



“The internet gives people some sort of tacit approval . . . to say whatever they want—things that they would never say to somebody's face in real life.”

—DR. SARAH COYNE



CIVIL DIALOGUE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

BY MADELYN LUNNEN

More than 2 billion people of the world's population of nearly 7.4 billion have social media accounts, according to global brand management agency We Are Social.¹ Most people use those accounts to keep up-to-date with friends and family, to learn about current events, and to kill time—fairly benign purposes.

Yet, it is probably evident to even the most casual observer that our transition into cyberspace is not being conducted as maturely as it could be, if social media commentary is any indication. Comment feeds can easily turn negative—even mean—and social media “lynch mobs” can attack at any time. One example of this online hostility is the charged reaction to a study published in 2016 by Dr. Sarah Coyne, a BYU School of Family Life professor. Even though it was a fairly routine study, with unsurprising results, it generated a surprising amount of backlash.

For the study, which was published in the journal *Child Development*, 198 preschoolers and their parents were interviewed about their use of and engagement with Disney princess merchandise and media. They were interviewed twice, once at the beginning of the year and again at the end, sorting and ranking their favorite toys from a varied collection of “girl” toys (e.g., dolls, tea sets), “boy” toys (e.g., action figures, tool sets) and gender-neutral options (e.g., puzzles, paint). Dr. Coyne and her coauthors found that both girls and boys tended to act more stereotypically feminine after watching Disney princess movies.

Regarding the results, Dr. Coyne says,

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with expressing femininity or behaving in a gendered manner, stereotypical female behavior may potentially be problematic if girls believe that their opportunities in life are limited because of preconceived notions regarding gender or if they avoid the types of exploration and activities that are important

to children learning about the world in order to conform to stereotypical notions about femininity (e.g., choosing not to explore or play certain games in order to avoid getting dirty). Grown women who self-identified as ‘princesses’ gave up more easily on . . . challenging task[s], were less likely to want to work, and were more focused on superficial qualities.²

Boy participants who engaged with Disney princess media also tended to act stereotypically female. On this, Dr. Coyne says:

Princess media and engagement may provide important models of femininity to young boys, who are typically exposed to hyper-masculine media. It may be that boys who engage more with Disney princesses, while simultaneously being exposed to more androgynous Disney princes, demonstrate more androgyny in early childhood, a trait that has benefits for development throughout the life span.³

These findings are not necessarily new. Dr. Coyne herself cites two other studies, done in 2009 and 2013, on the same subject. What is surprising is the nature of the reaction to Dr. Coyne's study in particular. Once the study was posted on BYU's Facebook page, discussion of it went worldwide, eventually extending to 70 news outlets and numerous social media accounts around the world. Reactions to the study were strong—and many of them negative. Comments included: “This whole study is bologna”; “Please find something better to do with your time and research. It's actually quite pathetic and sad”; and “How much money was wasted on this study?!” She even received on-campus hate mail.

Such reactions, while perhaps disappointing, may not be surprising given the ubiquitous and relatively anonymous nature of social media. But they can provide a positive springboard for discussions about better

ways to behave on social media, even if one is only killing time.

What Does This Say About Us?

When asked to comment on the nature of internet discussion in general, Dr. Coyne said, “It seems like social media or the internet gives people some sort of tacit approval for people to say whatever they want—things that they would never say to somebody's face in real life.”

In her book *Psychology of the Internet*, Patricia Wallace confirms Dr. Coyne's statement: “Because people experience disinhibition on the internet and feel relatively free of serious adverse consequences because of physical distance and reduced accountability, they often use tactics that go far beyond what they might use in person.”⁴ Examples of these tactics include threats, name-calling, and harassment. Wallace attributes these actions to anonymity, which is “another potent ingredient in the internet mixture as it applies to aggression.”⁵ The lack of identification enables people to act as they please, unrestricted by social norms.

Keith Wilcox, marketing professor at Columbia University, has examined this tendency toward negative commenting on Facebook. He and University of Pittsburgh professor Andrew T. Stephen coauthored a study that explored the ways Facebook affects self-esteem and self-control. They found that in certain demographics, the social media site increased the self-esteem of its users. However, when these users focused on others' posts, they suffered from a lack of self-awareness and self-control.⁶ In a recent *Time* magazine article, reporter Joel Stein interviewed a woman who had harassed and threatened him online for two years. Her explanation for her behavior was simple: “The things I hate about you are the things I hate about myself.”⁷

A second factor that affects the amount of aggression on social media is the level

GRAPHIC BY CONNECTIONS; ICONS BY GETTY IMAGES

of emotion caused by an article or video. “If people have a stronger emotional reaction to something,” says BYU communications professor Adam Durfee, “they are more likely to share it. Subsequently, it will gain greater exposure, thus eliciting more responses and shares. It’s a cycle—one that can foster either positivity or negativity.” This tendency is documented by psychologist Jonah Berger in the journal *Psychological Science*.⁸

Indeed, says Dr. Durfee, Facebook, where the “Pretty as a Princess” study first garnered such strong reactions, does control what its members see: “Stories that tend to get people involved, engaged, or polarized are the stories that Facebook presents to the most people. . . . When an article about genderization and Disney princesses hits the social sphere, you catch someone’s attention. Then, when this socially hot topic is engaged with, it creates an amplifying effect. And for each person who engages with it, Facebook will distribute . . . more.”

