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EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFORMATION ON INTERPERSONAL TRUST IN VIRTUAL WORK PARTNERS

Hugo Watanuki and Renato Moraes

Abstract

This developmental paper aims to start an exploratory investigation regarding the impact of social media information on interpersonal trust in virtual work partners. The potential impact will be examined via the lens of three key social theories used for studying virtual teams in Information System (IS) research. An initial theoretical model is proposed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: Interpersonal trust, Social media, Virtual work

1.0 Introduction

Consider the following scenario in a typical workplace environment: individual A has a work partner – individual B – with whom interactions occur exclusively via Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools. Since the two individuals have never met face to face, and because most of the communication between them in the workplace is task-related; individual A decides to review individual's B profile in social media technologies – such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter – to know more about the work partner. Can the information individual A acquire via social media technologies impact his/her trust in individual B? If so, what elements explain the impact?

These are the main questions this early research paper aims to explore. In formal terms, the objective of this paper is to start an exploratory investigation regarding the impact of social media information on interpersonal trust in virtual work partners.

According to Söllner et al. (2016), so far, most of the Information Systems (IS) research on trust relationships between people have been divided into clusters of studies that focus on trust i) within virtual teams, ii) buyer-seller-like relationships in e-commerce, and iii) among users of online social networks. The few reported studies that have tried to explore inter-effects between clusters i) and iii) in the workplace have either not been conclusive (Kuo and Thompson, 2014) or didn't focus on trust as the ultimate goal (Cao et al., 2012). This paper suggests that IS researchers can be more successful in addressing this gap in trust research by using a comprehensive theoretical framework.

2.0 Theoretical background

This chapter explores the potential inter-effects between the concepts of interpersonal trust and social media technologies in the context of virtual workplace relationships.

2.1 Trust in virtual work partners

Trends like globalization coupled with advances of ICT tools in the last decades, have pushed companies to move away from a collaboration model based on human resources located within the same physical location and increasingly exposed their employees to collaborate via ICT with virtual partners without their visual proximity (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002; Schiller and Mandwivalla, 2007).

When two virtual work partners need to maintain a collaborative relationship, interpersonal trust between them is essential (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Kuo and Thompson, 2014). Interpersonal trust is defined by McAllister (1995) as “the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another” (p. 25). Therefore, in a dyadic relationship trust involves two specific parties: a trusting party (trustor) and a party to be trusted (trustee).

Interpersonal trust on the trustor side typically develops via a combination of two processes: constructive interactions with the trustee and assessment of trustee’s interpersonal cues that indicate trustworthiness. Whereas the first process tends to contribute to the affective foundations of interpersonal trust, the latter supports its cognitive foundations. Therefore, interpersonal trust is frequently approached as a multidimensional concept (Bente et al., 2008; Gefen and Straub, 2004; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002; McAllister, 1995).

Though important, interpersonal trust between virtual work partners can be difficult to establish given the constrained context of a virtual relationship. Elements that facilitate trust building during face-to-face interactions, such as social dialogs and opportunities to monitor each other’s behaviour, may not be present for virtual work partners (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002; Kuo and Thompson, 2014).

Given that social bonds and availability of cues about the trustee tend to be scarce in a virtual workplace environment, social media seems to be an interesting source of additional information for trustors to interact with and assess trustees’ characteristics (Kuo and Thompson, 2014).

2.2 The effect of social media technologies

Social media technologies can be conceptualized as an IS artefact consisting of three components: the technological, supporting social interactions; the informational, consisting of user generated digital content; and the social, involving communication and collaboration among people (Spagnoletti et al., 2015; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016). Popular examples of social media technologies are Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (Jahng and Littau, 2016; Kuo and Thompson, 2014; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016).

Social media technologies provide individuals with the possibility to exchange information in various forms, comprising not only the user generated digital content (Lim and Van der Heide, 2014; Spagnoletti et al., 2015), but also the perception of the social interaction (Jahng and Littau, 2016; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016); which can potentially influence interpersonal trust for real life relationships (Kuo and Thompson, 2014).

This potential influence can be explored via three social theories commonly used for virtual team research in the IS domain (Schiller and Mandwivalla, 2007): social presence theory, social information processing theory, and social identity or deindividuation theory.

