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Energy Information Sharing in Social Networks: The Roles of Objective Knowledge and Perceived Understanding

Whether, when, or how people share energy-related information with peers or family members are crucial questions insofar as such exchange is potentially vital to the spread of key messages and at least theoretically facilitated by social media. We do not know, for example, whether an increase in objective energy knowledge would increase information sharing or whether other factors, such as whether people see energy as a comprehensible topic relevant to everyday life, also play a role. Using 2011 national survey data from U.S. residents (n = 816), we predicted energy information sharing as a function of objective knowledge, perceived understanding, and other variables. Following consultation with the U.S. Department of Energy and building on past research, we developed an 11-item energy knowledge index. We also measured agreement that energy is a topic that people like the respondent can understand, frequency of sharing of information about energy use or energy conservation in the last month, education, age, objective ability to interpret an energy bill, and presence of children in the household. Our final regression model underscored the importance of assessing not only objective energy knowledge but also perceived understanding, as both are equally predictive of energy information sharing frequency, with $\beta = .09$, $p < .05$, for objective knowledge and $\beta = .11$, $p < .01$, for perceived understanding. Education bore a negative relationship with sharing, $\beta = -.09$, $p < .05$, and having a teenager in one's household positively predicted energy information sharing, $\beta =. 08$, $p <. 05$.