

# Academics earn street cred with TED Talks but no points from peers, research shows

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This is the TED Talks logo. Credit: TED Talks

(Phys.org) —TED Talks, the most popular conference and events website in the world with over 1 billion informational videos viewed, provides academics with increased popular exposure but does nothing to boost citations of their work by peers, new research led by Indiana University has found.

In the comprehensive study of over 1,200 TED Talks videos and their presenters, lead author Cassidy R. Sugimoto, an assistant professor in IU Bloomington's Department of Information and Library Science, and a team of researchers from [Great Britain](#) and Canada, also looked at the demographic make-up of TED Talks presenters—only 21 percent were [academics](#), and of those only about one-quarter were women—and the relationship between a presenter's credentials and a video's popularity.

Data gathered from the TED website and from YouTube also found that male-authored videos on YouTube were more popular and more liked than those authored by women—possibly because research has shown that females are less likely to comment on YouTube than males—and that videos by academics were commented upon more often than those presented by non-academics. While YouTube videos by male presenters were more viewed than those by women, this was not true of the TED website.

"Overall, academic presenters were in the minority, yet their videos were preferred," Sugimoto said. "This runs counter to past research that has argued that the public, because of a lack of [literacy](#) on the subject, has a [negative perception](#) of science and technology that has been fostered by the media."

The new work instead finds positive associations with [science and technology](#) information and possibly, Sugimoto noted, some discerning characteristics in the public between presentations by academics and non-academics.

"While TED does not increase the impact of work by scientists within the [academic community](#) as seen through more [citations](#), it does popularize research outside of [academia](#)," she said. "Academics are receiving greater online visibility, but there is no evidence that [TED Talks](#) leads to an increase in the traditional metric of academic capital: citations."

Sugimoto said the Matthew Effect is likely in play—that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer—as it's possible TED academic presenters are chosen at least partly because they are already recognized scholars.

In general, most TED video presenters were male (73 percent) and non-academic (79 percent). Within the 21 percent that were academics, the researchers found that 73 percent of those held the rank of at least professor; 75 percent were based in the U.S.; 71 percent had their own Wikipedia page; and 77 percent were cited more frequently than the average. While viewers commented more on videos by academics than non-academics, viewers did not popularize one academic over another based upon age or university affiliation.

"Either university affiliation doesn't register with or is irrelevant to the online audience, or if it is relevant, it may be offset by those academics from less prestigious universities working harder to be invited to present at TED or have their video published," Sugimoto said.

And as far as boosting citations via TED presentations, the researchers looked at citations for an academic for three years before and after TED presentation and found no hike in citations after appearing on the TED website.

"The suggestion is that TED doesn't promote a scientist's work within their own community or that any positive impact is offset by [peers](#)

questioning the presenter's motivations," Sugimoto said.

The team used both bibliometric (most commonly, academic journal citation analysis) and webometric techniques, which include bidirectional hyperlink analysis of Web-based products.

Co-authors with Sugimoto on "Scientists Popularizing Science: Characteristics and Impact of TED Talk Presenters," were IU doctoral student Andrew Tsou; Mike Thelwall of University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom; Vincent Lariviere and Benoit Macaluso of Universite de Montreal and the Universite du Quebec a Montreal; and Philippe Mongeon, Universite de Montreal. The new research appeared in *PLoS ONE*.

The work was funded by the Digging Into Data initiative, a multinational funding program to promote "big data" research. Teams must be composed of scholars from at least two countries and receive funding from one of a number of potential national scholars. The U.S. portion of this grant was funded by the National Science Foundation. For more about the initiative, see this previous press release on IU's Digging Into Data scholars.

As a researcher studying doctoral education and scholarly communication in the IU Bloomington School of Informatics and Computing, Sugimoto is interested in the public's perception of science, how the public consumes scientific information and the resulting relationship with the public's perception and knowledge of science. She received a Ph.D. in information and library science from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2010 and came to IU the same year.

**More information:** [www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0062403](http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0062403)

Provided by Indiana University

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