



Ranting online equals big trouble

ONLINE AGGRESSION: Why is there an impulse to berate something or someone on social media and share it with the world? Is it wrong to express one's anger in the cyberworld? Chandra Devi Renganayar and Siti Syameen Md Khalili find out

SEVERAL studies have identified social media personality types and across all these studies one common personality type that has emerged is the "ranter".

Ranters are described as "highly opinionated online", "soapbox" and "very loud online", posting remarks and comments about virtually anything they encounter at the office, on the street or at home.

While some ranting can be harmless and go unnoticed, there are those whose ranting is quite harsh, tactless and offensive.

Take for instance the recent incident where a local well-established hair salon was put in a bad light when a customer went on a tirade on Facebook about her bad experience following a visit to one of its outlets.

Her Facebook page to boycott the salon drew more attention

when the owners responded to the allegations.

Ranting on social media seems to be a norm these days and, to a certain extent, an accepted culture among netizens, said Choo Mei Sze, the founder of a social media marketing firm.

The idea that they can earn a reputation by tarnishing the image of someone or something, leads them on and they do not bother whether using aggression may backfire on them, she said.

"Social media does make it easy for individuals to post whatever they feel about anything at any given time and the reach is fast and wide. One post made here in Malaysia can quickly reach many in other parts of the world.

"Some users love the idea of becoming famous on social media. They get a sense of gratification when their post gets lots of views, re-tweets or likes, and

this encourages them to criticise, be it about products and services, or direct their anger at others."

Choo, who holds a master's degree in developmental psychology, said these ranters fail to realise that bosses, colleagues, business partners, head hunters, potential employers and even the authorities can view their virtual personas as a reflection of their true self (in the real world).

"They feel they can express themselves more freely and that there are no societal restrictions when it comes to the online world.

"These self-absorbed people seem unconcerned that their impulsive and vile ranting can lead them into trouble, if not immediately, in the future."

The number of cases of social media users in Malaysia getting onto the wrong side of the law over their virtual screaming may be

Dr Falzal Kasmani, deputy director of Strategic Communications Centre, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, says **whatever happens online is followed closely by the media**



Choo Mei Sze, the founder of a social media marketing firm, says we no longer can hide on the social media

Making sense of bad online behaviour

RANTING can be considered a verbal (whether written or spoken) expression of anger and frustration. When someone rants, it shows that the person is angry and frustrated and is letting everyone know of his or her feelings, said Alex Lui An Lieh, a lecturer at the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, HELP University.

There is a difference, however, he said, between ranting, which is abrasive and aggressive, and constructive expressions of anger and frustration, which is descriptive, reflective and solution-focused.

He said there is nothing wrong with anger but it is how we expressed it that makes anger a potentially destructive force.

"Anger is a function of our fight-or-flight system that serves to protect our lives and those of our loved ones.

"Of course, there are many ways in which people express anger and frustration.

"Some people become aggressive and act out violently by breaking things and hurting others physically. Other people turn their anger and frustration inwards and start indulging in self-destructive behaviour like alcohol and drugs.

"Then, there are those who rant."

The clinical psychologist pointed out that the psychological concept of catharsis presumes that ranting reduces tension and physiological arousal (i.e. reduced heart pressure and heart rate) provided the target does not re-

taliante and act aggressively against that person.

However, he said, research that focuses less on the biological responses and more on actual feelings of hostility found that expressing anger does not relieve aggressive tendencies but instead, can sometimes make it worse especially in the long-run.

"The general finding of most research now is that ranting does make you feel good for a while but it does not reduce your anger. In fact, the good feeling only encourages you to become angry more often.

"It's like taking drugs — it makes you feel good for a while but once the effect wears off, you will feel as bad as before, if not worse. And the worst part is, the good feeling that comes from ranting can be reinforced and eventually become addictive."

The danger of frequent ranting, he said, is that it will end up as a habit, which is hard to break, and eventually it becomes part of a person's personality.

Lui said although ranting can be destructive to the individual, collective ranting can be beneficial to society.

"This is because ranting can send out a very strong message that an injustice has been committed and there are people who are extremely not happy about it.

"If enough people rant about a certain issue, then it is clear that something should be done about that issue and that it is a cause for

concern. In this way, ranting can serve as a check and balance that serves to ensure a fair and just society."

On why people rant online, Lui said a cyber-psychology expert, John Suler, who is a professor at Rider University in the United States, has identified six factors.

