

Trust issues: Users more gullible when they customize their technology

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Technology may have helped turn users into their own information gatekeepers, but they may not necessarily make better, more informed decisions with that data, according to researchers.

In a study, users who customized an online news portal based on their personal interests were less systematic in processing the [information](#) on that portal compared to those who modified the site as directed by the researchers, according to S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory. "What this suggests is that if you're not someone who tinkers with the settings of your social media pages or the technologies that you use and, instead, just go with the default, you scrutinize the messages and advertisements carefully," said Sundar. "However, if you are someone who customizes or decorates your pages to project your identity, then you are more willing to buy into anything that comes into that space."

He added that this effect may be related to the users' perception that when they customize technology tools, they transition from identifying as a consumer of the information to identifying themselves as the source of the information. This "self-as-source" perception could make them less critical of the messages, said Sundar, who worked with Hyunjin Kang, assistant professor in communication and information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

"Historically, in mass communication, sources are journalists, editors

and the media elites, but in modern digital communications, the user himself or herself becomes the source," said Sundar. "When a person customizes, the self becomes the source."

While the study was carried out on an online portal, the researchers suggest that a range of online customization actions—from choosing apps for a smart phone to picking a nickname on an Amazon.com profile—could prompt a similar mental shortcut to automatically trust information.

"All of this can make you feel that you are the source, so that anything that comes into that space, whether it's an ad or a promotion for a product, might be more persuasive and people would be more likely to buy into that message," said Kang. "And that's true especially with a lot of user-generated content—Facebook pages, for example—a lot of ads come on the Facebook feeds, so you're less likely to counter-argue if you customize your Facebook page a lot."

The researchers recruited 146 subjects to use a customizable web portal to create their own page. The portal allowed the users to choose applications and various design options.

Users were separated into four different conditions. Two groups—high self-as-source—were able to design their own pages, while the other two groups—low self-as-source—were asked to model their pages after a provided design. Each group was then divided into a group that received a health message from a credible source and one that received a health message from a source with low credibility. In the high credibility version, a doctor provided the information. In the low credibility version, a non-expert was the source of the messages. The messages were either about the health implications of using sunscreen or on the health effects of drinking milk.

The researchers measured the level of the participant's identity, perceived from the portal through a series of questions. For example, the participants who designed their own pages were more likely to agree with statements such as "I think the interface is a true representation of who I am" and "I feel the website represents my core personal values." Participants with a higher level of identity were more likely to consider the health messages persuasive.

Sundar cautions that advertisers and communicators could see the research as a way to better deliver messages, however, there are ethical considerations. Users may be lured into impulse purchases and other risky behaviors by advertisements going into their individualized spaces, he added.

"We want people to know that they are more prone to accept marketing appeals that appear in devices and sites they customize," said Sundar. "Users can be socially influenced because they are vulnerable when their identities become more wrapped up in the information environment."

The researchers reported their findings in the current issue of *Media Psychology*.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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