

A Study of the Antecedents of Trust in Social Media Posts

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Abstract

Access to information and information sharing is an important motivation for people to join Social Networking Sites (SNS). The social media posts are one of the primary information sources shared in such sites. In this study, we propose factors that represents the antecedents of trust in SNS posts. We expect to find that familiarity with the sender of the post, disposition to trust, source credibility, and endorsement are the antecedents to creating trust. In addition, we suggest that involvement in the topic moderates the effect of source credibility, disposition to trust, and endorsement on trust in the post.

Keywords

Trust, social media, elaboration likelihood model, social networking sites, misinformation.

Introduction

Social Networking Sites (SNS) remain the most preferred means of group communication on the Internet. SNSs provide a worldwide communication conduit for like-minded groups that form around specific goals or interests. Perhaps the most popular SNS, Facebook, maintains well over a billion users since its introduction in February 2004. Facebook is currently the most visited SNS worldwide (Fowler, 2012). This massive adoption of Facebook and increasing number of users coupled with Facebook's substantial web traffic demonstrates the potential of a SNS to impact worldwide events and effect change in many realms, such as the environment, politics, and other social causes. A majority of this change is achieved through sharing of information and news from trusted sources such as frequented sites, friends and followers well-known within a particular SNS community.

In general, people join groups for reasons such as a feeling of belonging and affiliation, information sharing, and helping each other for various purposes such as exchanging information and maintaining long term relationships (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Similarly, by joining a SNS, individuals seek information, social support, friendship, and recreation. Therefore, access to information and information sharing is an important motivation for people to join a SNS. Most of the SNS information is shared from trusted group members' posts and enriched via resulting group interactions.

These interactions play a critical role in group cohesion. Past research demonstrates the importance of trust in interpersonal interactions (e.g., Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; McAllister, 1995). Similar findings were reflected in other web usage studies for both group dynamics and transactional information (e.g., Gil & Artz, 2007). In the late 90s and early 00s, the studies addressed trust in ecommerce transactions as well (e.g., Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky, & Saarinen, 1999; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002).

During the evolution of world wide web, one of the important research concerns was increasing trust in web usage (e.g., Gil and Artz 2007). While there have been a plethora of studies in the area of trust in contexts such as e-commerce (e.g., Jarvenpaa et al. 1999; McKnight et al. 2002), the concept of trust in interpersonal relationships mediated via the Web has not been sufficiently studied. To date, there are no significant research approaches that study the factors that affect peoples' trust in their interpersonal SNS interactions. In other words, the research question we are trying to address is: What are the antecedents of trust in social media posts?

Literature Review

Trust is defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party” (Mayer et al. 1995 p. 712). Trust as a cognitive component consists of several beliefs (Anderson and Narus 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997). Trust can also be split into two different types (Panteli and Sockalingam 2005). The first type is dispositional trust which is mainly motivated by faith in humanity (McKnight et al. 1998). A second type of trust is conditional trust. Conditional trust usually can be found in the initial period of a relationship when there are no cues for distrust (Panteli and Sockalingam 2005). While a number of factors such as technical, psychological, and sociological factors do affect trust, the role of ethical factors on trust also needs to be considered when discussing challenges (Argandoña 1999).

Trust issues are critical challenges for Web-based systems (Berners-Lee et al. 2006; Pavlou 2003; Rubin and Geer 1998). Trust in websites has been extensively studied in the context of ecommerce as an important predictor of online shopping (Corbitt et al. 2003; Gefen 2000; Gefen et al. 2003; Kim et al. 2008; Pavlou 2003; Suh and Han 2003). According to Flavián et al. (2006) trust consists of three user perceptions regarding honesty, benevolence, and competence of the trust target. Different factors such as perceived security control (Ray et al. 2011) and social interaction ties (Tsai and Ghoshal 1998) affect trust in websites, as does usability and user satisfaction (Flavián et al. 2006).

Two domains cover the concept of credibility as a trust indicator in news media: source credibility and medium credibility. Source credibility is the way a communicator's characteristics affect the process of the message being delivered while medium credibility focuses on the channel's credibility through which the message is delivered (Kiousis 2001). Adding to the concepts of credibility, Metzger et al. (2003) argue that the concept of credibility is important in three domains: source, message, and media. They posit that because of lack of control over news media content, media customers are responsible for validating credibility in these three domains.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) also addresses the concept of message influence in communication environments. The ELM explains how people process messages that aim to convince them (Bhattacharjee and Sanford 2006) via a central or peripheral route. In the central route a person who receives the message usually assesses the quality aspects of the message. This route demands high cognitive effort. Conversely, the peripheral route does not require much cognitive effort (Cheung et al. 2012).

Research Model and Hypotheses

Based on ELM, Groves et al. (2003) argues that individuals who have more topical interest would spend higher amount of cognitive effort compared to others with no interest. In this study, we argue that involvement in the topic could be an important factor that moderates the effect of disposition to trust, source credibility, sender credibility, and endorsement on trust in news. Our research model reflects this in figure 1.

A SNS user who is familiar with a person who shares a post, based on the previous SNS activities, could harbor positive or negative trust relationships. If the reader believes that the trustee always shares the truth within the SNS, the reader would trust the post. On the other hand, if previous experiences indicate that the particular user always puts forth rumors, the poster's SNS posts would not be trustworthy. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Familiarity with the sender of the post positively affects trust in the SNS news post.

