Social media self-efficacy and information evaluation online

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ABSTRACT

This study introduces the concept of *social media self-efficacy*, or a person's perceived ability to reach desired outcomes in the social media environment, and examines the relationship between social media self-efficacy and how people evaluate information found online. Results of a survey of a representative sample of adult Internet users in the United States ($N = 3568$) indicate that users with higher social media self-efficacy find information shared via social media to be more trustworthy than do those lower in social media self-efficacy. These self-efficacious social media users also rely more both on the opinions of others and on social media specifically when evaluating or verifying the information they find online, suggesting that they may be more prone to seek out and be influenced by input from others. Practical and theoretical implications of these findings are explored.

1. Introduction

Social media enable people to distribute a wide range of information by creating and sharing content across a diversity of applications, such as blogs, wikis, and ratings or question and answer websites. As usage of social media continues to grow, and is further enhanced by its variety and mobility (Nielsen, 2012), the proportion of online information filtered in some manner through social media is swiftly increasing. Yet, there is substantial variance in the quality of the information available through social media (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008). The social media environment allows the sharing of information between widely dispersed and frequently unknown individuals, and cues that traditionally have served to aid people in determining the trustworthiness of a source or a message are often obscured or absent in this online environment (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003). This can lead to negative outcomes if inaccurate information is trusted or acted upon.

It has therefore become progressively more important to understand how information seekers evaluate the credibility of the information they receive via social media, as they increasingly rely upon this user-generated and user-curated content themselves and perpetuate it by sharing it with others. Furthermore, because the veracity of information and its perceived credibility may be particularly significant for certain information subjects (e.g., health), and less so for others (e.g., entertainment),

understanding the credibility assessment of social media-based information by different information subjects or domains is particularly critical.

Bandura (1997) demonstrated that observing others' performance and receiving feedback from others contribute to perceived self-efficacy within a domain, which is related to performance across a host of contexts (Bandura, 1997) due to elevated judgments of one's own abilities. We rely on Bandura's (1977, 1997) self-efficacy theory to conceptualize self-efficacy in the domain of social media in the form of *social media self-efficacy*, or a person's beliefs about his or her capabilities to perform desired functions specifically in the social media environment. We apply social media self-efficacy to examine the degree to which people vary in their evaluations of the trustworthiness of online information relative to offline information. Because self-efficacy may also relate to perceptions of *others'* behavior and information, particularly in the increasingly social online environment, we also examine how social media self-efficacy relates to reliance upon social means of information evaluation and verification.

Accordingly, we use data from a representative survey of adult Internet users in the U.S. to explore how social media self-efficacy is related to (a) people's evaluations of the trustworthiness of social online information in different domains and (b) the extent to which people are prone to be influenced by others' opinions when evaluating information credibility online. Because in the context of social media the judgments that people make about information may, in turn, have important implications for the content these users choose to pass on to others, we also explore the practical implications of our findings, as we simultaneously strive to extend self-efficacy theory.

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2. Self-efficacy and the social media environment

Self-efficacy is defined as a person's judgment of his or her ability to execute a behavior (Bandura 1977; Bandura 1997). Perceived self-efficacy corresponds with performance in areas ranging from educational achievements to athletic performance to health-promoting behavior (see Bandura, 1997, for a review). Yet, the underlying theoretical premise of self-efficacy—that a person's judgment about a behavior influences that behavior—is quite intuitive, and research typically does not reach beyond individual performance or action outcomes.

This study, however, extends self-efficacy theory not only by examining it in the social media environment but more significantly by moving beyond self-focused and efficacy-based performance outcomes of traditional research to examine how self-efficacy can impact judgments and perceptions of *others*' behavior and input, such as the perceived trustworthiness of information from social online sources. Indeed, evaluations of the socially shared information inherent in the social media environment provide an exciting new direction for self-efficacy research because, in this environment, self-efficacy may influence not only perceptions of others' performance but also the methods through which individuals go about assessing the quality of others' performance in the form of the perceived credibility of online social information.

