Foucault Studies

ARTICLE

Disciplining the Ethical Couponer: A Foucauldian Analysis of Online Interactions

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ABSTRACT: As the internet becomes increasingly important in establishing identities and social networks, it becomes a mechanism for social control. We apply the components of Foucault's *means of corrective training—hierarchical observation*, *normalizing judgment*, and *examination*—to the comments section of a popular couponing blog to analyze tactics participants use to discipline each other's couponing behaviors. We find Foucault's framework applicable with some modification. Participants use discursive techniques to establish hierarchical surveillance however hierarchies are not upheld throughout the interactions, making lateral surveillance more applicable. Participants engage in normalizing judgment by critiquing and correcting "deviant" behavior and positively reinforcing "good" behavior. The blog itself mirrors the examination; as the blog master describes activities, participants try them, and return to the site to report their results, which can then be compared to others. These findings illustrate online interactions as a mechanism of informal social surveillance and control.

Keywords: surveillance, online interactions, social control, discipline

Recent economic downturn has prompted many U.S. households to find ways to save money. Coupon use is currently on the rise after a period of decline from 2000 to 2006 and stagnation from 2006 to 2008.[1] Nearly 3.3 billion coupons were redeemed in the U.S. in 2009[2] and about one-third of Americans report making purchasing decisions based on the availability of coupons.[3] Current growth in coupon use is attributed to Americans' increased need to spend less money and recent changes in coupon distribution. Although the majority of coupons are acquired through print newspaper inserts, redemption of Internet coupons increased by 263% in 2009.[4] Hundreds of couponing websites and blogs have also emerged in recent years where

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[1] Marketing Chats, "Coupon Redemptions Grow 27%," *MarketingCharts.com* (2010), accessed May 31, 2011. Web: http://www.marketingcharts.com/print/coupon-redemptions-grow-27-12586/nielsen-coupon-redemption-method-apr-2010jpg

[2] Ibid.

[3] Retail Me Not, "Harris Interactive Poll 2009," *RetailMeNot.com* (2009), accessed May 31, 2011. Web: http://theinsider.retailmenot.com/company/harris-interactive-poll-2009.html

[4] Marketing Charts, "Coupon Redemptions Grow 27%."

readers share information about deals available at different retail stores and online.[5] More and more Americans are reading and participating in online interactions regarding couponing and other savvy methods for saving money.

At the same time, the Internet has increasingly become an important medium through which individuals create and maintain social networks, and construct personal and social identities. Currently 75.8% of the U.S. population and 23.9% of the world population are Internet users.[6] Many Internet sites and blogs become online sub-cultural communities where rules are created and enforced.[7] According to Rheingold,[8] the Internet provides a "new community" for its "netizens," substituting for deteriorating social relations in the "real world."

Some argue that as the Internet increasingly becomes a forum for social networking and interaction, it also becomes an increasingly important site for social control.[9] Social control on the Internet can be exerted informally through negative comments or social ostracism, or formally through institutional or governmental sanctions.[10] Further, online interactions do not occur in a vacuum but are connected to offline behaviors and ideologies.[11] Therefore, social control exerted online may carry over into the offline world.

Foucault's work on discipline is commonly used to understand social control. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault[12] describes the transformation of the criminal justice system from physical punishment to rehabilitation of the soul. Foucault argues this new system emerged in conjunction with changing notions of the human subject as a malleable object that can be molded, modified, and trained to act and think in certain ways. Thus, changes were not limited to the penal system but occurred throughout various institutions and coincided with the growth of the human sciences which put the human subject at the center of scientific scrutiny. Further, Foucault argues that the methods of the criminal justice system function not only in institutions, but operate "at every level of the social body"[13]—a concept he refers to as *carceral archipelago.* Foucault writes, "Prison continues, on those who are

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[5] Kelli B. Grant, "5 Best Coupon-Clipping Web Sites," *SmartMoney.com* (2008), accessed May 31, 2011. Web: http://www.smartmoney.com/spend/family-money/5-Best-Coupon-Clipping-Web-Sites-23634.

[6] The World Bank, "Internet Users (per 100 people)", *WorldBank.org,* accessed April 4, 2011. Web: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2.

[7] Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber, "Policing ourselves: Defining the Boundaries of Appropriate Discussion in Online Forums," *Computers and Composition,* vol. 13 (1996), 269-291.

[8] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

[9] Tom Brignall III, "The New Panopticon: The Internet Viewed as a Structure of Social Control," *Theory & Science,* vol.3, no.1 (2002).

[10] Chris Atchison, "Emerging Styles of Social Control on the Internet: Justice Denied," *Critical Criminology,* vol. 9, no. 1/2 (2000), 85-100.

[11] Heidi Campbell, "Who's Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, vol. 12 (2007), 1043-1062; David A. Rier, "The Impact of Moral Suasion on Internet HIV/AIDS Support Groups: Evidence from a Discussion of Seropositivity Disclosure Ethics," *Health Sociology Review,* vol. 16 (2007), 237-247; Yun GiWoong and Sung-Yeon Park, "Selective Posting: Willingness to Post a Message Online," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2011), 201-227.

[12] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1977).

[13] Ibid., 303.

entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline."[14]

Social control, and formal and informal disciplining of populations, is not a singular act but an ongoing social accomplishment achieved through the interactions among groups and individuals.[15] Studies of professional hierarchical interactions, for example, find that both participants work together through their interactions to establish the professional as the higher status individual in the professional encounter.[16] Often, disciplinary power takes the form of an individual re-framing a narrative of the self in such a way that conforms to professional or institutional expectations.[17] This re-framing of the self does not happen automatically or without resistance, but occurs through the ongoing interactions among individuals.

The purpose of the current project is to examine the interactional processes through which social control is enacted in online couponing sites. This project seeks to further sociological understandings of discipline in online settings while giving attention to couponing as an increasingly significant social activity. As Garcia *et al.*[18] point out, there are very few ethnographic studies of online communities, particularly those whose members do not have any offline contact. We use social constructionism[19] and Foucault's[20] theories of discipline to analyze participant interactions in a popular money-saving blog to further understand social control in this newer medium. Specifically, we use Foucault's concept of the *means of correct training* to examine the ways in which individuals who interact by commenting on the blog work to survey and discipline each other. This project contributes to sociological understandings of social control in online environments, the interactional labor involved in accomplishing social control, and couponing as a significant social phenomenon.

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[14] Ibid., 302-303.

[15] Douglas W. Maynard, "Interaction and Asymmetry in Clinical Discourse," *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 97, no. 2 (1991), 448-95. ; Dana Rosenfeld and Eugene B. Gallagher, "The Life Course as an Organizing Principle and a Socializing Resource in Modern Medicine," *Advances in Life Course Research*, vol. 7(2002), 357-90.

[16] Steven M. Kogan, "The Politics of Making Meaning: Discourse Analysis of a 'Postmodern' Interview," *Journal of Family Therapy*, vol. 20 (1998), 229-51.

