



Judgments about Web Based Rumors of College Instructors

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how online statements about college instructors can impact students' judgments about these instructors. UWSP students evaluated instructor profiles from a fictional web site similar to RateMyProfessor.com. As expected, negative comments produced significantly lower instructor evaluations. While positive comments were generally judged as more useful, negative comments were rated as more likely to be passed along. The findings are discussed in terms of their application to the study of both rumors and student evaluations.

INTRODUCTION

In the current educational climate, online forums such as RateMyProfessor.com are becoming increasingly utilized. However, research calls into question the accuracy and utility of these sites. For example, recent work has shown that there is a correlation between ratings of "sexiness" and the perceived quality of the instructor (cf. Felton et al., 2004). Thus, the proliferation of these sites may produce grade inflation and biased opinions.

Drawing on the social psychology of rumor (cf. Heath et al., 2001) and the educational psychology of student evaluations (cf. Marsh, 1991), this study investigated how statements about college instructors made in online forums can impact students' judgments about these instructors.

METHOD

UWSP students ($N = 109$) viewed 4 instructor profiles from a fictional web site, each containing "student" comments regarding 4 aspects instructor quality: instructor rapport, difficulty, skill, or fairness. Only one aspect was manipulated to be positive or negative for each profile (see sample below).

GradeYourInstructor: The Valid Instructor Evaluation Forum

Name: Roberta Wright
School: University of Texas
Department: English
Classes: ENG 101, 102, 201, 315, ...

Class	Semester	Recent Comments
ENG 101	Fall 2007	She wasn't too demanding, you had to do some outside work but its what you'd expect from a class of this level.
ENG 101	Spring 2008	Her grading process for exams and assignments was great!! I felt that my grades really reflected what was covered in the course and what I knew.
ENG 102	Fall 2007	Its nice to have an instructor who knows what she is talking about. She wasn't like other instructors who fumble their ideas.
ENG 201	Spring 2007	This teacher wasn't too much different from all others in dealing with students.
ENG 315	Spring 2008	I myself found this prof to be somewhere in the middle with her teaching having no real outstanding qualities.

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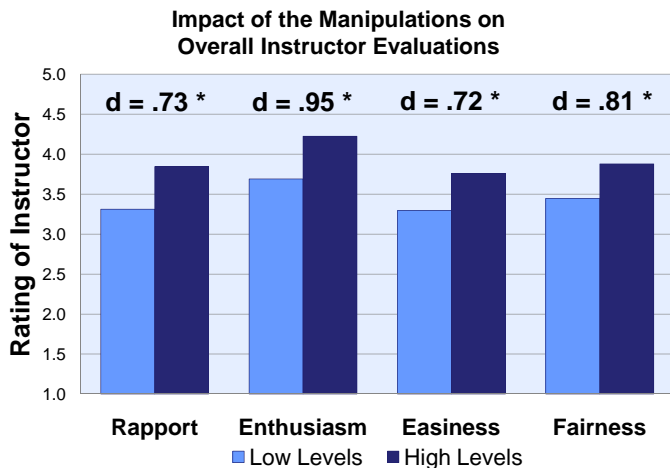
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Following each profile, students completed a traditional student evaluation of teaching that assessed both specific characteristics and general teaching quality (e.g., "Overall, this is a good instructor."). A second survey assessed whether the students believed the comments were reasonable, whether the comments were useful, and whether they would be likely to pass along the comments. All items used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

RESULTS

A multivariate ANOVA indicated that overall instructor evaluations were significantly lower when negative comments were made, $F(1,101) = 12.183$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .108$ (see univariate analyses below).



A multivariate ANOVA showed that the manipulated aspects had differential effects on how reasonable, useful, and transmittable the comments seemed, $F(9,96) = 3.219$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .232$ (see univariate analyses below).

Impact of the Manipulations on Ratings of the Likely Use of the Comments

Manipulated Aspect		Reasonable	Useful	Transmittable
Rapport:	Low Levels	3.85 (.73)	3.89 (.85)	3.35 (1.03)
	High Levels	4.08 (.50)	3.95 (.45)	3.58 (.77)
		d = .39 *	d = .05	d = .27
Enthusiasm:	Low Levels	3.98 (.58)	4.00 (.94)	3.46 (1.00)
	High Levels	4.18 (.50)	4.17 (.64)	3.73 (.90)
		d = .39 *	d = .20	d = .31
Easiness:	Low Levels	4.04 (.81)	4.09 (.81)	3.72 (.96)
	High Levels	3.90 (.71)	3.90 (.71)	3.32 (.93)
		d = .48 *	d = .25	d = .41 *
Fairness:	Low Levels	3.83 (.85)	3.69 (1.08)	3.33 (1.08)
	High Levels	4.07 (.45)	4.13 (.57)	3.60 (.79)
		d = .37 *	d = .58 *	d = .29

DISCUSSION

As expected, positive comments about instructor rapport, enthusiasm, easiness, and fairness all produced higher overall instructor evaluations. Similarly, students judged the comments to be more reasonable if the profile contained a positive comment.

A positive comment about fairness also tended to be perceived as more useful than a negative comment. This is consistent with previous work (cf., Parker et al., 2006) which demonstrated the importance of fairness as a significant predictor of students' evaluations of instructors.

Negative comments about course difficulty were particularly likely to be passed along. This is consistent with research on rumors (cf. Heath et al., 2001) that indicate that negative emotionally-charged statements are particularly transmittable.

Though the stimuli portrayed a fictitious website, students appeared to respond in strong and theoretically important ways. Overall, this suggests that this study has established a useful paradigm for understanding the functioning of rumor and gossip in the context of online evaluations of college instructors.

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