhibition, making it easier to express oneself freely. This has led to the belief that being behind a screen gives users the courage to behave in a way that they would not ordinarily behave were they FTF (Udris, 2014; Miller, 2016).

Following the invisibility element comes asynchronicity. CMC systems are asynchronous, meaning that conversations do not usually happen in real time, and so the user does not face the immediate consequences of their actions or behaviours due to the distortion of time flow within online based communications. This can also contribute to feelings of disinhibition, indifference towards others and safety, as users do not have to experience the immediate effects of their actions. Users feel protected due to their ability to delay their response by easily leaving an online situation. They can log off a site, close an app or shut down a computer without having to deal with the effects of their misbehaviours. During FTF conversations people are 'pressured' into conforming to social and societal norms that typically shape the flow and discourse of the conversation (Suler, 2005). However, "[disrespect] and thus a lack of empathetic concern for others is all too evident in contemporary online discussions" (Terry & Cain, 2016, p. 2) and asynchronicity is often viewed as a key motive behind the increase in users' malicious verbal abuse online.

Thirdly, a minimisation of authority focuses on the fact that there is a "lack or diminished influence of real-life cues like one's dress and body language" (Udris, 2014, p. 254) within cyberspace. Often, authority is expressed through dress, actions, body language, titles and environment. Without these cues, online users are less likely to feel intimidated. Therefore, the offline status of law enforcement, government leaders, superiors in the workplace such as bosses or employers, work colleagues, parents, and other members of authority within society is minimised and seemingly becomes irrelevant. The irrelevancy of other users' offline position within society can lead people to believe that everyone on the internet is on an equal footing. Therefore, disinhibition can occur and people may be emboldened to act as if no authority or hierarchy is present.

The solipsistic introjection is the fourth element of the ODE and explains the misinterpretation users can experience while communicating online (Joinson,2007). Without facial cues, text-based

communications alter self-boundaries - the user may end up thinking that "their mind has merged with the mind of the online companion" (Suler, 2005, p. 186). Suler (2004) argues furthermore that, due to reduced social cues, both verbal and visual, it is believed that a user's "mind weaves these fantasy role plays, usually unconsciously and with considerable disinhibition" (Suler, 2004, p. 323). This can occur by unconsciously assigning a persona, voice or physical features to someone based on how you think they behave. Through computer and device-based communication, users are reading content in their own voice in their head, which allows miscommunication to occur. In addition to this, it has also been thought that users read as though they are talking to themselves, this form of 'subvocalization' leads users to feel more comfortable in cyber-situations thus making disinhibition easier (Suler, 2004). Moreover, these conversations "may be experienced unconsciously as talking to or with oneself, which encourages disinhibition" (Suler, 2005, p. 186).

The fifth element of the ODE, dissociative imagination, explains the view that users are somewhat under the belief that the online world is imaginary. Users appear to see a separation or difference between their online behaviours and real life, without accounting for the real-life effects their online actions can have. Terry & Cain (2016) noticed that some online users may begin to "dissociate those at the other end of the communication by subconsciously viewing them merely as avatars or usernames instead of actual persons" (p. 2). Certain users may become so disinhibited that they are not aware of any presence of other users online (Suler, 2005). This is reinforced by the dissociative imagination factor explaining the notion that cyberspace is somewhat of a game or a dream causing users to feel that by logging off their online world they are leaving behind their actions. If normal, everyday rules do not apply to online activities then it is easier to adopt different personalities by going on and offline (Suler, 2004). This enforces the notion that disinhibited behaviours occur because users do not believe that there is a connection between the rules that govern the offline world and those that apply to cyberspace (Udris, 2014).

Anonymity is the final factor of the ODE and is considered crucial. Anonymity is the concealment of one's identity, whether partially or completely hidden. Online anonymity is frequently perceived rather than actually existing. Although usernames or email addresses are visible, "this information may not reveal much about a person, especially if the username is fabricated" (Suler, 2005, p. 184). This is similar to pseudonymity, wherein online actions "may be linked to a particular name, but not traced to an offline person" (Humphreys, 2016, p. 91), therefore keeping

the user's identity anonymous. Many academics have attributed anonymity to being one of the primary reasons for the practice of deviant acts and aggressive behaviours online, largely due to the loosening of inhibitions and the lessening feelings of self-awareness when anonymous (Rösner & Krämer, 2016; Suler 2005). When users are given the chance to separate their online actions from "their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing or acting out" (Suler, 2005, p. 185). The perception of anonymity that the online world gives allows users to feel at ease when exhibiting forms of explicit behaviour. Furthermore, as many social media platforms allow users to post and comment without revealing any personal information, it can make users "say or do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world" (Suler, 2004, p. 321).