"He said people behave differently when they are online and when they are face-to-face with another person due to dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection and dissociative imagination.

"Suler said that because people can hide or alter their identity online (dissociative anonymity), they can separate their online actions from their real-life identity.

"Therefore, people rant online because they are able to rant more freely by averting responsibility for what they say or do.

"The other reason is that in cyberspace people do not interact with others in real-time. Other cybercitizens may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply (asynchronicity).

"Not having to cope with immediate reaction from others allows the person to rant without any inhibitory feedback from the others. This is known as the 'emotional hit-and-run'.

"Similarly, since people cannot see each other online (invisibility), there are no immediate visual feedback from others to suggest disapproval or indifference to the ranting."

Solipsistic introjection and dissociative imagination, Lui said, suggest that due to lack of face-to-face cues, the ranting person creates an imaginary identity of his audience and the online social environment in which he can freely express his frustrations without any retribution.

The only way to cope with individuals who rant, said the psychologist, is to ignore them.

"Those people who are attracted to rant sites are usually people who are already high in their anger traits and nothing can stop them from expressing themselves in such an uncouth manner.

"Just like any naughty child who craves for attention by acting up and throwing tantrums, we should just ignore such behaviour. As soon as others are empathetic towards them, the need to rant will cease."



Alex Lui An Lieh, a lecturer at the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, HELP University, says anger is a function of our fight-or-flight system

small but everyone should take stock of what's happening around the world, said Choo.

In Britain, for instance, hundreds of people are prosecuted yearly for posts, tweets and emails deemed offensive, indecent and threatening and the number is growing as more get on cyberspace.

Choo cautioned that the era where one can remain anonymous online is ending.

"The truth is you are no longer faceless on social media. Though virtual, it is there for everyone to see, and what you say may haunt you, if not today, in years to come."

There's a false sense of protection and anonymity

when users go behind platforms like Twitter and Facebook to complain, grumble, nitpick and criticise, said Dr Adrian Budiman, a senior lecturer at the School of Multimedia Technology and Communications at Universiti Utara Malaysia.

"One of the biggest mistakes a person can make is to assume that he or she is safe and protected by anonymity when online.

"In today's digital domain, all interactions can easily be traced if necessary unless stringent measures are taken.

"What makes it more worrisome is that all of our interactions are permanent and cannot easily be erased.

"There are cases, where careless offhand remarks may result in losing a potential job or even being taken to court on civil or criminal charges."

The notion of using a non-provocative and impersonal medium which has a far-reaching audience will always remain attractive, he said.

"There will always be the polite,

well-mannered individuals as well as the trolls, people who deliberately attempt to upset others. People are generally more expressive and in some cases more honest when they don't need to assume socially acceptable roles and when they can hide behind anonymity.

"They think they can be offensive and rude without having to face future consequences.

"In some cases, they experiment with different personalities to see which one will be accepted by the community.

"If one doesn't work, it can be easily abandoned without any serious consequences."

The show of indignation on social media, said Dr Faizal Kasmani, deputy director of Strategic Communications Centre, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, is also encouraged by the support from the circle of friends in the network.

"On social networks, the tendency is for people who share a common interest or viewpoint to come together. And it is a norm for the network of friends to sup-

port any outbursts and encourage each other."

However, Faizal said the show of anger over social media platforms is not new.

The difference now is that it has become increasingly visible as society becomes more connected.

"Once blogs and online forums were popular platforms for people to huff and puff in anger and they were really brazen because they could hide behind a fake identity and not worry about the repercussions.

"But the situation has changed now with the likes of Facebook and Twitter — you are even more visible due to the connection that you have with your friends or followers.

"Also today, whatever happens online is followed closely by the media. So, when something goes viral online, it is quickly picked up."

Faizal's research on Twitter usage among Malaysians during the last general election showed that there are six categories of communication.

Users tend to use social media

to share information, to complain or give opinions, to post random statements, to tell people what they are doing, to ask questions and to share anecdotes about themselves or others.

"We found a small number of overtly racist posts but luckily that did not define the conversation during that period.

"People have a tendency to say whatever they want even if it is offensive.

"This becomes a problem especially in a multiracial society like Malaysia.

"No doubt social media is an effective platform for communication and self-expression but we've got to exercise some self-restraint and be tactful.

"We have to remember that it is an open platform and everyone can use it to their own advantage."

What do you think?
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