

## Online Reputation Management: A Shark Tale from Instagram

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During a business presentations class focused on online reputation management prior to a career conference, students were taught about personal SEO (search engine optimization), keyword searching, and personal branding. They were told to Google themselves to see what stories and links appeared with their names. Patrick Scott<sup>1</sup>, a sophomore in the class, knew his name search produced stories and videos of the time he jumped off a dock into Liberty Bay to catch a shark barehanded. Scott, a friendly and high-achieving student, realized that his online activity could affect his future. He worried that the viral video would affect his chances at getting an internship or job. After the class, Scott wondered how he should handle the incident.

### A Shark Tale

"It got so close to the dock and I said to myself, 'it would be really cool to catch one of these things'," college student and collegiate athlete Patrick Scott told *Inside Edition* on July 5, 2017, of his close encounter with a spiny dogfish shark. The adventurous Scott and some friends were on a dock in Liberty Bay when they spotted some of the sharks swimming unusually close. While his buddy recorded the drama on his phone, Scott jumped into the water to see if he could catch one. Shortly after he dove into the water, Scott emerged with the shark in his hands and tossed it onto the dock.

His friends gathered close to get a look at the dogfish shark. Scott picked up the shark, performed a Steve Irwin impression, grinned for the camera, and then his buddy stopped recording. What was not shown was that Scott released the live dogfish shark, an endangered species, back into the water. In an interview with Paige Gross of the *Seattle Times* published on June 30, 2017, Scott said the recording almost didn't happen because his friend stopped recording when his phone battery was at one percent. That is why the release of the shark was not recorded.

After the video was posted on Instagram, it went viral. Within a day, the Instagram post had over 150,000 views. It garnered even more attention on the *Inside Edition* YouTube channel with more than 5.4 million views as of January 20, 2022. After watching the video, some audience members posted outrage because they perceived the shark as being tortured by

Scott. *The Daily Mail Online* reported on July 2, 2017, that Scott had included in his Instagram post the message, "I let it go right after the video and made sure he swam off." The outrage became more vicious, according to an *Inside Edition* interview with the student. Some social media users even threatened Scott's life.

The amount of attention Scott received was unexpected. In the *Seattle Times* interview, Scott said, "I've never experienced anything like this, honestly, I was kind of nervous when I woke up."

The YouTube video garnered thousands of comments, which were both negative and positive. A brief survey of the comments has shown polarized reactions.

Negative comments:

One person who used the screen name 'K Bryant' said, "Would love to see someone snatch him unexpectedly where he can't breathe. Then throw him on his head, squeeze him, then throw him back where they found him. Oh, and don't check on him to see if he has a head trauma, concussion, etc. Yeah, that sounds hilarious."

'Political wife' said, "It was his choice to catch it, video tape it and post the video. He shouldn't blame anyone but himself for the death threats. Its (sic) the internet. Grow up."

Positive comments:

Several comments mentioned Scott's resemblance to Swedish YouTuber PewDiePie.

User 'A French Potato' said, "This dude wasnt (sic) even scared cuz (sic) HE literally LOOK LIKE AN AQUAMAN."

"He is so getting ladies," said 'Night Owl of Da Dark.'

User comments both chastised and glorified Scott's actions, which could be why he never removed the video. In addition, after giving a handful of different interviews and having the video posted on the *Inside Edition* YouTube channel, removing everything that was already on the internet would have been difficult. Over five years later, the video was still being viewed.

### **Social Media Networking: Casting the Net**

Seventy-two percent of teens used Instagram according to a 2018 *Pew Research Center* study, making it the most popular form of traditional social media. It was only beat by YouTube which was considered a video-sharing platform. Instagram's popularity was followed by SnapChat (69 percent) and Facebook (51 percent).

Social media platforms and apps allowed users to create and share content with a networked audience. They allowed individuals and organizations to develop and promote their own brands. Instagram was a social media site characterized by visual communication. Videos and images were curated and posted for followers and other site users to appreciate. As O'Donnell noted in a 2018 article, the unique visual landscape of Instagram enabled individuals "to share socially desirable images of their lives".