[17] Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, *Institutional Selves: Troubled Identities in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); James A. Holstein, and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Donileen R. Loseke, "Lived Realities and Formula Stories of 'Battered Women,'" in Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (eds.), *Institutional Selves: Troubled Identities in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 107-26; Melvin Pollner and Jill Stein, "Doubled Over in Laughter: Humor and the Construction of Selves in Alcoholics Anonymous," in Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (eds.), *Institutional Selves: Troubled Identities in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46-65.

[18] Angela Cora Garcia, Alecea I. Standlee, Jennifer Bechkoff, and Yan Cui, "Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2009), 52-84.

[19] Holstein and Gubrium, *The Self We Live By*.

[20] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

Foucault's Means of Correct Training and the Internet

According to Foucault, "the chief function of the disciplinary power is to 'train'."[21] The *means of correct training* refers to the process through which individuals are trained to behave in accordance with social or institutional rules. Individuals are *disciplined*, or taught to act in specific ways based on the conceptualization of the human subject as one that can be molded into a particular being. Discipline is achieved through "simple instruments" including hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination.

Hierarchical Observation

Foucault's[22] concept of *hierarchical observation* is the ability for one of higher status to see the actions of the individual. Foucault drew upon Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, the structural model for an ideal prison, to conceptualize surveillance in modern societies. The Panopticon is a structural design that makes all individual cells observable from a central watchtower, but makes the watchtower itself unobservable from the cells. The benefit is that the prisoners never know if they are being observed. According to Foucault, simply establishing the appearance of omnipresent observation is often sufficient for maintaining social control, as those potentially being watched will regulate their own behavior. The *gaze* is part of the operation of power because in order for evaluation or correction to occur, an action must first be observed. However, as Foucault pointed out, the power of the panoptic gaze is the *possibility* of observation, which need not actually occur in every instance.

Widespread use of the Internet and social networking sites provide easy access to others' seemingly private lives, making surveillance even more prevalent. Scholars have argued that the Internet provides a unique opportunity for the expansion of the panoptic gaze,[23] creating an *electronic panopticon*[24] that facilitates *digital rule.*[25] Nevrla[26] refers to this as *social panopticism*, defined as "surveillance in the form of individuals adhering to voluntary surveillance as a means of social interaction and identity building through the use of online social media." Brignall suggests the panoptic elements inherent in the Internet—including observation capacities of Internet providers and hackers, peer-to-peer sites and spyware, and congressional laws that limit Internet privacy for national security purposes—make the Internet a new mechanism of social control. Atchison highlights the ubiquity of the panoptic feature of the Internet, as "everyone on the Internet is a watcher and watched."[27] The critical element of the panoptic gaze is the Internet users' knowledge that their online activities *can* be observed.

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[21] Ibid., *170.*

[22] Ibid.

[23] Brignall III, "The New Panopticon."

[24] Alison Adam, "Cyberstalking and Internet Pornography: Gender and the Gaze," *Ethics and Information Technology,* vol. 4 (2002), 133-42.

[25] Richard Jones, "Digital Rule: Punishment, Control, and Technology," *Punishment & Society,* vol. 2, no.1 (2000), 5-22.

[26] Jake Nevrla, "Voluntary Surveillance: Privacy, Identity and the Rise of Social Panopticism in the Twenty-First Century," *Comm-entary: The UNH Student Journal of Communication (2010), 7.*

[27] Brignall III, "The New Panopticon," 95.

Hierarchical observation requires that there are activities to observe. Campbell and Carlson[28] found that individuals voluntarily disclose personal information online as a means of participation in the cyberworld. Even though individuals are aware of risks associated with disclosing their personal lives, they do so because they believe not participating will result in being "punished by exclusion from the rewards of the marketplace."[29] Internet blogging activities are particularly susceptible to observation because they are public, documented in writing, and recorded to be viewed over and over again. Furthermore, the blogger or blog commenter is unaware and unable to control who observes their online behavior.

Some researchers suggest lateral surveillance is more applicable than hierarchical surveillance to some online settings since individuals mostly engage in online interactions with peers.[30] Status inequalities may be less apparent in online settings[31] and the Internet has been credited as providing a forum for marginalized individuals to have a "voice."[32] On Facebook, for example, Westlake[33] argues that although any individual can report another to an administrator for inappropriate content, users more regularly monitor their own online behaviors for their peer audiences. However, others argue hierarchies are produced in online environments. In online gaming communities for example, hierarchies are generated based on time committed to playing the game and skill level; in some cases higher level statuses must be applied for and are allocated based on demonstrated competence.[34] Scholars have also observed the reproduction of race and gender hierarchies in online educational settings[35] and website moderators acting as authority figures.[36]

Normalizing Judgment
Foucault's[37] concept of *normalizing judgment*, another disciplinary instrument, refers to an ongoing evaluation and correction of behavior through a "double system" of "gratification-punishment." In normalizing judgments, individuals are compared and classified based on

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[28] John Edward Campbell and Matt Carlson, "Panopticon.com: Online Surveillance and the Commodification of Privacy," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* vol. 46, no. 4 (2002), 586-606.

[29] Ibid. 592.

[30] Anders Albrechstlund, "Online Social Networking as Participatory Surveillance," *First Monday*, vol. 13, no. 3 (March 2008). Web: http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2142/1949/

[31] Brian A. Connery, "IMHO: Authority and Egalitarian Rhetoric in the Virtual Coffeehouse," in David Porter (ed.), *Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 161-79.

[32] Ananda Mitra, "Voices of the Marginalized on the Internet: Examples from a Website for Women of South Asia," *Journal of Communication,* vol. 54, no. 3 (2004), 492-510; Ananda Mitra and Eric Watts "Theorizing Cyberspace: The Idea of Voice Applied to the Internet Discourse," *New Media & Society,* vol. 4, no. 4 (2002), 479-98.

[33] E. J. Westlake, "Friend Me if You Facebook: Generation Y and Performative Surveillance," *The Drama Review,* vol. 52, no. 4 (2008), 21-40.

[34] Mark Silverman and Bart Simon, "Discipline and Dragon Kill Points in the Online Power Game," *Games and Culture,* vol. 4, no. 4 (2009), 353-378.

[35] L. E. Sujo de Montes, Sally M. Oran, and Elizabeth M. Willis, "Power, Language and Identity: Voices from an Online Course," *Computers and Composition,* vol. 19, no. 3 (2002), 251-271.

[36] Campbell, "Who's Got the Power?"

[37] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, 180.*

conformity to some standard. Minor punishments, consisting of "a whole series of subtle procedures … from light physical punishment to minor deprivations and petty humiliations"[38] are enacted to correct slight deviations. The purpose of disciplinary punishment is *corrective*, with the intent to train individuals to behave in accordance with some norm. Training requires *exercise*, as practices need to be engaged in repetitively in order to be perfected. Rewards, such as hierarchical promotion, are an integral part of disciplinary power, as positive examples illustrate the standard, and individuals need to experience a positive result from good behavior. Through normalizing judgment, individuals become increasingly homogeneous.

