



Case study

Building interpersonal trust in a travel-related virtual community: A case study on a Guangzhou couchsurfing community

Qiuju Luo ^{a, b}, Hui Zhang ^{a, *}^a School of Tourism Management, Sun Yat-sen University, Building 329, 135 Xingangxi Road, Guangzhou 510275, PR China^b Center for Tourism Planning and Research, Sun Yat-sen University, Building 329, 135 Xingangxi Road, Guangzhou 510275, PR China

H I G H L I G H T S

- Trust building in couchsurfing is a dynamic process.
- Initial trust is formed online first and then transferred to the offline world.
- Interpersonal trust has different connotations in different stages.
- Horizontally trust building includes scene, input and output aspects.
- Longitudinally trust building evolves from courtesy to instrumental to emotional.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Article history:

Received 15 January 2015

Received in revised form

30 September 2015

Accepted 2 October 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Travel-related virtual community

Couchsurfing

Interpersonal trust

Interpersonal relationship

Constructive process

A B S T R A C T

Based on the theory of interpersonal relationships, this study aims to explore the process of interpersonal trust building in a virtual community involving both online and offline interactions. Results show that the interpersonal trust between couch surfers and couch host is a dynamic process covering three stages namely early, middle, and late. Initial trust is formed online at a high level, and then it is successfully transferred from the online world to the offline world. Meanwhile, the connotations of interpersonal trust develop continually from courtesy to instrumental, and then to emotional phase, with the development of the interactions between the two parties. Shaped by different factors under each phase, trust evolves from probable anticipation to mundane routine trust and then to ideological trust. A model illustrating the above process that how factors influence the process of interpersonal trust building and the evolution of trust connotations was proposed.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Trust is composed of interpersonal trust and institutional trust (Zhang, 1997). Researchers in the field of trust tacitly approve the basic assumption that in a society with scarce resources, there exist two types of relationships among individuals – cooperative and competitive. Society moves continuously forward in the progress of seeking “the optimal balance” between cooperation and competition (Gambetta, 1988). Interpersonal trust provides a necessary psychological precondition for human cooperation (Zhang, Zhang, & Liang, 2000). As a complex, multi-level, and multi-dimensional social psychological phenomenon, interpersonal trust is

understood and studied in various angles (Yang & Peng, 1999). Because of its importance in social life and interpersonal interactions, its complexity in driving factors and forming mechanism, and its diversity in research perspectives, interpersonal trust has always been a heated research topic among sociologists and psychologists (Xue & Zhai, 2009). In the tourism context, trust also attracts many researchers' interest, it is considered as one of the most important factors that makes online transactions successful in the travel industry (Ponte, Carvajal-Trujillo, & Escobar-Rodríguez, 2015).

With the emergence and development of Web 2.0 as well as people's growing passion for traveling, couchsurfing has been developing rapidly worldwide in recent years. As a non-institutional way of travel, the primary missions of the community are to get free accommodations while traveling, interact with local people, exchange information, and carry out cross-cultural communication (Chung & Buhalis, 2009). The idea for

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: bettyluoqiuju@126.com (Q. Luo), nkzhanghui@163.com (H. Zhang).

couchsurfing was conceived in 1999 and brought into action in 2004. As the originator of a travel-related virtual community for couchsurfing, the management system of this community is relatively sophisticated and its development is strictly following its original mission. As of December 14, 2014, there are 9 million members in more than 120,000 cities. The great experience of global users proves that this on- and offline interaction communication mode has achieved great success and has become a benchmark. Couchsurfing satisfies non-institutional tourists' demands of sharing information, finding travel partners, and exchanging resources with other members, however, it faced a crisis of trust among members both online and offline (Devan, Pascale, & Blake, 2011). As a consequence, two interesting phenomena merit attention out of the composite mode of combining both on- and off-line interactions. First, couchsurfing members initially communicate with each other using their virtual identities, which could be quite different from their identities in real life, and relationships formed among them may not represent they trust each other. Second, the on- and offline communication mode complicates the trust-building process among couchsurfing members. It is obvious that building trust in a virtual world is much more difficult than that in a face-to-face world because one's real identity is relatively hard to verify in the former situation. However, due to the nature of couchsurfing, members' trust (or something that resembles trust) is initially formed in a virtual world and then successfully transferred to the offline world (Tran, 2009). As interactions in the offline world involve higher risks, a higher level of initial trust is needed to make the offline interactions happen (Riegelsberger, Sasse, & McCarthy, 2003).

