




Moral justification for online shaming

Philbert Joseph Komu 
University of Dar es Salaam

Abstract

It is ever more common nowadays, since the onset of digitalized socializing, for people to censure those who fall short of established moral standards by publicly shaming them. The traditional aim of shaming *wrongdoers* has been to awaken in the victim a feeling of embarrassment, exposure, or guilt and remorse in the hope that these feelings would inspire a change in their behavior. Yet overall, the ease and ubiquity of online bullying and humiliation has significantly altered the overall impact of public shaming as a force for good. What used to be a reliable means of enforcing positive change has now evolved into an unprecedented genre in its own right. Thus 'online shaming' opens the forum of behavioral evaluation to a completely anonymous terrain of interchange, eliminating cultural and geographical barriers, whereby anyone is free to shame promptly and ubiquitously. The result is that the degree of shaming is often *disproportionate* to the targeted offense, raising serious moral risks that require *accountability*. Should there be technical mechanisms by which to simply do away with online shaming altogether? I propose candidates for a possible register of objective desiderata to guide our thinking about whether online shaming might ever be morally justified.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 09 April 2025

Accepted 13 October 2025

KEYWORDS

Online shaming, moral justification, proportionality, accountability

HOW TO CITE

Komu, P. J. (2025). Moral justification for online shaming. *East African Journal of Communication Studies*, Vol. 1(1), 29-49. <https://doi.org/10.56279/eajocs.v1i1.2>

1. Introduction

It is ever more common nowadays, since the onset of digitalized socializing, for people to censure those who fall short of established moral standards by publicly shaming¹ them. The prevalence of online platforms has made it intolerable for people not to impose their moral judgments on others, following shaming anywhere it goes. Most people blame it on the internet. That it has made it ever easier to express disapproval or to condemn others, especially via its designated social media. In other words, it is not hard to see that developments in digital communication have not only transformed us into beings whose daily lives are reliant on the internet but also seekers of new friends who sympathize with us through the social media (Sedighimornani, 2018). It is now easy to come across videos, photos, audios or text messages of the [perceived] wrongdoers posted almost fashionably online, for any reason whatsoever. We often hope that whatever shameful thing we post online does not only stay long but goes viral. Indeed, we are more and more sinking into an ocean where there is nowhere to turn in order to run away from taking part in shaming or being shamed.

Whether as a punishment, a form of revenge, a means of disgracing or ridiculing, or as a disciplinary measure, or merely bullying, the eminent aim of shaming wrongdoers has been to inspire a change in their behavior. For this reason, many people do not find it strange to shame wrongdoers. And we would often find it odd when anyone is disturbed by the event of shaming those who have committed acts that we generally consider unacceptable. Unsurprisingly, proponents of public shaming as a useful

¹ 'Shaming' is often viewed broadly, as Thomason (2011: 1) puts it, as a concept that includes feelings, practices, and even offenses which encompasses: "*feelings of shame, shaming practices, and stigmatizing*" but it need not be. I argue that, for online shaming to be morally justified, it is important to draw distinctions between shaming and other practices that can occur online such as bullying, harassment, and vigilantism. I will also show that the act of shaming need not arise the feelings of shame: you can be shamed without necessarily thereby feeling shame. The latter is the "*feeling you get as a result of doing or thinking something you believe to be bad or immoral. It can also come from a fear of others finding out what you've done*" (Sedighimornani, 2018:76).

moral tool have argued that the technology involved in online shaming has made it an ever more just way of enforcing the good. As Thomason (2021:1) puts it that “it is an important tool in helping to make social media and online communities safer and more welcoming to traditionally marginalized groups.”

Yet, the internet has increased both the severity of shaming as a punishment and the numbers of those who criticize shaming as a moral instrument. This implies that digital platforms have significantly impacted the way we habitually viewed shaming. Thus, the ‘traditional shaming’ that was seen as a worth retentive tool for improving moral conduct has been altered drastically by technology into a nasty ‘online shaming’. The latter cares less about the proportion of the targeted offense, punishing both wrongdoers and innocent third parties (Billingham & Parr, 2019; 2020). Fear is immanent that online shaming is a morally backpedal because it provides platforms for vigilantism, immoral revenge, harassment, and it is home to mere bullies, leaving many in agony. No wonder online shaming has increasingly engrossed many guiltless victims, triggering some serious consequences.

