Anger on the Internet: The Perceived Value of Rant-Sites

Ryan C. Martin, PhD,[1,2] Kelsey Ryan Coyier, BS,[2] Leah M. VanSistine, BS,[2] and Kelly L. Schroeder, BS[2]

Abstract

Despite evidence that anger is routinely expressed over the Internet via weblogs, social networking Web sites, and other venues, no published research has explored the way in which anger is experienced and expressed online. Consequently, we know very little about how anger is experienced in such settings. Two studies were conducted to explore how people experience and express their anger on a particular type of Web site, known as a rant-site. Study 1 surveyed rant-site visitors to better understand the perceived value of the Web sites and found that while they become relaxed immediately after posting, they also experience more anger than most and express their anger in maladaptive ways. Study 2 explored the emotional impact of reading and writing rants and found that for most participants, reading and writing rants were associated with negative shifts in mood.

Introduction

WHETHER THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING WEB SITES, or online discussion forums, people use the Internet to express their anger on a variety of topics. Online news sources routinely allow for public comments, often providing a venue for reader anger. Likewise, there are entire Web sites, called rant-sites, dedicated to allowing people to vent. Interestingly, despite how common cyber-ranting has become, we know very little about the expression of anger over the Internet. The current study provides an initial look at the way in which people express their anger on a particular type of Web site, known as a rant-site.

Rant-sites are Web sites that provide people with a forum to rant about whatever they would like. Visitors can post anonymous stories about someone or something that angers them. Such Web sites have become quite common with more than 20 examples surfacing through a Google search. Some provide a forum for rants on general topics (e.g., www.justrage.com), whereas others are designed for rants on specific types of topics (e.g., providing service providers a place to vent about customers). In addition to being common, they are also quite popular. Just one of these sites, www.justrage.com has more than 6,500 rants posted with more than 90,000 comments.

Despite their popularity, however, there is no published research exploring why people visit these Web sites or choose to vent their anger in this way. In fact, there is almost no research on how people express their anger on the Internet, regardless of the venue. This is not surprising as such research is difficult to conduct. Those who choose to visit and post on such Web sites seem to value their anonymity in a way that makes them unlikely to participate in studies about their Internet behavior. However, despite the difficulty, the scarcity of research is unfortunate as anger expressed online likely leads to damaged relationships and other sorts of interpersonal problems.

In addition to how little is known about interpersonal problems stemming from Internet ager, little is known about the immediate emotional impact of reading or writing rants. While there is a considerable literature base on the emotional impact of writing,[1] very little of this has focused on the emotion of anger. Additionally, the literature on writing and emotion has focused almost exclusively on the expressive writing paradigm,[2] which is a formalized treatment intervention. Consequently, these studies might not apply to the type of writing people do on rant-sites, which is void of any structure and about venting rather than trying to work through emotional problems.

The idea that venting helps people deal with their anger is not a new one. Catharsis has long been thought of as a treatment for problematic anger.[3,4] In fact, most rant-sites promote the idea of venting as a healthy approach to anger reduction. However, as noted by Olatunji et al. in an extensive review of the literature, catharsis has little benefit.[4] In fact, most research suggests that the cathartic expression of anger does harm over the long term.[3,4]

Much is unknown regarding how and why people communicate their anger over the Internet and, specifically, what value rant-sites hold to the people who visit them. The current project seeks to address the limited research on cyber-ranting. In study 1, we survey those people who frequent such Web sites and in study 2, we explore the emotional responses participants have to reading and writing rants.

Departments of [1]Human Development and [2]Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Study 1

Method

Procedure. To better understand the people who frequent rant Web sites, we posted an online survey on four popular sites. Participants who completed the survey were entered into a drawing for a $50.00 gift card.

Participants. Thirty-two (11 females, 21 males) participants completed the survey. Their ages ranged from 14 to 54, with an average age of 25.94.

