

Western University

Scholarship@Western

2023 Undergraduate Awards

The Undergraduate Awards

2023

Reactions of Facebook Users to Ontario University Mask and Vaccine Mandates

Emma Brain

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/undergradawards_2023

Reactions of Facebook Users to Ontario University Mask and Vaccine Mandates

Word Count (excluding abstract and references): 2,661

Abstract

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions worldwide experienced significant disruptions to in-person learning. Following a period of online learning, Canadian universities initiated a cautious return to campus, accompanied by new rules and regulations intended to keep campus communities safe. Common among many institutions was the implementation of mask and vaccine mandates, which generated significant discussion on social media platforms. Such strong responses to these regulations create an opportunity for academic investigation, as researchers can use this real-life experience to discern whether the public experiences emergency safety mandates as beneficial or disruptive to their lives. This paper takes the form of a content analysis of comments from a prominent Ontario university's official Facebook posts. It seeks to investigate the primary response of social media users to the implementation of mandates and whether sentiments remain constant among users of different relations to the university. Significant findings include the overwhelming presence of negative opinions towards the mandates and the lack of comments from current students of the institution under study. The analysis also revealed that users opposed to the mandates are likelier to post detailed comments backed up with outsourced information or strong emotional language. In contrast, positive posts were overwhelmingly short and lacked evidence of actionable intention to defend their viewpoint. These findings suggest that while those contributing positive comments may do so to signal their support or as a means of social interaction, social media users posting negative comments are more actively seeking change through their online interaction with the institution.

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (“Coronavirus,” n.d.). In response to the threat of this global health crisis, in-person schooling worldwide experienced significant disruptions (“Education,” n.d.). Following a period of online learning, Canadian universities cautiously initiated a full return to in-person learning with new vaccine and mask mandates for all members of the campus community in September 2021 (De Guzman, 2021). This paper explores the research question: what was the prominent response of Facebook users to an Ontario university’s announcement of these mandates - and did this change depending on the user’s relationship with the university?

Methodology

The sampling frame of this analysis includes comments on official posts by an Ontario university on Facebook; surveyed posts were restricted only to announcements about the implementation of masking and vaccine mandates, while reminder posts were excluded. In addition, only posts made in 2021 or later were included since this was when most of the campus community was allowed to return to the university. Reactions to the lifting of the mask mandate on February 6, 2023 are not present in this report as no official post regarding the matter was released by the university on Facebook by the time this report was written. Posts pertaining only to students in residence were also excluded since comments on these posts are less likely to be representative of the overall campus body. Following this strategy, 7 posts matched the inclusion criteria.

As for the sampling of comments, a comment exporter was used to export comments on these Facebook posts to Excel. The exporter was set to automatically filter out comments from users with private accounts and comments flagged as spam or comments from individuals with

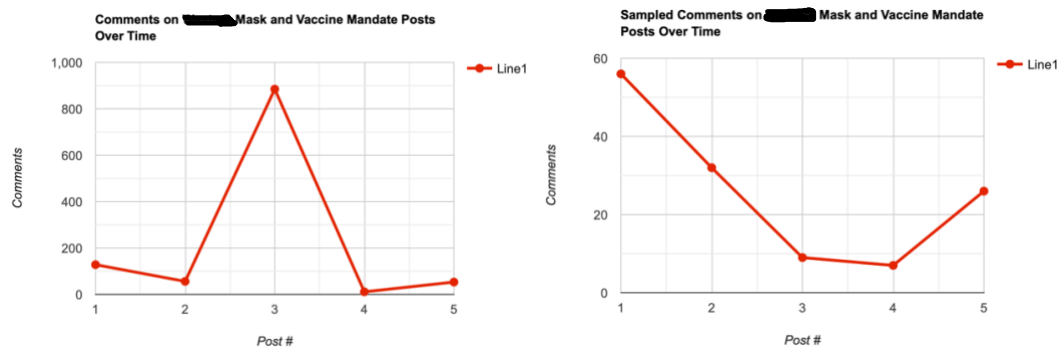
suspended or disabled accounts. In cases where more than 100 exportable comments were present on a particular post, only the first 100 after the initial posting date were included. The final sample was obtained by sampling only those exported comments with four or more likes. In cases with less than 5 comments matching the sampling criteria, the post was excluded from the analysis (resulting in 2 exclusions).

When looking for patterns in the data, comments were analyzed to examine each commenter's relation to the university and coded as being posted by either current students, alumni, parents of students, or those of unknown relation to the university. There was also interest in determining the geographic location of the comment's origin, so the commenters' current residence was coded as either within the university city (London), within Canada (but outside of the university city), international, or unknown. This allowed for insight as to whether the majority of comments originate from members of the city impacted by the university's mask and vaccine mandates - or if comments are opinions posted by those who are not likely to be directly affected by the university's actions.

