Chapter 15
The Role of Technology in the Development of Group Trust

Anita L. Blanchard
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

Lisa Slattery Rashotte
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors will elaborate a theoretical model for the development of group trust and the role that technology plays in that process. They first will articulate the particular nature of group trust, as opposed to individual trust or generalized trust. The authors then discuss the variables which affect group trust, such as sense of virtual community, entitativity, identity, and support. The authors will present a model that posits that technological features affect the commitment and attachment that lead to group trust. Technological features include group and personal identification cues (e.g., signature files, member activity). Future research directions utilizing this model are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Trust is an important component of online groups. Trust develops in these groups when the members feel as though they can rely on the information provided and believe in the other members. In this chapter, we are interested in examining how group trust develops in online groups that are supported by varying technologies in the forms of bulletin/discussion boards or newsgroups. We focus on these groups because they are a relatively common internet application and have a substantial history of use dating back to the first online communities (Finholt & Sproull, 1988; Rheingold, 1993; Sproull & Keisler, 1991). This provides us with a substantial body of knowledge within which to develop our conceptual model of trust and technology.

This chapter addresses the conceptual characteristics of the technologies and not the specific applications of the technologies. For example, in our model development, we will focus on the construct of identity technologies - of which signature files and group-specific emoticons are but two concrete examples. Our goal is to develop a theoretical model that will be applicable to bulletin boards and newsgroups but may also be applied to other

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-901-9.ch015

online groups which are either in existence or may emerge in the future (e.g., the groups forming on social networking sites like Facebook).

Overall, our model posits that technological features are one mechanism affecting how identity, structure, and interaction create the commitment and attachment that lead to group trust. Technological features can include identification cues (e.g., signature files, member activity), message organization structure, and moderation.

BACKGROUND

Trust and Online Research

In this chapter, we focus on group or social trust, as opposed to individual trust. Group trust is the belief that each member of a group "(a) makes good-faith efforts to behave in accordance with any commitments, (b) is honest in whatever negotiations preceded such commitments, and (c) does not take excessive advantage of another even when the opportunity is available" (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996, p. 303). Although trust can be examined between individuals, we feel that trust between members of a group, i.e., social trust (cf., Welch, et al., 2005), is of primary importance in understanding online *group* interactions. Social trust, as opposed to individual/interpersonal trust, is directed toward the group rather than specific individuals.

Trust requires risk (Gambetta, 1988; Luhmann, 1979; Sztompka, 1999). If members of a group do not perceive some risk in participating, there is no need for them to develop trust in the other group members. Risks in online groups include deception, embarrassment, and having someone take advantage of the member. Deception is an issue when a member is not participating truthfully about his or her identity. Deception in online groups is very upsetting to group members (Birchmeier, Joinson, & Dietz Uhler, 2005; Joinson & Dietz-Uhler, 2002; Utz, 2005). The popular media has also spent a great deal of time warning the public about the risks interacting with people on line who are deceiving them, some of whom are potentially malevolent (e.g., Schwartz, 2008).

Embarrassment occurs when members participate and then are either ignored or mocked by the rest of the group. One participant in a previous study described posting messages as broadcasting one's opinions to the group with a loudspeaker (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). If a member unintentionally violates the group's norms of conduct or expresses an unpopular opinion, he or she could be singled out by the group for unwanted negative attention.

Finally, members risk being taken advantage of if they continually give information and support, but never receive any in return. This violation of the near-universal norm of reciprocity (Goulder, 1960) could cause members to lose trust as they feel the group is taking advantage of them. This risk may also explain why some researchers and activists have such negative views about lurkers, members who read messages but who do not participate in group discussions.

We recognize that these risks are also possible in face-to-face (FtF) groups. However, all of these risks are at least as strong if not stronger online. The first risk, deception, is much more likely to be an issue online and represents the primary risk of online groups because of the limited amount of information interactants have about one another (other that what each chooses to provide to the group). In FtF groups, only those in the same physical proximity have the potential to cause another member embarrassment (Wellman & Guilia, 1999). Online, everyone has the potential to see someone called out for their behavior, even considerably after the fact, and thus cause the target to be embarrassed.

Now that we have established that trust is important in online groups, we can turn our attention to the antecedents of trust. We will discuss the variables which affect group trust, such as identity, structure, and interaction. Of course, we