Survey. The survey consisted of the trait anger and anger-expression scales of the STAXI-2.[5] The 10-item trait anger scale measures participant's general propensity to experience anger. Scores range from 10 to 40 with higher scores indicating a greater propensity to experience anger. The 32-item anger expression scale consists of four subscales: anger expression-in (tendency to suppress anger), anger expression-out (tendency to express anger outwardly toward other people or objects), anger control-in (tendency to actively decrease angry feelings by calming down), and anger control-out (tendency to control outward anger by preventing its expression toward other people or objects). Each of the anger expression scales has a range between 8 and 32 with higher scores indicating a greater use of the expression style.

Participants next completed nine items asking about particular types of consequence they have experienced related to their anger: physical fights, verbal fights, physical health problems, damaged relationships, damaged property, dangerous driving, substance abuse, experiencing other negative emotions, and self-harm. These items reflected the types of consequences measured by the Anger Consequences Questionnaire.[6] They then answered several demographic questions and questions regarding their use of the Web site.

Results and Discussion

Web site use

The average participant visited the particular site between one and three times per month and spent between 11 and 15 minutes on the site at each visit. However, eight (25 percent) visited multiple times per week or even daily. Time spent on the site ranged from less than 5 minutes to more than an hour per visit. As for how they use the site, eight (25 percent) indicated that they only read and never posted.

Participants were asked about the benefit of reading other's rants via a multiple choice question with an open-ended other options. Responses included simple curiosity (25 participants, 78.1 percent), entertainment (18, 56.3 percent), a sense of community (16, 50 percent), and making them feel better about their own lives by comparison (12, 37.5 percent). Other reasons participants gave were enjoying other people's misery, better understanding their own problems, and looking to help others.

For the 24 (75 percent) of participants who post rants, in response to an open-ended question about how they felt after ranting, all 24 of them responded by indicating that they usually feel calm and relaxed. However, seven participants (29 percent) reported that they would prefer to talk with someone. Sixteen participants (66.6 percent) appreciated having other people comment on their posts. When asked what they hoped to get from other people's comments, the most common response was validation of how they were feeling (42.3 percent), followed by advice (28.5 percent), and something funny (28.5 percent).

Web site users' anger

Participants average scores (and standard deviations) on the subscales of the STAXI-2 are as follows: trait anger scale = 22.13 (5.65), anger expression-in = 21.68 (4.59), anger expression-out = 18.00 (5.17), anger control-in = 20.74 (5.35), and anger control-out = 22.28 (6.12). Comparisons between these scores and the norms reported in the STAXI-2 manual[5] showed that Web site users had significantly higher scores on the trait anger scale, $t(31) = 3.68$, anger expression-in, $t(31) = 6.47$, and anger expression-out, $t(31) = 2.82$. No differences were found for either of the anger control scales. Nineteen participants (59 percent) had a trait anger score of above the 75th percentile, described in the STAXI-2 manual as potentially interfering with functioning.[5]

Participants reported many consequences as a result of their anger. These consequences, along with the average number of times they occurred in the month before taking the survey, are as follows: negative emotions ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.29$), verbal fights (2.35, 1.45), physical harm to self (1.61, 1.59), substance abuse (1.39, 1.69), damaged relationships (1.26, 1.57), damaged property (1.10, 1.35), dangerous driving (.94, 1.37), physical health problems (.90, 1.27), and physical fights (.87, 1.26). Twelve participants (37.5 percent) reported that they believe they have a problem with anger and 15 (46.9 percent) reported that someone has told them they have a problem with anger.

Study 2

Method

Procedure. Study 2 was designed to (a) explore the emotional impact of reading online rants, (b) explore the emotional impact of ranting, (c) assess the difference between those who want to post on the rant-site and those who do not, and (d) assess the difference between those who want to go back to the rant-site and those who do not.