Disposition to trust is an important trust antecedent which is not based on previous interactions (Gefen 2000). This factor is more important in the first interaction stages in which trustor and trustee are not familiar with each other. Although the effect is stronger for new participants, it is still significant for repeated uses (Gefen et al. 2003). When SNS users have stronger disposition to the trust in general they will more easily trust the poster. Therefore, when an individual has a strong disposition to trust an SNS user, they tend to trust SNS posts. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: Stronger disposition to trust in SNS users positively affects their trust in the news posted in SNS.

Most of the SNS posts originates from another website. When SNS users share them, other SNS users are able to see the original source. Credibility of the news source is specified as an important factor that affects audiences news trust (Hovland and Weiss 1951). Source credibility consists of two parts: expertise and trustworthiness of the source (Giffin 1967). Expertise of the source could be an important factor for SNS users to trust the news. If individuals see a post which is posted by an expert in that area, they will trust the news more compared to an individual without any expertise and professional experience. In addition, when the SNS users believe in the trustworthiness and expertise of the source of the post they will trust in the post more. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3: Higher primary source credibility of the posts on SNS positively affects trust in the news posted in SNS.

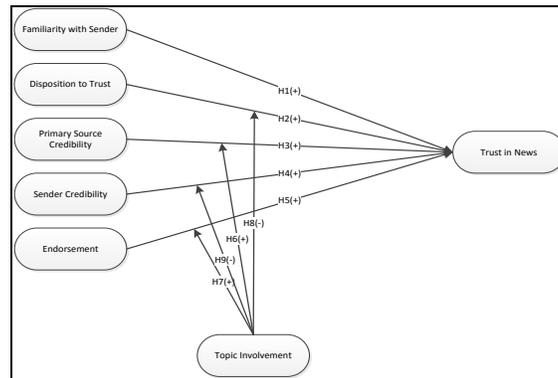


Figure 1. Research Model

H4: Higher sender credibility of the posts on SNS positively affects trust in the news posted in SNS.

Endorsement is an important antecedent of trust for e-commerce customers (Thevathayan et al. 2013). Word of Mouth (WoM) also impacts customers' trust in the vendor and product (e.g., Awad and Ragowsky 2008). One of the features of almost every SNS is the post's comment section. These comments are an important source of information that SNS users use in order to see whether the post is trustworthy or not. If readers see that other people endorse the post, they will trust the post more than when there are negative comments. Therefore, endorsement of the post by others will increase trust in the post:

H5: Others' endorsements of the SNS posts positively affect trust in the news posted in SNS.

We use involvement as a broader concept that reflects the interest toward the post's topic. Involvement is defined as "person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests" (Zaichkowsky 1985 p. 342). When readers are interested in a topic they will act in a different manner (Groves et al. 2004). Past studies indicate that involvement has a moderating effect in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (e.g., Sussman and Siegal 2003a; Zhang and others 2003). These studies argue that involvement moderates the effect on the message's persuasiveness. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) suggest that in different situations a message could have different levels of influence. They argue that different individuals or contexts may change the influence of a message (Sussman and Siegal 2003b). According to ELM, individuals who have more involvement in the topic of the message will spend more cognition to evaluate the message (Groves et al. 2004). Higher involvement of the message's recipient in the topic motivates them to increase elaboration of the message (Sussman and Siegal 2003a). Hence, we posit:

H6: SNS user's involvement in the post's topic moderates the effect of primary source credibility on the user's trust in the post such that the effect will be stronger for the higher user's involvement.

H7: SNS user's involvement in the post's topic moderates the effect of endorsement on the user's trust in the post such that the effect will be stronger for the higher user's involvement.

Low involvement in the message's topic demotivates the message's recipient; therefore, the recipient will spend lower cognitive effort to evaluate the message (Sussman and Siegal 2003a). When the SNS user has low involvement with the post topic they will spend lower cognitive effort and check a limited number of cues in order to validate the post's trustworthiness. On the other hand, when the SNS user has high involvement in the post's topic they will not spend cognitive effort to investigate the primary source. In such a situation, the person trusts in the cues that demand lower cognitive effort. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H8: SNS user's involvement in the post's topic moderates the effect of disposition to trust on user's trust in the post such that the effect will be stronger for lower user's involvement.

H9: SNS user's involvement in the post's topic moderates the effect of sender credibility on user's trust in the post such that the effect will be stronger for lower user's involvement.

Methodology and Expected Contribution

We will conduct a scenario-based experiment in order to measure the impact of the trust antecedents in the SNS post and the moderating effect of involvement in the post's topic coupled with the antecedents' effects. This study's results could have several implications for both academia and practitioners. In terms of theoretical contribution, this study applies the existing trust theories in the literature to measure trust in news shared in SNS. Our study is one of the first studies to empirically measure trust in SNS. Second, our research will apply ELM as a theoretical foundation to measure the effect of interest as well as topic trust. The findings could be applied to future research to study trust in communication contents. Third, the results of our study will indicate the importance of credibility that has been discussed in the literature. Since most of the SNS posts have different levels of sources (e.g., primary source, sender, etc.), we will examine credibility in these layers. Future studies could elaborate the concept of SNS credibility.

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