Perhaps one may wonder, why must we shame anyone? Scholars have quickly dismissed this question as irrelevant in moral deliberation. They find it plausible that we shame others because we believe that “it would be *wrong* to allow racist, sexist, dangerous, and disrespectful [among other immoral] conduct to go unchallenged” (Billingham & Parr, 2019:3). Online shaming has become such a strong and necessary factor in moral deliberation, and in determining whether something should attract social disapproval. However, while it might be *wrong* not to intervene in resolving immoralities when we could, it is unclear whether the intervention must involve shaming. And, if it must, whether and in which scenarios it would be morally justifiable to shame others. As we have seen, online shaming comes with *disproportionate* pervasive effects to the extent that critics have expressed the need to drop the concept from moral lexicon

altogether. Klonick (2016) sees the need to establish (legal) interventions to regulate our ways of enforcing social norms that constrain certain behaviour.

Many have attacked the practice of online shaming, especially for the nature – form and accuracy – of its punishment. For example, scholars have argued that the severity of its punishment might harm both wrongdoers and other less concerned third parties; and also, that there are no set limits to shamers who can ubiquitously and anonymously engage with this moral tool with little monetary setbacks and at rare costs of self-exposure² (Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia, 2021; Thomason, 2021; Barron et al., 2023; Norlock, 2017). This paper takes on the delicate question: is there a possibility for online shaming to ever be morally justifiable? To answer this question, I will propose a plausible objective set of desiderata that determines how and when online shaming *should* be morally justified. First, I look into the question of whether online shaming could ever be a good thing.³

1. The Moral Significance of Online Shaming

Shaming is not a new practice. Since ancient times, people have almost naturally participated in shaming practices in various forms that include pillories, flogging and scarlet letters. Ever since, people have continually treated shaming others as a good thing. It is the technology used in communication that has created an almost unavoidable way of enforcing the good, ‘online shaming’, which Gallardo (2017: 725) has described as

² Among the basic moral risks of online shaming is the fact that it is generally considered a good thing to do while at the same time people are seriously harmed, with no cost of being held accountable on the part of the shamers.

³ Many people take for granted that online shaming and cyber bullying or harassment are intertwined given how often the former falls into the traps of the latter concepts. If these concepts are not distinguished, linking the concept of online shaming with moral goodness will be utterly *cul-de-sac*. I am aware that distinctions must be drawn between cyber bullying or harassment and the concept of online shaming. Generally, these concepts are closely linked in that they all often involve “repeated verbal aggression over time” (Klonick, 2016:1034). Yet, the intention to enforce social norms by addressing some (perceived) violation of a social norm is what is often missing from cyber bullying or harassment, which makes online shaming unique.

traditional shaming's "fierce comeback in the digital age." On social media, people almost intuitively practice shaming through following, posting, messaging, liking, or commenting about – or to – the shamed individual (Zabielski, 2020; Gallardo, 2017; Klonick, 2016). When explaining how technological progress has impacted on shaming, Thomason (2021:1) reiterates that:

Given shaming's long history, the prevalence of online shaming should not be surprising. The technology involved has shifted quickly and sometimes dramatically, but online shaming seems to follow it wherever it goes. Chatrooms, fan forums, blogs, and social media platforms can all provide examples of shaming. It seems that as long as we have been online, we have been finding ways to digitally shame each other.

Literature has brought moral risks of online shaming into spotlight, claiming that it is impossible to have morally justifiable online shaming. But its positive role in enforcing the good cannot be undermined. We often think for example that individuals who are truly responsible for committing certain immoral acts must always be made to suffer feelings of regret, failure of which is a bad thing. Thus, *a fortiori*, these feelings are expected to lead to the deterrence of future wrongdoing. It is not surprising that there is huge consensus in the literature that despite its challenges, online shaming has notable positive moral outcomes (Koivukari & Korpisaari, 2021; Norlock, 2017). And it is commonly agreed that it is a good thing for anyone to feel shame.

Being shamed can be quite a good thing for its victims in many ways, even if sometimes not 'good' in the ethical sense. It is expected that the act of shame awakens in the victim a feeling of embarrassment, exposure, or guilt and remorse, which might inspire a change in their behavior. This means that online shaming can inspire self-consciousness or self-awareness (Muir et al., 2023). In other words, shaming is capable of changing an individual's behaviour for good or having good things happen to its victim. Conversely,

experience shows that there are people who might pragmatically take advantage of the event of their being shamed. Someone who wants to further their business in pornographic content, for example, might consider their leaked nude-photos quite a good thing for their business. Likewise, politicians who want to lead by fear, might consider their being branded as ‘murderers’ online as an opportunity to create more terror. Notwithstanding its impact on others, or its moral valuation, online shaming can therefore be quite good to the one who is shamed.

