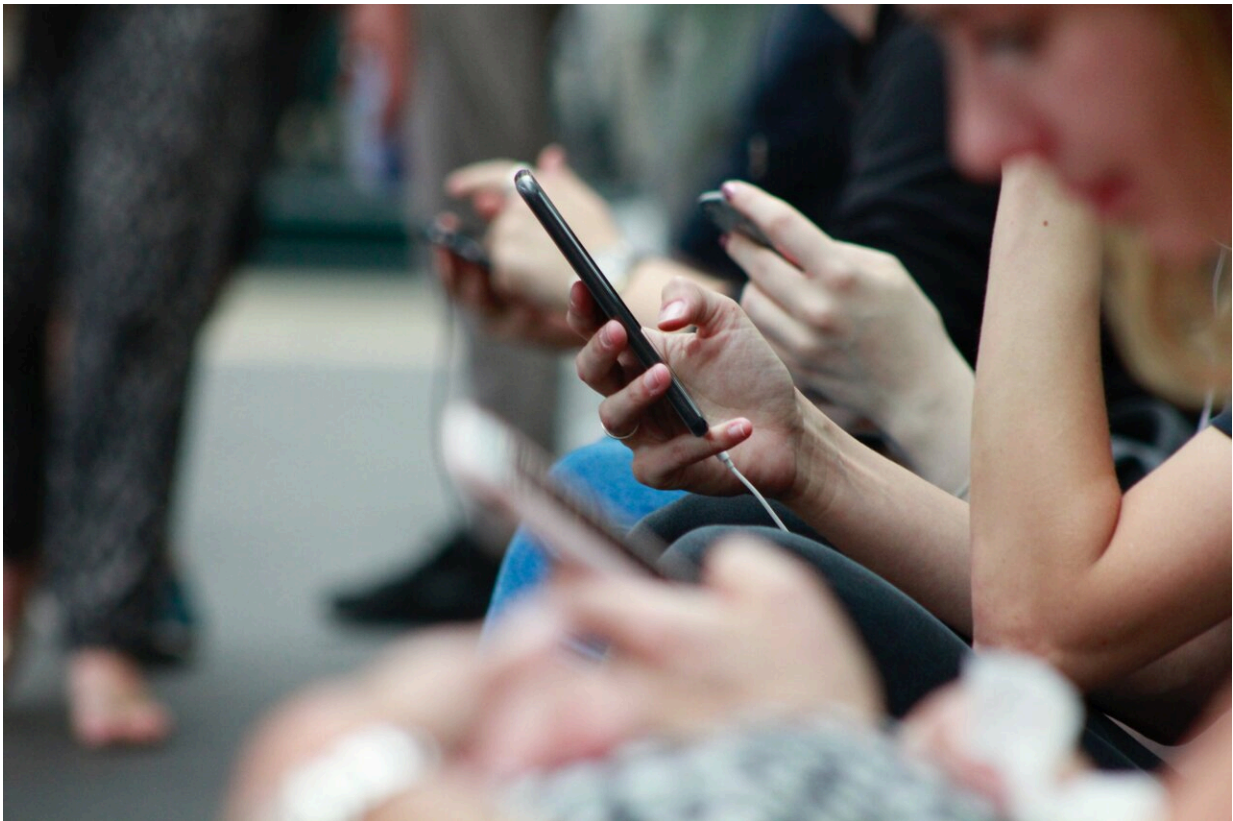


No, sharing that article doesn't make you an 'expert,' say real experts

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Have you reposted or retweeted an article on social media without reading it first?

Researchers at the University of Texas at Austin found that sharing articles on [social media](#), whether we've read them or not, can make us think we know more about them than we actually do. The findings were recently published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

Adrian Ward, an assistant professor of marketing at UT Austin, said sharing articles online can cause us to assume an "expert" identity, making us overconfident of our knowledge in ways that can affect our behavior, too. The researchers' findings have important implications in a world where much of the information we consume comes to us in the form of a tweet, post or TikTok.

"You might be able to say, 'It doesn't matter if people think I know about this. I know I really don't,'" said Ward, an author on the study. "Over time, you might actually come to think that you really do know about this stuff, because you [share](#) it online."

