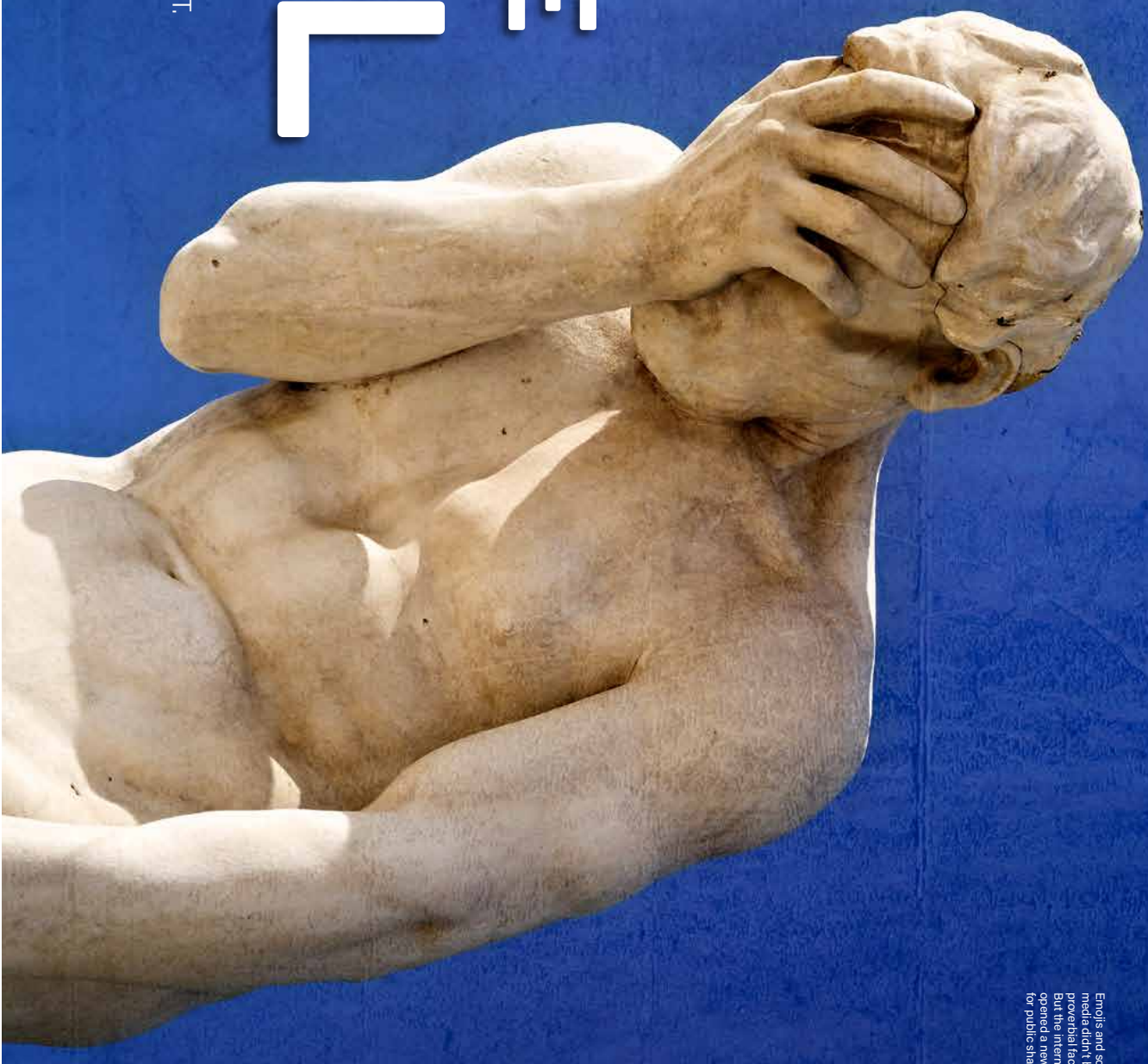




WHEN SHAME GOES VIRAL

THIS ANCIENT SOCIAL EMOTION HAS ALWAYS BEEN COMPLEX. THE INTERNET Poured FUEL ON IT. THEN CAME SOCIAL MEDIA.

BY TIMOTHY MEINCH



Emojis and social media didn't birth the proverbial facepalm. But the internet has opened a new frontier for public shaming.