For a post to have a wider appeal or viral spread, it had to go "beyond the particular confines" of Instagram as noted by Harper in a 2019 article. Reposts on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media giants increased the chance of *going viral*. In 2017, when Scott posted his video to Instagram, it could not be easily shared within the social media platform and instead had to be shared outside of Instagram to go viral. Popular videos that quickly spread on social media and had an unexpected reach were known as *viral videos*. With the enormous volume of online content, it was challenging for users to create content that would become viral.

### **Cybervetting: Fishing for Information**

An innocent teenage prank like trying to get a better look at a shark up-close, could impact future employment. When an employer looks at a prospective employee's online activities, the practice has been known as cybervetting. According to a 2017 *CareerBuilder* survey, 70 percent of employers used social media to screen candidates before hiring. And 69 percent accessed online search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing to research candidates as well. Companies had dedicated staff members that looked solely at a candidate's online personal brand. That same survey found that 54 percent of employers decided not to hire a candidate based on what they found.

Americans did more to protect their online reputation over the years on their own. Overall, 45 percent of U.S. social media users said all their social media accounts were private according to a *Statista* report from September 2018. According to that survey, in addition to the accounts that are completely private, 20 percent said some accounts were private and 7 percent said one account was private.

While teens did a better job of reputation management, many did this by hiding or making accounts private, which wasn't always the answer. Employers surveyed by *CareerBuilder* in 2017 also said they didn't want to see a "ghost online." The concept of ghost online was a reference to the inability to find someone through keyword searches. The survey also found that fifty-seven percent were less likely to call someone in for an interview if the candidate had no online personal brand at all.

The fears that Scott perceived were well-founded and not uncommon. In a 2020 research study published in *Ethics and Information Technology*, Jacobson and Gruzd found that almost half of the participants were uncomfortable with the knowledge that their public social media posts were being used for cybervetting screening. Melton et al. (2021) noted a paradox in their research study published in the *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*. Although

students were aware of cybervetting practices, they continued to post inappropriate content on unrestricted social media accounts thereby risking future employment.

Stories regarding job candidates being rejected due to social media posts abounded. For example, according to an article on *NBCNews.com* from August 13, 2007, one recruitment company that worked with clinics and hospitals all over the U.S. sought a physician. In that article, the author wrote that the recruiter was thrilled to receive the resume of a “well-qualified young female psychiatrist.” Unfortunately, a social media search uncovered the candidate’s proclivity for posting shirtless selfies from parties. “Pictures of her taking off her shirt at parties,” Van Allen, the recruiter, said. “Not just on one occasion, but on another occasion, then another occasion.” The candidate did not get the job.

A similar story involving a summer intern prospect revealed a common pattern. In an article on *TheMuse.com* from June 19, 2020, an undergraduate student who was offered an internship for the summer posted about the good news online. In a social media post about the HR internship, the junior declared that he was going to “party all summer”. The prospective employer found the post and the job offer to the student was rescinded.

Not everyone is skilled in managing their online reputation. For example, in a *New York Post* article from July 1, 2020, Harvard graduate Claira Janover lost a job offer from Deloitte, a UK-based accounting firm, over a stabbing threat she made over TikTok. In the video, Janover said she would “stab” anyone who told her that “All Lives Matter.” Besides losing her future job, since the video went viral, Janover also received multiple threats to her safety.

Social media posts could also lead to the loss of college acceptance or scholarships. The *USA Football* article dated July 12, 2017 told the story of Shedrick “Shed” McCall III, a star running back in high school and an aspiring YouTube star. McCall created videos about funny experiences he encountered. In those videos, McCall used inappropriate language and actions to describe those experiences. A video in which McCall described a time he was trespassing went viral. Shortly after the video was posted, the offer to play football at Old Dominion, a Division 1 school, was rescinded, six months after McCall had committed to attend.

### **The Dilemma**

College sophomore Scott didn’t realize there could be negative consequences of his shark video that could impact future job prospects. Now that his personal online reputation could be damaged, possible repair was needed. His 19-year-old antics were still available for cybervetting by future employers through a simple keyword search. Scott relished the attention but he worried that his online personal reputation could be marred. He desperately needed some advice and direction for what he should do now.

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