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I Don't Know You, but I Trust You

A Qualitative Study of Interpersonal Trust-Building in Social Media

Abstract

With the rise of social media, people have established trusting relations to people whom they have never met in real life. Trust between people is in existing theory defined as interpersonal trust, but has not yet been studied in a context that lacks the aspect of face-to-face interactions. The purpose of this paper is to explore a new dimension of interpersonal trust by addressing the research question, *How is trust built between people on social media?*. By performing a qualitative study based on 20 in-depth interviews, the research finds that trust between people on social media builds on a process of creation and development, and is highly influenced by the extent of emotions that the trustor has for the trustee. The strength of the trust depends on the type of relational ties that exist between the parties, ranging from weak to strong ones. Three factors are identified to drive the establishment of weak emotional ties - *Appearance, Image* and *Consistency* – and two factors are found to develop the ties into stronger ones – *Trustee being personal* and *Identification*. It shows that in SM, strong emotions can make people trust an unknown person in the same way they trust a friend in real life.

Keywords: Interpersonal trust, Social media, Trust as a process, Trustworthiness, Emotions

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Key Concepts

Social Commerce

A development of e-commerce based on the features of social media applications. Social commerce integrates the social features of social media applications into e-commerce, fostering user interaction and contribution with the aim of facilitating online buying and selling. Social commerce can be achieved in two ways: either by implementing e-commerce on social media platforms, or by bringing social media to e-commerce websites (Huang and Benyoucef, 2013).

Social media (abbreviation SM)

“Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

Social media account (also known as SM profiles)

Social media accounts are created by individuals who register to become part of a specific SM channel. They can represent a person, a group of people or an organization, but the most popular, and the ones considered for this study, are the personal accounts that are perceived to represent one individual person (Sundén, 2003). The personal account is usually made up of a personal profile, through which the user shares personal information and interacts with other users on the SM platform. The personal information that is shared varies depending on the user's preferences, but can contain a short description of who they are, their interests and/or pictures (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Profiles are therefore recognized as personal pages where one can “type oneself into being” (Sundén, 2003, p. 3). How visible the profiles are for other members of the SM network varies depending on the structural setting of the domain (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Trust

Trust is a willingness to be vulnerable and arises in situations of risk and interdependence. There are two main types of trust, trust in people and trust in systems. Trust in people –Interpersonal trust – is the focus of this study (Rousseau et al., 1998).

Trustor

A trusts B to do X (Baier, 1986; Luhman, 1980). In the trusting relationship, A is labeled the trustor (Hardin, 2002).

Trustee

A trusts B to do X (Baier, 1986; Luhman, 1980). In the trusting relationship, B is labeled the trustee (Hardin, 2002).

1. Introduction

In social media (SM) channels, people connect with people whom they have never met. Users can follow each other for years, through the ups and downs of their life, and build forms of personal yet impersonal relationships to each other. As a consequence, people's networks are expanding, and to a large extent include people outside their real-life circles. This means that the online relationships are established on other grounds than the regular face-to-face interactions (Granovetter, 1983; Huotari & Iivonen, 2004). New online trends suggest that people have started trusting these unknown people on SM to guide their purchasing decisions (Huang and Benyoucef, 2013). Trust between people in online settings is a yet unexplored topic, wherefore there is little knowledge of what actually drives people to trust those they only know through SM pages. It is therefore interesting to study how this personal yet impersonal trust is established between users of social media.

The last decade has experienced major changes in the web and Internet usage, mainly as a result of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is the collective term for forums where users can generate and share content with each other, making the Internet a place where people across the globe interact and exchange information (Huang and Benyoucef, 2013). One such forum is social media (SM), which over recent years has experienced a vast upwards-going trend: both in regards to the number of users and the average time spent in the forums. As one of the most connected countries, Sweden places in the forefront of these tendencies. In 2015, 76 percent of the population was a member of one or more SM platforms, which is an increase of 23 percent over the last five years. In only the last two years, the average time spent on SM has increased with 33 percent, to 6.4 hours per week (Findahl & Davidsson, 2016).

