

Chapter 5.18

Trust in Social Networking

Definitions from a Global, Cultural Viewpoint

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to understand the trust in social network services, where users post their personal information online to everyone with or without any specific relationships. Many definitions of trust were examined through a literature review in electronic commerce and virtual community areas, and it was found that most of them were based on a specific relationship, such as a buyer-seller relationship. However, one concept of trust—generalized trust, also known as dispositional trust—was found to best fit the situation of social networking. Generalized trust in social networking is further discussed from a cultural viewpoint. As an example, a Japanese SNS, Mixi, was analyzed in detail. Future research direction on trust in social networking is discussed as well.

INTRODUCTION

Trust has been conceptualized by previous research in a variety of ways ... and researchers have long acknowledged the confusion in the field. (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003, p. 55)

There have been many studies done on the issues surrounding trust online. In a global environment, much of the recent research concerning trust has dealt with e-commerce and collaboration efforts occurring over the Internet (e.g., Ba & Pavlou, 2002; Dellarocas, 2003; Gefen et al., 2003; Backhouse, Hsu, Tseng, & Baptista, 2005; Salam, Iyer, Palvia, & Singh, 2005; Chow & O, 2006). These studies tend to define trust in the context of reliability and the predictability of the business or person to perform as expected (Gefen et al., 2003). In these definitions, the object of trust is an interpersonal relationship with either a specific person or a specific business.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-104-9.ch012

Social networking refers to a category of online applications, also known as social network services (SNSs), that help connect friends, business partners, or other individuals together (Alabaster, 2006). With the relatively recent rise in popularity of social network services, such as MySpace, which currently has over 100 million accounts, users of social networking are giving out personal information to the public at large with little, if any, expectation of the future performance or predictability of another person or business. Although users seem to trust something, the definitions of trust mentioned above do not seem to be applicable to SNSs.

This study will examine trust literature for the different types of trust mentioned and see whether the current studies are applicable for studying trust in social networking. Additionally, since what seems to be being trusted by someone who posts their own personal information online to a SNS is the public at large, this study will examine if there are some differences between cultures on how much and what type of information a person is willing to share in this type of situation.

This study is important because there is not enough research involving trust in social networking or research that takes into account cultural differences in social networking. With the rapid rise of SNSs, trust is of interest to: 1) users of such applications because they may want to know more about the issues of information disclosure to the public; 2) marketers who are preparing to mine SNSs for data, because they may want to know about cultural differences in the type and quality of the data they mine; 3) academic researchers examining SNSs, because they may need a new perspective of trust.

BACKGROUND

Social Network Services

The term “social network” originates from Barnes’ work in the 1950s in Sociology, and originally referred to an informal system of personal contacts that cut across organizational boundaries (Barnes, 1987). In recent times, the term is being used to refer to online applications that connect individuals with family members and friends. Using blogs, chat rooms, e-mail, or instant messaging, users of social network services (SNSs) can communicate, either within a limited community, or with the world at large (Alabaster, 2006). One of the most popular SNSs today, MySpace, had 2.4 million members in November 2004 and 26.7 million a year later (Kornblum, 2006). One and a half more years, as of May 2007, when this chapter was written, the number is 192 million (Wikipedia, 2007). This popularity, especially among teenagers, is also drawing the attention of parents and schools who are concerned about the nature of some of the pages on the site and the safety of young users who give too much information about themselves (Kornblum, 2006). MySpace prohibits users under 14, but kids sometimes lie about their ages. Still, they have probably learned a long list of important safety and privacy lessons already: buckle up; do not talk to strangers; hide your diary where your nosy brother cannot find it, and so forth, yet they have not probably learned another lesson: Do not post information about yourself online that you do not want the whole world to know (FTC, 2006).

There are certain degrees of trust involved in giving out information to the public, but as a review of the literature will show later in this study, the trust when applied to social networking is seemingly different from those types of trusts used for e-commerce and other traditional collaboration activities online. Like e-commerce sites, SNSs are a new phenomenon with limited bandwidth available for knowing or learning to trust the other

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