The above six factors combine to form what is known as the ODE and to date have been the primary ways we have explained deviant behaviours, such as flaming, within the online world. However, there is no doubt that the majority of research and studies have cited anonymity as one of, if not the most important and primary reason, for online deviant behaviours, including flaming. However, alternative research has been undertaken that counteracts this notion and believes that there are other key factors that play into the disinhibited behaviours witnessed online.

(Negating) Anonymity as a Primary Factor Within the Online Disinhibition Effect

Anonymity allows "people to possess an alternate online identity and essentially hide behind a non-identifying pseudonym or username" (Terry & Cain, 2016, p. 2). This allows cyberspace users to separate who they are online from who they are in real life, resulting in an increased – and perceived - freedom to express themselves in any way they wish, whether that be through hostile means, harsh critiques or full self-disclosure (Terry & Cain, 2016).

Haines et al. (2014) cite anonymity as the primary factor leading to disinhibited behaviours online. They argue that this is due to its "reduction in awareness of others potentially [affecting] the expression and interpretation of comments" (p. 767). In support of this hypothesis, Humphreys (2016, p. 92) cites a South Korean law passed in 2007 which required "personal identification on Internet comments for major sites" (Cho, Kim, & Acquisti, 2012; as cited in

Humphreys, 2016, p. 92), that resulted in a quick and major decrease in slanderous, hateful comments and the use of curse words found on Korean SNS.

Haines et al. (2014) mention that the liberating effects that anonymity can have explains the desire users may have to argue or be aggressive online. Though interaction occurs across multiple channels the majority of academic literature focuses solely on anonymity as a key and vital feature to explain the reasons behind the ODE (Joinson, 2007). The anonymity that the internet provides can lead to disinhibition, thus causing hostile behaviour. Humphreys (2016), discusses anonymity in relation to two major social networking sites: 4chan and Facebook. In this discussion, it is argued that, as a result of the anonymous nature of 4chan, there are a greater number of posts that are offensive or graphic in content in comparison to the "bland and relatively conventional" (Backstrom, 2011; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012 as cited in Humphreys, 2016, p. 91) postings seen on Facebook. As a Facebook profile is intrinsically linked to the users' offline identity, users may be much more cautious about posting insulting or offensive content (Humphreys, 2016). It is, therefore, argued that there can be little doubt that anonymity affects behavioural outcomes and is clearly linked to flaming and other negative online behaviours.

As anonymity is the concealment of one's identity, it is, therefore, inherently linked to the idea of identity. However, although anonymity is a factor that is widely considered synonymous with disinhibition there is more to it than one's identity being known or unknown to other online users. Though many scholars (Haines et al., 2014; Humphreys, 2016; Joinson, 2007) use the idea of anonymity within cyberspace as the key way of explaining deviant behaviours online, it is actually broader than just this one factor or any other factor of the ODE. Anonymity only masks one's identity; it does not mean that other people do not see the user they are interacting with online (Udris, 2014).

Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) were aware of this and coined the term 'online sense of unidentifiability', which is a much broader term than anonymity as it includes "non-disclosure of personal data, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact". In their study, they found that there was a significant increase in threats and negative atmospheres and behaviours when users were in a cyber-environment; not anonymous but both invisible and with a lack of eye contact. Lapidot-

Lefler & Barak (2012) found that the highest levels of flaming occurred when there was invisibility or anonymity with a lack of eye contact and interestingly, the lowest levels occurred with invisibility or anonymity and eye contact. Clearly, eye contact is a huge factor in disinhibited behaviour; adding it to anonymity as well as invisibility results in greater amounts of disinhibition and, consequently, flaming. The research conducted by Lapidot-Lefler & Barak (2012) led the authors to believe that there is more reason to deem eye-contact a greater influence and factor of flaming and online deviant behaviours than anonymity.

Conversely, Rösner and Krämer (2016) write that scholars often believe that deviant and aggressive behaviours occur because of the anonymity that the internet can provide, but that "even on today's less anonymous platforms, such as social networking sites, users write plenty of aggressive comments, which can elicit a whole wave of negative remarks" (p. 1). So, although anonymity is a major reason for these behaviours to occur and a fundamental key factor in the ODE, the wider context in which online users preform social acts is being ignored (Joinson, 2007). Millions of people are sharing aggressive flaming posts, comments and content on "participatory social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, or weblogs, in order to voice public criticism, personal indignation, or to simply let off steam" (Rösner & Krämer, 2016, p. 1). These social networking sites promote the connection between users and their offline acquaintances (Regan & Sweet, 2015).

