

The Silent Saboteur: The Impact and Management of Malicious Word-Of-Mouth in The Digital Age

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Abstract. In the digital era, the impact of malicious word-of-mouth on individuals and businesses is complex. Malicious online reviews and false information can spread quickly, causing serious damage to personal reputation and corporate branding. This article provides an in-depth analysis of the effects of malicious word-of-mouth on various aspects of the economy and society, and proposes effective strategies for response. Through specific case studies, such as the controversy surrounding the BOY LONDON brand, the public relations crisis of the Wahaha brand, the damage to Jiang Ping's personal image, and the "pink-haired girl" incident, this article illustrates how malicious word-of-mouth can erode consumer decision-making autonomy, pose threats to personal physical and mental health, and tarnish the image of brands and enterprises. To address these challenges, companies and governments must take proactive measures, such as monitoring and responding to negative information on the Internet to maintain a positive image and strengthening Internet regulation to ensure the authenticity and transparency of information and to prevent the spread of false information. At the same time, improving public media literacy helps people identify and resist the influence of malicious word-of-mouth.

Keywords: Internet word-of-mouth; mental health; decision-making power.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, the Internet has become a central channel for shaping and spreading brand reputation, with Internet Word of Mouth (IWOM) being particularly influential. IWOM consists of testimonials, ratings and reviews shared by consumers on online platforms, which can quickly influence potential customers' purchasing decisions. Due to the wide reach of the Internet and the immediacy of information dissemination, a single comment or review has the potential to be seen by a large number of users in a short period of time, thus having a profound impact on a brand's image. Consumers are increasingly relying on word-of-mouth information on the Internet, which is regarded as a more authentic and credible reference than other traditional advertisements, before making purchase choices. Therefore, IWOM is crucial for enterprises, which not only relates to the establishment and maintenance of brand image, but also directly affects market performance and consumer loyalty. Companies must recognize the importance of IWOM and adopt strategies to actively manage their online reputation, including monitoring discussions on social media, responding to consumer feedback in a timely manner, and fostering positive word-of-mouth by providing high-quality products and services. This focus on and management of IWOM has become an integral part of modern marketing and branding strategies.

Current research reveals the far-reaching impact of malicious word-of-mouth on brand and consumer behavior in the digital age. This word-of-mouth spreads not only rapidly but also widely, and it plays a central role in shaping consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions. Malicious word-of-mouth poses a potential threat to the image of a company or brand, emphasizing the urgency of maintaining a high level of vigilance and taking effective countermeasures against this phenomenon. [1]. Individuals and companies must strengthen their awareness of prevention and develop well-thought-out strategies to protect their interests, while actively promoting the healthy development of the online environment. Through the measures, these can maintain a clear cyberspace while ensuring security [2-4].

By analyzing real cases on the Internet and combining relevant statistical data, this article comprehensively explains the multi-dimensional impact of malicious word-of-mouth on the economy and society and its effective countermeasures. First, IWOM undermines consumers' decision-making autonomy and interferes with people's ability to make rational choices based on correct information by spreading misleading information. Second, malicious word-of-mouth poses a serious threat to the physical and mental health of victims, which may not only cause psychological problems, but sometimes even lead to more serious physical injuries. Finally, the paper emphasizes the key role of the government and related agencies in dealing with malicious IWOM by taking the necessary regulatory measures to regulate the use of the Internet and protect consumers from malicious information. These measures aim to create a healthier and more positive online environment that promotes the transparent flow of information while protecting the legitimate rights and interests of individuals and businesses.

2. Disruption on Decision-Making Power

2.1. Impact on the Perception of a Brand

A man in Tangshan City, Hebei Province, China, garnered significant public notice in June 2022 for his aggressive behavior. However, the incident also sparked a great deal of social discussion and introspection because of how quickly word about it circulated online. The video swiftly incited outrage and criticism from the public after it was made public online.

As the event became worse, some online users noted that the attacker was dressed in a short-sleeved shirt bearing the BOY LONDON trademark. BOY LONDON, which used to be prominent in the fashion industry and was even regarded as a "style icon", gradually lost its former luster after this incident. Extremist comments such as "BOY's main clientele is now social hooligans" appeared on the Internet, which not only intensified the public's negative impression of the brand, but also inadvertently contributed to the brand's marginalization in the Chinese market. Many unthinking netizens, without a full understanding of the situation, followed the winds of online public opinion and unfairly accused and boycotted the brand.

