

When the Sacred Is Followed by the Profane: How Social Media Feed Sequencing Shapes Consumer Reactions

Xueqi Bao
INSEAD/INSEAD

Stephanie Lin
INSEAD

Taly Reich
New York University

Tamar Kreps
University of Hawaii

Amitava Chattopadhyay
INSEAD

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Abstract

Consumers spend significant time on social media, yet algorithms typically optimize engagement at the post level. However, consumers' reactions are shaped by how posts are sequenced. Across nine studies (N=5,054), we show that one specific sequence—frivolous profane content (e.g., memes) appearing immediately after sacred content (e.g., posts about heroism)—is perceived as inappropriate, reducing engagement and lowering evaluations of the platform and the brands involved. We propose that this effect is driven by consumers' desire to preserve psychological space for sacred content. Consistent with this account, the effect diminishes when the sequence is reversed and is stronger among individuals who view themselves as highly moral. Furthermore, consumers judge influencers who post frivolous profane content too soon after sacred content as less appropriate, which in turn reduces engagement (via click-through rates). Lengthening the interval between posts mitigates these negative effects.

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