



# Understanding trust influencing factors in social media communication: A qualitative study



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## ABSTRACT

Based on five types of trust, this research explores trust influencing factors in peer-to-peer interpersonal communication, group communication and mass communication. Previous research has mainly focused on trust and the corresponding antecedents in electronic commerce communication and online collaboration. This study extends the literature on trust influencing factors in social media communication. A trust traffic light model is used to illustrate the importance of keywords, drawn from interviews with 115 participants who use WeChat frequently. Salient trust factors were found and further elaborated through qualitative analysis. Furthermore, we developed a trust cognitive onion model to illustrate the interactions of trust factors.

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## 1. Introduction

Virtual communication has become universal due to the wide use of social media allowing cyber citizens more freedom to share their opinions (Sarker, Ahuja, Sarker, & Kirkeby, 2011). Social media use has been defined as a particular consumption of digital media that provides a mechanism for users to connect, communicate, and interact with each other through social networking sites and instant messages (Correa, Hinsley, & De Zuniga, 2010). Many social media sites are primarily designed to facilitate communication among individuals and groups – for example, twitter, LinkedIn, Microblogs, WhatsApp, Line and WeChat, etc.

Compared with regular online communication – such as computer mediated communication (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995) – the participatory nature of social media entails that users get to know more acquaintances and get closer to the friends they already had through online interactions (Dewan & Ramaprasad, 2014). Valuable information can spread rapidly

through social media platforms, allowing users to expand and sustain their social networks. Moreover, the popularity of social media communication can be seen as viral dissemination of information, social media can reach more popularity compared with traditional media (Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012).

The main function of a social media platform is to develop and maintain mutual relationships through effective online communication. Online communication in social media may be affected by a variety of social factors impacting the development of mutual relationships (Pinjani & Palvia, 2013). For example, in online communication, the facial expressions of each person may be indiscernible and people may become distracted by other issues when communicating. A key indicator of human interactions is trust. Regardless of the problems with virtual communication, people still need to use it, and in order for their communication to be useful, they need to establish minimum levels of trust (Chien, Chen, & Wu, 2013). In addition, many of the traditional ways through which people establish bonds through physical contact and socializing are absent or at best limited in virtual interactions (Li, Hess, & Valacich, 2008). Trust may prevent the geographical distances of individuals from becoming psychological distances (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). Thus, building trust is of critical importance. For this reason we aim to focus on trust in our research on social media communication.

Previous studies have found that trust antecedents and factors vary based on the type of communication community (Cheng, Yin, Azadegan, & Kolfshoten, 2016; Chang, Cheung, & Tang, 2013; Gefen & Pavlou, 2012). Compared with traditional computer medi-

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ated communication, social media communication focused on the social ties and relationships, thus trust building is slightly different with other contexts (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014; Kimmel & Kitchen, 2014). Consequently, current research needs to be further refined. Moreover, current scientific knowledge on trust is largely based on empirical studies that investigate trust from an organizational and team perspective (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Nevertheless, trust is scarcely investigated from the individual perspective. Individual trust is the representation of conflicting priorities of an individual (Cheng & Macaulay, 2014). Organizational trust factors may not be suitable in the context of social media communication, which is composed of interpersonal interactions. Besides, despite the importance of trust in social media communication, there is little research on the cognitive mechanisms that influence trust. What factors eventually influence trust and in what way this influence unfolds is largely unknown. In view of these gaps, this paper contributes to the literature on trust factors in the online community (Kim & Ahmad, 2013; Luo, Li, Zhang, & Shim, 2010), and aims to explore trust influencing factors in social media social media communication. Our research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the individual trust influencing factors in social media communication?

RQ2: How could trust factors affect communications among various communication modes on social media sites?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides the background for this study, including a summary of the relevant studies that have been done on this topic. Then we present our research method and data collection approach. Next, we present and discuss the results of our study. We conclude this paper with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, the study's limitations, and directions for future research.