The social media 'virus'

According to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey, 72% of American adults, and 84% of adults aged 18-29, said they used [social media sites](#). A majority of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram users said they visited those apps at least once per day.

A few years ago, Ward attended a talk where a computer scientist compared the spread of information on the Internet to the spread of diseases like the flu. One person has a piece of knowledge and can share it to "infect" other people who then continue the chain.

Ward felt like something was missing in that explanation.

"I was like, I don't think that everybody who is sharing content is actually reading or processing that content," he said. "A lot of times, you just

share or retweet."

Ward wondered what a disease "carrier" might look like on social media: someone who spreads information without actually possessing the knowledge. Would people who shared articles on social media without reading them have some "symptom," like thinking they actually knew the information presented in the article? And if so, why?

I'm the expert, it's me

Ward and his team set up a series of experiments to figure out whether people shared content on social media without reading it and how that affected their knowledge.

In one study, researchers showed 98 college students online news articles and allowed them to read and share to their liking. Then they assessed the participants' objective knowledge—how much they knew about the articles. And their subjective knowledge—how much they thought they knew.

The researchers discovered a pattern. People who shared content had higher subjective knowledge, or thought they knew more about the article, whether they'd read the story or not.

Ward and his team ran follow-up studies to figure out why this increase in perceived knowledge happened. They discovered an interesting result in a study with 217 college students.

When participants shared articles under someone else's name, their subjective knowledge didn't increase: The effect only appeared when participants' names were attached to their share. This told Ward that participants' sharing behavior was causing them to internalize something about themselves.

"When we share stuff," Ward said, "we are proclaiming, in some ways, that we know about it."

When we see articles that our friends have shared on social media, we assume our friends know what they're talking about. So when we share articles ourselves, we give ourselves that "expert" identity, too, even when we haven't read what we're sharing.

Ward and his team found that this "expert effect" impacted participants' behavior, too. They asked 300 active Facebook users to read an article on investing, and had them share the article or not. Then they had the participants conduct a retirement planning simulation where they could distribute their money between riskier stocks or safer bonds.

The participants who shared the articles made riskier decisions than those who didn't share.

This was a novel finding to David Dunning, a professor in the University of Michigan's psychology department who was not involved with the study. He said that other researchers have examined the idea of feeling more knowledgeable about a subject than we actually are, but that this is one of the first to explore that phenomenon in Internet and social media use.

"[The study] shows a way in which social media can not only impact our behavior, but ultimately what we believe about ourselves, what we believe about our expertise," Dunning said. "You could change people's actual behavior based on their self-concepts, because of something they did on the Internet."

How do I use social media responsibly?

Ward said that our [social media accounts](#) don't expose us to all sides of

the story equally. We're likely to see content on our feeds that agrees with what we believe, and if we continue to share it without reading, we may continue to feel strongly that we know what's going on without actually having that knowledge.

And, we miss the opportunity to engage with topics or articles that aren't aligned with our beliefs.

Guy Golan, an associate professor at Texas Christian University who studies social media, said one way we can increase our social media literacy is by taking our time with it.

"When we consume online information, most people make a decision about the content that they're viewing within a few seconds, nanoseconds," said Golan, who was not involved with Ward's study.

"And I think the first initial step is to encourage people to spend a little more time with the information."

Golan said that before sharing an article on social media, people can ask themselves three key questions. What's the source of this information? Can I trust it? And is there enough information in the headline for me to pass it on to someone else?

Twitter encourages taking a pause by asking users if they want to read an article first before hitting the retweet button. However, it's a difficult thing to do, considering how quick our social media interactions can be—during a five-minute break from work, or a late-night doomscroll.

As for Ward, he's pretty inactive on social media, besides a Twitter account he uses to keep up to date with soccer news. He felt it was taking over his life: He recalled a time he stood in the shower, planning the photo he wanted to take for Instagram at an outing that would take place later that afternoon.

"I found that [social media apps] were directing my thought and attention and energy ... so I had to cut it out and see if I missed it," he said. "And it turns out I didn't."

More information: Adrian F. Ward et al, I share, therefore I know? Sharing online content - even without reading it - inflates subjective knowledge, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1321](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1321)

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