It is also widely acknowledged that online shaming effectively censures wrongdoing. Given the number of people who participate in online shaming, and the many more who believe that it is a force for good, it is clear that we cannot just naively criticize or dismiss it in our moral deliberations. Morally, people who participate in shaming proudly think of themselves as upholding valuable codes of conduct (Zabielski; Crockett, 2017; Gallardo, 2017). People tend to almost naturally believe it to be justifiable to censure those who behave in ways that violate conventional standards. We all suppose that certain wrongdoings must be met with strong disapprovals or criticisms. And the belief is growing that, if we want to effectively and sternly blame – or firmly condemn – wrongdoers, we should shame them online. In such an era, the idea of doing away with online shaming might prove to be either too difficult or impossible to implement, provided the ubiquity of its practice in censuring wrongdoing. Online shaming has been instrumental in deterring future wrongdoers, with the assumption that hopefully the wrongdoers and others with similar ambitions will never do it again.

One of the impacts of the shift to online shaming from its traditional-local settings is that shaming has ceased “to be a temporary mark of disgrace and becomes a lasting inscription of stigma” (Solove, 2007:96). No one would rationally want to be branded with such a mark. For this reason, scholars have argued that online shaming has been effective in provoking social change through its mechanism of sending a message of

condemnation on behalf of (and to) the community (Norlock, 2017; Thomason, 2018; Billingham and Parr, 2019). It is not surprising that recently governments and other authorities have increasingly employed online shaming as a means to address chronic wrongs in the society. For example, the Tanzania Police Force, in collaboration with the ITV, have a televised and social media program named “*Aibu Yako Hata Wewe!!*” – A Kiswahili phrase literally translating to “Shame on you for doing that too!” The program aims at publicly exposing drivers for failure to adhere to road traffic signs, rules and regulations by covertly recording videos of their recklessness in driving and later televising and posting those videos online. Such a program has been applauded as having provoked social change through sending a message to the drivers at fault and those drivers who act likewise. The hope is that such shaming will create a society of individuals who want to avoid being similarly shamed, even if that may not always be the case.

Online shaming also draws attention to social ills such as sexism, racism, corruption, and exploitation. Recently online shaming has been defended as an effective tool for identifying bad practices and maintaining social order. Koivukari & Korpisaari (2021) have argued that it would be challenging and impossible to criminalise online shaming given that its practice is embedded in fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression. It is also widely acknowledged that online shaming gives imaginable powers to the traditionally disadvantaged and marginalized to have a voice that can be heard (Crockett, 2017). This has a further positive impact in reducing state or legal interventions on the fights against crime and injustices (Zabielski, 2020:12). As Oravec (2020) would argue that this is a performative online shaming move from rule of law to rule of shame. On the other hand, organizations can be brought in the spotlight by online shaming for poor services, unfair competitions, exploitations, etc. which can bolster socio-economic change (Billingham & Parr, 2019; 2020). Whatever this means is that online shaming’s moral value is something worth retaining.

2. The Moral Issues of Online Shaming

It has been shown that online shaming can save right moral purposes, especially when it is practiced with good intensions. Yet scholars have raised alarming concerns about online shaming, with accusations that we may not simply ignore as irrelevant. Let us first consider Kate Klonick's three primary allegations about online shaming that it is "an over-determined punishment with indeterminate social meaning; [...] not a calibrated or measured form of punishment; and [...] of little or questionable accuracy in who and what it punishes." (2016:1029-30). In fact, such accusations were already predicted nine years earlier when Solove (2007:96) argued, "Permanent shame can be unproductive. It punishes people for longer than necessary and it prevents them from building new lives." Surely, we naturally take it to be wrong to punish someone infinitely, or to disproportionately punish both the wrongdoers and those who have done nothing wrong. In fact, these long-lasting effects of online shaming might as well cause wrongdoers to see no use of reforming.