Data were collected in groups of 10–35 in a computer laboratory. Participants first completed the Differential Emotions Scale (DES)[7] to determine happiness, sadness, anger, and fear levels at that moment. The DES consists of a line for each emotion labeled "not at all" on one end, "moderately" in the middle, and "very much" at the other end. The line was marked with a 0 on the "not at all" end and 100 on the "very much" end.

Participants were then taken to a screenshot of the homepage of a rant-site and asked to read through the rants for 5 minutes. The screenshot was taken on the first day of data collection so was exactly what those participants would have seen if they had gone to the rant-site that day. A screenshot was used so that all subsequent participants in the study would see the same rants as those seen during the first data collection. Participants then completed the DES once again.

Participants were then instructed to spend 5 minutes writing their own rant. They were reminded that their responses were anonymous so they would feel comfortable ranting about anything they wanted to write about. When they were done, they completed the DES one last time.

Participants were then asked a series of demographic questions and questions about the Web site they had viewed, including if they would like to have their rant posted, anonymously, on the Web site they had been viewing. The rants were not actually posted and participants were told of this later in the study.

Participants. Participants were 91 (68 percent female) students from introductory psychology courses who earned course credit for their participation. The average age of participants was 19.26.

Results and Discussion

Emotional effects of reading rants

A one-way (time) within-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed on the four subscales of the DES from immediately before and immediately after reading the rants. A multivariate Time effect was found, $F(4, 87) = 2.53$, $p < 0.05$, ES $= 0.10$. Significant univariate differences were found for happiness and sadness, with happiness decreasing an average of 4.58 points (ES $= 0.05$) and sadness increasing an average of 4.74 points (ES $= 0.06$).

Emotional effects of ranting

To determine the emotional effects of ranting, another one-way (time) within-subjects MANOVA was computed on the four subscales of the DES from immediately before and immediately after writing. Again, a multivariate Time effect was found, $F(4, 87) = 12.05$, $p < 0.00$, ES $= 0.36$. Significant univariate differences were found for happiness and anger, with happiness decreasing an average of 9.99 points (ES $= 0.23$) and anger increasing an average of 13.63 points (ES $= 0.27$).

Differences between those who posted and those who did not

Thirteen percent of participants elected to have their rants posted on the Web site. To explore the differences between these participants and others, independent sample *T*-tests were computed on DES change scores during both reading rants and writing rants. Significant differences were found; for anger while reading $t(88) = 2.63$, $p < 0.01$ and happiness while ranting $t(88) = 2.02$, $p < 0.05$. Those who elected to have their rants posted experienced an increase in anger while reading ($M = 13.83$) compared to a decrease in anger while reading ($M = -2.65$) for nonposters. In the case of happiness change while ranting, nonposters experienced a greater decrease in happiness while writing ($M = -11.73$) than others ($M = -0.25$).

Differences between those who will go back and those who will not

Only 7 percent of participants indicated they would go back to the Web site on their own with 32 percent reporting they were unsure. Independent sample *T*-tests were computed on DES change scores during both reading and writing rants. There were significant differences with regard to happiness and sadness change while reading, $t(60) = -3.05$, $p < 0.01$ and $t(60) = 2.45$, $p < 0.05$, respectively. For happiness, those who would go back to the Web site on their own reported an increase in happiness while reading ($M = 19.83$) compared to a decrease for those who would not go back ($M = -7.88$). For sadness, those who would go back saw a decrease in sadness ($M = -12.17$) while those would not go back saw an increase ($M = 8.16$).

In response to an open-ended question regarding why they would go back, participants described the following: found the Web site "interesting" (66 percent), found the posts "funny" (33 percent), thought the Web site would help her "feel less alone" (17 percent), and thought the Web site would provide a "an outlet" (17 percent).

General Discussion

The current project provides an initial look at how people express their anger online and the emotional impact of such expressions. Findings from study one revealed, from the perspective of rant-site visitors, the perceived benefit of reading and posting rants. Study two identified the immediate emotional impact of reading and writing rants.

