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Navigating the Terrain:

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Adding Insult to Injustice: Exploring differences in the role of justice perceptions and social media use on vengeful dissent in online and on-campus education

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Demand for online higher education has grown considerably in recent years but comes with a unique set of challenges. Online students often experience lower sense of connection, which may give impetus to join student-led social media groups. Use of these groups may exacerbate another challenge: the reportedly greater levels of vengeful dissent towards staff from online students, which, in on-campus students, has been linked to low procedural justice perceptions. This study explored the association between procedural justice perceptions and vengeful dissent in online and on-campus education, examining the moderating effect of student-led social media groups. A total of 127 adults (M age = 25.46, SD = 7.82; 73.22% female) who were either studying or had recently completed a degree at an Australian university in either fully online or on-campus mode (64 online; 63 on-campus) completed an online self-report survey. As hypothesised, low procedural justice perceptions were more strongly associated with greater vengeful dissent in online students and use of student-led social media groups strengthened the association in online students only. The findings represent the first to empirically explore the justice perception-dissent relationship in online learning and have several implications for policy and practice in navigating online education.

Keywords: Online education, social media, vengeful dissent, procedural justice

Introduction

Demand for online higher education, which overcomes geographical limitations and offers the flexibility to fit study around work and family commitments, has increased considerably. In 2018, Norton reported that, due to funding changes permitting Australian public universities to invest more in online education, online enrolments were expected to increase. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to rapidly transition to fully online delivery, bringing it to the forefront of many universities' agenda. Online higher education presents unique challenges. Evidence indicates that student satisfaction and connection are often lower, possibly due to limited synchronous communication opportunities with staff and peers, which has been empirically shown to foster connection, community, and relationship building (Martin et al., 2018; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017). University students often utilise social media to form student-led groups to connect with their peers; however, for online students, these groups are often their only avenue for informal connection with other students (Adalberon & Säljö, 2017; Kibby & Fulton, 2014). Another challenge is the apparent increased hostility and aggression among online students towards staff, known as *vengeful dissent*. Vengeful dissent involves students expressing their disagreement or dissatisfaction regarding classroom issues in a malicious, vitriolic, or threatening manner (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004; 2007; Shaw & Barker, 2020). Evidence shows vengeful dissent is linked to poorer student and staff well-being, burnout, organisational turnover, and poor academic performance (Frisby, 2015). Additionally, issues of workload and time pressure in academia are well-documented (Miller, 2019), but for online educators, dissent could exacerbate these pressures. Therefore, understanding conditions that may promote vengeful dissent is crucial for implementing evidence-based strategies to mitigate it.

On-campus, dissent has been explored through the lens of *classroom justice*, which posits that dissent occurs when students believe they have experienced unjust processes or outcomes (Chory-Assad, 2002; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). Three types of justice, distributive, procedural and interactional, have been identified;

however, evidence suggests dissent is best predicted by poor perceptions of *procedural justice* (i.e., how fair students believe policies used to make academic decisions are; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004; 2007; Goodboy et al., 2021). While there are consistent anecdotal reports spanning over twenty years that suggest vengeful dissent is a more pressing and common issue in online learning environments (e.g., Hailey et al., 2001; Peoples-Halio, 2004; Frisby, 2015; Shaw and Barker, 2020), empirical research exploring it is remarkably limited. The challenges of poorer connection and greater vengeful dissent could be related: online students seeking connection to their peers may join *student led social media groups*; however, if they contain largely negative content (e.g., other students complaining about their own perceptions of justice), their own poor perceptions of procedural justice may be exacerbated, thus increasing the likelihood of vengeful dissent (Shaw & Barker, 2020). Therefore, this research will explore the association between procedural justice perceptions and vengeful dissent in online and on-campus education, and the moderating effect of student-led social media groups. We hypothesise that 1) the association between procedural justice perceptions and vengeful dissent will be significantly stronger for online than on-campus students; and 2) that high use of student-led social media groups will strengthen the relationship between procedural justice perceptions and vengeful dissent in online students only.

Method

Participants and procedure

A total of 127 participants (73% female), aged 18-58 years (*M* = 25.46, *SD* = 7.82), completed a correlational, cross-sectional online, self-report survey. Sixty-three were online students and 64 on-campus. To be eligible, participants were required to be studying a degree offered by an Australian university (or have completed it in the past six months), have completed at least one subject in their degree, and be studying either fully online or fully on-campus. Participants were recruited through social media advertisements, word of mouth and the university research participation pool (SONA). No incentives were offered, except for two course credit points for university research pool participants. To avoid biases, advertisements described the study in broad terms. Participants accessed the survey via an anonymous link, gave informed consent, then completed demographic questions and study measures. The study received ethics approval from the University's Human Research Committee and took 20 minutes to complete.