The above accusations already suggest that online shaming can be quite vicious. One of the vices of online shaming is that it is uncontrollably subjectivism in its moral deliberation. This results into different individuals being punished unevenly for committing the same heinous crime, depending on who participates in the act of shaming (Laidlaw, 2017; Goldman, 2015). As a result, individuals practice doxing by seeking from online platforms private information about others in order to have something to expose publicly.⁴ It is not surprising therefore that online shaming has often fallen into the traps of new forms of moral and legal violations, which include: cyber harassment, cyber bullying, and other various forms of violence (Gallardo, 2016). Moreover, shame's stigma is a difficult one to escape, regardless of how good one can be. Our mere association with those who commit shameful acts could turn us into victims of shame as well (Billingham & Parr, 2019; 2020).

⁴ Zabielski (2020:9) describes this doxing practice as "online practice whereby personal information is sought and made publicly available in order to violate someone's privacy and enable harassment."

While olden times show that shaming used to merely target its victims and a few people around them, online shaming is trendy. Unfortunately, it is the bad news that spreads quicker and wider than the good ones. Both simple and complex wrongs that are posted online can go viral depending on who is being shamed and who it is that is shaming. Merely because it is online, and on the internet that does not forget, it will stay long and it must trend (Gallardo, 2017). As a result, online shaming can punish someone infinitely (Laidlaw, 2017; Klonick, 2016). This has caused online shaming to be considered a highly *disproportionate* punishment if and when weighed against the violations committed (Zabielski, 2020; Basak et al. 2019). Moreover, participants of online shaming often do it for fun, lacking proper facts about the context of the committed wrong, which results into lack of due processes of persecution. For this reason, unlike in the courts of law, online shaming is against both the principle of presumption of innocence and the desire for natural justice or precisely *audi alteram partem* (Zabielski, 2020; Basak et al. 2019, Gallardo, 2017; Solove, 2007).

Needless to say, the consequence of being attacked through online shaming is that serious danger can be caused to the shamed. Online shaming has often caused far reaching negative effects to people's lives and carriers including: severe distress, anxiety, panic attacks, depression, ostracism, isolation, loss of jobs and occasionally people being forced into suicide (Zabielski, 2020; Billingham & Par, 2019). It might be true that the aim of punishing wrongdoers is not to inflict harm on them, but to help them reform, deter others from copying the same wrongful acts, and keep the society safe from the wrongdoers. It might even be wrong to intentionally harm people in the disguise of punishing them. But, of course, a counter-argument can be raised that it would be hard to come up with a form of punishment for gross violations of social norms that did not have any harmful effects. We therefore cannot fail to punish those who skew their behaviour from acceptable norms for fear that the punishments would then harm them. It appears, therefore, that online shaming as a practice is

prima facie something that we may want to embrace. But it has a lot of pitfalls. For example, people have been caught by surprise as victims of shaming in scenarios such as revenge porn or nonconsensual pornography that they knew nothing about (Pinto & Seidman, 2023). Others are just third parties in the shameful acts, being shamed only on virtue of their close relations with the wrongdoers. Thus, the dangers of online shaming must be addressed if it is to be morally justified.

Online shaming has also been accused of being complaisant to moral risks that generally endanger the need to retain the lexicon in moral deliberations. It seems, for example, implausible to shame someone politely and respectfully. Subsequently, those who vouch for civility have rational grounds to dismiss any form of shaming whatsoever. To that effect, Thomason (2021:1) has argued that “shaming threatens to undermine our commitment to the co-deliberative practices of morality.” She argues so because she believes that shaming is a backward-looking reaction, a retroactive assessment of wrongs, that neither addresses the causes of the wrongs nor is it reflective of creating the society in which we desire to live. In proposing the reasons for doing away with online shaming, Aitchison & Meckled-Garcia (2021:1) summed up that this is a practice that involves some informal collective punishment that is presumptively morally wrong in itself for anyone to think of doing to others. They then went ahead and thought that online shaming should be equated to ostracism simply because it does not respect equal basic rights to its targets, having some unlimited imaginable mass power that has serious punitive consequences, and that it is “incompatible with due process values”. In line with those who think that compliance approaches of enforcing morality such as shaming are bad, Thomason (2021) also thinks that the best approach would be the integrity one, whereby values are upheld by encouraging good behaviour.

While we may agree with the above claim that, in enforcing morality, we should encourage good behaviour than wait to punish wrongdoers, this

proposition could be fatal to the practice of online shaming. As we have previously seen, online shaming could be used to encourage good behaviour as well. Furthermore, it would be impossible to criminalize or ban online shaming without thereby violating fundamental legal and human right principles such as freedom of expression (Koivukari & Korpisaari, 2021). Therefore, we must find possible ways to rescue online shaming from these apparent moral dilemmas. In what follows, I propose a list of desiderata that may be helpful in developing a conception of ‘online shaming’ that could avoid its currently associated moral issues, and therefore be morally justified.

