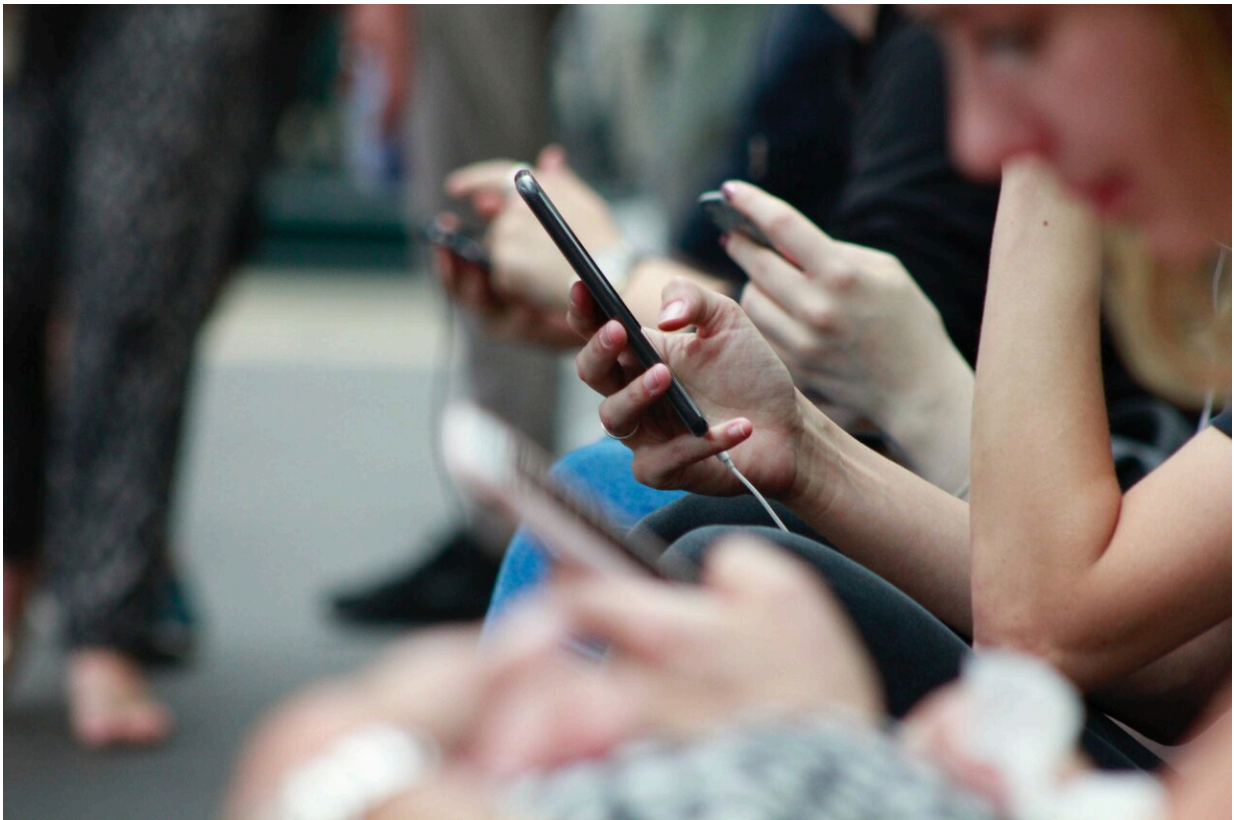


Even loyal customers distance themselves after socially unacceptable mentions of the brand on social media

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Researchers from University of Arkansas and Northeastern University have published a new *Journal of Marketing* article that examines social

media disengagement—the psychological motivation to distance oneself from a brand on social media.

The study is titled "For Shame! Socially Unacceptable Brand Mentions on Social Media Motivate Consumer Disengagement" and is authored by Daniel Villanova and Ted Matherly.

Companies know that driving consumer engagement with their brands on social media is an important part of the modern marketing tool kit. They also know that it is easier to keep existing users than to acquire new ones. And while consumers can both increase their engagement with a brand or disengage, less is known about the drivers of disengagement.

This new article investigates social media disengagement, which is the manifestation on social media of the psychological motivation to distance oneself from a brand. Understanding social media disengagement is critical because it can undermine the reach of future marketing content. For example, when someone unfollows a brand on Twitter, that consumer is no longer directly reachable by the brand's Twitter presence, nor are that consumer's followers, who will no longer see the brand's content via the consumer's interactions.

Just as customer retention is understood to have drivers that are distinct from customer acquisition, the reasons that consumers engage with brands on social media may not completely overlap with why those same consumers disengage. The researchers study one potential driver of why consumers who are highly connected to a brand may choose to disengage from it: their observation of socially unacceptable mentions of the brand on social media. They propose these behaviors threaten the identity of highly connected consumers, leading to consequences for the brand.

The study finds that when consumers observe socially unacceptable brand mentions, such as profanity-laden tweets, they become motivated

to distance themselves from the brand. This motivation to distance manifests on social media in heightened disengagement intentions (i.e., a desire to reduce posting) and even unfollowing the brand on social media.

The dangers of vicarious shame

Socially unacceptable brand mentions do not affect all consumers equally. Villanova explains that "these problematic posts have a greater impact on people who are more connected to the brand. They threaten a part of these consumers' identities and generate vicarious shame. Unlike guilt, which involves a personal sense of wrongdoing and a motivation to atone for the wrongdoing, shame leads to weakness and incompetence and a desire to withdraw and distance from the situation."

Consumers who have integrated the brand into their concept of themselves are more likely to view other people's socially unacceptable brand mentions as reflecting poorly on their shared brand-related identity. Whereas consumers with weaker self-brand connections can view socially unacceptable brand mentions and move on, consumers with stronger self-brand connections experience vicarious shame when seeing these behaviors, driving their desire to disengage from the brand.

One of the researchers' studies looks at fans of ten Major League Baseball teams that competed in the 2018 postseason and finds that fans who were strongly connected to the brand were more likely to unfollow it in the face of socially unacceptable brand mentions on Twitter. Separately, in a lab experiment, they show that a more socially unacceptable tweet led fans of National Football League teams to feel a greater sense of shame, which drove their intentions to disengage from the brand on social media.

What brands can do

Matherly says that "brands can take action to mitigate the risks of disengagement for highly connected consumers. For example, consumers who were strongly connected to various apparel brands saw a socially unacceptable Reddit post. With no additional information, the consumers indicated they wanted to disengage from the brand, but when they were told about the brand moderating and removing such posts, the desire to disengage was reduced, suggesting that active management of the brand's social media environment is important."

The study offers vital lessons for chief marketing officers:

- Be proactive in mitigating the potential damage of social unacceptable content.
- Actively moderate posts with socially unacceptable brand mentions to stop consumers who identify with the brand wanting to disengage from it.
- Educate consumers by explaining why certain [social media](#) content was removed.
- Help consumers become productive members of the community when these clarifications are provided.
- Produce high quality content to crowd out socially unacceptable brand mentions.

Social [media](#) disengagement is costly to brands and is important for both researchers and practitioners to understand its drivers. While prior research suggests more highly connected [consumers](#) are able to maintain [positive attitudes](#) towards a brand when they are exposed to negative brand information, these results suggest that socially unacceptable brand mentions may lead to vicarious shame and subsequent disengagement. The insulating effects of strong [brand](#) relationships may not be as unequivocal as once thought.

More information: Daniel Villanova et al, EXPRESS: For Shame! Socially Unacceptable Brand Mentions on Social Media Motivate Consumer Disengagement, *Journal of Marketing* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429231179942](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429231179942)

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