

Are provocative social media posts an effective way for new businesses to engage audiences online?

July 29 2023, by Melinda Ham



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Engaging an audience in the hyper-competitive world of online social media content is a big challenge for any new business venture. One

strategy, adopted by established "superstar entrepreneurs" such as Elon Musk, is to post provocative comments on Twitter.

But does it work for start-ups? The answer is: it depends, according to research led by Macquarie University Business School.

Researchers analyzed 369,142 Twitter posts generated by 268 US-based technology start-ups using data from the Crunchbase website. They focused on founders' social media behavior before and after they'd received [venture capital funding](#).

"We found that if 'low status' [start-ups](#)—the ones that hadn't got venture funding yet—posted provocative tweets then they lost audience engagement," says Associate Professor Erik Lundmark, director of research. "Conversely, tweets by those that had received [venture funding](#) attracted more engagement when they contained provocative language."

Because of the highly competitive nature of VC funding, "the consecration event" of securing funding provides an important endorsement of a [venture](#)'s quality and raises their status, says Lundmark, whose team's research is published in the *Journal of Business Venturing*.

"Our premise was that it is widely believed that provocation drives engagement online, particularly on social media," Lundmark says. "There is also some research that indicates that provocation does lead to increased engagement, but it's been done on well-established organizations and high-status actors such as politicians and established brands."

The researchers wanted to understand what would happen if new ventures emulated these high-status actors. Would provocation have the same effect for them?

Musk, the founder of Tesla and SpaceX, has gained a reputation for frequently castigating people on social media. He's even called them names, such as "pedophiles" or "idiots". This provocative language generates more attention, driving more audience interaction, retweets and responses. Musk has 149 million followers on Twitter having bought the company in 2022 for \$44 billion.

The researchers defined provocative language as "rule-breaking", when posts used expressions of aggression or violence, law-breaking, swear words and were antagonistic. Using this language is risky because while it may generate audience reaction, it can also attract negative reaction too.

When startups received funding, they were deemed "high status" and when they made provocative comments, it tended to increase audience engagement as measured by likes and retweets.

Prior research had established that it was valuable for new ventures to engage with their audience to gain more support for their business, their product and to obtain more investment but little research has been done until now on how to do that effectively with social media.

Warning to 'edgelords'

The researchers in this study focused on provocative language "because it represents a particularly prominent, current, and widely discussed phenomenon within social media," they wrote in their paper.

And they sounded a note of caution for would-be Twitter edgelords, people who deliberately adopt a provocative persona.

"Recurring Twitter tantrums aimed at generating engagement—even if seen as suitable at the time—might have detrimental long-term effects.

We looked only at new ventures and Twitter, so one should be careful when extending our findings to other contexts," Lundmark says.

Further research could determine whether people react differently to provocation depending on whether they perceive it to come from a high or a low status actor in other contexts and whether gender or ethnicity are factors, he says.

Another question worth asking, says Lundmark, is whether negative comments are as beneficial as positive comments? Is negative attention better than no attention?

Lundmark's study only looked at tweets, so with the advent of the new platform Threads, further research could discover whether the type of [social media](#) platform used affects [audience](#) engagement.

More information: Benedikt David Christian Seigner et al, Tweeting like Elon? Provocative language, new-venture status, and audience engagement on social media, *Journal of Business Venturing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jbusvent.2022.106282](#)

Provided by Macquarie University

Citation: Are provocative social media posts an effective way for new businesses to engage audiences online? (2023, July 29) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-07-provocative-social-media-effective-businesses.html>

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