3. Desiderata for the Moral Justification of Online Shaming

As we have seen, some scholars have thought that online shaming is an important tool in enforcing morality. Contrary arguments have associated online shaming with too much ethical problems, which suggests that we should do away with shaming altogether. I show below that the raised worries can be overcome, if and when the practice of online shaming can meet the following desiderata:

3.1. Extensional Adequacy

There is so far no consensus in the literature as to what the concept of ‘online shaming’ actually entails (de Vries, 2015; Zabielski, 2020). All we know to be true is that, as Billingham & Parr (2019:1) argues, online shaming has provided us with an “unprecedented opportunities to criticize those we consider to have done wrong”. But we also know that it is possible for someone who has done nothing wrong or illegal to be shamed online (Gallardo, 2017). It is not surprising that some people believe that online shaming is a metaphysical universal: a term that must include a broad of lists of different forms of practices that happen online including bullying, doxing or vigilantism, and harassment (Laidlaw, 2017).⁵

⁵ Scholars such as Klonick (2016) have viewed online shaming as synonymous to such concepts as cyberbullying, and cyber-harassment merely because they all have a common element elongated verbal aggression. But it would be difficult to have a morally justified shaming if there were no

But surely online shaming must be different from these other concepts. It is not startling therefore that many scholars have proposed a narrower conception that must distinguish online shaming from those other concepts (Billingham & Parr, 2020; Basak et al., 2019; Klonick, 2016). It has thus been a pressing issue in the literature to determine this uniqueness of online shaming. This is due to the fact that concepts such as online bullying and online harassment have an intrinsic negative moral connotation. One would be hard-pressed to agree with the claim that one can be rightly and justly bullied or harassed. If these concepts are treated as synonymous with online shaming, therefore, the risk is that online shaming will equally never be morally justified.

The question now is: what distinguishes online shaming from those concepts that have wrongness embedded in them? It is firstly worth noting that what these concepts have in common is the fact that practicing them involves a prolonged verbal aggression (Zabielski, 2020). But it is also widely acknowledged that what makes online shaming *sui generis* is the fact that it must aim at enforcing a moral norm. Scholars have argued that the concept of online shaming must meet such a condition: that it must be (a) directed towards those who have violated society's pre-established moral norms and (b) acceptable in the eyes of the public as opposed to legal or authoritative systems (Zabielski, 2020; Basak et al., 2019; Billingham & Parr, 2019; 2020; de Vries, 2015). This still begs the question: to what extent then can the concept of online shaming be extended for the practice of shaming to be justified?

Various conclusions can be drawn from the above arguments. The central is that there are qualities that cannot deny online shaming of its moral justification. As such, online shaming can be as prolongedly aggressive as possible, provided that: it aims at enforcing a moral norm; it *fairly* and

distinction between shaming and these other morally perverted concepts. However, the target of shaming is not to bully or harass anyone but to address violations of perceived or real social norms.

factually targets those who have violated the norms; and it is endorsed by the public as acceptable.⁶ Such a shaming can be performed offline or online. And it is essentially *alegal* in the sense that first it can be triggered or elicited by both legal or illegal acts, and second it cannot be justified on legal grounds. As such, online shaming must be distinguished from such other defamatory practices as cyber bullying, cyber harassment and online vigilantism or doxing. To effectively do this, it is important to ensure that the shaming is directed towards those who have violated social norms, the aim is to enforce morality and that the public generally acknowledges both that norms have been violated and that the wrongdoers deserve to be shamed.

3.2. Shamefacedness

I definitely do not want to be publicly shamed. Many people do not plausibly want to be subjected to such situations where they are being shamed or even stigmatized. In fact, some people in Africa would prefer dying to being subjected to shame or disgrace (Wiredu 2003:319). Oftentimes, we believe that if and when we shame someone, we are equivalently telling them: *'you ought to feel bad for the awful thing you have done'*. Subsequently, we would be enforcing in them good behaviour. But it is important to remember that not everyone has an ability to feel shame or be shamed. States of affairs that could be very shameful to us might be extremely comfortable to others who remain unshamed by them, which may even result in what Adkins (2019) calls 'online shame backlashes.'⁷ As pointed earlier, a courtesan who wants to gain more fame and popularity in her obscene business might consider a scenario of her

⁶ Various questions might be raised such as: who establishes this fairness and the fact that the violation was by this shamed person? Or, how do we make sure that the shaming is proportional to the violation? And that we are not shaming an innocent person? To these and similar questions, I show below that those who participate in online shaming ought to know that they can be held responsible for any shaming that goes beyond fair margins.

