

Online comments can undermine anti-smoking PSAs

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Commentary accompanying anti-smoking public service announcements (PSAs) in online forums like YouTube has an impact on the PSA's overall effectiveness. Both negative and positive comments accompanying PSAs degrade the persuasiveness of the videos.

According to researchers from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, viewer commentary on PSAs have become an integral part of a PSA's overall message.

"One thing is very clear: It is no longer possible to consider the influence of news or other messages in the public information environment apart from the [comments](#) which follow them," write Rui Shi, a doctoral candidate at Annenberg, and Profs. Paul Messaris and Joseph N. Cappella. Their research is covered in their article "Effects of Online Comments on Smokers' Perception of Antismoking Public Service Announcements," appearing in the *Journal of Computer Mediated-Communication*, a publication of the International Communication Association.

Shi, Messaris, and Cappella worked with a group of nearly 600 adult regular smokers. Participants completed an online survey where they were told they were testing a new website where people can share health related video clips and PSAs. Everyone was shown and asked to respond to an equal number of anti-smoking PSAs. Each PSA had a carefully balanced mix of comments that were:

- Positive and civil
- Positive and uncivil
- Negative and civil
- Negative and uncivil
- Mixed positive and negative comments
- No comments, just PSAs

The results showed the PSAs with no commentary were rated the most effective overall. Any form of commentary – positive, negative and mixed—made the PSA less persuasive.

"The most surprising finding from the study is that positive comments failed to improve PSA evaluation over the no-comment exposure to ads," the team writes. They theorize that the pure existence of comments reduces the effects of the PSA in part because comments distracted the audience from the PSA's message. Those who watched the PSAs without any commentary had better recall of the PSA's content than those who read comments. "The detrimental effect of comments [...] seems to suggest anti-smoking PSAs would be better off without comments, especially if the PSAs are strong or if the target audience is somewhat ready to quit smoking," they write. The power of audience participation via social media is clearly a double-edge sword. They note that a concerted effort to understand the influence of online commentary and social media is necessary to understand the way emerging media affect the public for good and for ill.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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