2.1. Conceptualizing social media self-efficacy

Individuals use four sources of information when making self-efficacy judgments: enactive mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional state (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997). *Enactive mastery experience* involves prior experience with a task that builds skill and is perceived as successful by the individual, resulting in a heightened sense of self-efficacy. Prior experience producing social media content, for example, should contribute to social media self-efficacy, as should a person's confidence in his or her ability to successfully find specific information sought online, and his or her perceived social media skill. The second source of efficacy information is *vicarious experience*, which entails observing others' successful or unsuccessful performance in order to make a referential comparison and model successful behavior. Consuming social media content, such as reading or viewing blog entries, comments, or videos created by others, for example, should contribute to a person's level of social media self-efficacy via vicarious experience, because browsing this content entails observing others' performance in the social media environment.

The third source of information that affects self-efficacy perceptions is *social persuasion*, or performance feedback. Positive feedback tends to encourage self-efficacy perceptions, while negative feedback weakens them. Online, the level and type of feedback (e.g., comments about content producers' contributions) received can influence the amount of information contributed to a website (see, e.g., Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009; Cheshire & Antin, 2008; Heinz & Rice, 2009). Because someone must first contribute content in order to receive any feedback or posts about this content from other users, his or her level of content production, for example, should again contribute to perceived social media self-efficacy. The fourth source of efficacy information is an individual's *physiological and emotional state*, which impacts self-efficacy perceptions mostly in physical pursuits or other activities during which strong emotional reactions or arousal may cue anticipated success or failure and affect performance (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997). These states, however, are not expected to impact perceptions of self-efficacy in the online environment to the same extent as the other three sources because physical impairments or strong emotional reactions are less likely to occur frequently and thus impact efficacy perceptions than social persuasion, vicarious experience, and enactive mastery experience.

Although self-efficacy has yet to be explored in the context of social media specifically, scholars have used self-efficacy to examine performance using contemporary technologies such as computers and the Internet (Compeau & Higgins, 1995; Eastin & LaRose, 2000). The Internet, however, is a broad environment, and people who are efficacious in one area (e.g., using the web to access and send email) may be much less efficacious in another (e.g., using social media). In fact, some scholars have differentiated between fluencies, defined as higher-level competence, with computers, email, and the web, respectively (Bunz, 2004; Bunz, Curry, & Voon, 2007). This suggests that a person's self-efficacy with the Internet generally may differ from his or her perceived efficacy with social media, and should therefore be distinguished from it. Thus, drawing from Bandura's theory of the sources of information that inform self-efficacy judgments, social media self-efficacy is based upon a person's level of social media content production and consumption, perceived social media skill, and confidence in his or her ability to successfully find information online.

3. Social media self-efficacy and information evaluation

There is a considerable research heritage on people's perceptions of the credibility of sources and messages. Although early work in this domain primarily examined face-to-face contexts and the factors influencing the credibility of human sources (see Wilson & Sherrell, 1993 for a review), recent work has naturally migrated to online environments by examining a range of phenomena, from the design elements that bolster a website's perceived credibility (Fogg et al., 2001), to factors influencing the credibility of blogs (Kaye & Johnson, 2011), to the elements of credible online product reviews (Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner, 2012). In part, the motivations for examining credibility online stem from the considerable differences in this context that obscure how people have traditionally evaluated information and source credibility (Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003), coupled with the serious consequences of inappropriately relying on misinformation today, given its prevalence and prominence (Horrigan & Rainie, 2006).

Thus, in an environment where vital information repositories can be unreliable, and where information consumers are progressively more social in their behaviors online, social media users' level of trust in an information source is critical to how they evaluate information. Information from offline sources is traditionally judged to be more credible than that from online sources, although this varies depending upon the domain or subject of the information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). However, perceptions of the trustworthiness of information from online social sources in comparison to offline sources may vary with individuals' levels of social media self-efficacy. Prior experience with an information source, for example, can influence trust judgments (Gefen, 2000; Hardin, 2006), and familiarity has been found to positively predict trust in online information sources (Gefen, 2000; Kim, Ferrin, & Rao, 2008). From the perspective of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), self-efficacious social media users should have more experience with social information sources via enactive mastery experience and vicarious experience than those lower in social media self-efficacy. These users are therefore likely to be more familiar with such sources than those lower in social media efficacy.

While it is possible that variance in the perceived trustworthiness of online information can influence social media self-efficacy, research on the influence of prior experience and familiarity on trust judgments (Gefen, 2000; Hardin, 2006; Kim et al., 2008) as