"ARE WE DATING THE SAME GUY?": COLLECTIVE SENSEMAKING AS A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN FACEBOOK GROUPS

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Introduction

Online dating apps are a multi-billion-dollar industry in the United States and are responsible for a quarter of young adult relationships (Pew Research Center, 2023). For many people, Hinge to happily ever after is plagued by offline risks of violence, as dating apps place the burden of managing those risks on users (Gillett, 2021). Despite following conventional wisdom to meet in public or location share, women, women of color, and the LGBTQ community remain particularly vulnerable, and lack tools to better ascertain risk. Even if apps did verify that users do not have a record for domestic violence or stalking, the impact would be limited as many of the "red flag behaviors" are not illegal or are difficult to prove in court. Facebook groups afford controllable visibility and searchability, making them an advantageous platform for groups or social movements to build an archive of knowledge. "Are We Dating the Same Guy" Facebook groups leverage the affordances of ICTs to manage the ambiguities of dating, crowdsource information on men, and provide social support to other women experiencing the tribulations of modern dating. Using discourse analysis, this study analyzes the collective sensemaking practices of AWDTSG groups oriented at constructing knowledge, managing privacy boundaries, content moderation, and providing social support.

Background/Theoretical Framework

The first AWDTSG group emerged in New York City in March 2022 with strict rules for participation. The group served as a template for analogous regional groups. Although the title implies a focus on cheating, the group was created with the mission to warn women against abusive men and create a supportive community. These counterpublics defy misogynist cultural logics of competition and misandry.

Lacking empirical frameworks that typically undergird online knowledge communities, AWDTSG construct alternative ways of knowing through collective sensemaking that privilege interpretive, collaborative, and experiential knowledge claims, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995; 2007). Knowledge is constructed through patterns of interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) with members and the platform itself. We argue that platforms function as a third party in the creation of knowledge through acts of moderation, real or anticipated. The anticipation of top-down moderation acts imposed by the platform itself is viewed as an ever-present threat to the community archive. Through the enforcement of group rules, the community collectively negotiates the tensions of privacy breaches and the perceived moral responsibility of protecting women from potential harms.

Providing and seeking social support in AWDTSG groups are an integral part of the broader practice of collective sensemaking. Rather than seeking to obtain epistemic authority, knowing is valued as a way to provide social support to fulfill the obligation of reciprocity to protect the community. Knowledge seeking can be seen as a ritual through which individuals may claim membership in the community. (Schaefer & Dervin, 2011).

This paper argues that similar to organizational gossip, interactions in the group create knowledge through reflexive and relational communication (Bishop, 2019; Waddington, 2012). Gossip, or the sharing of women's personal experiences, is central to developing a shared culture and creating alternative knowledge that helps women avoid isolation within a patriarchal society. Through isolation, acts of violence and abuse perpetrated against women are transformed into individual instances rather than a systemic issue. In this cultural milieu, women are responsible for not becoming victims, transforming victimhood into a moral failure rather than an action inflicted upon them. As shown by AWDTSG, the affordances of ICTs may be harnessed in the service of building a counterpublic in order to claim agency through knowledge production and maintenance. Through the sharing of knowledge, group members claim co-ownership of the archive, requiring the co-creation of privacy rules to maintain boundaries and resist acts of moderation.

This research seeks to understand: how is collective making used to generate knowledge in AWDTSG? How are these processes shaped by privacy concerns, anticipated acts of moderation, and the desire to build affective support networks?

Method

Using qualitative inquiry, we began analyzing an AWDTSG Facebook group in a practice akin to the ethnographic concept of "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998). While this mode of inquiry is less systematic, researchers employed this approach in order to

silently observe and familiarize themselves with the norms and practices of the group (Marwick & Partin, 2022). Four months of sustained silent engagement through deep hanging out informed our approach to discourse analysis. Multilevel discourse analysis enabled us to examine sensemaking practices at the interpersonal and organizational levels and their implications for more macro-level interactions (Malvini Redden & Way, 2019).

We manually collected a sample of posts ranging from the group's start date in May of 2022 to August of 2023. We collected all posts from the group founder and administrator, group moderators, and a sample from group members. From the sustained deep hanging out, four themes emerged that informed our data collection for the discourse analysis: seeking information on a specific person, warning group members, seeking advice, and offering general advice. A corpus of one hundred posts were systematically collected, with twenty-five posts per category. In order to be selected posts had to have a minimum of twenty comments. Because we were interested in how knowledge was constructed through group member interaction, we only included posts that demonstrated active engagement within the comments. We excluded posts irrelevant to dating, such as a post about someone's pet.

Findings

Our analysis revealed that the AWDTSG community engages in collective sensemaking in order to manage ambiguities within online dating. In doing so, their shared narratives coalesce to form an archive of alternative knowledge. Knowledge claims are legitimated through discursive rituals that privilege embodied forms of knowledge, social support, and fulfilling moral obligations such as disclosure reciprocity. We present three major findings. First, the platform simultaneously serves as a tool for claiming power, and a constant threat toward the continuation of the group. While Facebook groups enable this counterpublic to emerge and control visibility, it mandates certain discursive rules be followed, influencing how knowledge claims are made and legitimized. Second, group level moderation enacted by admins is viewed as an act of community protection against platform interventions. However, we found evidence that the original group founders use the opaqueness of moderation to manipulate and deceive members. Third, social support is an integral part of knowledge creation, resisting cultural logics that socialize women to see each other as competitors in the dating sphere. However, the benefits of this support and archive are threatened by the administrators that appear to be orchestrating hundreds of groups as a grift to crowdfund from members. Any challenges to moderator authority result in a ban from the community and potentially harm women in vulnerable situations.

Our findings point to the ways in which ICTs may be used to reclaim gossip as a mode of resistance through the act of collective sensemaking. Group members of this sensemaking community resist misogynist cultural logics, but their ability to meaningfully engage is stymied by the manipulative moderation acts imposed by admins.

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