Today, social networking sites enable users to post verbally aggressive flames less anonymously as "most people are registered by their real name and share personal information" (Rösner & Krämer, 2016, p. 1). In their 2015 study, Regan & Sweet observed that the online drama and flaming between students that are not anonymous to each other, but who performed these acts at home with a lack of eye contact and were invisible, was incredibly high. This reinforces Lapidot-Lefler and Barak's belief that a lack of eye contact together with invisibility is viewed as a trigger of toxic online disinhibition. Regan and Sweet (2015) later go on to explain that the "filtering that occurs in the offline world gets lost in online spaces, as individuals do not seem compelled to adhere to the same type of social graces that are expected in offline experiences" (p. 178). This supports many factors of the ODE with the exception of anonymity, as they are being performed on social media sites where anonymity is not necessarily a large feature.

Marwick & Boyd (2014) consider that today "[contemporary] youth conflict often plays out through social media like Facebook and Twitter" (p. 1187), where users have a public audience that can also engage and take an active role within flaming battles and arguments. It is their belief that the involvement of audiences on online environments promotes a participatory culture for aggressive behaviour. In these instances, it is argued that anonymity does not seem to play a major part in the aggressive behaviour as users appear to want people to know who they are and they want to participate in these negative, aggressive behaviours. One of the consequences of this, and a possible societal concern, is that the online actions of these individuals may begin to bleed into their offline lives, resulting in similar behaviours being exhibited and becoming more socially acceptable in the offline world.

To conclude, flaming is an aggressive online behaviour that is apparent all across the web on SNS. Users can easily devolve into a mentality where they believe flaming to be acceptable due to the disinhibition that the internet and online spaces can offer. This disinhibition can be understood by studying the ODE. However, although many academics argue that there is reason to believe anonymity a prevailing factor of the ODE, there is also substantial evidence that it no longer represents the primary factor given users tendencies to continue to flame whilst using less anonymous sites. The presence or lack of eye contact can be seen to have a much larger impact on the degree of flaming or disinhibition with online users appearing to be less inclined to engage in these activities in situations where eye contact can be established.

Chapter 3

Case Studies

The pervasiveness of online flaming is considered a critical issue across all major participatory SNS on the internet, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, as well as the comment section of news outlets. As a result, the topic has garnered great attention from scholars, authorities and the general public. Disinhibited behaviour makes up much of the content that is publicly viewable on today's SNS and social media platforms. However, these sites do not necessarily provide anonymity when a user's offline identity can clearly be traced back to them through their SNS profiles (see Figure 1). It, therefore, can lead to the conclusion that anonymity no longer seems to be a concern as this behaviour becomes an increasingly normal occurrence on the web.

Figure 1: Flaming examples on different SNS, where users can be easily traced back to their offline identities.
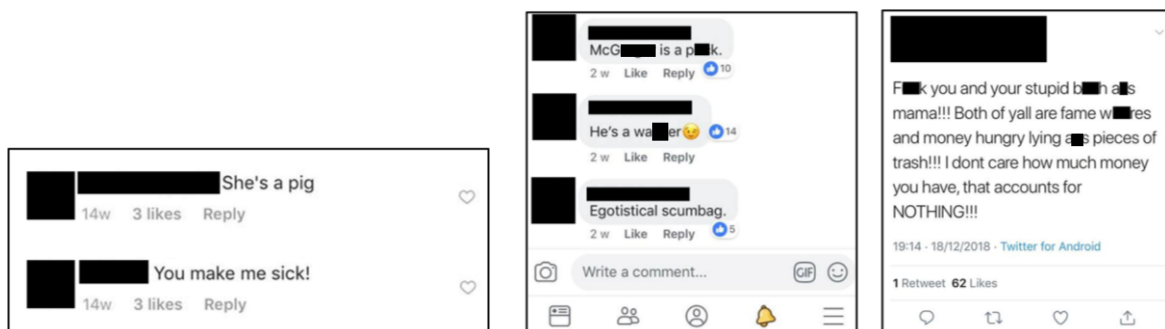
Left: Public comments left under an Instagram post. Both are examples of flaming as they are derogatory in nature and use insulting language.

Middle: The comment section of a Facebook post; flaming highlighted through the vulgar language used to demean someone.

Right: A post on Twitter that shows the common instances of flaming online. Curse words, bad grammar used for emphasis and use of block capital lettering. Also, an example of indirect tweeting – target of the tweet is not named however clearly directed to someone.

In this chapter, two different cases of flaming will be analysed, in the context of the literature reviewed in chapter two, in order to understand why flaming is still an inescapable issue within cyberspace.