WHEN MONICA LEWINSKY EMERGED IN 2014 AFTER A DECADE OF QUIET EXISTENCE, SHE HAD A MESSAGE TO SHARE. SHE ALSO HAD A MASTER'S DEGREE IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, EARNED IN LONDON WHERE SHE HUNKERED DOWN FOR GRAD SCHOOL. VANITY FAIR PRINTED HER EXCLUSIVE FIRST-PERSON COMEBACK STORY IN 2014. THEN SHE TOOK

the stage to tell of life after becoming "that woman" in one of history's most widely broadcast sex scandals: "I went from being a completely private figure to a publicly humiliated one, worldwide," Lewinsky says in her 2015 TED Talk, which now has more than 18 million views. "I was patient zero of losing a personal reputation on the global scale, almost instantaneously."

The infamous 1998 incident with President Bill Clinton occurred at the dawn of the internet age — a fact not lost on Lewinsky, who says her name has appeared in "almost 40 rap songs." Her actions as a 24-year-old intern went viral pre-social media. In recent years, the rise of Facebook and Twitter, and the potential for public shaming on the Internet, motivated Lewinsky to speak up. "A marketplace has emerged where public humiliation is a commodity, and shame is an industry," she says in the video.

One can only speculate whether Lewinsky would have been met with criticism or empathy on today's digital stage. In some cases, this internet-based outrage culture results in positive change. It has exposed grave offenses, elevated political movements and toppled abusers in the U.S. and beyond. Hollywood giant Harvey Weinstein, for example, was ousted, charged and imprisoned on the heels of the widely broadcast #MeToo campaign.

For better or worse, the internet and social media have significantly amplified humanity's means of public shaming, taking victims from the town square to a global network of connected screens. "The internet now allows hundreds or thousands of people to participate in collective shaming, in a way that wasn't possible before," says Takuya Sawaoka, a social psychologist and researcher Organized public shaming dates back more than 1,000 years, with the pillory designed specifically to make a spectacle out of society's offensive characters.

director at OpenMind, a psychology-based educational platform. The result is a steady flow of new names and targets — both high-profile and everyday citizens — flooding our media feeds and rage cycle. Some call it cancel culture; others embrace it as a social reckoning. Whatever you call this new wave of public shaming, researchers are evaluating whether the ancient emotion is benefiting or harming humans today — and to what extent. The results may hold some keys to our collective future.

THE ROOTS OF HUMILIATION

Long before the internet, people who violated moral codes in a society would get fastened to a pillar, stocks or pillory, a device in which the offender's head and hands were locked



PREVIOUS SPREAD: LEXEY PEVNEV/SHUTTERSTOCK. THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: STANISLAW KARAGYOZOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK; WWISSE GRANT/GETTY IMAGES; REUTERS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



Monica Lewinsky was a 24-year-old intern when her scandal with Bill Clinton — then president of the United States — went viral in 1998. She says public shaming changed her life forever. Since then, social media has slung shame at countless other targets.



in a wooden frame. The masses would gather to taunt and jeer them, hurling rotten food at their heads along with insulting words. This dual punishment and spectacle — aptly named pillorying — started more than 1,000 years ago in parts of Europe. And it lasted well into the 19th century, when, you could say, it got canceled.

"It's worth noting that this practice was eventually outlawed because it became regarded to be too cruel," Sawaoka says. England fully abolished the pillory by 1837, along with many nearby countries and most U.S. territories by that time. The state of Delaware was a last holdout in the Western world, outlawing it as recently as 1905.

Whether or not it involves a literal pillory, shame has generally run parallel with human civilization and social order through the ages. Some anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists make the case that shame is universal and biological, as an evolved mechanism to ensure our survival.

The idea is that adaptations favoring group cooperation and mutual aid stretch as far back as early human foragers, according to a 2018 study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Researchers suggested that feelings of shame in an individual are nature's way of "encoding the social cost" of certain behaviors — such as stealing. The study tested this idea in 15 remote, independent communities around the world and found the same patterns in each.

Considering how societies are built on norms and hierarchy, a 2020 study published in *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* framed shame as "an evolved disease avoidance architecture" wherein the emotion helps to protect individuals from undesirable social circumstances, such as being an outsider to a group. The study presented some evidence that shame may be linked to disgust — in this

case, disgust directed at the self as a source of contamination for the group.

While experts continue to probe the origins of shame, many contemporary psychologists classify it as a self-conscious, moral emotion associated with feelings of powerlessness, worthlessness and other psychological turmoil in the individual. "Maybe it's this thing that came from group-level processes and certainly had its benefit. But it really can wreak havoc on the individual level and make things worse," says Michael Slepian, a social psychologist at Columbia University.