Scholars have observed normalizing judgment in a variety of social forums, including definitions of physical and mental illnesses[39] and labeling school children based on test scores.[40] Not only are patients and students objects of normalizing judgment, but those who inhabit positions of disciplinary power over them, such as nurses,[41] midwives,[42] and teachers[43] are also subject to disciplinary techniques. These observations underscore Foucault's arguments that "power is everywhere"[44] and individuals can simultaneously be objects and subjects of power. Further, scholars observe normalizing judgment not just in institutional settings, but in everyday life situations such as driving,[45] eating,[46] and evaluating children, spouses, friends and oneself.[47]

Examination

Hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment come together in the *examination*, the third instrument of disciplinary power Foucault[48] identified. The examination objectifies its subjects by requiring the creation of something visible that can be evaluated. Results of the

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[38] Ibid., 178.

[39] Elizabeth King Keenan, "Using Foucault's 'Disciplinary Power' and 'Resistance' in Cross-Cultural Psychotherapy," *Clinical Social Work Journal,* vol. 29, no. 3 (2001), 211- 227.

[40] James H. Borland, "Gifted Education without Gifted Children: The Case for No Conception of Giftedness," in Robert J. Sternberg and Janet E. Davidson (eds.), *Conceptions of Giftedness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 2nd ed.), 1-19.

[41] Robin Riley and Elizabeth Manias, "Foucault Could Have Been an Operating Nurse," *Journal of Advanced Nursing,* vol. 39, no. 4 (2002), 316-24.

[42] Ruth Surtees, "'Inductions of Labour': On Becoming an Experienced Midwifery Practitioner in Aotearoa/New Zealand," *Nursing Inquiry,* vol.15, no. 1 (2008), 11-20.

[43] Dennis Carlson, "Are We Making Progress? The Discursive Construction of Progress in the Age of 'No Child Left Behind,'" in Dennis Carlson and C. P. Gause (eds.), *Keeping the Promise: Essays on Leadership, Democracy, and Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 3-26; Sue Lasky, "The Cultural and Emotional Politics of Teacher-Parent Interactions," *Teaching and Teacher Education,* vol. 16 (2000), 843-860.

[44] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, 93.*

[45] Matt Hannah, "Imperfect Panopticism: Envisioning the Construction of Normal Lives," in Georges Benko and Ulf Strohmayer (eds.), *Space & Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 344-59.

[46] Susan Grieshaber, "Mealtime Rituals: Power and Resistance in the Construction of Mealtime Rules," *The British Journal of Sociology,* vol. 48, no. 4 (1997), 649-666.

[47] Spencer E. Cahill, "Toward a Sociology of the Person," *Sociological Theory,* vol. 16, no. 2 (1998), 131-148.

[48] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.*

examination are documented in ways that aim to identify certain aspects of the individual. This documentation facilitates the calculation of a standard to which individuals may be compared. According to Foucault, this system of examination and documentation resulted in the creation of the individual as an object that could be described, analyzed, and compared; and a comparative system through which individuals may be evaluated based on a measure of similarity or difference to others.

Examinations in contemporary society can range from educational measurements and standardized tests to psychological evaluations and medical examinations.[49] Each examination measures and documents some aspect of the individual that is then used to compare the individual to peers. Based on the comparison, an assessment of the individual is made. Individuals' posts in online communities can serve as a form of examination. Individuals post comments that are made available for observation and can be used to compare themselves to eachother's based on some criteria. Responses to comments are posted that provide positive or negative reinforcement for the post or the actions reported in the posts. The effectiveness of such examination can be seen in individuals' conformity to the unwritten rules of online communities and their initiative to correct their peers' comments. Scholars have observed that members of online communities learn and internalize unwritten rules and consequences for breaking them that operate in online forums.[50] For example, Tyma[51] suggests that the self-surveillance that occurs in MySpace mirrors that of actual prisoners in that members of the community are disciplined into specific behaviors and monitor themselves so that social rules are followed. Online community members are offended by those who do not adhere to established rules and have the capability to report the "deviant." Through online interactions, individuals not only work to regulate each other's online behaviors[52] but may also seek to shape others' offline activities.[53]

The Current Project

This project seeks to deepen sociological understanding of the mechanisms through which discipline is enacted in online environments. In particular, we seek to examine *how* discipline is achieved through interactions on the Internet. Our central research questions are: 1) Does Foucault's means of correct training apply to an online environment? And 2) If so, what interactional work is involved in achieving discipline in an online forum?

We use a social constructionist perspective[54] to examine the processes through which discipline is enacted online. Social constructionism views reality and the self as the ongoing

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[49] Borland, "Gifted Education without Gifted Children." ; King Keenan, "Using Foucault's 'Disciplinary Power' and 'Resistance'."

[50] Johnson-Eilola and Selber, "Policing ourselves."

[51] Adam Tyma, "Rules of Interchange: Privacy in Online Social Communities – A Rhetorical Critique of MySpace.com," *Journal of the Communication, Speech & Theatre Association of North Dakota,* vol. 20 (2007), 31-39.

[52] Adol Esquivel, Funda Meric-Bernstam, and Elmer V. Bernstam, "Accuracy and Self-Correction of Information Received from an Internet Breast Cancer List: Content Analysis," *British Medical Journal,* vol. 332 (2006), 939-42.

[53] Rier, "The Impact of Moral Suasion on Internet HIV/AIDS Support Groups."

[54] Holstein and Gubrium, *The Self We Live By.*

products of social interactions. From this perspective, individuals negotiate everyday realities through ongoing social interactions with others. Issues such as ethics, morals, and appropriate behaviors are not considered stable factors that are external to individuals but instead they come into being through the course of humans' interactions with each other. Through these interactions, norms and ethics are created, contested and negotiated. The emergent versions of reality produced through interactions shape the kind of "selves" available for identification.

We use Foucault's concept of *the means of correct training* as a guiding framework through which to examine the interactive work of disciplinary training. We apply the concepts of *hierarchical observation*, *normalizing judgment* and *examination* to participants' interactions in the comment posts of a money-saving coupon blog to assess the utility of Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power in an online setting. By analyzing these comments, we identify ways in which blog participants survey each other and engage in interactions that attempt to mold future behavior. Couponing blogs may not immediately seem like sites for social control, but these blogs have a high number of loyal followers who regularly report and comment on each other's actions. Followers may subscribe for daily feeds (posts are automatically delivered to an email account) or check the site multiple times per day to see what the blog author and other followers have posted. Posts are time-sensitive since they relate to deals that are currently going on which encourages followers to check in often, creating a much more active site than some other blogs. Many comments relate to the content of the blog posts, asking for more information about the sale or deal posted, however some discussions take on ethical and morality issues stemming from a participant comment. Our analysis focuses on the interactions surrounding ethical and moral issues related to couponing.

