"That Neighborhood is Sketchy!": Examining Online Conversations about Social Disorder in Transitioning Neighborhoods

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine online conversations about a
Chicago neighborhood that is currently transitioning from
a lower to a higher socioeconomic population (otherwise
known as "gentrifying"). Based on patterns identified in the
online conversations, we present our findings related to so-
cial disorder as it was one of the most prevalent topics. Our
results suggest that comments about social disorder were
mostly based on perception of safety rather than personal
experience or real data, where online respondents who had
negative comments shared mostly anecdotal information,
while positive comments were heavily legitimized and sup-
ported with more persuasive arguments.

Author Keywords

community technologies; gentrification; online discourse

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]:
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Introduction

"Gentrification" is the process of transformation in urban
areas where residents of low socioeconomic status are
displaced by those of high socioeconomic status [6]. This
complex process structuring the global urban landscape,
which has been studied for over fifty years, has been a con-

tentious topic in both scholarly and public debates [3, 2, 7]. Despite an explosion of ethnographies of gentrifying neighborhoods [7, 9], few have analyzed how social media and online communication structure the social exchange and social organization of communities in the midst of transformation. A thorough analysis of this discursive landscape is particularly salient given links between gentrification and delimitations of public space and the increasing use of social media to organize local social lives, social spaces, and neighborhood change. Furthermore, neighborhoods are not only where people spend a vast majority of their time, but also neighborhoods have been linked to impacting issues such as mortality [5], economic mobility [15], and personal health [1, 8]. Online conversations have the ability to influence revitalization and investment efforts, making lower income neighborhoods that have experienced consistent divestment more susceptible to continual decline [10, 11, 13]. Online conversations have the ability to influence residential mobility as well as shape local narratives, public perception, and social discourse about neighborhoods in transition. The objective of this study is to explore online communication about one Chicago neighborhood and begin to identify patterns in online conversations as they are related to the dynamics of social interactions amongst residents. This study provides insights into how to design technologies that bridge communication gaps amongst predecessors and newcomers.

Background

Fifty years of literature on gentrification provides significant insights into a complex process structuring the global urban landscape [7]. Within the literature on gentrification, there are many competing frameworks used by scholars and practitioners. At its very core gentrification is widely understood to be the socioeconomic transformation of a locality from lower-income to a higher-income status, usually through the migration of middle- to high-income residents [4, 7]. However, that description doesn't fully address the myriad of economic, cultural, political, social, and institutional mechanisms that strongly influence the urban space. As such gentrification also can be characterized as a race-based and class-based power struggle for urban space [4].

Many of these power struggles between predecessor and newcomer residents often play out at the local level. For example, social class theories posit that residents with higher socioeconomic status tend to perceive more neighborhood disorder and gentrifiers are more likely to be active in regulating unwanted behaviors (e.g., lobbying local government agencies to pass ordinances) [14].

Background literature also suggest that stereotypes, implicit racial biases, and perceptions of disorder are high predictors in residential selection [7, 9]. When deciding to move to a new neighborhood, most households would prefer to live in a "safe" community; however, "safety" is a highly subjective notion [12]. Outside of official crime statistics, residents use various methods to gauge a residential area's perceived disorder such as the upkeep of the physical environment and presence of social nuisances.

Many scholars posit that present housing racial segregation persists due to implicit racial biases [4]. Neighborhoods with high concentration of Blacks and Latinos are more likely to carry a stigma, which leads whites to avoid residing in those areas [4]. Research from Sampson and Raudenbush indicates that areas with high concentrations of blacks or Latinos are perceived to have more crime and disorder, even when controlling for actual disorder and observed disorder [12]. As the researchers explain: "social structure proved a more powerful predictor of perceived disorder than did carefully observed disorder. The data suggest that in shaping perceptions of disorder, residents supplement their knowl-

edge with prior beliefs informed by the racial stigmatization of modern urban ghettos" [12]. The authors posit that due to historical social constructions, blacks and Latinos may be seen as proxies for criminality. Additional research from Sullivan and Bachmeier arrive at similar findings [14]. When examining three gentrifying neighborhoods, they found that "white residents perceived more disorder - both crimes and incivilities - than do blacks," even when controlling for years living in neighborhood and social class.

Methods

Humboldt Park: A Neighborhood in Transition
Much of the controversy around gentrification is the challenge of identifying neighborhoods that are truly transitioning as such transitions are slow, even happening over decades. We selected Humboldt Park, a neighborhood on the west side of Chicago that has unequivocally been identified by scholars as transitioning because of the shift of residents' race, education, and income level over the years as well as the substantial rise in housing costs [9]. Furthermore, surrounding neighborhoods have gone through a similar shift, which has lead to there being steady interest by developers and real estate agents to begin investing as well as rebranding the area (e.g., calling what is the eastern area of Humboldt Park another name when selling redeveloped real estate). Furthermore, between 2009 and 2013, nearly 65% of the properties sold were cash purchases by developers, which is 15% higher than the average in Chicago.