Slepian's work builds on a popular theory in psychology that guilt, when compared to its relative, shame, takes on a distinct role in the human psyche. Essentially, guilt stirs feelings of regret or remorse toward a specific incident or behavior that has affected someone else. Shame, on the other hand, brings up broader feelings of worthlessness and self-judgment.

"That's the key distinction between guilt and shame," says Carnegie Mellon University organizational psychologist Taya Cohen. "You did a bad thing, vs. 'You are a bad person.'" For example, if you post an angry rant about a friend on social media, you might feel guilty and later apologize. A so-called shame response to the same situation would make you feel like a horrible, worthless person. Slepian says he questions whether there is any healthy place for shame today. "I don't know whether making people feel small and powerless and helpless is ever a good thing."

SLINGING SHAME

Just as Lewinsky was patient zero for instant global humiliation, Justine Sacco in 2013 became a poster child for viral Twitter shaming, now common practice on a platform built for rapid-fire input (often criticism) from

DEALING WITH DIGITAL SHAME

SOME ARGUE SHAME can be a forceful tool for change when wielded against powerful figures and institutions. But when it's weaponized against others in shared digital spaces, these same tactics can morph into insidious behaviors, like cyberbullying or online harassment.

Getting called out, insulted or bullied isn't exactly new. But the internet's ability to amplify and permanently document those messages is. And this tool is now in the hands of most young people: A 2020 report by the Cyberbullying Research Center shows that 95 percent of U.S. teens are online, most tweens (ages 9 through 12) have personal devices and 9 out of 10 of them used social media or gaming apps in the past year. Here's how experts recommend guiding kids and teens through this digital landscape.

1 Think before you post. In the digital age, what we share can become permanent.

It's also a way of presenting ourselves to others, says web safety expert Nancy Willard, author of *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats*. In short, consider what your social media footprint says about you. "Write down the key words that you would like other people to use

when they describe you," Willard says. "Then, when you're posting something, [ask yourself], Does that reflect those qualities?"

2 Work through scenarios in advance. If someone lashes out at you online, says Justin W. Patchin, codirector of the Cyberbullying Research Center, you might feel the desire — even the

need — to respond. Instead, parents and educators should consider helping their kids prepare for such situations beforehand. "Give them a situation," he says, "to just practice those skills of deflecting, ignoring or [even] making a joke of it."

3 Stop and stay calm. It's easy for even subtle digital clues to make your blood boil. "If you're upset, realize that the threat response center of your brain has taken over," Willard says.

"Unfortunately, when this happens, your emotional regulation and your thinking centers go offline." But there are ways to remain zen. Take some deep breaths. Step away from the keyboard. Go for a walk outside.

4 Put yourself in the other person's shoes. If you're being belittled online, it may say more about the other person than it does about you, says psychologist Sherry Turkle, founding director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self and author of *The Empathy Diaries*. "If you can keep that in mind," she says, "then the whole experience will seem less bewildering to you, emotionally."

5 Empower yourself with tools. If you do find yourself, or your child, being cyberbullied, often the tech itself can provide a number of simple ways to respond: Blocking the offender, reporting hurtful exchanges, taking screenshots. Saving message threads, Patchin says having that evidence can help if the behaviors do escalate beyond one hurtful offense to repeated, long-standing harassment. "It's a lot easier for authorities to get involved when they can see exactly what's going on," he says. —ALEX ORLANDO



Social media sites such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat can be common avenues for cyberbullying.

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In recent years, multiple national protests and civil rights rallies emerged from hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, that spread primarily via social media platforms online.

the masses. Minutes before boarding an 11-hour flight to South Africa, Sacco posted a tweet (to her 170 followers) that permanently changed her life: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!"

By the time Sacco landed, tens of thousands of people had responded to and shared her tweet. The hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet went viral around the world, with a barrage of criticism calling her racist. The moment was fueled in part by the fact that she was airborne and would remain oblivious to the fallout until she reconnected to the internet. She also worked as a senior communications director, which created the perfect storm of irony and internet memes. Sacco was immediately fired from her job, and became the subject of endless articles and a book. One of the overwhelming questions in her case, and many similar instances, is to what degree any single blunder should define a person's reputation. And when does Twitter shaming — or any pile-on of criticism toward someone — become bullying?