Research Method

This study used data from a popular couponing blog we call "Frugal Shopper" that we chose for several reasons. First, Frugal Shopper is among the most popular couponing/money saving blogs, receiving about 128,096 page views per day and over 3.8 million page views per month at the time of data collection.[55] Second, this blog is an "open" site, available for public viewing without any kind of membership. Third, this blog has a high number of comments posted by readers, making it one of the most interactive couponing blogs we were able to find. Finally, although the site is officially moderated, very few comments are deleted.

We focus on a money-saving blog due to personal interest and familiarity. The first author is an avid couponer and subscribes to multiple couponing blogs. Stephanie was first introduced to couponing blogs in 2009 when she learned how to coupon from a friend. She found Frugal Shopper to be the most helpful site because of its easy-to-follow format and open comment section. Being new to couponing, the comments helped her learn how to do the deals "properly" and learn the language (terms and acronyms) that accompanies couponing. The comments section also gave insight into what the group considered right and wrong methods of couponing, shopping choices, and ongoing moral/ethical dilemmas within the group. Although Stephanie subscribes to the blog used in this project, she has never posted comments to the site.

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[55] Metrics collected using the "urlm.co" online tool.

Stephanie's position as a "lurker" to the site is a potential source of bias, as she engages in the same activities as the participants of the site (couponing). However, many contemporary qualitative researchers suggest that research is best undertaken by researchers who can identify with their participants based on similar experiences.[56] We believe that Stephanie's "insider" knowledge of the couponing world is an asset to the research project through her understanding of the language, acronyms, and store policies that are referenced throughout the blog, and her ability to relate to the participants. As a couponer, Stephanie might be characterized as one who follows "the code" identified below but does not enforce it upon others.

Data used for the study are based on comments made on blog posts from November 1, 2009—December 31, 2009. This date period was chosen because of its proximity to holidays which increased activity on the site, providing us with plenty of data to analyze. Although the official data collection lasted two months (November and December), we had monitored the site and observed the comments section prior to embarking on this project. The first author was a follower of the blog for a year at the time and began critically observing the comments section around May when the idea for this project arose. We observed for several months to ensure the content of the comments selected for analysis were typical of the site. Although there were more comments and posts during the selected time period than other months, the content of the comments are similar to those observed throughout the year. During the month of November, posts from the blog master ranged from 4 to 31 per day, with an average of 12 for November and 13 for December. Comments on these posts ranged from 0 to 351.

Our analysis focuses solely on comments posted that are publicly available. We did not contact or initiate interactions with any participants or the blog master. Therefore, participants' demographic information can only be inferred. The comments suggest that the average participant is a middle-class, stay at home mom of at least two children. Most are married and speak to their "job" as stretching their husband's dollars. The blog is based out of a Southeastern city but blog followers may live anywhere as comments often state "regional coupons" were not available where they live.

Following others' recommendations,[57] we changed all names to pseudonyms and changed the name of the blog to maintain anonymity. Although most posted to the blog as a pseudonym (for example, something like "savvy mom"), we changed their pseudonyms to other pseudonyms selected by us. Many participants posted anonymously (commonly referred to as "anon" followed by the time of their post). We did not create pseudonyms for anonymous participants but we changed the time of the posts. Where timing is relevant, we changed the times reported but maintained the accurate time between posts.

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[56] Christopher Dunbar, Jr., Dalia Rodriguez and Laurence Parker, "Race, Subjectivity, and the Interview Process," in Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (eds.), *Handbook of Interview Research: Context & Method* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002), 279-298; Carolyn Ellis and Leigh Berger, "Their Story/My Story/Our Story: Including the Researcher's Experience in Interview Research," in Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (eds.), *Handbook of Interview Research: Context & Method* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002), 849-876.

[57] Storm A. King, "Researching Internet Communities: Proposed Ethical Guidelines for the Reporting of the Results," *The Information Society*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1996), 119-27; Judith Sixsmith and Craig D. Murray, "Ethical Issues in the Documentary Data Analysis of Internet Posts and Archives," *Qualitative Health Research,* vol. 11 (2001), 423-32.

Every comment posted during this time period was reviewed and considered for analysis. "Initial coding"[58] was performed by reading each comment and making note of themes that arose. Each comment that directly related to the research topic was copied and pasted into a Word document for further analysis, generating a total of 431 pages of data. Comments were deemed irrelevant and therefore excluded if they were of generic informational content such as: "I think the site is down" or "how much is shipping?" All comments that included reference to ethics, morality, gratification, praise, sanction, and/or judgment were copied and pasted for analysis. The final data set consisted of 2,168 comments.

Once the data set was created in a Word document, the data was more carefully analyzed. Conversational threads were coded based on their relevance to the different components of Foucault's means of correct training (hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination). Negative cases were also included in the codes (e.g., non-hierarchical observation). "Focused coding"[59] was then performed in which conversational threads within each code were analyzed in more depth. The initial coding was performed by the first author, and focused coding was performed by both authors together.

Study Limitations

The data presented here are from a single blog site and a specific online community. Readers tend to be predominantly women with children and presumably middle-class (based on comments stating they are married, stay-at-home mothers). Therefore, caution should be taken when generalizing these results to other online communities. Nevertheless, the findings presented here support previous research on online communities and the similar dynamics of the "real" world.

Results

Establishing a "Code"

Although debated, the "code of ethics" for couponing prevalent throughout the discussions is centered on a single rule: do not "clear the shelves," or take all of a store's stock of a product. Participants are expected to benefit from deals but leave plenty of the item in the store so others can also benefit. The site master provides some information on "couponing etiquette":

> If you are planning to buy mass quantities of a sale item, it is beneficial to contact the store and order the item in advance. … This is much better than coming in on the first day of a sale and completely cleaning out the shelves. There really is such a thing as coupon etiquette!!

However, this rule is hotly debated as there are no clear guidelines regarding how many of a product is "too many" and whether or not certain circumstances warrant clearing

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[58] Kathy Charmaz, "The Grounded Theory Method: An Explication and Interpretation," in Robert M. Emerson (ed.) *Contemporary Field Research: A Collection of Readings* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1983), 109-126: Glaser, Barney G, *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1978).

[59] Charmaz, "The Grounded Theory Method."

the shelves. Hence, debates ensue regarding the "appropriate" use of coupons and identifying which behaviors do and do not violate the code.

Through their comments, participants work to discipline each other to shop in accordance with the code. In this way the "code" is like the unwritten "street code"[60] where acculturation to the group leads to actions and where deviance (in this case, petty humiliations) can be justified if the individuals see themselves as "code enforcers." These "code enforcers" use various elements of Foucault's *means of correct training* in attempt to discipline others into becoming "ethical couponers."