Case Study 1: Ligue Du LOL

The story of the Ligue du LOL incident gained widespread attention and received heavy coverage from around the world in early 2019. It centred on a group of approximately 30 French journalists, executives and others in the media circle who posted defamatory content, demeaning and mocking the work of women (primarily) and also people of colour (POC) and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Michallon, 2019).

The Ligue du LOL is a closed, private group made up predominantly of male journalists. It was created on Facebook by Vincent Glad in 2009. In this group, the members of Ligue du LOL harassed, mocked and undermined many women within the field of journalism, which is a male-dominated profession. Although, originally set up and used through Facebook, it apparently "started as dubious humour in private exchanges, however, appears to have soon degenerated and spread on to the wider web mostly through Twitter" ('French Journalists Suspended', 2019). These anonymous Twitter accounts, with unidentifiable pseudonyms were set up "to harass prominent journalists, writers and activists" ('Ligue du LOL', 2019). Breeden (2019) reported that the majority of the tormenting went on through Twitter, where the group's members would slander and demean the female journalists' work, make vulgar jokes and circulate "crude photo montages at their expense".

Speculation as to the group's existence circulated for many years but, in February of 2019, the group was exposed by left-leaning newspaper, Libération. The founder of the group, Glad, was a regular freelance writer at this establishment along with another Ligue member Alexandre Hervaud, who was Libération's Deputy Chief Senior Editor of the Web. Both were suspended once their involvement was uncovered ('"Ligue du Lol": deux agents de la Mairie de Paris suspendus', 2019). Glad posted a public apology on Twitter following his suspension (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Glad issued an apology via Twitter stating "I owe you an explanation. And especially apologies", followed by a two-page explanation of his actions.

The Irish Times ('French journalists suspended', 2019) reported that a total of six people were dismissed following their role within the Ligue du LOL group, with many others voluntarily stepping down from their positions. Many members followed in Glad's footsteps and also posted their regret publicly on SNS. Once the news broke, multiple victims posted on Twitter explaining the abuse that they had suffered at the hands of the group (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Victims' online impact statements

Left: Wanga publicly shared the abuse she suffered at the hands of the group, stating that the Ligue du LOL is what prompted her to delete Twitter in 2013 because they engaged in harassment for sport and targeted feminists, the LGBTQ+ community and POC.

Right: Piot explained that the group began to undermine her little by little through photo and video montages embarrassing her in order to bring her down.

An example of the harassment that the Ligue du LOL engaged in involved the posting of a pornographic photo collage of a feminist writer on Twitter (Breeden, 2019). Another harassment case included female video maker, Florence Porcel, who was pranked via a phone call where a Ligue member claimed to be a media executive with a job offer. They recorded and posted the conversation online which led Porcel to feel shame, humiliation and fear (Breeden, 2019; 'French journalists suspended', 2019). LeReilly (2019) wrote about the anti-gay flames that he received via Twitter for several years. He also mentioned the anti-feminist, derogatory content that was published about his friends and colleagues. Bellan (2019), who was also a victim of the group's abuse wrote about the abuse directed at her and her husband, all while working for a man she knew was a part of the Ligue du LOL.

The BBC ('Ligue du LOL', 2019) reported that the Minister for Digital Affairs in France, Mounir Mahjoubi came out and said that the Ligue du LOL was "a group of guys high on their power at being able to make fun of other people. Except that their mockery had an effect in real life," ('Ligue du LOL', 2019). The group's members' actions had a profound effect on both the victims but also their own lives. The persistent mocking, insults, "rape jokes, photoshopped pornographic collages using their personal pictures" (Michallon, 2019), proved to have major effects on the victims mental and emotional health. Many of the victims were afraid to speak out initially for fear of the backlash they would receive ('French journalists suspended', 2019). The real-life consequences that this has had on the multiple careers of the abusers – following exposure of who they were and what they were doing - was perhaps unimaginable to the members when the group was started. The members of this group have "deviated the course of professional lives and contributed to shaping French journalism as we know it today." (Michallon, 2019).

Ligue du LOL: Flaming, the ODE and Anonymity

This case is a classic example of flaming within cyberspace. The members of the Ligue du LOL flamed multiple people, predominantly women, to varying degrees. Over the course of ten years violent, insulting, sexist, homophobic, racist and misogynistic remarks were made by many men in positions of power. Some of their actions were very violent, namely the threats of rape and assault. These men purposely set out to disrespect, undermine, mock and annoy. This behaviour was undoubtedly aided by the disinhibition that the online world provides.