Dr. Durfee theorizes that the first comment or reaction to any post can often determine the attitude of any comments or reactions that follow, which behavior is ascribed to the Noelle-Neumann spiral of silence theory. “Once the tone is set, people don’t want to deviate from it, often opting to stay silent, either from the belief that they are in the minority or fear of adverse consequences.”

How to Have Constructive Online Conversations

What, then, can we do to encourage constructive, respectful conversation online? Dr. Durfee recommends six tactics, employed most effectively at the beginning of an online conversation:

- Treat people well and rationally. Tread carefully!
- Make sure to include any expertise you have or reasons for feeling the way you do. This adds credibility to your statement. If you’re a doctor or the mother of three children and that’s relevant to the discussion, say so!
- Avoid using absolutes (e.g., *always*, *never*, *all*, etc.).
- Never attack.
- Give your thoughts when they’re merited.
- Give other people’s ideas the same respect you want given to yours.

In essence, we should interact online the same way we would converse in person. In the same vein, the groundbreaking book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High*⁹ provides an excellent model for healthy dialogue that can be applied to commenting and posting on social media. The authors recommend the following:

- **Check your motives.** Social media hasn’t just changed the way people communicate—it has modified their motives. Before you post, you should ask yourself: “Is my goal to get lots of likes (or even provoke controversy)? Or do I want healthy dialogue?”
- **Replace hot words.** If your goal is to make a point rather than score a point, you should replace “hot” words that provoke offense with words that help others understand your position. For example, replace “That is idiotic” with “I disagree for the following reasons . . .”
- **Pause to put emotions in check.** Never post a comment when you’re feeling emotionally triggered. Never! If you wait four hours, you’re likely to respond differently.
- **Agree before you disagree.** Don’t point out disagreements until you acknowledge areas in which you agree. Often, arguers agree on 80 percent of the topic but create a false sense of conflict when they spend all their time arguing over the other 20 percent.
- **Establish mutual purpose.** Ask yourself what you want and what others might want. “Find a shared goal, and you have both a good reason and a healthy climate for talking.”
- **Establish mutual respect.** “Respect is like air. The instant people perceive disrespect in a conversation, the interaction is no longer about the original purpose—it is now about defending dignity. When we recognize that we all have weaknesses, it’s easier to find a way to respect others.”
- **Step out of a conversation and rebuild safety** if others misinterpret your comments. Do this by contrasting the “don’ts” with the “do’s.” For example, you could say: “The last thing I wanted to do was say that I don’t believe you. I do.”

Steve Willis, vice president of professional services at VitalSmarts—a company based

on *Crucial Conversations*—and a member of BYU’s College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences National Advisory Council, recognizes the application of *Crucial Conversations* to social media conversations. He says, “In our own study of this pattern of behavior, we’ve found that contentious conversations that start online tend to spill over into real life. We’ve found that about one in five people report that they’ve decreased in-person contact with someone because of something that was posted online. So while online conversations are different than in-person conversations, a lot of the same principles as to how to handle them effectively apply to both.”

As more and more people move online, it becomes increasingly important to learn how to navigate the world of social media. A few simple tips are all that’s needed to avoid hostility and encourage healthy, constructive dialogue. The internet can be a civil place—as long as we make it one. 🗣️

Notes

1. Simon Kemp, *We Are Social*, “Digital in 2016: We Are Social’s Compendium of Global Digital, Social, and Mobile Data, Trends, and Statistics,” slide 7, published January 26, 2016, https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/digital-in-2016/7-wearesocialsg_7GLOBAL_DIGITAL_SNAPSHOTINTERNETUSERSTOTAL-POPULATIONACTIVE_SOCIALMEDIA.
2. Sarah M. Coyne et al., “Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement with Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children,” *Child Development* 87, no. 6 (November/December 2016): 1921, doi:10.1111/cdev.12569.
3. Ibid.
4. Patricia M. Wallace, *The Psychology of the Internet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 118.
5. Ibid., 124.
6. Keith Wilcox, Andrew T. Stephen, “Are Close Friends the Enemy? Online Social Networks, Self-Esteem, and Self-Control.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 1 (2013): 90–103, doi: 10.1086/668794.
7. Joel Stein, “How Trolls Are Ruining the Internet,” *Time*, August 18, 2016, <http://time.com/4457110/internet-trolls/>.
8. Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002).
9. Jonah Berger, “Arousal Increases Social Transmission of Information,” *Psychological Science* 22, no. 7 (July 2011): 891–93, doi:10.1177/0956797611413294.