⁷ Adkins (2019: 1) argues that online shaming might require "the assertion of social and epistemic authority on behalf of a larger community, and is dependent upon an audience that will be receptive to the shaming testimony."

leaked nude photos on social media – or any other form of slut-shaming – as a good thing.

In fact, it might be the case that the event of our shaming someone is more of advertising and promoting her indecent behaviour than addressing her wrongs. Scholars have argued that it is not necessarily the case that when we shame someone then the feelings of shame are induced to them. In many occasions, someone might be shamed without thereby being made to feel shame (Thomason 2015, 2018). Surely, many people dismiss certain scenarios of being shamed as ridiculous.⁸ And quite often, people who are stigmatized – as those who form membership of stigmatized groups do – embrace and celebrate it (Thomason, 2021).

There is no doubt that shaming is widely used as a shaping instrument, a form of punishment against wrongdoing. However, the question of whether it is a morally justifiable tool is still a tricky one. We have seen that one must be hard-pressed to agree that it would be morally justifiable to shame someone who wants to thereby take advantage of her being shamed, or else when the shaming is quite good for her. We have seen that the goal of shaming is to sanction those who violate social standards. Equally, since those who participate in shaming think of themselves as upholding moral standards, it is primarily imperative that this goal is attained. But we know that some people are not always shamefaced for obvious reasons, which hinder the attainment of the goal of shaming. Even so, it would be wrong to allow racist, dangerous, disrespectful or sexist practices, for example, to continue to be unchecked (Billingham & Parr, 2019), simply because those who practice them do not feel shamed by them. As noted earlier, it is possible for the society to generally view a certain act as bad, even-while there is one famous person who does it for popularity. It would be strange to argue that shaming the famous person is wrong simply because the person is not shamefaced. Shaming, in such occasions, may not only make

⁸ While some people might consider being called 'fat' quite offensive, for example, others might consider this ridiculous because being fat does not harm anyone's reputation.

the person more famous but the wrongful act too. Still, shaming such individuals might as well deter future wrongdoers. Whatever this prima facie means is that online shaming would be more morally justified if those that are being shamed, and/or the community that is made aware of the wrongful acts committed, have an ability to feel shame. This does not necessarily require that the direct victims of the consequences of shame be shamefaced. Even so, *a fortiori*, shaming would be morally justified if its consequences do not further escalate the wrongs committed.

3.3. Proportionality

We have seen that the moral problems associated with online shaming include the fact that shaming's punishment is unproductive and overdetermined; the punishment's social meaning can hardly be determined; its form of punishment is not only too long but also not calibrated; and that, generally, online shaming cares less about what or who it is that it punishes (Klonick, 2016; Solove, 2007). It appears that online shaming is incapable of being proportional and its punishment has spillover effects to individuals such as the relatives of the shamed person, who had nothing to do with the wrongful act.⁹ While we may agree, however, that it would be morally wrong to punish someone disproportionately, it is almost impossible to describe what "*proportional punishment*" should include. What would be a proportional punishment for someone who has committed serious offenses such as murder or rape, for example? At face value, it looks like shaming is wrong because it includes in its punishment those who have not taken part in wrongdoing. But, should we not shame someone for being outside the pool of morally acceptable behaviors just because her mother would be equally shamed if the daughter was subjected to shaming? In fact, some scholars (e.g. Aitchson &

⁹ Billingham & Parr (2020) distinguish between narrow proportionality where the burden of shaming befalls those who are culpable for an offense, and wide proportionality where third parties incur some psychological or reputational harms for an offense committed by those close to them. In the cases of wide proportionality, an act of shaming can be morally justified provided that its positive effects, such as the created fear for committing similar wrongs among members of the public, outweigh its negative effects.

Meckled-Garcia, 2021) would think of anyone who thinks that someone who has violated a social norm should not be shamed as conniving with – or being complicit in – wrongs.

