



From virtual travelers to real friends: Relationship-building insights from an online travel community



Werner Kunz^{*}, Sukanya Seshadri¹

College of Management, University of Massachusetts, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125, USA

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ABSTRACT

The growing trend of online travel communities connects travelers worldwide. This study addresses whether or not these relationships lead to offline interactions. The theoretical framework reflects cue utilization theory, social balance theory, and uncertainty reduction theory. A field experiment examines responses from 293 travel community members. Results show individual reputation, online communication, and perceived similarity among travelers play significant roles in offline relationships. Trust and sympathy among community members mediate this decision process. Study results offer several managerial implications and highlight the importance of vivid and complete participation profile in social media. Moreover, finding the right tone for effective communication in online communities is critical.

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1. Introduction

The Internet substantially changed the travel industry over the last two decades. Customers easily access information and build new relationships using social media. Previously, companies typically employed traditional marketing channels to build customer relationships (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Today, companies also use social media to build these relationships.

Online communities offer a wide variety of possibilities to establish, maintain, and develop relationships between individuals and businesses. For tourists, online travel communities represent a growing trend (Bialski & Batorski, 2007). For example, the CouchSurfing.com web platform is an Internet service that connects travelers worldwide. Online encounters between travelers often lead to offline relationships (e.g., visiting each other's home city). In contrast with online match-making sites, a travel online community primarily shares trip experiences, not romantic matches (Whitty, Baker, & Inman, 2007). Prior research examines relationships among online community participants; however, a paucity of research exists regarding how online relationships might lead to offline relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Foster, Francescucci, & West, 2010; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Typically, these communities rely on preexisting, offline relationships (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn). Online communities likely help users build offline relationships with strangers as well.

This study identifies and investigates key conditions necessary for online travel community members to engage in an offline relationships.

The proposed framework builds on various theoretical approaches. According to the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), individuals follow risk-reducing steps in uncertain situations. Arguably, meeting a stranger online is such an uncertain situation. According to cue utilization theory, specific information serves as a proxy for other attributes (Olsen, 1977). Accessing online communities, individuals look for informational cues to make their decisions. Finally, Heider's (1946) Balance theory implies that individuals try to avoid imbalanced situations. Two people's views differing significantly cause imbalance and create anxiety. A field experiment with 293 CouchSurfing members tests the hypotheses. Results show that the community reputation, online communication behavior, and perceived similarities among travelers play significant roles building potential offline relationships. Trust and sympathy between members also mediate this process.

The present study contributes to online community research by explaining the transformation process, from online to offline relationships, in a global travel community. This study provides insights into how to build relationships through online communities that can lead to offline interactions (e.g., location, or event visit). These insights help practitioners to use global online communities more effectively.

2. Research background

2.1. Online community relationships

Prior research identifies several motives for community engagement. Findings suggest that social connections (i.e., keeping in touch with friends) and information sharing (e.g., events or gossip) are central reasons for online community engagement (Foster et al., 2010; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ridings & Gefen, 2006;

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 617 291 8736.

E-mail addresses: werner.kunz@umb.edu (W. Kunz), sukanya.seshadri@umb.edu (S. Seshadri).

¹ Tel.: +1 617 291 8736.

Sheldon, 2008). Thus, relationship building and information exchange serve as primary motives for online community participation.

The relationship partner or source of information need not be a close friend. Strangers (i.e., no preexisting relationship, or “latent ties”) also serve as valuable information providers. Prior research notes how people perceive information from strangers in general and in online environments (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Constant & Sproull, 1996; Weiss, Lurie, & MacInnis, 2008). For example, Brown and Reingen (1987) find that active information seeking (e.g., initiating an online conversation to obtain product information) likely occurs among weak rather than strong tie sources (close friends). Constant and Sproull (1996) show weak ties give useful advice; such usefulness largely stems from the expertise and experience of the weak tie source. Weiss et al. (2008) suggest past behavior guides information seekers’ judgments of information value. A fast response may be more valuable—clarifying information seekers’ problems sooner. Thus, strangers become valuable information sources and suggest a need to investigate requirements for building these relationships.

2.2. Online travel communities with strangers

Most online communities build on preexisting social relations (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) show that Facebook users prefer to search for people with whom they have offline relationships. In contrast, online travel community members are strangers; the community focuses on shared travel experiences. Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002) describe online travel communities as platforms for travelers to obtain trip information, find travel companions, provide travel tips, or simply share interesting experiences (e.g., CouchSurfing, TripAdvisor, WAYN). Members usually do not know one another in-person. On the other hand, online travel community members often share high levels of personal information (Sanchez-Franco & Rondan-Cataluña, 2010). In contrast to online matchmaking sites, a travel online community focuses primarily on shared travel experiences rather than romantic relationships (Whitty et al., 2007).