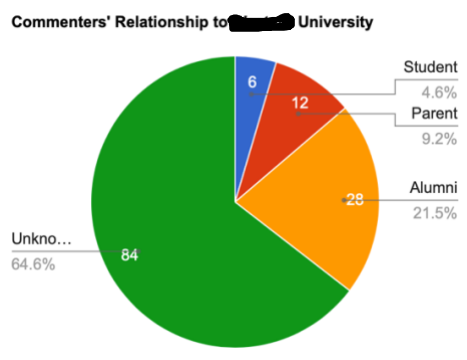
Next, comments were coded for themes. First, the comments were coded as overall positive, negative, or neutral in their response to the announcement of mask and vaccine mandates. Subsequently, the major themes present in the positive and negative comments were identified. The major themes in negative comments were shame, threats to withdraw financial support, lawsuits, and accusing the university of greater conspiracies. Among the positive posts, significant themes included thankfulness, pride, and relief. There were no common themes among the neutral comments, which ranged from questions to remarks directed at particular individuals or statements of facts - though each of these occurred not more than once or twice in the sample.

Findings

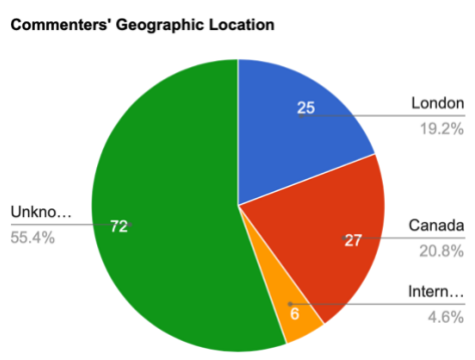
Overall, the sampling process yielded 130 comments for analysis - 56 comments from a post on August 11, 2021; 32 from August 25, 2021; 9 from August 22, 2022; 7 from October 17, 2022; and 26 from November 29, 2022. There was significant variation in the number of comments overall and those meeting the sampling criteria for each post. One interesting finding was that the total quantity of comments on each post and those that matched the sampling criteria did not mirror each other. Instead, the relationships were somewhat opposite - with the third post displaying peak commenting behaviour but yielding some of the lowest numbers of comments matching sampling criteria. This could be due to a high prevalence of private or spam comments on the third post, but it should be kept in mind when evaluating the accuracy of results.



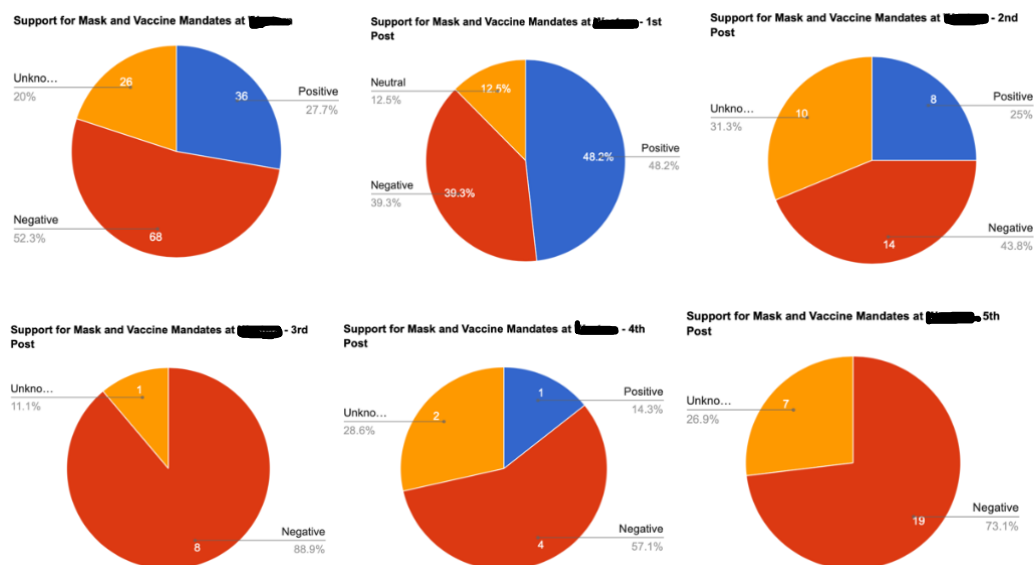
Next, the relationship of commenters to the university was analyzed. Of the sampled comments, 28 (21.5%) were from alumni, 6 (4.6%) from current students, 12 (9.2%) from parents of students, and 84 (64.6%) with an unknown relationship to the university. Though, caution should be given to apparent tendencies for users of particular relation to the university to post a specific theme, as the majority of commenters had no readily identifiable relationship available for analysis.



