

## Chapter 18

# The Role of Communication in Online Trust: The Communicative Action Theory Contribution

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter aims at better understanding the behavior of the Internet user. It suggests studying the role of communication on the trust of Internet users towards commercial Websites. In order to realize this research, the authors mobilized the Communicative Action Theory of Jürgen Habermas (1987). Therefore, they have brought a new perspective in understanding online trust following action theory. For Habermas, communication is an action that depends on contextual, cultural, and human factors, which cannot be reduced to deterministic mechanisms. He deals with three types of action, which an actor might pursue following his interests, which can be instrumental, strategic, or emancipatory. The instrumental and strategic are purposive-rational actions, which aim at achieving success and at developing a calculated trust based on calculation of the advantages and the costs of the relation, whereas, the communicative action is coordinated by mutual understanding that allows the development of a relational trust based on social interactions. In communicative action, mutual understanding through language allows the social integration of actors and the coordination of their plans and their different interests. In this case, trust is based on a common definition of the situation and the resolution of conflicts of interests between actors. Internet is a medium of communication that can support the three kinds of action. The instrumental and strategic actions allow the development of calculated trust, whereas the communicative action allows the development of relational trust based on social interaction and mutual comprehension.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The literature on information systems, marketing and e-commerce highlights the critical role of trust in success of Business/Consumer relationships (Gefen et al. 2003; Chouk and Perrien, 2003, 2004, 2006; McKnight et al. 2002; Hoffman et al. 1999). According to several researchers, the lack of trust is the main reason of Internet users' reluctance towards online shopping. Kearney has concluded that 82% of online shoppers abandon shopping from the early stages of their visits to the Websites (Hausman and Siekpe, 2009). Quelch and Klein argue that '*trust is a critical factor in stimulating purchases over the Internet*' (cited by Corbitt et al. 2003, p.1). Online, the consumer cannot verify the quality of the offered products / services, and he cannot control the security of his personal and financial information. Thereby, he feels that his private life is totally dominated by Internet technology which exploits his vulnerability and protects the interest of the economic system (Salter, 2005). The opportunistic behavior of firms and the colonization of consumer's life world by the Web site explain his reject and his resistance from buying online.

Considering the prominent place of trust in Business/Consumer relationships, researches have focused on studying the determining factors of this phenomenon. One stream of search is characterized by a technological determinism highlighting the role of Websites' technical characteristics as perceived by Internet users (Gefen et al, 2003). Another stream deals with individual variables related to Internet user like psychological antecedents (Lundgren and Walczuch, 2004), familiarity with an Internet vendor, (Gefen, 2000; Bhattacharjee, 2002). Another research avenue was interested in the variables related to the merchant like organizational reputation (McKnight et al. 2002) and perceived size of the organization (Jarvenpaa et al. 2000). Some researchers were concerned with the pivotal role of communication in the development of online trust. Morgan and Hunt (1994), highlight that communication is a very important factor for trust development. These authors have defined communication as the formal and informal sharing of relevant, secure, and real time information between a consumer and a vendor. Chouk and Perrien, (2004) have shown the role of third parties in influencing user's attitude and trust development towards an E-merchant. However, most researchers were focused on technical and persuasive aspects of online communication and neglect to conceive it as an action that implies all participants (users and merchant) in a social interaction. According to Shih, (2004), the purchase of an online product implies intense information communication, and an interactive behavior between firms and Internet users.

Following an instrumental rationality, the positivist approach of communication conceives the commercial Web site as a technology that supports the egocentric needs and the utilitarian interests of the parties (Firms and Internet users), protecting the capitalism ideology as the dominant class (Salter, 2005). It is a medium used by the firms to colonize the Internet users' world and to directly change their attitudes and behaviors. Along those lines, most of commercial Websites conceive the communication as one-way directed by the firm towards the Internet user where the technical features of the Website are used as a means to manipulate the Internet users' behavior. Kozinets, (2002), assumes that the market has for a long time dominated the consumer's identity who is considered passive and devoid of expression. With the theory of communicative action of Jürgen Habermas, (1987), there has been a major paradigm shift. The conviction that technology directly influences the users' behavior gives place to a new conception according to which the Internet user is considered as an actor who can accept, refuse and even criticize the received message from the commercial Website. Indeed, the interactivity which characterizes commercial Websites support new forms of communication in two directions, exceeding the traditional and the determinist forms of communication between the firms and Internet users. Among

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