Bialski and Batorski (2007) show that “intense” exchange activities on CouchSurfing helps transform online to offline relationships. Their study does not consider exchange activity types, information cues community members use, or the time when they meet new people (i.e., strangers) on the platform and just start the relationship. Rosen, Lafontaine, and Hendrickson (2011) reveal that community members

who lack face-to-face meetings with other members suffer a lower sense of belongingness. On the flip side, a sense of community belongingness relates positively to greater attendance at offline gatherings. Finally, Wu and Chang (2005) find interactivity and trust are the key drivers of community flow experiences.

3. Framework of the hypotheses

This section develops a theoretical framework for achieving offline relationships. To establish offline relationships, travel community members must be willing to interact offline (e.g., meet at events, visit each other in their home towns). Such openness to offline interactions is to form an offline relationship and represents the dependent construct (see Fig. 1).

Due to the lack of face-to-face contact, an online community increases perceived relationship risk (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Uncertainty and equivocation reduction serve as primary goals for online community members (Weiss et al., 2008). Community members obtain information about other member from community profiles and the member’s past online behavior. As Ellison et al. (2007) note, online communities allow users to view one another’s personal information easily and “identify those who might be useful in some capacity (such as the math major in a required calculus class), thus providing the motivation to activate a latent tie” (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1162). Missing profile information raises a red flag. Either the person does not care about the community profile, or he is hiding important information.

Cue utilization theory posits specific information about a person serves as a proxy for other attributes (Olsen, 1977). People make inferences based on known attributes if specific information is not available (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Gurhan-Canli & Batra, 2004). For example, a person’s reputation comes from collective indicators based on a community’s value system (Kunz, Schmitt, & Meyer, 2011). Thus, some profile information reflects the person’s particular status and esteem in the community (e.g., number of friends or references, and membership years). A person’s community reputation affects interactions with other community members. If the focal person feels uncertain about the potential partner’s reputation, the interaction’s perception is riskier. H1: Willingness to participate in an offline relationship is stronger when the counterpart’s community reputation is good.

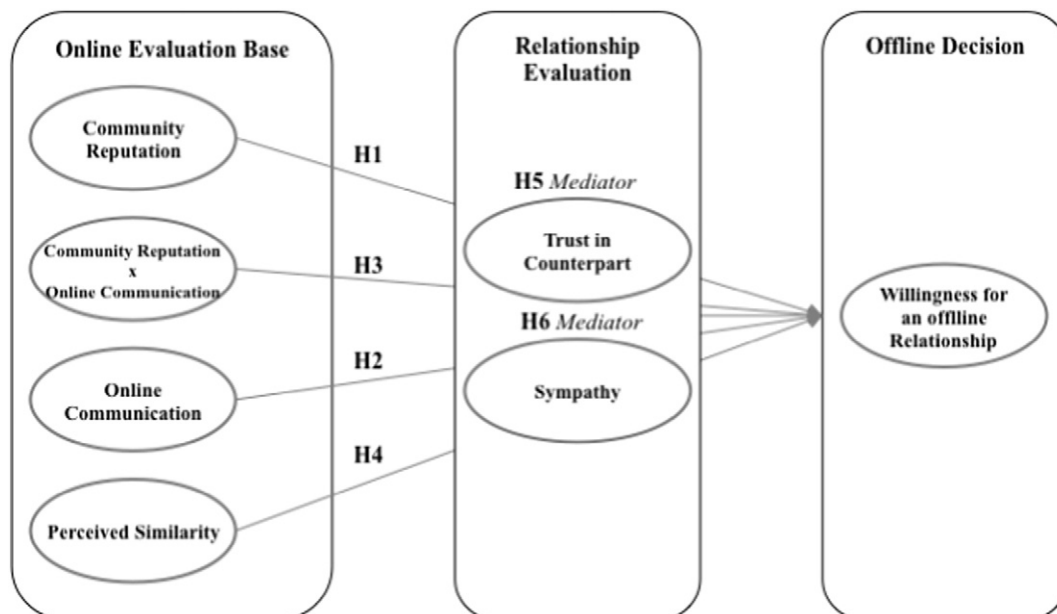


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

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