Humboldt Park has a reputation of having a rich Latino culture and history after the large migration of Puerto Ricans to the area between 1950 - 1965. Currently, there are over 63,000 residents in Humboldt Park, with the median age being 30. The majority of residents self-identified as Latino (47%), 45% African American (or black), and 5%

Caucasian. The median household income in Humboldt Park is roughly $30,000, significantly lower than the city's median household income ($47,000). However, comparing household income, education level, home values, and other factors that typically indicate gentrification, these factors have indicated a shift in resident demographics since 2000.

Data Collection and Analysis
We first identified sixteen social media sources that citizens use to discuss Humboldt Park (HP) by 1) using search engines and 2) asking HP residents which websites they use to discuss neighborhood issues. We developed data scrapers in Python to collect online conversations, which were typically forum posts in the form of username, subject, message, date, and URL. We scraped nearly 12,000 messages in total, reading each and removing those that were unrelated to the neighborhood (e.g., random advertisements, spam, trolling messages). As shown in Table 1, we collected 10,472 messages from various sources that spanned dates from July 2005 to August 2014.

To analyze the data, we first created a codebook with 102 codes based on a similar project conducted with in-person interviews and observations [9]. Each of the four team members (two professors and two graduate students) coded a random 10% (roughly 1000 messages) of the data based on the initial codebook. We met weekly to discuss modifications to the codebook, which included adding and deleting codes as well as redefining existing codes. After four weeks of iterating on the codebook based on examining the data, two graduate students were tasked with coding the entire dataset by first calculating interrater reliability (Cohen's Kappa 81%) and then splitting the data in half, each receiving half the messages from each source. The team met weekly to discuss the progress and challenges faced

Website	Posts
Yelp Business	3494
CityData	2051
Everyblock	1276
Reddit	1263
Yelp Forum	1002
NextDoor	437
DNAInfo	397
Smaller websites*	275
WBEZ	132
Trulia	123
StreetAdvisor	22
Total	10472

Table 1: Number of posts from each website scraped. Smaller websites refer to posts collected from six websites that were few in number (<5 threads or 100 posts).

with analysis as well as anomalies in the data that may require additional iteration to the codebook.

In the following section, we present findings that emerged based on our analysis along with quotes from participants that illustrate the themes. Quotes are verbatim, with little alteration except to protect the identity of participants.

Findings

Based on our analysis of online conversations about Humboldt Park, the most prevalent topics were related to notions of safety, criminality, and danger, concepts we refer to as perceived disorder. Sampson and colleagues conceptualize perceived disorder as the interplay between objective physical attributes (e.g., litter, graffiti), social conditions (e.g., public debauchery and selling illicit drugs), and implicit biases [12]. This perspective posits that "perceptions of disorder are socially constructed and are shaped by more than actual levels of disorder" (e.g., crime rates) [12]. More importantly, Sampson suggests that perception of safety and personal biases tend to outweigh the actuality of safety. Our findings similarly suggest that online conversations tended to focus on perceptions of social disorder, criminality, and safety rather than actual crime rates.

In a vast majority of the posts, safety seemed to be an elusive feeling where users with negative perceptions of the neighborhood did not provide much explanation for their conclusions. Often safety was measured in terms of how an individual felt in specific spaces or how they felt in comparison to their last community. For example, one user posts, *"I don't really feel particularly safe or welcome there. I felt safer and more welcome when I lived in Uptown than I ever have in HP. It's sad, really - there's a lot to like about the neighborhood."* Most negative comments about safety in the neighborhood did not include an explanation. Those

that did include an explanation were vague but persuasive, using emotion or fear to support their assessment of the lack of safety. One user states that they've witnessed numerous crimes and incivilities: *"Lived on the corner of haddon and washtenaw for two years.. Saw kids get killed, people get mugged, a car jacking, drugs being bought and sold, scumbag cobra gangbangers waving guns at passerbyers oh and heard numerous gun shots.. We moved to where civilized people live. It's REALLY not a great area! Go east of damen. It's safer."* Though the odds of one witnessing this many crimes are unlikely, vague comments about perceived drugs, gang activity, and violence in the community were most prevalent in conversations and shaped a convincing narrative about the neighborhood being unsafe that does not align with actual crime rates.

There was also a substantial amount of comments that described the neighborhood using vague comments such as "sketchy" or "rough." A woman, for example, comments on Yelp that after having a great time at a local bar *"there were alot of sketchy people wandering around the streets. I have to admit when I was going to my car alone i took off my 4 inch heels and booked to my car."* (In this context, "booked" refers to "ran.") Comments about the lack of safety seemed to dissuade newcomers from seeking housing in the area or visiting the areas local businesses. For instance, a newcomer to the city describes the advice he's received about settling in Humboldt Park: *"The neighborhood seems to be borderline sketchy (as a couple of people here have told me in another thread)"*. While these types of comments are helpful in a sense, it illustrates the lack of detail included in online discussions about safety that could impact local economies and businesses that are anecdotal but do not provide detail.