## 2. Research background

### 2.1. Trust and communication in online communities

Trust in online communities serves as a moderator that facilitates mutual communication and further leads to improved relationships (Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004; Shankar et al., 2002). In current studies, numerous researchers have attempted to investigate trust in various virtual communities. Generally speaking, studies have focused on three types of online communication.

The majority of studies are about trust in electronic commerce (E-commerce) transactions (Lim, Tan, Cyr, Pan, & Xiao, 2012), such as how to build customer trust when communicating with consumers (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003; Kim & Park, 2013; Pavlou, 2002), and how to maintain relationships of trust through online communication (Daim, Ha, & Reutiman, 2012; Kasper-Fuehrer & Ashkanasy, 2001). Generally, communications in e-commerce site consist of two parties, the buyer and the seller. The sellers provide e-service to the buyers through online communication, the role of communication is to enable smooth online transaction, and thus utilitarian value was required in e-commerce communication. Although interpersonal trust among the two parties was widely investigated (Palvia, 2009; Gefen et al., 2003), the emphases is more about business levels that help with marketing and customer retention issues.

Another type related to online communication occurs in the context of virtual collaboration. With the emergence of virtual collaboration, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) looked at the relationship between communication and interpersonal trust in global virtual teams, and proposed that communication behaviours facilitate trust early on, communication behaviours maintain trust later on, and member actions facilitate trust later on. Based on the the-

ory of virtual teams presented by Jarvenpaa et al. (1998), Walther and Bunz (2005) came up with six communication rules for virtual groups in computer mediated communication (Ou, Pavlou, & Davison, 2014); the results of rule measurements reveal correlations between trust and communication, and indicate that the problems virtual teams face could be ameliorated through communication rules.

However, trust is also an essential element of social media sites (Kim & Ahmad, 2013). Based on earlier studies, Trifunovic, Legendre, and Anastasiades, 2010 proposed that trust formation in social networks can be studied from the social context, in which friendship relies on explicit trust whereas contact relies on implicit trust, but in this study the emphasis is on social trust. What is more, studies regarding trust in social media isolate the relationship between trust and communication, ignoring the fact that a detailed understanding of trust contributes to smooth communication on social media platforms. Therefore, we aim to highlight the interrelationship of trust and communication, and to further investigate the facets that influence trust and lead to pleasant communication.

### 2.2. Communication in social media

In a satisfying social media communication, users are motivated to join social media platforms, keep strong ties with friends and strengthen their relationships with new acquaintances (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), and search for peer identification and a group sense of belongings in an online community (O'Leary, Wilson, & Metiu, 2014). Considering the fact that social media communication is a relatively new context for social interaction that is in need of research, we aim to investigate social media from the perspective of social media communication.

According to literature, there are three modes of communication: interpersonal communication (Greenberg, 1964), group communication (Chockler, Keidar, & Vitenberg, 2001) and mass communication (Griffin & McClish, 2011).

The first mode is interpersonal communication, which happens between two separate individuals when information is transmitted through point-to-point interaction (Hewes, 2013). Human sociality suggests that individuals have the desire to self-disclosure, to acquire peer identification (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). Interpersonal communication provides the chance for individuals to meet these needs. What is more, sociological scholars have suggested that the relationships between people can be divided into those that are based on strong connections and those that are based on weak connections. Frequent online interpersonal communication transforms weak connections into strong connections (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011).

The second mode is group communication. Group communication on social media sites refers to the communication behaviour of groups. It combines common goals and the willingness to collaborate together (Butler, 2001). Group consciousness develops in the process of information transmission and interaction, which leads to a sense of belongings to the group (Wirtz, den Ambtman, & Bloemer, 2013). Group norms regulate the behaviour of the group members, and in turn lead to a similarity of the individuals in the same group (Biron & Bamberger, 2012). In group communication, the perceived communication quality (Burgooon et al., 2002), communication richness (Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997), communication openness (Zimbardo, Haney, Banks, & Jaffe, 1973), and communication appropriateness (Garner, 2012) are all determinants of effective group communication.

With respect to the third mode, social media sites provide opportunities for mass communication (Zolkepli & Kamarulzaman, 2015). Through redefining human relationships, Internet based mass communication focuses more on media relationship instead

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