All that is required is that the mass is made aware that the dangers of online shaming being *disproportionate* are almost inevitable. For as long as this danger is existent, the implication is that online shaming is almost always morally unjustified. Such awareness, and of course extra measures such as legal restrictions, as Billingham & Parr (2020; 2019) argue, can reduce individuals who engage themselves in online shaming, slow their judgements, and increase more rational reflections on how to shame anyone, and the impact of doing so. In summing up the need to observe proportionality as key in moral justification of online shaming, Billingham & Parr (2019:28) argue:

[...] the punishment of those who violate the law of nature must be proportionate to the aims of that punishment. The same applies with respect to the public shaming of those who violate social norms. An instance of public shaming is justifiable only if it is proportionate. This requires that its negative consequences are not excessive in comparison with its positive consequences. The positive consequences here are those that we identified in the previous section – causing remorse, deterring future violations, strengthening our commitment to and compliance with valuable social norms, and so on.

3.4. Accountability

Why do people engage in acts of shaming others? Scholars such as Barron et al. (2023) have argued that participation in online shaming is motivated by either of the two desires: hedonic desires (i.e., the desire to feel good or the pleasure of witnessing other people's misfortunes) and/or justice desires (i.e., the need to do good by seeing to it that wrongdoers receive deserving punishments). Shamers, as norm enforcers, must also be willing to be responsible for – in the sense of *justify* – their actions. As Billingham

& Parr (2019:25) establishes, “It is highly desirable that those who shame others can themselves be held to account, taking responsibility for their criticism and its effects, and being open to responses, discussion, and correction.” This means that shamers too must take into account the principles of natural justice and presumption of innocence, allowing the target of shaming the right to effectively reply in order to do away with inaccuracy of criticisms and enhance impartiality. Since online shaming can easily fall into practices that are morally wrong in and of themselves such as harassment or bullying, shamers must realize that they can be held accountable for taking part in these wrongs. It is equally important to note that, legally, distinctions have been made between shaming and such torts as defamation.¹⁰ Thus, while online shaming does harm its victims by collective actions of the shamers, each individual shamer stands a chance of being held personally responsible for her actions.

In formal systems of enforcing norms, it is expected that: the enforcers be impartial; those accused of violating the norms have a chance to defend themselves; and when they are condemned, they still have a chance to appeal. However, online shaming is an informal method of enforcing the social norms where such an articulate process of justice is often not available. For online shaming to be justified, it would be crucial that those who sanction others be somewhat responsible and those being sanctioned have a chance to defend themselves. Billingham & Parr add that:

[There is a need] to create a culture in which those who engage in public shaming make themselves accountable to others. In other words, they should recognize and respect others’ right of reply, and especially that of the target of their criticism. Those who accuse others of violating social norms should be willing to listen to the other side of the story and consider whether their criticisms might be misplaced (2019:28-29).

¹⁰ It is argued that defamation “extends liability beyond the original deformer. Individuals who repeat or otherwise republish defamatory communications are subject to the same degree of liability as the original speaker of such content” (Gallardo, 2017:730)

What is required is that new social norms are established to the shamers about how to conduct themselves while shaming others. Such norms could be that shamers cannot do so anonymously¹¹ and that each individual shamer should be ready to take remedial responsibility for the collective harm caused to the shamed. Failure to hold to account those who unfairly shame others may create a dangerous circle of what Muir et al. (2023) refer to as ‘hurt people hurt people’, a circle of people shaming others as a form of entertainment or simply because they too had been shamed in the past.

4. Conclusion

Disputes in the literature are not on whether online shaming does have negative or positive impacts to its victims and their close ones, morally speaking. Arguments are instead that the indefiniteness of the consequences of online shaming block our cognitive capacity to determine the morality of shaming. It was therefore important to look into the extent to which online shaming could be both virtuous and vicious in order to determine whether or not it can ever be justified. I have shown that online shaming is a valuable tool in moral deliberations. Yet, it has serious harmful consequences to deserving wrongdoers, those who have been unfairly accused, and innocent third parties. These negative consequences are partly due to our tendency to overextend the concept of online shaming to include such other moral wrongs as online bullying, online harassment, doxing, and even defamations. I have therefore argued that, for online shaming to be morally justified, the following desiderata must be met. First, that the concept of online shaming must be distinguished from other inherently bad practices such as online bullying and harassment. In this regard, I established that the uniqueness of online shaming is in the fact that its primary target is to solely emphasize on enforcing moral norms. Then it is important that the shaming is not used as a footprint for

¹¹ Billingham & Parr (2020:28) has shown that it is important allow as morally justified certain amounts of anonymity for members of marginalized groups in order to increase freedom of expression and reducing the risks of “shame backlashes”.

escalating further immoralities. It is also crucial that the extent of shaming is narrowly and widely *proportionate* to the wrongs committed, and that it must be possible for the shamers to be held *accountable* for taking part in the act of shaming.