Though there were significantly more negative comments

than positive comments about safety, the positive comments were more often accompanied by details about positive characteristics of the neighborhood and further explanation that legitimized their opinion. One user, for instance, describes in detail the social capital and sense of community he feels as a resident in the neighborhood even by those deemed as socially undesirable, saying: *"If you actually LIVE there, you know the people on your block. The dealers have actually look out for me before, and my neighbors have told me if something is up. i'd actually say I feel quite safe on block and around my neighborhood. People work together. It's a community, which is far more than can be said for some 'safe' neighborhoods."* In this example, while the poster comments that they view the neighborhood as safe and having positive attributes, they also acknowledge perceived disorder, which may be an effort to legitimize and strengthen their comment about the state of the neighborhood.

Positive comments about the neighborhood were many times more detailed such as the comment above which suggests that having a connection to the community led to positive attitudes towards safety. These users often described getting to know their neighbors, enjoying the local amenities such as the park and local businesses, and getting involved in reducing local crime by engaging in community policing.

Other responders who perceived the community as safe, rationalized that "disorder" is a frame of mind. These responders cited that the issues afflicting the neighborhood were (1) anomalies, (2) prevalent throughout the entire city, not just their community or (3) much better than past conditions. Additionally, we found that users who felt a sense of safety often reported not experiencing any personal or property violations themselves. They offered stories such

as, *"I've walked down this street and nothing every happened to me. Just practice street smarts and you'll be alright."* Practicing "street smarts" was often stated in online conversations on safety.

Furthermore, many users associated safety with neighborhood physical and social characteristics. Issues with perceived violence, gang activity, shootings, litter, and "unwanted behaviors" such as loitering and noise seem to dominant online conversations. Discourse regarding such behaviors were described vehemently different based on the users perception and experience with such behaviors.

Despite positive or negative perception of safety, there seemed to be much collective animosity towards individuals who are perceived as contributing to social disorders. "Gangbangers", "thugs," "drug dealers," "scumbags," and "garbage" were terms that people use to describe those that cause problems in the neighborhood and that they needed to pushed out of the community using the police or market forces (e.g., increased housing costs). As one user explained, *"I think an important thing to remember, especially in regards to gangs/crew whatever, is that the more people move in, the further away that garbage will be pushed out."* It was difficult to ascertain whom or what behaviors constituted an individual being deemed as one of these terms (e.g., gangbanger); however, it seemed that individuals who engage in suspicious or undesirable behavior such as loitering during day hours and/or perceived to be tied to drug and gang activity. Seldom did posters mention demographics or other characteristics.

However, another, albeit less vocal, group of users contested that perceptions of "gangbangers" and social disorder bodies were racially motivated. One of the most vocal proponent of this perspective offered the following argument:

"As someone who has lived in exactly this neighborhood for the past 3 years (and recently bought a place to live in here), I find these comments to be ill-informed and frankly, to sound like they are written by white people a little afraid of minorities. What exactly constitutes a "gang banger?" I sure haven't seen them. I see lots of hispanic families-I really hope gang banger is not just a blanket term for minority [..] This is a great neighborhood and for those of you who think Humboldt park is scary, then I'm glad you're staying away and leaving it for the rest of us to enjoy. But please don't make the yuppy mistake of assuming that just because we have more than white frat boys here that it is unsafe."

These users believed that perception of rampant gang-bangers within the community were due to racial stereo-types, and that terms such as drug dealers and gangbangers were euphemisms for Black and/or Latino males.

Conclusions and Future Work
Our findings suggest that users defined safety in terms of perceived neighborhood social and physical disorders, aligning with prior literature [12]. Posters often expressed notions of safety in terms of environmental factors, social disorders and incivilities, and implicit biases (i.e., intuition). Additionally, while most posters affirmed that the neighborhood is not without certain disorders and incivilities, they disagreed on whether the community was, in fact, safe. One of the key differences among the groups were the ways in which they substantiated their claims.

One challenge in conducting qualitative research of online communities is the difficulty in assessing the veracity of posters' experiences and connection to the offline community. Data collected from the websites that we analyzed are available to the public; therefore, we cannot determine whether posters reside in the transitional neighborhood or if their shared experiences were truthful. Additionally, while some users self-identified as predecessors or newcomers to the neighborhood, most did not. The one exception was Nextdoor, which is a private social network that requires users to be current neighborhood residents as a requisite for membership. Users (or "neighbors") on Nextdoor sign in using their real names and verify their residential addresses. We compared data collected from Nextdoor to those gathered from public social networks and noticed no significant difference in the types of comments.

In future work, we will continue to explore the ways in which online conversations shape perceptions of neighborhood disorder, and the linkages between race, ethnicity, and other related social factors. We plan to conduct a deeper discourse analysis on the conversations to understand how online comments impact the narrative of the neighborhood. Furthermore, we plan to investigate similarities and differences in online discourse across websites. Findings from this analysis will be used to build and design technologies that facilitate diverse conversations among existing and newcomer residents in transitional urban spaces.

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