The incident developed as a result of people's rage, which led more people to choose to reveal and criticize the situation online. However, at the same time, other people let their ire out on a brand that was unrelated to the incident because of offensive words they had heard. They were unaware that such incorrect thinking might seriously harm a brand and even force it out of a nation's market. In order to show their "sense of justice," netizens must observe the situation objectively, consider their own perspectives before voicing their ideas, and determine whether their arguments are sound and sufficiently supported. Governments and related institutions should avoid extreme actions when dealing with public opinion, such as overreactions or radical statements, to prevent exacerbating the issue instead of resolving it.

2.2. Impact on Decision-Making

The Chinese Wahaha brand's best-selling product, Wahaha AD Calcium Milk, is very popular among consumers for its appealing taste and has significantly increased the brand's revenue. In 1996, the company was attacked by malicious rumors. A woman in her thirties from the countryside, out of boredom, edited a message online saying, "Drinking Wahaha AD Calcium Milk and other dairy drinks will cause children to get leukemia." This message was forwarded on several social media platforms, spreading more than 170 million times. Consumers fell into a panic and condemned the Wahaha brand one after another. For a while, the brand was flooded with abuse. What's more, in order to understand the whole situation and to heat up and create more rumors, such as "AD Calcium Milk can cause cancer," and so on.

The Wahaha brand was caught in a storm of public opinion and filed a lawsuit in court, demanding that the defendant publicly apologize and compensate 200,000 yuan. The investigation showed that all the content was nonsense made up by the person in their spare time.

Conjecture has no expense. A carelessly created falsehood has the potential to endanger the whole company. This can lead to consumers' attitudes towards a brand affecting their purchase decisions for its products [5]. Netizens should confirm the information's source and veracity before accepting and disseminating it in order to prevent unwittingly creating rumors. They should also consider how their words and deeds may affect other people or businesses before speaking, and they should refrain from saying anything inappropriate that could hurt someone. This incident also emphasizes how critical it is to raise media literacy levels and the public's capacity to recognize information in order to slow the spread of misinformation [6]. Furthermore, it is imperative for firms to implement a robust crisis management protocol to promptly address rumors and mitigate the negative consequences. Maintain open lines of communication with the public and promptly disseminate official statements and information to rectify any misconceptions [7]. By working together, this can prevent the creation and dissemination of online rumors while sustaining the reliability and order of the online community.

3. Impact on Mental Health

In June 2024, Jiang Ping, a student from a secondary vocational school, secured the 12th best score in the world, advancing to a global mathematics competition. The topic "Jiang Ping was questioned" rapidly rose to the top of Weibo's hot search list, remaining there for one hour and twelve minutes, with the total topic views reaching 120 million, drawing the attention of major media outlets. The online public opinion was sharply divided, causing significant distress to the girl and her friends and teachers.

At the critical moment before the final competition, Jiang Ping's school contacted psychological institutions and related organizations. While Jiang Ping received psychological counseling, they quickly reached out to the Weibo management to remove the hot search topic and delete the posts. Thanks to the joint efforts of both parties, Jiang Ping was not affected by the malicious gossip during the final competition.

Online public opinion can exert tremendous psychological pressure on individuals, especially negative commentary, which may lead to issues such as anxiety and depression. This incident highlights the complexity of how individuals in an online society face pressures from public opinion, maintain their personal reputation, and gain societal recognition for their achievements. For Jiang Ping personally, staying focused, proving her abilities, and seeking legal and social support when necessary were crucial strategies to counter skepticism. As netizens, it is important not to blindly follow trends and to verify the sources of information to avoid being misled by false news. Online public opinion is a double-edged sword; a correct understanding and response to it can aid in the better development of both individuals and society.

Another similar incident, mishandled and exacerbated by various factors, led to a tragic outcome. A girl who had just received her graduate admission letter faced cyber violence due to hair dyeing and, after enduring 194 days of online attacks, ended her life. Her photo was misused by a marketing account, and the malicious remarks not only flooded the comment section but also infiltrated her life like a shadow. The anonymity of the Internet has become an excuse for some to act recklessly, spreading rumors, defamation, and malicious comments to vent personal negative emotions without regard for the impact and consequences on others. The girl did not receive timely treatment, nor were there relevant organizations to control the escalation of public opinion, ultimately leading her to succumb to the immense pressure in an extreme manner.