Hierarchical Observation
Hierarchical observation, the first component of Foucault's *means of correct training*, is the ability for one of higher disciplinary status to see individuals' actions. "The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible."[61]

When individuals post to a blog, they engage in an action that becomes available for observation. In our data, participants often posted a description of couponing activities, describing some deal they were or were not able to achieve. By describing their activities, they make them visible to the group and available for surveillance. Some acknowledge this visibility with comments such as, "Your actions WILL be scrutinized by others," and "I know I will get flamed because I always flame those that criticize as well."

Previous researchers suggest lateral surveillance is more applicable to online environments than hierarchical surveillance due to the tendency for individuals to interact with those of similar status online.[62] Lateral observation was certainly prevalent in the interactions we observed, where one member would observe and critique the actions of another without drawing upon a status hierarchy to validate their critique. For example, a participant posted that she purchased 24 bottles of coffee cream. Another responded, "Do you think 24 is excessive?" to which the original participant posted, "Please mind your own business. I spread out my shopping between ten different stores, so as to not wipe any of them out." Here the first participant's actions are observed by the second participant, who offers a critique. The first participant's response shows the equal status relationship between the two, as it disregards the comment and justifies the action. By explaining that she spread her shopping over multiple stores, the participant implies that her actions were within "the code" of not emptying the shelves. This pattern of interaction is common on the site, where participants critique and debate without clear status hierarchies.

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[60] Fiona Brookman, Heith Copes, and Andy Hochstetler, "Street Codes as Formula Stories: How Inmates Recount Violence," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (May 2011). Web: http://jce.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/05/13/0891241611408307.

[61] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 170.

[62] Albrechstlund, "Online Social Networking as Participatory Surveillance,"; Brian A. Connery, "IMHO: Authority and Egalitarian Rhetoric in the Virtual Coffeehouse," in David Porter (ed.), *Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 161-79; Westlake, "Friend Me if You Facebook."

Establishing Hierarchies

Although we did not observe any clear status hierarchies, we did observe individuals working to create hierarchies. Due to the anonymity of an online environment, some traditional status lines are blurred. Therefore, individuals worked to establish hierarchies to validate their own opinions and knowledge and invalidate those that were contradictory. One way hierarchies were created was through the establishment of oneself as an "expert." Previous researchers have observed that the status of "expert" is an interactional achievement assigned and negotiated in social situations.[63] Further, the constitution of oneself as an "expert" often corresponds with the constitution of the other as "novice," and these roles may be upheld or challenged as social interactions unfold.[64] In our study, individuals used several tactics to declare themselves a couponing "expert."

One method of declaring oneself an "expert" was to draw upon previous experience and expertise in retail. The following comments are taken from a debate that ensued over whether or not obtaining items for free or near-free was detrimental to retailers.

> *Anon 5:23*: As a former corporate accounting employee I can assure you that the value of coupons are compensated for in the advertising and marketing budget for each company. Believe me they know what they are doing. … As a matter of fact, the companies that I worked for loved when customers used the coupons.

> *Anon 9:23*: Ugh. Coupons do not cause businesses to go into deficits. Stores make money each time a coupon is redeemed. … In addition, having worked at a large retail chain, I know that stores work in concert with companies regarding which items they put on sale at what times based on coupon issuance.

These examples demonstrate the use of retail experience to establish oneself as having "expert" knowledge about couponing and therefore having more valuable knowledge and opinions than others.

Some participants who did not have retail experience themselves drew upon conversations with retail workers to verify their claims.

> *Anon 3:55*:I was speaking with the Target store manager recently about stacking coupons and buying multiples, trying to understand if these deals really "cripple" Target in any way. He explained that at absolutely every manager's meeting they are encouraged to educate their cashiers and staff on their coupon policy and how and why it "helps" Target. Yes, he said "helps."

Participants also used education as a way to legitimize their advice and correct others. One participant wrote, "I read through all the comments and all I can say is, 'oh dear.' Here's

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[63] Helga Kotthoff, "The Interactional Achievement of Expert Status: Creating Asymmetries by 'Teaching Conversational Lectures' in TV Discussions," in Helga Kotthoff (ed.), *Communicating Gender in Context* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997), 139-78.

[64] Sally Jacoby and Patrick Gonzales, "The Constitution of Expert-Novice in Scientific Discourse," *Issues in Applied Linguistics,* vol. 2, no. 2 (1991), 149-181.

my advice (and yes, I do have a degree in finance). …" Here the participant draws on her education to present herself as an expert in fraud and financial ethics, thereby establishing a hierarchical relationship that validates her own opinion over others.

Hierarchies are also created by using "factual evidence" such as statistics, legal statutes or store policies to legitimize knowledge and establish themselves as holding better knowledge than other members. In response to concerns over a future lack of coupons resulting from individuals taking advantage of retailers, several participants drew on statistics to support their viewpoints.

> *Anon 6:41*: I think we should remember that 99% of coupons are not used!!!

> *Anon 7:42*: … a good place to look is on 'Google.' Do a search on coupon redemption and you will see how coupons are actually processed and how only a small percentage, like 5% of those clipped coupons, are ever used.

In other instances, participants use laws or store policies to verify their claims. In one discussion, a participant questioned the motive behind the blog master "promoting" a particular item. Another participant responded:

> *Anon 8:20*: (Really people need to know what they are talking about before they post). Federal Trade Commission 16 CFR Part 255 states that when using Endorsements or testimonials to sell a product that person giving the testimonial or Endorsement must state if they are making money from the company selling the product.

In another case, there was a debate over whether a store would price match a doorbuster sale or a Black Friday deal from a competitor's ad. Here a participant gives "insider" information regarding an internal memo about these scenarios.

> *Autumn*: The reason some can do this and some cannot is simply what store you happen to shop at. There was a corporate guideline sent to all stores with the price match info on it that should be at the guest service desk. It says RIGHT ON THE GUIDELINE PAGE that the doorbuster and limited time ads (which the Toys R Us ad fits under both categories) do not qualify.

In these instances, participants draw upon "factual evidence" to establish themselves as an authority on the subject. In this way, they work to establish hierarchies in online settings to validate their opinions over others.

Jacoby and Gonzales[65] point out that hierarchical roles are negotiated through interaction, and a status established through one interaction may be upheld or reconfigured in future interactions. In their observations of face-to-face interactions among a research group, an "expert" status was sometimes upheld through ongoing interactions in which the "novice" contributed to the ongoing definition of the "expert" as one of higher status. In the current data,

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[65] Ibid.,

although we observe individuals using different techniques to try to obtain expert status online, these status moves are often ignored or disregarded by future participants.

For example, in response to a Walgreen's employee who claimed there was not enough room to store 30 boxes of Kleenex, a participant wrote:

> *Anon 10:50*: These are small upright boxes. At my wags where I shop they are on the top shelf of the Kleenex and there is plenty of space to put out possibly even 50. As well, they had a separate display in the front being that they are on sale in the ad.