One finding that is of particular interest is that in study one, participants who posted rants unanimously indicated that that they felt calm or relaxed after ranting. This seems to run contrary to the research on catharsis,[3,4] which finds that venting anger tends to make people angrier. However, as pointed out by Olatuni and colleagues, even though catharsis is associated with increases in anger in the long term, it is common for people to feel relaxed immediately after venting.[4] This helps explain why participants feel that venting their anger is worthwhile, as they are immediately reinforced with feelings of calmness and relaxation.

Olatunji et al. also argue though, that there are long-term consequences to frequently venting anger.[4] Specifically, and contrary to catharsis theory, frequent venting leads to subsequent increases in anger rather than decreases. Consistent with this, study one found that those who frequent rant-sites have significantly higher trait anger scores than the norm and express their anger in more maladaptive ways than the norm. Likewise, they experienced frequent anger consequences, averaging almost one physical fight per month and more than two verbal fights per month. Finally, approximately a third of the participants believed they had an anger problem and almost half of them had been told they have an anger problem.

Results from study two show the emotional impact of reading and writing rants. Contrary to the experiences reported by rant-site users in study one, participants in study two became less happy and sadder after reading the rants. After writing rants, they became less happy and angrier. However, when looking specifically at those participants who chose to have their rants posted on the Web site, it is found that they did not see the same decrease in happiness while posting that others did. Similarly, those participants who indicated they would go back to the Web site on their own saw a substantial increase in happiness while reading the rants, whereas others saw a decrease in happiness. This suggests that there is an entertainment value in the Web site for some participants, which makes them more likely to return.

Taken together, the results from both studies suggest that reading and writing online rants are likely unhealthy practices as those who do them often are angrier and have more maladaptive expressions styles than others. Likewise, reading

and writing online rants are associated with negative shifts in mood for the vast majority of people. The causes of these shifts in mood could not be identified from the current study, but it is likely rooted in the content of the rants they read or write.

Similarly, what is still unknown is why some people find rant-sites entertaining, while others do not. Given that profanity is common on these sites and that the rants sometimes include explicit threats toward people, it is not surprising that many people find them offensive. However, it would be interesting to explore the characteristics that might predict who finds such sites entertaining. Likewise, future research should explore what role anonymity plays with regard to posting. The majority of participants in study one (67 percent) indicated they would still post even if it was not anonymous. However, in a review of the literature on Internet anonymity, Christopherson argues that anonymity does influence how people communicate online so it is reasonable to assume that rant-site posters would change their behavior if they had to provide their name or Email address.[8]

A significant limitation of the current project is the small sample size in study one. Regrettably, those who post anonymously online appear to be particularly reluctant to participate in research and recruiting such participants, even with an incentive, was difficult. Due to the small sample size, results should be interpreted with caution and future researchers should identify other mechanisms for encouraging participation among rant-site users. However, the results still serve as an important first step in understanding Internet anger, a phenomenon we know very little about.

A limitation of study two is that participants were not regular rant-site visitors, bringing into question the generalizability of the findings. Given that such a study could not practically be conducted with regular rant-site visitors, this limitation is one that may need to be tolerated to conduct research in this area. This concern about generalizability is quelled somewhat by the finding that ~40 percent of participants were considering going back to the Web site on their own now that they know of it.

While the scope of the current project is somewhat limited given its focus on a particular type of Web site, the results likely generalize to other similar types of online venues (e.g., social networking Web sites, media discussion forums, blogs). In many ways, rant-sites mimic these environments as writers can post their ideas, others can respond, etc. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that ranting in these other venues may lead to similar sort of problems.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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Address correspondence to:
Dr. Ryan C. Martin
Department of Human Development
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay
Mary Ann Cofrin Hall C318
2420 Nicolet Drive
Green Bay, WI 54311-7001

E-mail: martinr@uwgb.edu