Interpersonal trust building in Couchsurfing is worth studying. First, although couchsurfing shares some similarities with other social network sites (SNS), such as in profiles, friendship links, and references, it is designed to arrange, prepare, and simplify the transaction from online to offline communication. Couchsurfing members communicate with strangers online before they meet each other in the real world in order to provide or get accommodation; in a sense, online interaction is secondary to the offline interaction (Ronzhy, 2013). Correspondingly, in a successful couchsurfing experience, trust is initially built in the online environment and then transferred into the real world; after that, it goes back to the virtual world. This chain of trust in couchsurfing is a "black box" being further studied. Second, couch hosts provide accommodations to strangers for free, or even serve as tour guides for them; this phenomenon goes against the rules of market exchange and many common social norms. As a consequence, traditional bases for interpersonal trust building may not work in the context of couchsurfing, which makes exploring contributing factors for interpersonal trust formation in couchsurfing a valuable topic to study.

Interpersonal trust is determined by people's initial trust and their following interactions (Zhang, 1997), in other words, interpersonal trust building is a dynamic process (Grabner-Kräuter & Bitter, 2015; Zhang et al., 2000). Several studies have noted the importance trust plays in contributing to couchsurfing's boom; however, these studies adopted a static perspective or a non-systematical approach, and most of them have only focused on one single aspect of interpersonal trust with respect to couchsurfing, such as online trust, initial trust, and so on. The systematic study on the whole chain of trust between the couch surfers and the couch hosts has been neglected. This article addresses this issue. Specifically, this study aims to solve the following problems: First, what is the degree of members' initial interpersonal trust in the couchsurfing community? And how initial interpersonal trust contributes to the following trust building in couchsurfing? Second, interpersonal trust building is a dynamic process, and how

this dynamic process represents in couchsurfing? In other words, which factors facilitate interpersonal trust building at different stages in couchsurfing? And third, are interpersonal trust at different stages in couchsurfing the same? Or what are the connotations of interpersonal trust at the different stages in couchsurfing?

2. Literature review

2.1. Trust: definition and theoretical perspectives

The history of research on trust by Western scholars began in the 1950s (e.g., Deutsch, 1958). Since the 1970s, interpersonal trust has become increasingly popular among western researchers (Peng, 1998). However, because of the extensive scope that interpersonal trust covers and its multidisciplinary in nature, there exists a problem that researchers are likely to make a judgment of it from one single aspect (McKnight & Chervany, 2001), and scholars have yet to reach a consensus on its definition (Sutcliffe, 2006). Generally speaking, interpersonal trust can be regarded as a substantive or an action, a personal trait or a belief, a social structure or a behavioral intention (McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Although the definitions of interpersonal trust vary, several important components should be addressed: trust exists in situations characterized by uncertainty, trust is an expectancy, the degree of trust is directly related to the magnitude of this expectancy, the strength of the trust is related to the confidence, trust requires mutuality, and trust is related to good outcomes (Bhattacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998).

There are several approaches to study interpersonal trust namely situational theory, individual trait theory, interpersonal relationship theory, and social structure theory (Peng, 1998; Xue et al., 2009). First, situational perspective conceptualizes trust at the situational level, regarding trust as a product of situational conditions, and as a way of conflict resolution. Second, the individual trait theory conceptualizes trust at the individual level, regarding trust as a relatively stable psychological trait. Therefore, this perspective focused on individual differences in trust. Third, the interpersonal relationship theory conceptualizes interpersonal trust at the relational level, regarding trust as a product of social interaction. Trust in this perspective has three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Peng, 1998). Fourth, the social structure theory conceptualizes trust at the societal level, considering trust as a social phenomenon based on cultural values or social institutions. The role of trust in this perspective is to reduce social complexity (Luhmann, 1979).

As researchers have taken different perspectives in their attempts to define interpersonal trust, it is necessary to select one perspective before conducting any research. This research adopts an interpersonal relationship perspective for three reasons: first, interpersonal relationship perspective suggests that the primary function of trust is sociological and the bases on which trust relies are primarily social (Peng, 1998), hence overcomes the shortcomings of situational theory and individual trait theory. The interpersonal relationship theory focuses on a micro level rather than on the macro level like social structure theory, which helps to uncover the complicated trust issue in couchsurfing; second, couchsurfing complicates the definition of who is a tourist (Iaquinto, 2011), many interpersonal interactions exist between couch surfers and hosts, while an interpersonal relationship perspective can provide a thorough approach wherein both parties in the relationship are considered, which helps to explore the whole process of trust building in couchsurfing. And third, there are many researchers studying interpersonal trust from the perspective of interpersonal

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7421623>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7421623>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)