As for geographic location, 25 comments were from users residing in the university city, 27 were from within Canada more broadly, 6 were from outside Canada, and 72 were unknown. According to this analysis, less than 25% of commenters live within the community directly impacted by the mandates. Still, interpretations of trends are weak due to the majority of users not declaring their location.



Finally, the comments were analyzed regarding whether the content was positive, negative, or neutral concerning support for the university's mandates. Overall, there was a more significant proportion of negative comments on posts, with the first post being the only one to display a majority of positive posts - though only by a slight margin. Notably, the third and fifth posts contained no positive posts in the sample.



Interestingly, there was variation in the theme of comments depending on the user's relationship to the university - with current students showing the greatest support for mandates with 66.7% positive posts - while only 50% of posts from parents were positive. Alumni generally showed very negative comments, with only 21.4% positive posts.

Also, only 20% of comments from users residing in the university city were positive - compared to 30% from within Canada more broadly and 0% by international users. While the latter two statistics support the assumption that commenters may not be overly concerned with supporting the mandate if it does not directly impact the health of their community, the first statistics also demonstrate that the majority of Londoners commenting did not support the university's actions.

As for the most common themes identified within the negative comments, there was a strong presence of shame, threats to withdraw financial support, juxtaposing the university's response with other institutions, lawsuits, and accusing the university of conspiracy.

Many comments directly expressed shame to be associated with the university or suggested that the university should be ashamed of itself. Examples of these comments found during analysis include:

“I am so ashamed to be an alumni... You should all be ashamed of yourselves.”
“Deeply ashamed to be a X grad today.”
“A disgrace against humanity. Shame on you X!...”
“Ashamed to be an alumni. Discrimination against a right to choose and creating a barrier to higher education. Disgusting.”

Further, many of these negative comments threatened to withdraw financial support from the university if it did not revoke the mandates. Such comments included:

“...The school will never see a dime from me as a result of this decision...”
“not a penny from this Alumni until the institution stops this authoritarian rubbish.”
“...Although I will not be able to show up in person to protest, I do volunteer with an Alumni organization that raises funds for X and have made my donation annually. I will watch the unfoldment of this issue and if this policy is not overturned, I will withdraw my support from X.”

Notably, most of the comments following this theme were posted by alumni and seemed to comprise a form of activism or protest for users who could not be physically present to take their stance. Withdrawal of financial support was seen as potentially forcing the school to retract its mandates.

Several comments also expressed irritation regarding the university’s divergence from the response of other institutions not following mandates. These institutions ranged from other universities, elementary or high schools, or those unrelated to education.

“Why is the science so different in Ontario. Look to Calgary. U of C won’t mandate vaccinations and masks when classes resume this fall.”

“You do realize it’s been known for some time that masks don’t actually protect you, right?...If you’re following the science, why are almost all other Canadian universities doing a completely different thing?”

“This is not about safety. Tell us why we can get on a plane without a mask or vaccine but can’t attend class in our own country...”

Additionally, many comments reference lawsuits against the school - hoping that the university will be sued or referring to legal action already taken against the institution.

“I hope you get sued!”

“I hope people push for answers as to why it was ever allowed to exist in the first place, Was so wrong and against all ethics and morals. I hope they still get sued.”

“You guys better hire some lawyers.”

“Hopefully more lawsuits will be filed!!! Enough is enough!!!”

Finally, many comments accused the university’s mask and vaccine mandates as being part of larger conspiracies:

“[Vaccine mandates] are illegal and irresponsible. Masks [do] not stop virus, and causes more damage by blocking free breathing. Your nazi-regime is clearly a pay-off from Big Pharma and/or Trudolf’s nazi-party. May you burn in hell for ruining so Many Young students lives.”

“You are aiding a tyranny worse than the rollovers of the Weimar Republic. Your professors are a joke!”

“There will be accountability, for the genocide. Everyone that has anything to do with this WILL be brought to justice.”

<p>“...Stop pushing your agenda X!!! Bunch of greedy liars! Money connections speak volumes! Whats there to gain for X huh?!? Prob lots!...Im done with supporting a draconian place like this!”</p>
--

An abundance of comments following this theme accused the university of various conspiracies, ranging from aiding an authoritarian government takeover, genocide, or accepting bribes from private corporations. These comments were noticeably longer and contained more vulgar language, indicating the anger within them.

As for the positive comments, the major themes were thankfulness, pride, and relief. Thankful comments were undoubtedly the most prevalent among these three themes but also comprised very short responses on average. Examples include:

<p>“Wonderful news! Thank you!”</p>

<p>“Good. Thank you!”</p>

<p>“Thank you for standing up and protecting the X community!”</p>
--

Pride was also a frequent theme in the comments - with users praising the university for its decision-making practices or expressing pride at being associated with the school.

