Chapter 43
Contribution of Mindfulness to Individuals' Tendency to Believe and Share Social Media Content

Peerayuth Charoensukmongkol

National Institute of Development Administration, Thailand

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to explore the effect of mindfulness on individuals' tendencies to believe social media content and share it without realizing the potential consequences. The sample used in this study comprised 300 participants in Bangkok, Thailand, of whom 157 were full-time employees and 143 were college students. Results from partial least squares regression analysis supports the hypothesis that individuals who exhibit higher levels of mindfulness tend to be skeptical of the validity of information to which they are exposed. In addition, skepticism is linked to a decreased tendency to believe social media content and to share content on social media. The findings further support a direct link between mindfulness and a decreased tendency to share social media content. Overall, these findings confirm the positive contribution of mindfulness as a quality that may allow individuals to question the validity of social media content before they decide to believe it and share it with others.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term social media has been widely defined in literature as "Internet-based services that allow individuals to create, share and seek content, as well as to communicate and collaborate with each other" (Lee & Ma, 2012, p. 332). It is evident that social media have begun to replace traditional media, such as television and newspapers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Currently, people tend to rely heavily on social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, to gain access to news and information (Talcoth, 2015). Advances in smartphone technology also provide access to news and information from anywhere through mobile social media applications. Information posted on social media often disperses rapidly across geographic boundaries (Suh et al, 2010). These platforms not only allow individuals to obtain a wide coverage of information faster and easier than traditional media do, but also facilitate information sharing among

members (Li et al, 2014). In contrast to traditional media where individuals passively receive information provided by content editors, social media promote the active participation of users in producing content, thereby empowering people (Lee & Ma, 2012).

Despite the benefits of social media, which significantly facilitate information diffusion, problems can arise when people increase their reliance on these applications for information consumption without questioning the accuracy of the content (Carlos et al, 2013; Gundecha & Liu, 2012). In addition, some users share posts with others without considering the potential consequences of sharing invalid or distorted information. Literature has shown that rumors tend to be pervasive in social media (Diakopoulos et al, 2012; Mendoza et al, 2010; Ratkiewicz et al, 2011). According to Oh et al (2010), a major criticism of social media is that they can be used for propagating misinformation, rumors, and, in extreme cases, propaganda. Similarly, they can be used as channels for spreading biased information, tribal prejudices, and hate speech (Mäkinen & Wangu Kuira, 2008). The viral spreading of political misinformation in social media is one example of social media abuse (Ratkiewicz et al, 2011). Furthermore, hoaxes, such as Hollywood rumors, tend to spread via social media from time to time (Dewey, 2014). Given the negative effects of overreliance on social media for news and information and the tendency to share misinformation on social media, which can cause suspicion and fear among the public (Chen et al, 2015; Oh et al, 2010; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), it is important to understand some of people's personal characteristics that explain these social media behaviors. Gaining this body of knowledge is crucial because it can offer some recommendations to help prevent this behavioral tendency. In practice, it is generally difficult and somehow controversial for policy makers to resort to legal actions to strictly monitor and control contents that citizens post and share on social media (Sakawee, 2013). However, if policy makers understand some key personal characteristics that can restrain such behavior and are able to provide proper intervention or campaign to promote these characteristics, this can serve as a more effective solution to reduce the spread of misinformation in society.

In particular, this study focuses on the role of mindfulness, which is defined as a state of bringing a certain quality of attention to moment-by-moment experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). The concept of mindfulness, which originates from the practice of meditation, has been applied extensively in the fields of clinical study, psychology, and management over the past decade (Gärtner, 2013; Shonin et al, 2014; Zhang et al, 2013). However, little is known about its benefits in use of technology, particularly with regard to behaviors concerning the use of social media. Although the benefits of mindfulness during use of social media were previously proposed (Deschene, 2011), its contribution has not been empirically tested in academic research. The main reason mindfulness is the focus of the study is that research extensively supports that it is a characteristic that significantly helps individuals reduce a wide array of unhealthy behaviors that result from uncontrolled emotions and impulses (Hafenbrack et al, 2013; Shonin et al, 2014). Given some empirical evidence that shows that the tendency to share contents on social media is also significantly driven by emotions (Oh et al, 2010; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), the quality of mindfulness might be an important personal characteristic that can tackle social media behaviors.

Because the main goal of mindfulness is to cultivate awareness of internal and external stimuli that individuals experience moment-to-moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003), the objective of this research was to explore whether the degree of mindfulness individuals exhibit explains the tendency to believe information posted on social media platforms without questioning content validity and to share content without considering the consequences of doing so. Because mindful individuals typically are constantly aware of their thoughts, feelings, and actions, this research postulates that mindfulness may make individuals aware of the accuracy of social media information before they believe it or decide to share it.

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