The aggressive communication between the abusers and their victims occurred exclusively through social media. The victims and abusers were all peers within the same journalistic circle, some of the victims even worked alongside their abusers (Bellan, 2019). Perhaps the behaviour stemmed from the female writers, POC and members of the LGBTQ+ community representing a threat to a cis-white, male dominated field. Glad and co., spread traditional flames in the form of insulting content such as posts and tweets and left comments under the work of the victims. These incredibly hostile, vitriol remarks were posted by people of seemingly high societal standing, emphasising what Terry & Cain (2016) stated that no matter who, everyone can devolve into this sort of flaming state.

Like Moor et al.'s (2010) study, the abusers seemed to have a lowered awareness of other people's feelings while online, with no sense of consequence, guilt or shame as evidenced by the length of time the behaviour carried on. The abusers claimed that initially it was funny; that it began as humour but dissolved into something worse (@vincentglad. (2019, February 10). Je vous dois des explications. Et surtout des excuses. [Twitter post]. Retrieved from https://Twitter.com/vincentglad/status/1094637974304755712). The victims were evidently less likely to find the abuse funny, especially due to the persistent, targeted nature of the flaming.

Cyberspace provided the abusers with a safety net to act in ways that they would not ordinarily in FTF communications. The toxic disinhibition they experienced led to antisocial behaviour which occurred due to the lessening of inhibition that the online world tends to provide us. The ODE describes the lowering of psychological restraints and alteration of self-boundaries that are typically seen in FTF communications and can explain why the abusers repeatedly verbally

abused, threatened, demeaned and mocked their victims. A combination of all factors, including anonymity, influenced and disinhibited the abusers.

The abusers were able to be physically hidden from their victims. Their device's screens became their shields, protecting them from any rebuttal from their victims, thus lowering their inhibitions. The asynchronicity of the online environment means users don not have to deal with the immediate consequences and repercussions of their online actions. This distortion of time-flow led to the abusers not having to address their behaviours for 10 years. Whilst online, the abusers were unable to see the social standing of their victims, consequently they were not intimidated by their status. The minimisation of authority that SNS provides, meant that they did not have to deal with authority figures such as police or bosses. The reduced visual and verbal cues and subvocalization allowed the abusers to feel like they were talking to themselves, therefore creating a sense of comfort when behaving this way. Due to dissociative imagination, their threats and mockery were possibly viewed as a game for abusers without real world consequences. They did not have to witness, accept or address the consequences of their actions until after they were caught. The abusers clearly felt a separation between their real world lives and online actions.

Finally, the anonymity factor of the ODE does come into effect. The Ligue du LOL members, under the pretence of being anonymous, appear to have behaved much more radically. The abusers used pseudonyms on Twitter and the Facebook group was a closed, private group which led to abusers feeling a perceived sense of anonymity. For many of the abusers the guise of anonymity worked as their jibes, harassment and mockery was not traced back to their offline identities.

As mentioned before, anonymity is regularly cited as the primary reason for disinhibited behaviour online. In this case, it clearly did have a part to play in the harassment and it mattered to the abusers but, arguably, only to a certain extent. Their Facebook profiles were inextricably linked to their offline personas and so, all members of the group knew the other members in the Ligue du LOL. Although the abuse conducted through Twitter was under pseudonyms to protect themselves, it was reported by The Irish Times that "some of the victims were aware of the identity of a number of their alleged harassers" ('French journalists suspended', 2019) and that some members posted online under their real names. These facts contradict the notion that anonymity was a primary driver behind the online behaviour of the perpetrators.

If their offline identities were clearly displayed instead of their online aliases - through their handle, biography, profile photo or the content they posted - would they have begun to, and continuously abused, other female, POC or LGBTQ+ journalists? Possibly not. However, given that the identities of some of the members of the Ligue were known to their victims, coupled with the fact that this seemingly did not dissuade them from continuing to abuse online, it is arguable that their behaviour would have occurred whether or not anonymity was involved – although possibly to a lesser extent. This leads to increased thinking that people are becoming desensitised to and compliant with this type of aggressive, deviant behaviour playing out. It is becoming increasingly normative and accepted within our modern lives, perhaps suggesting that societal norms are bending to allow for this type of aggressive online behaviour.

Case Study 2: The Twitter Joke Trial

The High Court (and subsequent Court of Appeal) case of Chambers -v- DPP [2012] EWHC 2157, later dubbed the Twitter Joke Trial, further explores the topic of flaming. This case was widely reported in the British media in 2012. It involved a 26-year-old man, Paul Chambers, who was due to travel from Robin Hood Airport, England to Northern Ireland to visit an online acquaintance. Due to perverse weather conditions at the time, the airport had been closed. On the 6th of January 2012, Chambers took to Twitter to vent his frustration by stating: "Crap! Robin Hood Airport is closed. You've got a week and a bit to get your shit together otherwise I am blowing the airport sky high!!"