References

- Adkins, K. 2019. When shaming is shameful: double standards in online shame backlashes. *Hypatia*, 34(1), 76-97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12456>
- Aitchison, G., & Meckled-Garcia, S. 2021. Against Online Public Shaming: Ethical Problems with Mass Social Media. *Social Theory and Practice*, 47(1), 1–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45378050>
- Barron, A.C, Woodyatt, L., Thomas, E.F., Loh, J.EK. & Dunning, K. 2023, Doing good or feeling good? Justice concerns predict online shaming via deservingness and schadenfreude. *Computer in Human Behavioural Report*, 11: 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2023.100317>
- Basak, R., Sural, S., Ganguly, N., & Ghosh, S. K. 2019. Online public shaming on Twitter: Detection, analysis, and mitigation. *IEEE Transactions on computational social systems*, 6(2), 208-220. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TCSS.2019.2895734>
- Billingham, P., & Parr, T. 2019. Online public shaming: Virtues and vices. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 51(3), 371-390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josp.12308>
- Billingham, P., & Parr, T. (2020). Enforcing social norms: The morality of public shaming. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 28(4), 997-1016. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12543>
- Crockett, M. J. 2017. Moral outrage in the digital age. *Nature human behaviour*, 1(11), 769-771. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0213-3>
- De Vries, A. 2015, January. The use of social media for shaming strangers: Young people's views. In *2015 48th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*. 2053-2062. IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2015.245>
- Gallardo, K. 2017. Taming the internet pitchfork mob: Online public shaming, the viral media age, and the communications decency

- act. *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law*, 19(3), 721-746. <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/>
- Goldman, L. M. 2015. Trending now: The use of social media websites in public shaming punishments. *American Criminal Law Review*, 52, 415.
- Klonick, K. 2015. Re-shaming the debate: Social norms, shame, and regulation in an internet age. *Maryland Law Review*, 75(4), 1029. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2638693>
- Koivukari, K., & Korpisaari, P. 2021, November. Online Shaming-a New Challenge for Criminal Justice. In *Perspectives on Platform Regulation* (pp. 473-488). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.
- Laidlaw, E. B. 2017. Online shaming and the right to privacy. *Laws*, 6(1), 3. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2944307>
- Muir, S. R., Roberts, L. D., Sheridan, L., & Coleman, A. R. (2023). Examining the role of moral, emotional, behavioural, and personality factors in predicting online shaming. *PLoS One*, 18(3), e0279750. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0279750>
- Norlock, K. 2017, 'Online Shaming', *Social Philosophy Today*, 33, 187–197. <https://doi.org/10.5840/socphiltoday201762343>
- Oravec, J. A. 2020. Online social shaming and the moralistic imagination: The emergence of Internet-based performative shaming. *Policy & Internet*, 12(3), 290-310. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.226>
- Pinto, M., & Seidman, G. 2023. Introduction: Shaming-Definition, Historical Origins and Contemporary Proliferation of an Elusive Concept. In *The Legal Aspects of Shaming: An Ancient Sanction in the Modern World* (pp. 2-27). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Sedighimornani, N. 2018. Shame and its features: Understanding of shame. *European Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, 3(3), 75-107. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1453426>
- Solove, D. J. (2007). *The future of reputation: Gossip, rumor, and privacy on the Internet*. Yale University Press.
- Thomason, K. K. 2015. Shame, violence, and morality. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 91(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12110>

- Thomason, K. K. 2018. *Naked: The dark side of shame and moral life*. Oxford University Press.
- Thomason, K. K. 2021. The moral risks of online shaming. In *The Oxford handbook of digital ethics* (pp. 145-162). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wiredu, K. 2003. An Akan perspective on human rights. In: *The African Philosophy Reader*. Second edition paperback. (Eds.) P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux. Routledge, pp. 313-323.
- Zabielski, J. 2020. *Fifteen Minutes of Shame? Understanding the Experience of Being Subjected to Moral Outrage Online*. [Master's thesis, Uppsala Universitet].
<https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-424349>