Social media fatigue a factor in sharing of misinformation: Study

It creates information overload that hinders users’ ability to critically analyse content

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Those who say they are tired or overwhelmed by social media are likelier to believe in misinformation and share it online — and “narcissistic” individuals are more likely to do so.

These findings were published by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in the journal Scientific Reports in September.

The study surveyed more than 10,000 people from eight countries — Singapore, the United States, Malaysia, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines.

“Social media fatigue creates an information overload that hampers the cognitive judgment of social media users,” said Assistant Professor Saifuddin Ahmed from NTU’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

He led the study in collaboration with PhD student Muhammad Eshah Raul from the University of California, Davis.

In such circumstances, individuals become overwhelmed and struggle to critically evaluate the misinformation they encounter, he said.

“Cognitive skills determine an individual’s ability to analyse information critically. Those who say they are tired or overwhelmed by social media are likelier to believe in misinformation and share it online,” he said.

The surveys were conducted in June 2022, with 8,070 responses collected; 1,008 were from Singapore.

Across all eight countries, the researchers found that survey participants from Singapore were the most likely to share misinformation, at 21 per cent.

The results found that survey participants from all eight countries who experience social media fatigue are more likely to fail to consider the misinformation they encounter.

The researchers further investigated how cognitive and narcissistic traits affected the relationship between social media fatigue and sharing misinformation, and found that individuals with higher narcissistic tendencies are more likely to perceive the misinformation as accurate and share it on social media when fatigued.

“Whether someone from Singapore with social media fatigue shares misinformation depends on whether he thinks the misinformation is accurate,” he said.

The researcher’s co-author, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR SAIFUDDIN AHMED from Nanyang Technological University’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, said the study’s findings are particularly relevant for misinformation.

“It is essential to study cognitive ability and narcissism in conjunction, as they can offer important insights into the psychology of misinformation belief and sharing, allowing academics and policymakers to propose strategies to minimise the harmful impact of misinformation,” he said.

“This tendency to share misinformation is particularly relevant for misinformation that is often characterised by sensational and controversial content eliciting strong emotional reactions from the audience,” he added.

Prof Saifuddin noted that excessive fatigue may also amplify impulsivity — or the tendency to act without thinking — among narcissists with low cognitive ability.

“He said: “Narcissists prefer immediate rewards and satisfaction rather than delayed gratification. Thus, it is likely that when accompanied by high fatigue and limited cognitive ability, narcissists do not make sound judgments about misinformation and share it because of their impulsive nature.”

With millions of users relying on social media as a source of news and entertainment and as a mode of communication, addressing social media fatigue and its consequences is imperative, said the researchers.

“The findings that individuals with particular personality and cognitive traits are more susceptible to misinformation propagation than others suggest the need for interventions tailored to specific groups rather than one-size-fits-all approaches,” the researchers added.

They also recommended that besides regulations to restrict the spread of misinformation and raising digital literacy, policymakers and social media companies should also adopt interventions aimed at reducing social media fatigue.

For example, interventions tailored to specific groups rather than one-size-fits-all approaches, the researchers added.

This will not only directly address the issue of fatigue but may also limit misinformation propagation because of the fatigue, they said.

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