As you might expect, it's complicated. "One of the

PUBLIC MORAL OUTRAGE IS NOT ALWAYS AIMED AT REFORMING A SPECIFIC OFFENDER. THE GOAL MIGHT BE SOLIDARITY WITH A VICTIM, GROUP OR CAUSE, AND SHIFTING CULTURAL VALUES.

problems with [social media] is that it's devoid of context," says Lisa Feldman Barrett, a neuroscientist and psychologist at Northeastern University and author of *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*.

This is compounded by the fact that social media doesn't always allow for the same back-and-forth discourse that people use in real life to talk about their problems. Instead, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are mostly designed for broadcasting, she says, rather than actual communication and exchange between people. "It's mostly about speaking, and it's not very much about listening."

However, public moral outrage is not always aimed at reforming a specific offender. The goal might be solidarity with a victim, group or cause, and shifting cultural values in anyone witnessing the outrage.

"The person who has done [the offense], say, Harvey Weinstein, may be a lost cause," Cohen explains. "But, by making him an example, it sets the standards for our society. Moral codes. What is acceptable and non-acceptable behavior?"

Feldman Barrett's research has dug deep into the specific cultural context where emotions play out. She rejects the popular notion that feelings of guilt are universally healthier than shame, calling this a "very Western view." Instead, she says shame means something different in more collectivist societies, like those found in the East, versus individualist cultures in the West. "The American way tends to be: 'You're a piece of s** for what you did. You should feel really bad about what you said, maybe to the point of being worthless,'" Feldman Barrett says. "I think the way that shame is wielded right now in this American way is meant to punish."

By contrast, shame in some cultures — like in Japan, Taiwan or some parts of Africa — is not about blame or punishment. In Taiwan, according to a 2019 paper in *Frontiers in Psychology*, children are often shamed as an expression of love and moral guidance. "It's about connection, and repairing and honoring a relationship," Feldman Barrett says.

STIRRING OUTRAGE

The Twitter and social media masses often rally against racism, sexism and other behavior rooted in bigotry. If you examine cultural movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, you'll find specific offenders being shamed along with challenges to broader organizations, like police departments or political parties. Some research shows that collective anger can also be a unifying and effective force for systemic change. Outrage may even be necessary, suggests Victoria Spring, a postdoc fellow studying moral emotions at New York University.

"Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were both angry about racism, Gandhi was angry about British Imperialism in India," Spring says. "All of them were outraged about injustice, and they were able to transform that into activism." King even made a call to "awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor"



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FROM LEFT: NITO/SHUTTERSTOCK; HAYK_SHALLUNTS/SHUTTERSTOCK

MARIA SAIVENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK

in his 1957 speech, "The Power of Nonviolence," as a means to reconcile with them. Spring highlighted collective action as one common outcome of outrage in a 2018 paper published in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*.

Researchers found a compelling example of this in a 2011 study when they observed how women exposed to hostile sexism rallied to participate in collective action for equal salaries. Meanwhile, exposure to "benevolent sexism," or affectionate and chivalrous forms of male dominance, decreased women's intentions to engage in political action, according to the study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Spring says social media does seem to complicate our relationship with outrage, likely because humans are still figuring out how to leverage the phenomena of having such a vast audience: "We're constantly weighing the costs and benefits of saying something or not saying something."

In related work, Sawaoka and colleagues recently identified what they call "the paradox of viral outrage" in a 2018 paper in *Psychological Science*. That work showed how the pile-on effect of online shaming can actually trigger



A single social media post can quickly reach millions of people around the globe. Humans are still figuring out how to wield and navigate this phenomenon.

sympathy toward an offender, even when their remark or misstep was grave. "We find that the more people who participate in collective shaming, the more this shaming can start to look like bullying," Sawaoka says. Commenters who criticized the initial offense were also viewed more negatively when they were seen alongside a barrage of other shaming replies. "The exponential dynamics of internet postings make this expression of legitimate individual outrage appear excessive and unjust," wrote the researchers.

Online shaming can become ever-more complex when the target is the culture at large. Or, say, the history of racism and slavery in the U.S. Exploring these matters and their effects can spark an array of reactions in individuals. "If I identify as an American, and I believe America is great, then it's very difficult to acknowledge something that runs counter to that identity," Cohen says. "People will do whatever they can to avoid acknowledging that."

They may even turn to shaming people on the internet. It's a vicious cycle. ■

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