Here the participant disregards the first participant's attempt to achieve hierarchical status based on retail employment experience. In another example, in response to the post regarding the participant's conversation with a Target manager, a participant wrote:

> *Anon 4:58*: Anon 3:55 is partially correct. I recently spoke to a regional manager for my grocery store. Yes, the sales are set by the manufactors, and the store is reimbursed for the difference, plus any coupons used. However, the processing fee ($.08) barely covers what it costs to sort and mail the coupons where they need to go. The coupons help boost sales and move products that THE MANUFACTORS either need to move or promote. When you're using a Target coupon on a Target product, Target is taking the direct hit, as they are the manufactor.

Here the participant attempts to override the first participant's status move by instating information from one of higher status (regional manager vs. store manager). In this instance the second participant acknowledges the information from the first participant but draws on information from someone of higher status to verify his or her own information. In other examples, most participants simply ignored the "factual evidence" presented or the "expert statuses" created and proceeded to state their own opinions. Thus, although we observe participants working to establish hierarchies, and therefore presenting their ideas and opinions as more valid than others', we find that these hierarchies are not upheld through the interactions in this particular forum.

Normalizing Judgment

The second component of corrective training is *normalizing judgment*, the evaluation and correction of actions observed. Normalizing judgment can take the form of minor punishments such as "petty humiliations" and inability to complete a task. According to Foucault, punishments must occur in conjunction with rewards for good behavior, since the goal of correct training is to promote actions that are considered appropriate. In the forum we observed, individuals regularly comment on each other's actions in ways that punish behaviors that deviate from, and encourage behaviors that are consistent with, the code.

Petty Humiliations

Participants that we observed regularly engage in public shaming of individuals who do not follow the code. The anonymity of the forum may make this process easier than in face-to-face

interactions because people may speak more harshly online[66,67] and there are no direct personal risks to making a negative comment anonymously. For example, the following interactions took place regarding a couponing deal that enabled customers to get free toddler wipes.

> *Anon 10:12*: YIPPY!!! I just cleaned out the shelf of the toddler wipes. Didn't even have to pay tax. The cashier said 'Wow.' Happy dance.

> *Jan in A-Town*: Anon, is it really necessary to clear out the shelves? What about the rest of us? Just because it is a good deal doesn't mean you have to take EVERYTHING.

> *Anon 12:30*: Jan in A-Town, you sound bitter. So what's wrong if Anon 10:12 got a good deal? She got there first and hit the jackpot.

Here participants critique the original participant for clearing the shelves. A few participants come to her defense, criticizing those who responded negatively to her actions. In some instances, including this one, debates over couponing ethics escalate and readers insult and call each other names.

> *Anon 7:15*: Anyone who "buys" stuff with coupons and walks away with free loot and then resells it is disgusting! You greedy people! It makes me sick to think that people who really need products who are on strict budgets cannot get the stuff because of this.

> *Anon 11:25*: Why does anyone need a stockpile when deals are always coming? Just call it like it is: hoarding.

> *Irene*: The attitude of "get as many as you can" shows NO class, and lack of self-control.

As these examples demonstrate, participants use name-calling and insults as petty humiliations to critique other participants' actions that violate the code. Although much less common, some participants retaliated with harsh comments toward those who tried to uphold the code.

> *Laura715*: I cannot stand it when people get all up in arms because someone else bought a bunch of one item. Oh well! Get over it!! … People get so jealous just because someone else got the deal.

> *Anon 5:30*: Whining and complaining on A COUPON SITE is crazy. Start your own blog and complain on it. FS does this to help us stretch a dollar not to get slack from all of you. … Go figure. Get a life.

Participants also use sarcasm and humor to critique each other's actions. In a discussion that shamed the participant who purchased "too many" wipes, one participant stated:

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[66] Rier, "The Impact of Moral Suasion on Internet HIV/AIDS Support Groups."

[67] John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *Cyber Psychology and Behavior* 7, 3 (2004), 321-326.

> *Anon 11:18*: Eighteen Target wipes is low-hanging fruit. But I'm glad you beat the other lady with the stack of coupons Anon! But if she gets between you and those wipes on your next freebie run, just run her over with your cart. Great values to instill in your children.

Another participant later retaliated:

> *MadG*: I am laughing my butt off! I took all the Trident gum, have 50 packages of TP in my attic, and I got the other 30 boxes of tissues. … BTW last week I think I took out a kid in the cereal aisle at Target when I got my eight boxes of Chex cereal!!!!! Oh yeah I have about 50 Glade candles and don't plan on sharing with anyone. THEY ARE ALL MINE!!!!

These comments demonstrate the use of petty humiliations to correct others' behaviors and reinforce the code. However, since participants are not all in agreement over what the rules are and how strictly they should be followed, similar tactics are used to challenge the code.

Although these comments may seem petty and meaningless, they do appear to have an effect on some readers. Participants commonly post that they got a good deal and include information that shows they followed the code. For example, the following posts are in regard to the deal for free toddler wipes.

> *BigMoney*: I just came back from Target and got two wipes and Xmas potato head. There are plenty of them left for others.

> *Laura715*: Well, I traveled 45 minutes away to another town to get the wipes. I did by no means clear any shelves. There were lots of wipes there. I did take several packages though. I spent my time and gas to make the trip, so it wouldn't make sense to just get one or two.

In another example, a participant posted regarding a deal on tissues at Walgreens under "Anonymous" at 11:10pm: "I did this deal for 30 boxes and no beeps. I paid under $4 which is almost all tax." At 11:18, before anyone else commented, the same participant posted:

> And just for the record, I was ANON 11:10 and NO I DID NOT CLEAR THE SHELVES. I know that is a hot topic around here so just wanted to make sure you all know, there were at least another 30 boxes on the shelves. Just to clarify.

A debate ensued over the next few days between other participants surrounding the ethics of acquiring 30 boxes of tissues. Many scorned her and other couponers for being "greedy" and "taking advantage" while others supported and applauded her for getting a good deal. The next evening, the participant posted again to justify her behavior.

> Well, just to clarify for those of you who need to know why I purchased 30 boxes of tissue. First of all, 27 of them are in a case and the box is rather small for storage, let me tell you. Secondly I have three children, two of whom have allergies and go to school. I sent several boxes with each of them to school as well as donate many items to the local Senior Center. I didn't realize it was such a big deal to buy "too" many tissues. … And once again, the manager got me a case from the back. I DID NOT clear the shelf and I shared the deal with two

others while I was shopping. I don't know why I feel like I have to justify myself but I just wanted to clear the air.

Here the participant responds to critiques presented by others, explaining that she had use for the tissues and operated within the code by not clearing the shelves. This demonstrates the effectiveness petty humiliations have on some, as they are compelled to report their compliance with the code.

Inability to Complete a Task

Another element of normalizing judgment is the individual's ability to complete a particular task. Foucault writes, "In a disciplinary regime punishment involves a double juridico-natural reference."[68] That is, part of the disciplinary power is enacted directly through the institution however there is also a component of disciplinary power that occurs naturally. When an individual is disciplined in accordance with a particular set of rules, they are naturally able to complete certain tasks. One individual's failure in conjunction with others' success reinforces the "naturalness" of the progression, the significance of the tasks, and the importance of completing them in a particular way.