<p>“I’m proud of X’s leadership on this topic. Let’s keep everyone safe.”</p>

<p>“Well done X proud Alumna”</p>

<p>“Proud thank you for protecting my classmates and I”</p>

<p>“So proud to be a X alumni!...”</p>
--

Finally, many comments expressed relief upon viewing the announcement of the mandates and feeling much more comfortable returning to campus under such conditions. Additionally, many commenters not associated with the school themselves expressed relief knowing that their family members at the university would be safer.

“Well done X - I was concerned but now I am relieved - courageous decision for the benefit [of] all - see y’all in a few weeks.”
--

“...I feel much safer having my son attend classes after this decision.”
--

“Thank you X!! As an alumni who still lives in the city and has family working at X this helps me breath a sigh of relief.”

One noticeable particular is that the negative comments were often longer and included the presence of stronger arguments against the vaccine or additional evidence from outside sources to support the commenters’ point. In contrast, the positive posts were significantly shorter and provided little reasoning behind the commenter’s support for the mandates. This suggests that while Facebook users who support the mandates may wish to provide brief encouragement or interact with the institution on social media, the negative commenters are more directly seeking change and action through their comments. One can also see the persistence of these commenters, as the negative comments remain a much greater share of those sampled comments as one moves from the first to the last post.

Conclusion

In conclusion, results from this paper demonstrate that the response by Facebook users to an Ontario university’s announcement of mask and vaccine mandates was majorly negative. The only group which posted more positive comments were current students - which may demonstrate their concern for safety in their learning environment. On the other hand, parents

were split between positive and negative comments, while comments by alumni were overwhelmingly negative. Therefore, an alternate explanation for the additional positive comments by current students may be due to their desire to look good in the university's eyes and not jeopardize their on-campus reputation or opportunities by posting any negative opinions. Alumni who were no longer concerned about direct implications on their degree appeared much less hesitant to speak out against the university and its administration - evidenced by their being the group most commonly referencing their relation to the university within their comments.

Further, no significant differences existed when comments were analyzed relative to the poster's geographic location. While there were no positive comments from international users, positive support remained low for both Londoners and broader Canadians, which fails to support the idea that those within the community directly affected by the mandates would show more outstanding support for the university's actions.

Standing out in particular was the greater depth of content in the negative posts - as opposed to short remarks by positive commenters. Negative commenters also brought with them evidence or threats, seemingly in hopes of convincing the university to rescind its decision. Even after the last analyzed post, when the university revoked the vaccine mandate, negative commenters continued to overwhelm the post - either calling for the additional removal of the mask mandate or threatening retrospective legal action against the vaccine mandate. Conversely, the positive commenters had entirely disappeared - possibly showing that they were not in support of this change to the mandate but also failing to show any opposition to the vaccine mandate's removal. This shows a stronger desire on behalf of the negative commenters to continue to make their points known.

Moving forward, the conclusions drawn in this study should be analyzed relative to the limitations of the study method. Not only were significant numbers of respondents categorized into the “unknown” category regarding their geographic location or relation to the school, but there is inherently a self-selection bias present in the analysis of comments. As social media use and commenting are entirely voluntary, the themes present in the comments are only representative of those wishing to make their opinions publicly known and may not represent privately held sentiments individuals are uncomfortable sharing. A self-selection bias exists. As well, by analyzing social media comments, the viewpoints of those demographics less likely to use social media are not represented. In this case, there is a high likelihood that the opinions of elderly individuals less familiar with social media and technology - and who are also more vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 - are underrepresented. Finally, while this paper considered commenters’ reactions to the university’s mask and vaccine mandates, there was an inability to separately consider opinions on each mandate. Facebook posts by the university referenced both mandates within singular posts, and most comments did not indicate which they were reacting to.

Overall, while further research should occur to confirm the accuracy and representativeness of findings within this paper, there is evidence that more Facebook users reacted negatively to the news of mask and vaccine mandates implemented by the university. These negative comments expressed incredible emotion and determination to make their voices heard, providing detailed personal accounts and suspicions. While those supporting the mandates did post occasional encouraging remarks, they lacked the same advocacy passion found in those opposing mandates and stuck to broader amiable themes.

References

“Coronavirus (COVID-19) SARS-CoV-2.” *IPAC Canada*. Retrieved (<https://ipac-canada.org/coronavirus-resources>).

De Guzman, Mari-Len. 2021. “[X] to Require Proof of Vaccination for Campus Community.”
(this citation has been redacted for anonymity)

“Education: From School Closure to Recovery.” *UNESCO*. Retrieved (https://www.unesco.org/en/covid-19/education-response?TSPD_101_R0=080713870fab2000e32bb833f871c29dd27394c7cc8e01aaba0a963e5998fa7c5bb46da03da4430408779a11661430007a8ba69215096d40bbb267e05625a74e82032e9487c6d8f33806ba73ccd9ab58ec691d15e21df23878762ba4866f1ea9).