

SIUE Researcher Examines How Viral Stories Shape Online Identity

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EDWARDSVILLE - As digital media becomes an increasingly significant part of daily life, individuals and organizations alike are paying closer attention to how online conversations shape identity, reputation and public response. [Mary Macharia, PhD, associate professor of Computer Management and Information Systems at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#), brings a CMIS-informed perspective to these issues through her research on digital media and identity threats.

Macharia's article, "Uncovering Identity Threat and Response Processes Involving Digital Media (ITARP-DM)," published in *Computers in Human Behavior*, examines how identity threats unfold online and how individuals respond to them. The study draws on 50 viral stories, supplemented by interviews with 11 individuals connected to those stories.

Macharia's research identifies three distinct ITARP-DM processes: ridicule and redress, grassroots movements, and transgression reminders.

The ridicule and redress process involves public criticism, apology, and consequences. For example, an individual may post content that others view as offensive, prompting widespread backlash that can affect both the individual and their employer. The grassroots movement process describes how people sometimes come together online in response to social injustice, using digital media to call for accountability or policy change. Finally, transgression reminders occur when past viral stories resurface. In these cases, users may share previously known negative information; the individual involved may attempt to present a more positive account of themselves, and online audiences may split between support and criticism.

For businesses and organizations, these findings are a reminder that digital media can create both risk and opportunity. It can function as a lasting record, a tool for public response or a catalyst for change. Organizations can benefit from establishing clear

digital media policies and providing employee education that help reduce risk while encouraging thoughtful online engagement.

As Macharia noted in a recent interview, both businesses and individuals should be mindful of what they post because the “internet is forever.”

Macharia's research offers valuable insight into the evolving relationship between digital media and personal or organizational reputation. By identifying the distinct processes through which identity threats emerge and unfold online, the study provides a framework for understanding both the risks and opportunities inherent in public digital engagement. Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of proactive digital media strategies for individuals and organizations navigating an increasingly connected world.