The tweet was discovered by the airport's security manager on the 11th of January, five days after it was posted. Due to the airport's safety protocol, it was ultimately reported to the South Yorkshire police. Chambers was then arrested on the 13th of January under Section 51(2) of the Criminal Law Act 1977 and subsequently lost his job once he was arrested.

The Crown Prosecution Service prosecuted Chambers under section 127(1) of the Communications Act 2003, which provides that any sent message that is offensive, obscene or threatening by nature over a public electronic communications platform is an offence. Chambers was "found guilty of sending [a] menacing tweet" ('Twitter joke trial returns to court', 2012) in 2010 and fined £385. He was also ordered to pay an additional £600 after the conviction.

Chambers appealed the ruling but it was initially dismissed by the Crown Court Judge in November of 2010. In May 2012, the hearing of his second appeal was heard by the Court of Appeal, where the Chief Justice found no evidence to suggest that Chambers' 600 odd Twitter followers "found it to be of a menacing character or, at a time when the threat of terrorism is real, even minimally alarming" (Chief Justice, p. 2160) as he accepted the evidence that the threat went unnoticed. The conviction was ultimately overturned ('Twitter bomb joke man wins case', 2012).

In the course of the legal debate, Chambers' legal team claimed that the tweet was never "sent in the context of terrorism and it was wrong for the crown court to make such an association" ('Twitter bomb joke man wins case', 2012). Those who supported Chambers through the trial maintained that the nullification of the conviction is "common sense catching up with the law, which now clearly accommodates irony, wit and bad taste" ('Twitter bomb joke man wins case', 2012). However, according to Rawlinson (2012), this case "will have implications for the way online communication is dealt with by the courts" (Rawlinson, 2012). Posts, content and tweets of this nature that are dispersed online and are meant to be sent in jest "regardless of the subjective view of the appropriateness or quality of their humour, should be taken as such" (Rawlinson, 2012) and that any joke similar to this would be an incorrect interpretation of the Malicious Communications Act 2003 (Rawlinson, 2012).

The Twitter Joke Trial: Flaming, the ODE and Anonymity

Chambers' tweet is considered a flame due to its violent nature of threatening to bomb an airport. At the time the tweet was posted, it was disrespectful and insensitive given the climate surrounding terrorism. It contained mildly profane language e.g. the use of "crap" and "shit". Punctuation can also be used to emphasise a flame, here Chambers used "!!". The Twitter user expressed his annoyance at the airport's closure on a public platform and the offensive content was viewed as a hostile expression of intent; even though it was intended as a joke and not to be taken seriously.

Chambers' case is a classic example of how normal, everyday people can become easily disinhibited by the properties the online world can elicit; as Chambers was classified as an "educated young man of previous good character" (Chief Justice, p. 2159). However as expected,

upon being hidden by a screen from his followers and the airport's security, the lack of facial cues, meant law enforcement could not see that he was joking.

He did not have to deal with the effects of his tweet immediately, as a few days passed before he was arrested. The reduced influence of authority online enabled Chambers to act like there was no authority present – Chambers was unlikely to have mentioned blowing up an airport to police officers or a member of the airport's security FTF. Due to the nature of subvocalization, Chambers probably felt as if he were talking to himself, therefore able to speak freely and openly without fear of any backlash. Likewise, the disinhibiting effects of viewing the online world as imaginary can produce actions due to the feeling of no real-life consequences; except that was not true. Chambers tweet caused him to lose his job, face a fine and confront the prospect of going to jail.

Anonymity can allow online users to essentially become someone else by altering their online identity or allow one to hide behind a pseudonym. It can be a source of liberation to freely speak how one wants. However, this does not apply to Chamber's case; as he used the less anonymous platform, Twitter, where his Twitter handle was @pauljchambers, his profile picture was a personal picture of himself and he shared personal information, thoughts and opinions on his account. The availability of online anonymity had no influence on Chambers' decision to tweet his annoyance, given that he did not avail of it at all.

Rösner and Krämer (2016) believe that more and more people are using less-anonymous platforms today, yet they are still posting aggressive content. Chambers' case supports this hypothesis. Furthermore, Lapidot-Lefler & Barak's (2012) argue that the lack of eye contact and invisibility afforded by online activity can combine to cause disinhibition and results in people not filtering themselves while online. These scholars are making a compelling case that anonymity is less of a driving force behind disinhibited behaviours, such as flaming.