Some of the comments display the readers' upset emotions over not being able to complete the task of scoring a particular deal. Such comments were particularly common when a major retailer (Target) changed its coupon policy so that each customer (computer) could only print two of a particular coupon.

Anon: Target's "new" coupon activator SUCKS!

Erin: THIS SUCKS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I hope hot coupon world will somehow be able to get a program up so we can print more than one, but sounds doubtful!!! I have a very MAD face right now!

A few of those who "follow the code" reported that they were happy restrictions were being enacted that legitimized some of their rules and punished those who deviated. These participants used the new restrictions as a "teaching moment" to blame those who violate the code for the new restrictions, thereby reinforcing the code.

Anon: Well maybe this will stop people from being so greedy and wiping out the shelves.

Anon: We tried to warn all the greedy people about clearing shelves and we were shot down. Wonder why it took Target so long to put a stop to it. Oh well, don't you feel just a little bit guilty? Probably not.

Corrective Training

Foucault states that discipline must be *corrective*:"the disciplinary systems favour punishments that are exercise—intensified, multiplied forms of training, several times repeated."[69] While these comments are posted in an online forum, mostly in an anonymous fashion, members

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[68] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 179.

[69] Ibid.

post comments in order to correct those who are deviating from the ethical boundaries and established rules of the community.

Some participants were very direct in their approach and singled out the individual attempting to break the rules with an immediate "corrective" reply.

> *Anon 9:50*: Why are you worried about a print limit? I just printed them twice, they are all the same barcodes etc. each time I printed them. So you can copy them since they are not unique bar codes, right?

> *Anon 10:03*: Uhhh, Anon 9:50, copying coupons is fraud. So I wouldn't go there if I were you!

> *Phoebe*: Uh-oh, Anon 12:28, you are going to get in trouble with the readers on this site for copying a coupon. That's a no-no 'round here.

> *Anon 5:16*: Hopefully Anon who copied the coupons was just new and now (hopefully) knows what he/she did was wrong and won't do it again.

Rewards/Gratification

Another component of corrective training is rewards or gratification for good behavior. Foucault writes, "In discipline, punishment is only one element of a double system: gratification-punishment."[70] Just as failure to complete a task is a "natural" punishment for incomplete or improper discipline, successfully completing a task is a "natural" reward for complete and proper discipline. Reward can also take the form of positive comments from others. In the site we analyzed, many participants will post about their "scores," reinforcing for other readers that the deals work when done properly. They may also indirectly let readers know that there is always another deal, so breaking the rules is unnecessary.

> *Daphne*: OMG, I'm in couponer's heaven! My Rite Aid is open 24 hours, so I went at midnight. I got six Schick Quattro razors for free!! They're usually $10 each! (Don't worry, the store still had a lot; I didn't clean them out). I got over $55 worth of stuff for a total of $5! Yay!! Thank you FS!

> *Casey*: My heart was racing as I placed my order just now, but it worked. This is so exciting!

> *Karen*: Good for you. It is exciting when you get to save money. And always remember to get rain checks whenever a store is out of a sale item. Good luck and happy shopping.

> *StoreExp*: 50 bucks is an amazing savings! Great job!

Here participants report getting good deals, showing the rewards of "good behavior" to others on the site. Others compliment them on achieving savings by following the rules of the code.

A few participants described receiving positive reinforcement from the stores where they regularly shop with coupons.

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[70] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 180.

> Anon: YAY! … Had so much success at WAGS with the Ecotrin, band-aids, and Olay!!! I'm on a super high! The cashiers are starting to recognize me and today the guy said, "I'm not supposed to give you the highest price off the Olay, but since you are always in here, and I love to see all your deals and how much money you save, I'll do it for you." THANKS FRU-GAL!! I tell everyone it's ALL YOU!!

Thus the gratification for scoring a deal properly can come as a "natural" reward for acquiring items for less money, and may be further emphasized through verbal positive reinforcement from store cashiers and participants on the site.

Examination

The final component of corrective training is the *examination*. The examination combines hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment in a ritualized manner that results in the ability to evaluate the individual as a singular "case" that can be assessed, compared, judged and classified. Foucault writes, "The case is … the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc."[71]

In a sense, the blog and its posts are the examination. The blogmaster creates a post describing a deal that can be achieved at a particular store by matching a sale price with various coupons. Sometimes deals can be quite complicated, requiring individuals to purchase several items and use multiple coupons, which might come from different sources. In order for some deals to work, participants must be aware of and work within a store's couponing policy, as some stores have regulations on the coupon-to-item ratio allowed or may have other offers such as price matching or accepting competitor coupons. Participants come to the site to learn about the deals and find out how they can achieve them. Then they go out into the stores to try the deal and post their results in the comment section of the blog. Once posted, the couponing activities are documented for comparison and classification. They are then commented upon, often with negative or positive reinforcement.

> *Anon*: My Target will not adjust the price of an item for a coupon. So, I couldn't use the $1 on a $0.97 item.

> *Leigh*: I was able to use the $1 St. Ive's coupon on the .97 body wash at Target. It beeped, but she checked it and put it through. So I guess it depends on your cashier!

> *Anon*: I believe Target's coupon policy states that they adjust the price of a coupon. I had the $2 off ReNu coupon and used it to by 12 travel size bottles that were priced around $1.50 and my cashier had to adjust each one, which she wasn't too happy about.

> *Melissa*: If you have young kids, I just wanted to point out that once you have the travel size bottles, it is a MUCH better value to buy the large size bottles and refill the small ones. I don't think that value is always a focus when looking at these deals, rather the focus seems to be how cheap a particular item could be, so I thought I would add some info on value!

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[71] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 191.

Leigh: I used to think that way too. But, when you buy a 2 oz and get for free, you pay .00 per ounce. Even if you buy a big one on sale and get 1.00 off, I guarantee that it's going to cost more than .00 per ounce.

Anon: I printed it once and then made photo copies. I used 5 at Walgreens on their trial size. So, I got 5 free in one trip!!

Natalie: Didn't you read the coupon? Do not copy!!! You are bad and make couponing hard for people that do the right thing. You should go tell them and pay them their $5.

Dana: This is why manufacturers put a limit on coupons, Anon. I understand what you are saying, Melissa. I don't go out of my way for travel or trial sizes unless I really need them for travel.

This uninterrupted thread illustrates the examination qualities of the blog comments. Each shopper reports their success or failure at achieving a particular deal, and the reports are recorded one after another so that comparison and scrutiny are made easy. Other participants then compare, evaluate and sanction each shopper's achievement.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to see if Foucault's model of social control can be applied to an online environment. There is some evidence to suggest that real-life behaviors and social norms translate to online environment.[72] Many scholars have used Foucault's work to understand different elements of power and control both online and in various social contexts, but we were unable to find any studies that directly examine the utility of the three components of Foucault's means of correct training for understanding control online. To assess the utility of Foucault's framework, we examined the interactional processes through which participants of a couponing blog worked to discipline each other's couponing behaviors.