When people share information and ideas with each other in these social media forums, forms of collective intelligence emerge (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). A clear example of this is how people, who previously searched for information in their offline networks, now can turn to their extended, online networks for support (Huang and Benyoucef, 2013). The collective intelligence is consequently changing the patterns of e-commerce, turning it into a phenomenon called social commerce. Shortly, social commerce means utilizing the social features of Web 2.0 in e-commerce (Kim and Srivastava, 2007). This has shifted the power base in online purchasing; from it being the companies that earlier provided, and thereby controlled, the information flow to potential customers, has now become customers sharing this information with each other through their SM accounts. By sharing experiences, information and opinions, users of SM are making the purchase process more transparent (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008).

When people rely on other people's information and advice, forms of trust are materializing. Trust is known to be an important driver to commercial activity (Gefen et al., 2008), but social commerce has altered whom, and in what ways, people trust. In social commerce, people are trusting unknown people to provide them with information and help them guide their purchasing behavior (Huang and Benyoucef, 2013). Although this may facilitate their decision-making, it also entails a risk since they do not know in advance if the purchase will live up to their expectations (Gefen et al., 2008).

Trust is always associated with risk, since a person never can know in advance what the outcome of trusting will be (Rousseau et al., 1998). Especially when trusting another person, it is hard to know if that person will meet the expectations of the trustor (Ibid.). Moreover, if the other person is unknown and cannot be seen in real life, as in many

online networks, it can be thought to be even more difficult to assess their trustworthiness. Yet, the rapid proliferation of social commerce suggests that trust is being established between unknown people on SM to an increasing extent.

Social commerce is hence an interesting focus for trust research, seen from both a social and economic perspective. From a social perspective, it is interesting to study how trust between people has expanded beyond real-life relations. This further has implications for economic theory, because the trust that is built in these online communities is an important foundation to how customers make purchases and engage in economic activity.

Current theory categorizes trust into two main fields, system and interpersonal trust (Rousseau et al., 1998). Interpersonal trust is trust between people, based on expectations one party has on the actions of the other (Ibid). Face-to-face interactions and observation are commonly listed as typical mechanisms for building and maintaining this form of trust (Huotari & Iivonen, 2004). System trust is the expectations people have on different systems in the environment to function properly, such as organizations, markets and states (Luhmann, 1979). In online environments, this is the form of trust that typically has been studied, commonly exploring customers' willingness to adopt a new technology (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), and characteristics of IT systems that make these system more or less trustworthy (Gefen et al., 2003). Gefen et al. (2003, p. 51) mean that the existing trust research has focused on establishing the factors that "build online trust in an environment that lacks the typical human interaction that often leads to trust in other circumstances". In the context of social media, the "typical human interaction" that Gefen et al. (2003, p. 51) refer to is reappearing in the online environment, although absent of face-to-face contact. Social commerce is the result of people looking for support and confirmation from other people, rather than the systems. Hence, it become interesting to study interpersonal trust in the context of SM, where these personal yet impersonal relationships are created between people, a field yet unexplored in trust research.

1.1 Filling the Theoretical Gap and the Purpose of the Study

With the increased usage of SM, people have expanded their networks. These new relationships have created trusting ties between people who have never met in real life. Since it is trust between people, the study proceeds from the idea that the trust that is built is of interpersonal character. However, there is a lack of current studies on interpersonal trust in online contexts, where the parties do not interact face-to-face. Hence, the purpose of the study is to fill the theoretical gap in the literature and to contribute to existing theory by studying the trust-building process that takes place between people in the context of social media.

1.2 The Research Question

To address the identified gap in the literature, a qualitative and explorative study is performed. The researchers in this way aim at creating an increased understanding of trust in the specific setting of SM. To properly do so, the study takes guidance from the following research question:

How is trust built between people on social media?

Answering this question will enhance the existing knowledge of trust-building in the online context. By looking into the interpersonal dimension of trust it will explore how it potentially differs between the offline and online world.

1.3 Research Design

In order to answer the research question, a semi-structured interview series is performed with customers who have trusted a recommendation from a person on SM that resulted in a purchase of that particular product or service. The participants of the study have taken on the role as the trustor and the person behind the SM account the trustee. The trustee must be a person whom the trustor only has a relationship to through Internet, in order to isolate the features of interpersonal trust to an online context. Further, the purchased product must have been associated with some risk for the buyer (trustor), and the information provided by the person behind the account of importance, making the trustor dependent on the trustee to perform the specific purchase. By ensuring that these preconditions for trust, risk and interdependence, were apparent in the studied cases, it is confirmed that it is trust, and not something else, that has been studied.