Three fundamental categories can be used to classify the malicious comments made by netizens, based on the typical occurrences of cyber violence that have been published in Chinese news during the previous ten years. The victims' psychological well-being has suffered significantly from all three of these factors.

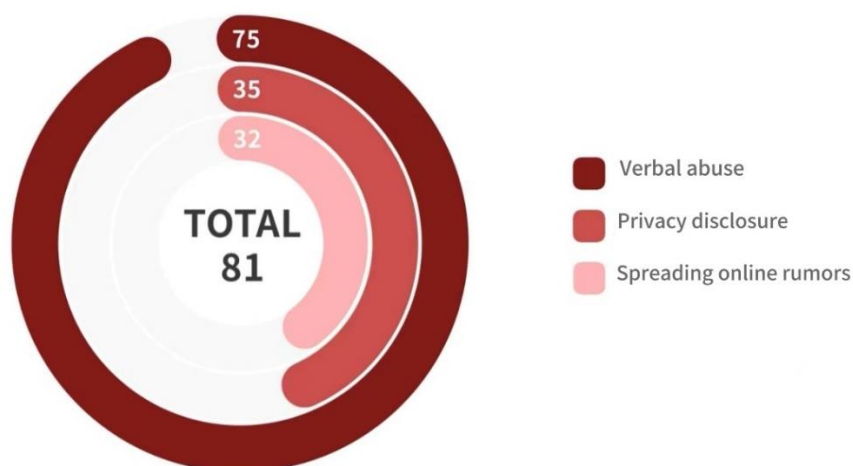


Fig. 1 Malicious comments from netizens on the incident

As shown in Figure 1, in 75 out of 81 typical cases, netizens resorted to verbal violence against the victims without being fully informed about the entirety of the incidents. In 35 cases, the privacy of the victims was compromised by netizens, and in 32 cases, the victims suffered varying degrees of harm from rumors.

At the same time, the victims' emotional responses also indicate that the damage from malicious word-of-mouth is substantial. By further examining the aforementioned cases and expanding the search over a 10-year period to include more covert cases, such as those not filed with the Public Security Bureau, the victims' feedback can be broadly categorized into five types of behavior.

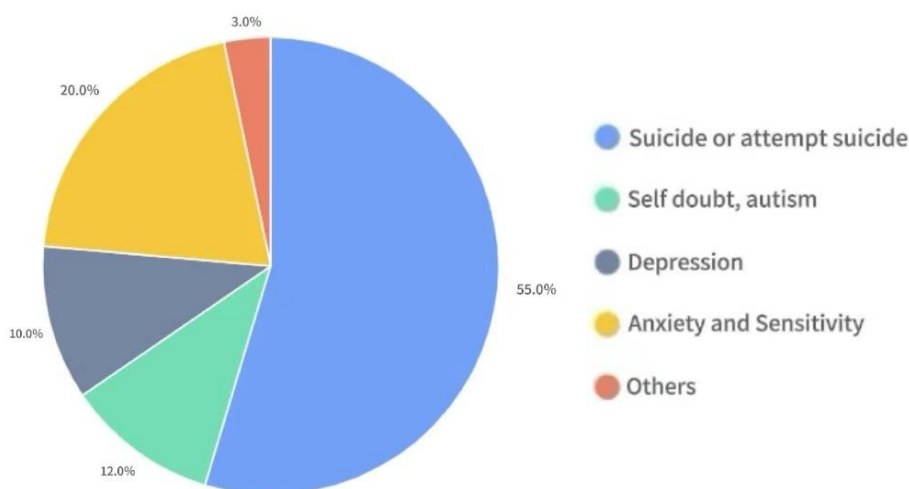


Fig. 2 Malicious comments from netizens on the incident

In Figure 2, ten percent of the victims exhibited varying degrees of depression; twelve percent of the victims experienced thoughts of self-doubt; twenty percent of the victims fell into states of anxiety and sensitivity, accompanied by irritability; and as high as fifty-five percent of the victims were inclined to use suicide as a means to resolve their issues.