Measures

Vengeful dissent (VD) was measured using the VD subscale of Goodboy's (2011) Instructional Dissent Scale (IDS). The IDS includes 22 items, with six items specifically for VD (e.g., "I hoped to ruin the reputation of an instructor/ teaching staff by exposing his/her bad practices to others"). Participants rated how often they engaged in these behaviours on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *never* to 4 = *very often*). Procedural justice perceptions were measured using the procedural justice subscale (PJS) of the Perceived Classroom Justice Scale (PCJS; Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004), with language adapted for an Australian context (e.g., "the missed work make-up policies" changed to "the special consideration/extension policies"). The PJS has 17 items where participants rate how fair they perceive university policies and procedures on a 5-point Likert scale 1 = *extremely unfair* to 5 = *extremely fair*). (e.g., "the late submission policies"). Use of student-led social media groups was measured using nine purpose-designed items where participants rate how often they engage in social media groups ("I visit social media pages or groups about my degree/university") on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *never* to 4 = *very often*). All scales reported excellent Cronbach's α ranging between .88-.92.

Results

Alpha was set at .05 for all analyses. Data were tested for the assumptions of moderated regression. Minor violations in homoscedasticity were observed, which were controlled using the heteroscedasticity estimator correction (HC3) in Haye's (2018) PROCESS Macro (Version 4.1). All other assumptions were met. Descriptive statistics are in Table 1, while bivariate Pearsons's correlations are in Table 2.

Table 1.

Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), and Confidence Intervals (CI) of Study Variables

	Online		On-Campus	
	M (*SD*)	CI [LLCI – ULCI]	*M* (*SD*)	CI [LLCI – ULCI]
PJS scores	62.42 (12.47)	[59.31 – 65.54]	61.90 (12.45)	[58.77 – 65.04]
VDS scores	7.81 (3.82)	[6.86 – 8.77]	6.92 (2.25)	[6.36 – 7.49]
SMUS scores	12.30 (4.71)	[11.12 – 13.47]	12.83 (4.47)	[11.70 – 13.95]

Table 2.

Bivariate correlations between PJS, VDS and SMUS scores for online and on-campus students

Online Students	PJS Scores	VDS Scores	SMUS Scores
1. PJS Scores	1		
2. VDS Scores	-.50**	1	
3. SMUS Scores	-.23	.50**	1
On-Campus Students			
1. PJS Scores	1		
2. VDS Scores	-.23	1	
3. SMUS Scores	-.20	.16	1

** p <.01

Fishers Z tests were run to test Hypothesis 1 and revealed a significant difference in the correlations between PJS and VDS scores (z = 1.69; p = .045) between study modes such that the association between PJS scores and VDS scores was statistically stronger for online students. Moderated regressions were used to test Hypothesis 2. No significant results were found for on-campus students. For online students, the model was significant, accounting for 61% of the variance in VDS scores $F(3, 60) = 11.97$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .61$. There was a significant, negative effect of PJS scores on VDS scores, p<.001, and a significant positive effect of SMUS scores on VDS scores, $p = .004$. The interaction between PJS and SMUS scores on VDS scores was significant, $F(1, 60) = 9.78$, $p = .003$, $\Delta R^2 = .20$. The Johnson-Neyman zone of significance indicated the negative relationship between PJS and VDS scores was non-significant until SMUS scores reached 11, at which point the relationship remained significant and continued to increase in strength. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1 and unstandardised regression coefficients for both models are in Table 3.

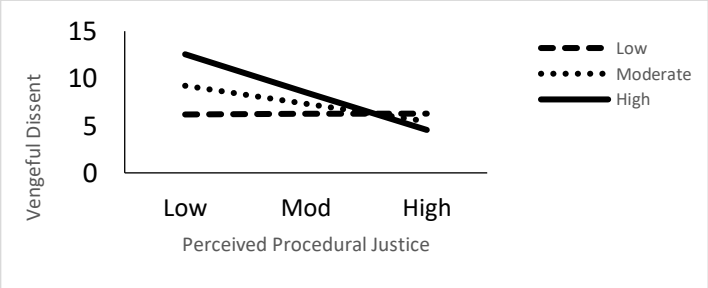

Figure 1. The Relationship between Perceived Procedural Justice and Vengeful Dissent by Level of Social Media Use in Online Students

