Socially Disenfranchised: Harassment On and Off Social Media

Xinru Page, Computer Information Systems, Bentley University

Abstract  As social media increasingly mediate our relationships and social lives, individuals are becoming more connected and gaining social benefits. However, many are now experiencing online harassment. Avoiding or abandoning social media is one common tactic to cope with harassment. This presentation investigates the motivations, concerns, benefits, and consequences associated with non-use of social media to avoid harassment. In doing so, it provides empirical insights into a formerly uninvestigated population of non-users prevented from using social media because of social (rather than functional) barriers. This talk identifies how these individuals face social consequences both on and off social media, resulting in a lose-lose situation that we term social disenfranchisement. Building on Wyatt’s framework and the risk-benefits framework, we introduce this previously unidentified category of non-use as an extension to the commonly used taxonomy and provide a cohesive theoretical framework within which to understand various types of non-use. We then analyze the phenomenon of online harassment from the perspective of this framework. Addressing the concerns of socially disenfranchised non-users is of utmost importance in the fight against online harassment. As others are increasingly connected, they are increasingly left behind and even ostracized. This presentation therefore concludes with design recommendations and implications for social media platform designers to mitigate the use or non-use consequences for socially disenfranchised non-users.