The harm of malicious word-of-mouth to individuals is inestimable. As individuals, they lack the ability to resolve such incidents immediately, and some of them do not even know how to make the right decisions when faced with malicious comments to minimize the physical and mental harm they suffer. On one hand, the awareness of netizens in this regard should be heightened. Only when they truly understand the dangers of malicious word-of-mouth can such incidents be prevented. On the other hand, the government and relevant institutions should also pay attention to the physical and mental health of the victims, take timely measures to respond, and maximize the prevention of tragedies.

4. Government Intervention

In the face of the challenge of negative information on the Internet, the role of the government is crucial. Establishing a rapid response mechanism is the first step for the government to deal with negative information on the Internet. A real-time monitoring system can quickly identify and locate the source and distribution path of negative information. For companies that receive malicious word-of-mouth, once potential negative information is detected, the government should take immediate action by releasing accurate information through official channels, correcting erroneous views, and calming public suspicion and panic. This can minimize the damage to the company.

For individuals who have been harmed by malicious comments, the government should take immediate steps to ensure the physical and psychological safety of the victims, which may include the provision of emergency psychological counseling services to help them deal with the emotional distress and psychological stress caused by cyber violence. Professional counselors can provide victims with the necessary psychological support and intervention to help them ease their emotions and rebuild their self-confidence. Meanwhile, the government should work with cybersecurity organizations to quickly locate the source of public opinion. After identifying malicious comments and cyberattacks, the government needs to take legal action to require the relevant platforms and individuals to delete harmful comments and works. This is not only a protection for the victims, but also a purification of the online environment.

Building an effective online regulatory system is the key to long-term governance of the online environment. This requires not only technical means, such as algorithms to identify and filter inappropriate content, but also legal means to establish clear online behavioral norms and punish malicious behavior. Online anonymity may lead to an increase in malicious comments, so the government needs to curb such behavior through legal and regulatory means to ensure order in cyberspace [8].

Enhancing public media literacy is equally important. The government should improve the public's ability to identify false information and enhance their immunity to online rumors through education and public awareness. Consumers are more sensitive to negative information, so improving media literacy is crucial to curb negative word-of-mouth [9].

Cross-sectoral cooperation is another key point. The government needs to collaborate with the education sector, legal institutions, social organizations, and the private sector to form a multi-party, collaborative online governance model. Through such cooperation, cyberspace can be covered more comprehensively, undesirable information can be combated more effectively, and public demand can be responded to more quickly. Such cooperation is crucial to building a healthy and positive cyber environment [10].

Through these comprehensive measures, the government can not only effectively curb negative word-of-mouth, but also enhance the public's trust and satisfaction with government behavior and build a more harmonious online society. This requires the joint efforts of the government, enterprises, social organizations and the public, and everyone should become the guardian of the online environment and work together to create a clear cyberspace.

5. Conclusion

Malicious word-of-mouth has profound effects on both individuals and businesses, as it can rapidly alter public perception, harm brand reputation, and influence consumer purchasing decisions. The article analyzes how malicious word-of-mouth impacts the autonomy of consumer decision-making, poses a threat to personal physical and mental health, and damages the image of brands and enterprises. The article, through independent analysis of the impact of malicious word-of-mouth on brands and individuals to varying degrees, demonstrates that due to the rapid spread and wide reach of malicious word-of-mouth, it can cause brands to quickly lose honor and customers, and can subject individuals to public opinion pressure, resulting in severe psychological and physical harm. Companies need to actively manage their online reputation and respond promptly to consumer

feedback on social media, and the government should strengthen Internet regulation to protect consumer rights and interests.

The discussion in this article, during the process of data organization and analysis, is based on selected real-life cases, rather than on a large social group. Future research directions can be extended from this foundation. For instance, it is possible to delve into the specific impacts of different regulatory policies on the behaviors of various market participants, or to study how regulatory policies interact with market mechanisms to foster the healthy development of the economy. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches can be considered to integrate theories and methods from fields such as economics, sociology, and psychology to achieve a more comprehensive research perspective. This article provides a starting point for assessing the impact of regulatory policies, but a deeper understanding of their complexity and dynamics requires further empirical research and theoretical discussion. Future research can further deepen the foundation laid here, providing more precise and effective guidance for policymakers and market participants.

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