Chambers did not avail of a pseudonym or use a less anonymous platform to post his frustration, as the disinhibition that the online world causes, he did not see anything innately wrong with posting a bomb threat online. This promotes the increased thinking that this type of flaming

behaviour is becoming normalised within our modern society, as we become increasingly desensitised to what we say online.

In summary, the case studies cited above, combined with recent academic discussions, suggest that despite a move away from anonymous platforms disinhibited behaviours, including flaming, continue to thrive. This is supportive of this paper's theory that users have become more and more accustomed to reading and using inflammatory or offensive material online as the protection of anonymity is no longer thought necessary.

Chapter 4

<u>**Analysis**</u>

In this section, I will look at how anonymity is not as important as a disinhibiting factor as it used to be. This, I will argue, is largely due to the normalisation and desensitisation of flaming in today's online society.

Looking at the case studies discussed in the previous chapter, it is clear that those individuals who were flaming online were disinhibited and, as a result, not thinking about the consequences of their actions online. Some members of the Ligue du LOL worked for forward thinking, feminist establishments and yet, they degraded the work of female, POC and LGBTQ+ writers, they openly mocked them and threatened them. Where the Ligue du LOL members may have initially begun their mockery as a joke, it grew sinister over time. It cannot be denied that, although some of the members of the Ligue were known to their victims and their participation in the group speculated upon, they benefited from the anonymity that the cyber world provided them through the use of pseudonyms.

In the case of the Twitter Joke Trial, Chambers was a young man, with good career prospects who joked about bombing an airport. The tweet had the potential to cause mass hysteria or panic amongst Chambers' followers. However, it did not. Chambers did not benefit from the anonymity factor that is heavily emphasised within certain scholars' work on the ODE. Although there were clear malicious intentions behind the actions of the first case study compared to the tweet in the second one, both the abusers in the Ligue du LOL and Chambers stated: it was a meant as a joke. However, there were real world, negative consequences to the flamers' actions. These case studies highlight that due to the disinhibiting effects of the ODE, the flamers were not thinking about the negative outcomes that their flames could have on their own lives – or indeed on the lives of others. This further emphasises that online flaming is becoming much more normalised within our online lives.

As flaming becomes more and more pervasive, we as a society appear to be much more desensitised to what we and others say online. The more prevalent flaming becomes, the more likely it is to be accepted as an online behaviour and the less need there is for anonymity.

Throughout this paper, it has been argued that, in today's modern world, there is an increase in the usage of social media and the development of these platforms seems to show an increasing trend towards the use of less anonymous platforms such as SNS like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn and YouTube, where our profiles are becoming increasingly linked to our offline identities through our usernames, profile pictures and the content we upload. Even on these less anonymised platforms, cyber users are flaming and carrying out other abusive behaviours.

In the Twitter Joke Trial, there is no evidence found to suggest that other Twitter users reported the offensive tweet. In the second hearing, it was found that Chambers' 600 followers did not appear to find anything malicious behind his bomb threat. Although it was meant as a joke, law enforcement still intervened which raises the question – should one of his followers not have found the threat to be alarming too? If this was the case, can it now be surmised that nobody reacted negatively to the threat as a consequence of the desensitisation and normalisation of this type of online behaviour?

Following on from this, we also appear as a society to be growing less inclined to care about the anonymity factor that the internet can provide. Anonymity appears to be no longer be an important factor in flaming within our cyber society and it is arguable that this is a consequence of our becoming normalised and desensitized to this behaviour. As the pervasiveness of flaming increases, this is emphasised by the fact that it is now being carried out on less anonymised platforms, suggesting that unless there is an intervention that causes people to consider the consequences of their actions, such as legislation or penal sanctions that are specifically drafted to address these types of online behaviours, it is hard to see where this will end.

Given that anonymity is no longer as prevalent as it once was and now people are using platforms that are easily traced back to their offline identities, law makers and enforcement should look at ways of intervening and stopping flaming from occurring and getting out of hand like in both case studies previously mentioned. Although it may be difficult to police, in an overstretched judicial system and across multiple borders, it is important for the wellbeing of all internet users that flaming be monitored and controlled.

However, such laws must be explicit enough to deal with what could be a genuine flame that may hurt someone and what may be a joke. It is vital to remember that as observers we are also disinhibited; even if we are aware of the effects the cyber world has on us - without verbal and visual cues how are we to know the true intentions behind online posts. What could be seen as a joke to the person posting online, could cause potential harm or damage to those who read it. Interpretation of quotes or opinions, whether online or off, is subjective. What is considered humorous by one person may be offensive to another. As Rawlinson (2012) mentions in his article following the Twitter Joke Trial, "by whose standards and by what members of society would such a message be viewed as a joke".

