

The social dilemma of dealing with Facebook troublemakers

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Online troublemakers tend to be socially well connected. Some Facebook users therefore, remain friends online with troublemakers because they are worried about the repercussions if they 'unfriend' them.

This is the finding of a study by Sarah Buglass, a PhD student in the School of Social Sciences at Nottingham Trent University, who will presented her research this week at the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference in Nottingham.

Sarah said: "People are spending more and more time online making them more vulnerable to potentially damaging social tension and disagreements. Our study explored the characteristics of people who might be more likely to cause this sort of trouble in an [online social network](#)."

The researchers analysed the online relationship characteristics of 5,113 network contacts from 52 Facebook [users](#) (13 to 45 years). The participants were asked to rate 100 randomly sampled Facebook '[friends](#)' from their networks in terms of online disagreement (with self and others), relational closeness and communication frequency (online and offline).

Analysis of the results revealed that online troublemakers tended to be socially popular contacts who were known and in regular communication with the participants offline but not online (i.e. the participants were Facebook friends with the troublemakers but had very limited online

contact). This implied that Facebook users might be keeping an eye on provocative friends in a bid to avoid confrontation themselves. Online disagreements were more frequent in the 19 to 21 year old group.

Sarah Buglass explained: "Facebook users appear to be harbouring known online troublemakers on their Facebook networks. While some were not averse to reporting the online indiscretions of others to the service provider, many more choose to merely ignore them. It appears that they don't want to communicate with the troublemakers online for risk of damaging their own reputation, but at the same time they don't appear to want to unfriend them either."

"The social repercussions of unfriending someone reach far beyond the boundaries of the online network. People don't want to risk causing offline tension with their friends, family members or colleagues by disconnecting them from their online lives. Remaining online friends with troublemakers appears to be a social necessity for some."

More information: Paper title: 'Looking for trouble: Characteristics and consequences of provocateurs on online social networks'

Provided by British Psychological Society

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