First, social presence theory (SPT) (Short et al., 1976; Schiller and Mandwivalla, 2007) suggests that the awareness of others social participants' interactions (i.e., social presence) can be augmented in communication via ICT tools as more channels become available for the nonverbal cues. A high degree of social presence is important for the development of trust since the trustor's perception of human interactions with the trustee is a precondition for trust (Vries, 2006), especially its affective dimension (Bente et al., 2008; Gefen and Straub, 2004; McAllister, 1995). Despite the limited presence of actual human contact in virtual workplace environments, previous research has suggested that social presence can be embedded in technology artefacts, such as websites, via images and biographical information that convey sense of personal, sociable and sensitive human contact (Bente et al., 2008; Gefen and Straub, 2004; Jahng and Littau, 2016; Vries, 2006). This is in line with the informational component of social media technologies whose focus is on user-created content, such as personal profiles, text, photographs, and video streams (Spagnoletti et al., 2015; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016).

Second, social information processing theory (SIPT) (Walther, 1992; Schiller and Mandwivalla, 2007) proposes that when communicating solely via ICT tools in which nonverbal cues are not available, individuals adapt and use available information to form impressions and evaluate others. SIPT suggests that, in virtual environments where nonverbal communication cues are often not available, people tend to rely on peripheral social information, such as language, written attitude, and self-disclosure to form impressions about others (Lim and Van der Heide, 2014; Jahng and Littau, 2016; Walther, 1992). In that sense, social media technologies provide users with generous opportunities to disclose information about other individuals (Spagnoletti et al. 2015; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016). The way these additional cues can affect interpersonal trust will depend if they make salient aspects of personal identity or social identity (Tanis and Postmes, 2005).

Regarding personal identity, previous research has suggested that even relatively minimal information, such as an individual's profile information in social media can function as a set of cues to better evaluate professional credentials (Lim and Van der Heide, 2014; Jahng and Littau, 2016), which in turn can help foster cognition-based component of trust (Bente et al., 2008; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002; McAllister, 1995).

As for social identify, according to social identity or deindividuation (SIDE) theory (Spears and Lea, 1992; Schiller and Mandwivalla, 2007), in environments where individuating cues about others are limited, individuals categorize themselves as part of social groups based on the information available by other sources. Therefore, in virtual environments, when trustee's cues to shared social identity with the trustor are available, such as common interests, experiences, values, and demographic traits; they may accentuate the perception of similarity to a social group and enhance trustor's feelings of attraction and identification toward the trustee (Tanis and Postmes, 2005; Vries, 2006). These are elements that can help foster both affective and cognition-based components of trust (McAllister, 1995; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002; Lu et al., 2010).

The proposed relationships described above are illustrated in Figure 1.

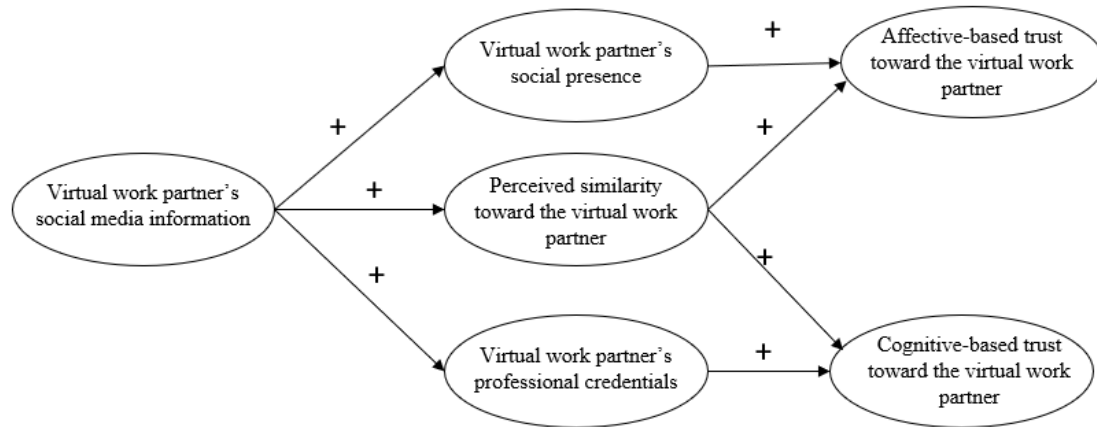


Figure 1. Theoretical model proposed.

3.0 Concluding remarks and next steps

This early research paper aims to start an exploratory investigation regarding the impact of social media information on interpersonal trust in virtual work partners. By considering a wider theoretical framework in comparison to previous studies, an initial set of relationships were proposed.

As next steps on this research, the theoretical model needs to be empirically validated. Given the exploratory nature of the model, the current plan is to conduct a survey among professionals and evaluate results via second-generation multivariate techniques, such as Structural Equation Modelling. First, moderating and control variables need to be determined and proper operationalization of all concepts in the model need to be established.

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