Our findings suggest that Foucault's means of correct training is applicable to the online environment we studied with some modification. Observation is certainly necessary, as in order for behaviors to be scrutinized they must first be observable. When individuals post reports of their behaviors online, they make those behaviors available for observation. However, consistent with previous research on online environments,[73] we find lateral surveillance to be more relevant than hierarchical surveillance. Although we observe participants using different discursive techniques to establish hierarchies, they were generally not upheld in the responses. This finding supports the idea that hierarchies can be established and negotiated through social interactions in everyday life rather than simply imposed by external forces.[74]

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[72] Nick Yee, Jeremy N. Bailenson, Mark Urbanek, Fracis Chang and Dan Merget, "The Unbearable Likeness of Being Digital: The Persistence of Nonverbal Social Norms in Online Virtual Environments," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2007).

[73] Albrechstlund, "Online Social Networking as Participatory Surveillance,"; Westlake, "Friend Me if You Facebook."

[74] Jacoby and Gonzales, "The Constitution of Expert-Novice in Scientific Discourse"; Kotthoff, "The Interactional Achievement of Expert Status."

The interactional negotiation of status hierarchies may be particularly prevalent online, where other status characteristics such as race, gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status may be less apparent.

The lateral surveillance we identified may also be a function of the type of site we observed. Participants are anonymous on this site and many post without a pseudonym (as "anonymous"). We would expect traditional hierarchies associated with characteristics such as race, class, gender, age and occupation to be prevalent in a non-anonymous online setting such as an online class or Facebook. In such settings, hierarchical observation may be expected over lateral observation. In addition, many bloggers participate in the comments section of their blogs, where they may be perceived as an authority figure. The blogger of the site we observed does not participate in the discussions so this form of hierarchical power was not observed on this site. Participants may also achieve hierarchical status through frequent posting, however we did not observe that on this site. We also find that Foucault's concept of normalizing judgment applies quite well to the online environment we studied. Participants provided feedback to each other in the forms of gratification and punishment for following or breaking the code. Punishments, which often took the form of petty humiliations such as verbally critiquing someone's actions or calling them names, often focused on correcting behaviors and therefore appear disciplinary. However we do notice that some critiques and name calling were quite harsh given the offense. We suspect that the anonymity of the online environment combined with the lack of face-to-face contact solicit harsher comments than people would generally make in person. This idea is consistent with previous research[75] that shows individuals making more negative and harsh comments online than would typically be seen in face-to-face interactions. Additionally, we note that participants frequently attacked the character of the actor rather than just their behaviors. In a study of college students' interpretations of roommates' behaviors, Emerson[76] found bothersome behaviors only came to be defined as character flaws among his participants when behaviors were ongoing and earlier interventions to stop them were unsuccessful. In our study, participants made negative comments about code violators' characters after only a single post. This finding supports the findings of others that online interactions may become more easily confrontational and harsh compared to face-to-face interactions.

We also find the examination to be less distinguishable online than in the other contexts Foucault describes, such as the military, schools, and medical exams, but apparent nonetheless. We suggest that the blog itself contains the same properties as a more formal examination. The blogmaster posts instructions on how to achieve a deal, which serve as the task the participants are assigned to complete. Participants collect their coupons and then go into the stores to try to achieve the deal. They then return to the blog to report their successes or failures. The reports are then available to be compared, evaluated and classified. This format is similar to a school teacher providing a set of problems, students attempting to complete them

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[75] Rier, "The Impact of Moral Suasion on Internet HIV/AIDS Support Groups"; Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect."

[76] Robert Emerson, "From Normal Conflict to Normative Deviance: The Micro-politics of Trouble in Close Relationships," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2011), 3-38.

and then turning them in for evaluation. However it differs from other institutional contexts in that in the online context reports are voluntary and can easily be manipulated by the participant. That is, someone may claim to achieve the deal without violating the code, but they may lie about their actions. Individuals may also choose to be anonymous online but may not be anonymous in other institutional settings.

Another distinction between the online environment we observed and other institutional contexts is the lack of clearly defined rules[77]. Because there is a lack of clear status hierarchies in the interactions we observed, there is no single person or group able to define the rules. Rules are what the group defines them to be, however group members are not in agreement over what the rules are. Although there is enough general agreement for us to get a sense of a "code," there is plenty of dissent, so a participant can generally find at least some support for any of their couponing behaviors.

Due to the lack of a clear code and status hierarchies, the effectiveness of the disciplinary techniques we observed are questionable. It appears that some participants took the code into account and were eager to report their compliance. Foucault[78] explains that power is not centrally located, it is everywhere. Power is shared in differing degrees among all members of a group. As it relates to this study, power can be exerted by multiple agents including (but not limited to) other people in close proximity as well as more distant entities such as the virtual communities (blogs) with which these individuals align themselves. In terms of the blog's influence over individual shoppers, power originates outside of the individual's immediate setting--thus, power is enforced by individuals upon themselves. This interaction is best explained by Foucault's panoptic model of surveillance. A scowl extended by a random stranger lets us know when we are out of line just as well as a sanction from a formal judicial body. Further, the sense that a distant virtual community *could* implicate an individual as guilty of violating an informal ethical code leads individuals to engage in self-discipline. Dennis[79] describes the concept of "sousveillance"[80] as "surveillance from underneath" but with a "self reflective responsibility." Participants police other blog participants and in doing so they may engage in a "form of self-control and maintenance."[81] The blog serves as the platform in which participants turn vigilantes towards other members but also towards themselves. It is possible as these participants stand in the aisle of Target, they may think of the petty humiliations others have suffered and act in accordance with the code.

On the other hand, many participants violated the code and openly posted accounts of their violations. These participants appear to reject definitions of themselves imposed by others as "code violators" or "deviant" and instead work to interactionally negotiate the boundaries and parameters of the code. Foucault[82] himself stated "where there is power, there's re-

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[77] Atchison, "Emerging Styles of Social Control on the Internet."

[78] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

[79] Dennia Kingsley, "*Keeping a close watch* – the rise of self-surveillance and the threat of digital exposure," *The Sociological Review*, vol. 56, no. 3 (2008).

[80] S. Mann, "'Reflectionism' and 'Diffusionism': new Tactics for Deconstructing the Video Surveillance Superhighway," *Leonardo*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1998), 93–102.

[81] Kingsley, "*Keeping a close watch."*

[82] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

sistance…" and these individuals are resisting against the power structure that the blog has created.

Couponers exert power over themselves based on the projection of how they believe others (members of the blog) would hold them accountable. This point is particularly salient considering how couponers are: 1) personally influenced by "the rules" of the virtual community, and 2) active agents in holding other site-users accountable to this same set of "rules."

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