Table 3

Unstandardised Regression Coefficients (95% Confidence Intervals) and Standard Errors (SE) for Models Predicting Vengeful Dissent through Procedural Justice

	On-Campus		Online	
Variable	B [LLCI, UCLI]	SE	B [LLCI, UCLI]	SE
Constant	6.83 [6.28, 7.40]*	0.30	7.34 [6.61, 8.10]***	0.40
PJS scores	-0.40 [-0.11, 0.03]	0.04	-0.20 [-0.23, -.10]***	0.04
SMUS scores	0.10 [-0.10, 0.20]	0.10	0.30 [0.10, 0.43]*	0.10

PJS x SMUS scores	-0.01 [-0.03, 0.01]	0.01	-0.04 [-0.10, -0.01]*	0.01

*p <.05, ***p<.001

Discussion

This study explored the association between procedural justice perceptions and vengeful dissent in online and on-campus education, examining how student-led social media groups moderate these relationships. Supporting our hypotheses, the negative association between procedural justice and vengeful dissent was stronger in online students and using student-led social media groups only strengthened this association in online students. These preliminary findings offer a valuable contribution to the understanding of justice perceptions. They are the first to empirically explore the justice perception–dissent relationship in both online and on-campus settings, extending the extant literature on classroom justice theory (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004) by demonstrating that it occurs in both contexts, but may be stronger in online education. To that end, the results provide support for prior anecdotal reports (e.g., Hailey et al., 2001; Peoples-Halio, 2004) that vengeful dissent may be more pronounced in online education and provide some initial evidence that student led social media groups may be a factor that strengthens this effect.

Regarding implications for policy and practice, the findings highlight the importance of clear expectation setting in online education. The stronger association between procedural justice and vengeful dissent in online students might be due to how online education is marketed, as it often highlights flexibility. Students may misinterpret flexibility with leniency in policy application (e.g., waiving late penalties) and feel unjustly treated when this expectation is not met. Universities should establish clear expectations regarding flexible learning, especially considering many universities offer online courses through third-party providers with dedicated student support teams who can assist in clarifying this (Roddy et al., 2017). The findings also highlight the need for effective communication of academic policies. Written academic policies can be misunderstood, especially when there are few chances for verbal clarification (Shaw & Barker, 2020). If students interpret policy differently from its intended meaning or application, they may perceive an injustice when expectations are not met. Online educators should consider implementing pre-record videos explaining policy and procedure in simple language, using examples to illustrate how relevant policy will be applied.

Our findings that student-led social media groups strengthened the association between low justice perceptions and greater vengeful dissent for online students can be interpreted through the lens of confirmation bias and anonymity. There is evidence suggesting that people use the internet to seek information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs across a range of topics (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015; Ling, 2020). While no research has specifically examined this in the context of dissent in online education, it is plausible that some students engage in these groups to express their own perceptions of injustice, which may be magnified by others with similar views. Furthermore, since online students and staff have limited synchronous communication, students may feel anonymous and less restrained in criticizing a staff member they also perceive as anonymous when they feel an injustice has occurred (Schwartz et al., 2020; Shaw & Barker, 2020). To that end, the moderating effect of student-led social media groups may not have been observed in on-campus students due to their access to offline discussions with peers and more personal exposure to staff, which might foster greater restraint. Although this interpretation is tentative, it highlights the importance of further research into the dynamics of student-led social media groups and dissent, to help universities develop policies that effectively outline standards for appropriate online communication.

The study findings need to be considered within the context of the study limitations. Due to the limited attention justice perceptions and dissent in online learning has received, effect sizes remain uncertain, making a-priori sample size predictions challenging. On campus studies suggest moderate to large effects. Assuming similar magnitude in on-campus settings, where effects are moderate to large, the current sample would be sufficient (Field, 2018; Goodboy, 2011). Nonetheless, replication with a larger sample would strengthen future research. Additionally, despite efforts to mitigate it, there could be selection bias, as students volunteering for such studies may be either generally satisfied or dissatisfied with their course. Future research should continue

to explore the role of justice perceptions in dissent within online education. In doing so, it should seek to explore what aspects students find procedurally unfair in online education and how it is different to on campus. Future research should investigate how social media influences justice perceptions and dissent, while also identifying strategies to build community in online education to curb unproductive social media use.

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