

Negative tweets can trash TV programs for other viewers

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Negative social media comments about a television show tend to lower enjoyment for other viewers, while positive comments may not significantly boost their enjoyment, according to researchers.

Participants in a study who saw negative messages—in the form of

tweets—flash on a television screen while watching a sitcom clip were more likely to say other people would rate the show negatively, said S. Shyam Sundar, distinguished professor of communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory at Penn State. Participants also were more likely to agree that people would not recommend the program to their friends, he added.

"People who saw the negative tweets were less likely to enjoy the program because they thought other people didn't like it," said Sundar. "It was directly affected by what they thought others thought."

Researchers refer to this phenomenon—when people adopt beliefs and ideas because they think others hold similar beliefs—as the "bandwagon effect," said T. Franklin Waddell, assistant professor of journalism, University of Florida, who worked with Sundar. While the bandwagon effect is typically a strong motivation for media users, the researchers were surprised at just how powerful the effect was in this study. The researchers, who released their findings in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, initially thought that other variables, such as the need to be unique and the need for affiliation, would dampen the bandwagon effect.

"We had expected that negative comments would only affect certain types of [viewers](#) who are predisposed to follow the crowd, but surprisingly, these findings were quite consistent across a variety of different personality types," said Waddell.

The bandwagon effect manifests in several ways in various forms of media and social media, added Sundar.

"The bandwagon effect could be in the form of star ratings, the number of viewers, number of views, number of shares, for example," said Sundar. "And, as in this case, the effect could be positive or negative."

Waddell said that it did not take much to trigger the bandwagon effect in this study.

"While you might only see two or three comments during a television program, this small handful of comments is enough for viewers to automatically make judgments about how viewers as a whole feel towards programming," said Waddell. "These perceptions of group opinion, in turn, can cause viewers to hop on—or hop off—the bandwagon for a television show."

Because the negative comments affected participants more than the positive ones, the researchers suggest that a negativity bias may be at work.

"The negativity bias suggests that individuals may be more likely to recall and be persuaded by negative information, rather than positive information," said Sundar. "Positive news—when good things happen—doesn't seem to be as memorable for us compared to when something negative happens."

While the researchers placed the tweets at the beginning and near the end of the clip, the timing of the comments had no significant difference on the effect, according to Sundar.

Waddell added that, although more research is needed, the findings may help broadcasters better understand how online and social media affect traditional news and entertainment.

"The effects we found are small, which is to be expected given that people base their enjoyment of television programming on a variety of reasons, with online comments simply being one part of the larger puzzle overall," said Waddell. "With that said, this study does contribute to a larger body of work, which consistently shows that [negative comments](#)

undercut [media](#) credibility and enjoyment, from online news to popular television shows. In short, the benefits that broadcasters might hope to achieve through social television, such as bolstering enjoyment, and the actual reality of how comments affect viewers, appear to be in competition with one another."

A total of 196 participants watched a 10-minute clip of the pilot episode for "30 Rock," a popular sitcom that ran on NBC from 2006 until 2013. During the episode, groups who were exposed to positive [social media](#) messages saw tweets, such as "i LOVE this show!" and "#30rock = awesome." Subjects in the negative condition saw messages including "i HATE this show!" and "#30rock = awful."

The first message appeared at the 2-minute mark of the clip and the second one flashed at about the 9-minute mark.

Because the commenters in this study were anonymous, the researchers said that future research may look at whether identifying commenters influences the bandwagon [effect](#).

More information: T. Franklin Waddell et al. #thisshowsucks! The Overpowering Influence of Negative Social Media Comments on Television Viewers, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2017.1309414](https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2017.1309414)

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