

Negative posts hurt company's rep, but 'inoculation' may help, says study

February 26 2015

When people read negative Facebook posts about an organization, it erodes their trust in the institution and diminishes its reputation. Efforts to "inoculate" readers against damaging messages, however, do appear to mitigate the harm somewhat.

One of the first formal studies to confirm the impact of negative social media content has been published by a research team that includes a Penn State faculty member in the February 2015 issue of "Corporate Communications: An International Journal."

"We found that negative, user-generated Facebook posts significantly impact stakeholders," said Michel M. Haigh, a senior research fellow at Penn State's Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication. "After they were exposed to negative Facebook posts their perception of the organization-public relationship, the company's corporate [social responsibility](#) efforts, and its reputation were significantly less positive."

Haigh, and co-researcher Shelley Wigley of the University of Texas at Arlington, involved 472 undergraduate college students in an experiment. Participants were asked their perceptions of a large international food manufacturing firm. They were queried on how trustworthy they felt the company was and its level of commitment to long-term positive relations with its publics. The survey also measured thoughts about the firm's corporate social responsibility efforts and its overall reputation.

The respondents then were separated into two groups. One read an "inoculation" message in which existing attitudes about the firm were challenged. The second group did not get such a message; instead they read a neutral text.

A week later all participants read adverse Facebook messages about the company that had been posted by people on its website, and then the participants were re-surveyed. Results indicated the negative Facebook posts clearly had an effect. The levels of decline in trust, commitment, belief in corporate social responsibility and reputation all were statistically significant.

"It didn't matter that they did not know the individual making the negative comments on the organization's Facebook page," said Haigh, an associate professor in the Department of Advertising/Public Relations at Penn State. "Their perceptions about the organization were negatively impacted by the adverse information."

The group that had read the "inoculation" message before reading the negative Facebook communications also registered a lower opinion of the firm afterward. But it was slightly less negative than the others.

"Results indicate it may be possible to protect one's attitudes against negative, user-generated content," Haigh said. "While not statistically significant, the pattern indicates that participants exposed to an inoculation message felt slightly more positive."

This study is believed to be the first to observe the impact of damaging, user-generated Facebook messages on the attitudes of people toward an organization. The article, titled "Examining the Impact of Negative, User-Generated Content on Stakeholders" can be accessed through Emerald Insight online.

More information: "Examining the impact of negative, user-generated content on stakeholders." *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 20 Iss: 1, pp.63 - 7. [DOI: 10.1108/CCIJ-02-2013-0010](https://doi.org/10.1108/CCIJ-02-2013-0010)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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