THE DETERMINANTS OF ONLINE INFORMATION TRUST IN HOTEL SERVICES

Lee-Yun Pan, Department of Business Administration, Feng Chia University, No. 100, Wenhwa Road, Seatwen, Taichung, Taiwan, R.O.C., lypan@fcu.edu.tw
Shih-Chi Chang, Department of Business Administration, National Changhua University of Education, No. 1, Jin-De Road, Changhua City, Taiwan, R.O.C., shihchi@cc.ncue.edu.tw

ABSTRACT

Today, most travel information has been digitalized and can be accessed via Internet. Online tourism forums and other virtual communities also allow free expression and sharing information, perception and opinions. The information presented online may be not consistent across the different travel websites. As a result, making judgments of information credibility becomes a challenging task for most users. Information seekers may need some cues to judge whether the information is correct or not. In this study, we try to explore the online information trust and employ an empirical survey on consumers to investigate the importance of the determinants of online trust.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent and evolution of Internet search engines, consumers are finding it easier to gather product and supplier information via Internet (Swaminathan 2003). Today, most travel information has been digitalized and can be accessed via Internet. Online tourism forums and other virtual communities also allow free expression and sharing information, perception and opinions. More and more tourists will search information online to make the tourism plans.

Although there is abundant information on the Internet, no one has to review the content of these documents before they are posted on the web. The information presented online may be not consistent across the different travel websites. How to judge the information correct or not becomes a new issue to you. As a result, making judgments of information credibility becomes a challenging task for most users. Information seekers may need some cues to judge whether the information is correct or not. In this study, we try to explore the online information trust and employ an empirical survey on consumers to investigate the importance of the determinants of online trust.

DATA ANALYSIS

Online information trust in our study is defined as a "willingness to rely on another party and to take action in circumstances where such action makes one vulnerable to the other party" (Doney, Cannon, and Mullen 1998). According to the findings of Netnography study, we found that information seekers may rely in the following signals to judge the trustworthiness of the online information: trust of the websites, trust of the information providers, and trust of the online information content.

A field survey was conducted on a sample of consumers in the Taichung city of Taiwan. Interviewers were employed to ensure the quality of the questionnaire. Before answering the questionnaires, interviewers had to make sure the online experiences of our respondents. The qualified respondents should be those who ever searched services information online at least once during last two weeks. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: trust of the websites, trust of the information providers, trust of the online information content, and respondents' basic demographics. The first section of the questionnaire asked for the trust level of the information posted on the specific websites, to understand the characteristics of the websites that influenced people who trust the information posted in the discuss forums. The second section of the questionnaire tried to understand the influence effect of the

characteristics of the information providers toward online information trust. The third section of questionnaire focused on the trust effects of information contents. The last section of the questionnaire collected the respondents' backgrounds, such as gender, age, online activities, product knowledge and involvement. All the measurement scales were modified from the established scales. The double translation method was applied to make sure the translation was adequate because all measures were originally developed in English.

There were one hundred and ninety-two effective questionnaires in total, and the profiles of our respondents were similar to the Internet population in Taiwan.

We performed a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to evaluate construct validity in the measurement models and to test the adequacy of the measurement model. We estimated the proposed measurement model using LISREL 8.51. The adequacy of the measurement models was evaluated on the criteria of overall fit with the data, convergent validity, discriminant validity and reliability. There were fifty-three items to measure fifteen constructs in the questionnaire. According to the CFA, thirteen items were dropped because of cross-loading. The results showed that the overall fit of the measurement models was within acceptable levels, the convergent validity and discriminant validity were acceptable. We made sequential analysis according to the results of CFA.

Respondents tended to trust the online information most if the information arguments were stronger, and if the information was posted on the expert website or on the website that information seekers were familiar with it. Strong argument was the most important determinant of online information trust. It showed that information seekers relied on credible signals to trust the information. Respondents tend to not trust the information provided by the employees of manufacturers most, the trust level was significantly lower than other determinants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The information with reliable evidences would be trust most. Information seekers needed the photographs, statistics figures, or any evidences to prove the truth and trustworthiness of the statements. Strong argument was the most important determinant of online information trust. It showed that information seekers relied on credible signals to trust the information.

The expertise of the website also influenced the trustworthiness of online information. The information seekers would expect that the expert website could attract more experienced users and opinion leaders to share their expert knowledge and experience. Since an expert website was focused on one specialty, it would be expected to offer more information and have ability to perform the accurate judgments.

Trust should be established for a long time, and could be transferred from an object to another object. Since the information seekers were familiar with the website, they might involve time and effort to learn how to search and judge the information on it. Therefore, it was much easier for the information seekers to judge the trustworthiness of the information. When the information seekers viewed themselves as part of the group and had identification with the website, their values and manner of choosing would be more and more similar with other members. The members of the website would follow similar norms, values, and objectives and they could have confidence in the other members' judgments and trust another's opinions. Therefore, information seekers would trust the online information more if they had higher identification with the website.

All the respondents tended to not trust the employees' information. Information seekers would expect that these employees would get benefit by spreading the message and not be interested in our best interests. Therefore, consumers would tend to not trust the information posted by the employees.

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