When posts can be subjective, how is one to know whether or not the user is flaming? How do we know whether or not there is malicious intent behind a post or if it was meant as a joke? Furthermore, what are the factors that play a part in deciding whether or not a post is a flame or a joke – is it based on the content, context, the user who has posted it, how people react to it or the duration it has been online for? In the case studies discussed, the intention and effects were different; one had multiple victims, harmed over a 10-year period due to the persistence of the flames thrown and the other did not seem to harm anyone except himself.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This paper strived to understand flaming in the context of the ODE and anonymity. It sought to answer whether or not flaming requires anonymity when our society is becoming increasingly desensitized to the content we put onto the internet. The paper explored the issue of flaming within a society that is becoming increasingly numbed to the negative effects online actions have on all users, both posters and readers of posts. As we move towards less anonymous platforms of SNS, we appear to be so disinhibited by the effects of the ODE; we are flaming when our actions can easily be traced back to our offline identities through our cyber profiles.

In Chapter 1, the main themes discussed within the paper were introduced. Then Chapter 2 set out the theoretical grounding, specifically what flaming, the ODE and anonymity are and how they relate to each other. In Chapter 3, two case studies were presented, detailing two different instances of flaming on the web. Interestingly, in both cases the flamers claimed to have been joking but all suffered real world consequences at the hand of their online actions. Finally, Chapter 4 analysed both case studies in light of what was discussed in the literature review.

Flaming is a global, persistent issue which is often categorized by outbursts or remarks that are violet and passionate in nature. It is typically seen as a way to demean, harass, mock or insult people online through the use of derogatory language, swearing and defamatory content. It is an online occurrence that can easily be seen on all forms of participatory SNS and appears to occur much more frequently on CMC than FTF communications. It would appear that any individual has the potential to devolve into a state where they become desensitised to the words and comments that they make while online. Although many have speculated as to why the existence of this disinhibited online incidence occurs, it can be explained through the study of the ODE.

Briefly, the ODE theorises why people behave differently online than in their offline lives. It describes the reasons why flaming and other deviant online behaviours occur. The ODE surmises that its six factors are the reasons why people become disinhibited, thus allowing them to discuss, post and comment much more freely. Invisibility, minimisation of authority, asynchronicity, dissociative imagination, solipsistic introjection and anonymity come together to aid users in

loosening their inhibitions and acting differently online. This often takes the form of benign or toxic disinhibition. As flaming is the hostile expression of opinions online, it is clear that it falls into the toxic disinhibition category. The ODE and its six factors are the main reasons that lead to flaming and other deviant behaviours.

Although many academics perceive anonymity as the core element within the ODE to explain why disinhibition plays out online, others have presented alternative ideas such as a lack of eye contact coupled with invisibility. These ideas are supported by the simultaneous shift to less anonymous cyber platforms. As heavily discussed throughout this paper, society appears to be moving towards a less anonymised SNS, therefore leading anonymity to become much less important to us. Although, the factor of anonymity can play a part by offering protection for users to flame, we are progressing towards less anonymous web platforms and SNS, where our online personas can be easily traced back to our offline identities. From the case studies discussed in the paper, it can be concluded that although anonymity aided the abusers of the Ligue du LOL, it did nothing to prevent Chambers from posting aggressive content online. The flamers in both instances have appeared to become disinhibited by the lack of eye contact with their audience and their invisibility.

As the line between our on and offline lives is becoming increasingly blurred, the implications of our online actions will need to be accounted for, in the same way our real-life actions must be. This paper surmises that legislation will need to be well defined in order to understand fully what constitutes a flame, as it is difficult to assess and regulate due to the subjective nature of words and their meaning. Implementation of stricter penalties for those who flame is required, otherwise, the ongoing and persistent nature of flaming online will continue. With the increasing occurrences of flaming, law enforcement, law makers and SNS companies must keep up with the policing and sanctioning of those that offend online in order to protect all users. Without any protections in place we may see a rise in the already increased level of flaming online.

In conclusion, cyber users flame when online because of a sense of safety that the ODE, including anonymity, provides. However, as we move away from anonymous platforms to SNS where we are connecting to others users, and our profiles are inextricably linked to our offline identities, it appears that this behaviour is continuing. As we become increasingly desensitised to what we say

online and begin to use less anonymous platforms, anonymity does not seem to be a core factor in the reasoning behind the aggressive online behaviour of flaming. Both case studies emphasise the disconnect users can feel between their real life and online actions. This in turn highlights how desensitized we have become to our own words online and, as the issue spreads and becomes more evident, it stresses the normalisation of this behaviour within society.

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