A series of semi-structured interviews were performed in order to get an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the trust building process from the trustor's perspective. By only incorporating the trustor's point of view, the scope of the study is limited to the characteristics in the trustee that made the trustor perceive them as trustworthy. This choice is assumed to have benefited the validity of the data. Including trustees in the study is argued to have increased the risk of biased data, since the trustees would have had to guess why the trustor perceived them as trustworthy.

1.4 Disposition

The study follows the logic of Swale's (1990) classical hourglass. The purpose is to mirror the first three chapters with the last ones, and emphasize the level of the analysis in each chapter. Figure 1 illustrates an overview of each chapter and acts as the study's roadmap. In the following section, each chapter will be presented briefly in chronological order.

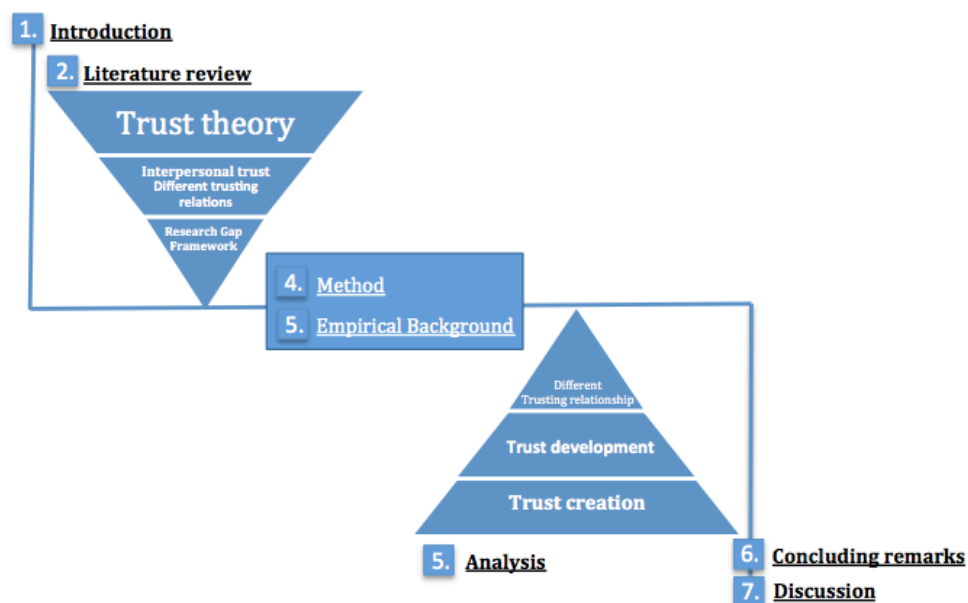


Figure 1: The thesis road-map

In the introduction, a brief background of the study and its purpose of filling the gap in the existing literature is presented. The next chapter, literature review, presents the current state of the research on trust. It starts with an overview of trust, continues into the field of interpersonal trust, and further describes how trust varies for different relational ties. In the subsequent chapter, the methodological approach for the study is explained. Chapter four, empirical background, confirms that the study has looked into actual trust and further describes the sample in more detail, together with a background to the contexts in which the purchases were made. An analysis of the study is presented in chapter five, which will describe the patterns and tendencies found during the interview series. These are analyzed through the lens of the existing theory on interpersonal trust, both in how it aligns with and deviates from it. Lastly, chapter six and seven include concluding remarks as well as a discussion of the findings. The research question will be addressed, and the study's contributions, together with its strengths and limitations are argued for. The thesis ends with suggestions for further research related to the field of trust in the context of social media.

2. Literature Review

Trust is an important, yet complex and multidimensional, phenomenon that has been studied for decades. The chapter aims to provide the reader with the literature that is most relevant for the purpose of this paper. Starting with a general introduction (2.1), the first section presents key concepts of trust. Next part of the chapter describes the interpersonal dimension of trust (2.2). Since interpersonal trust relates to relationships, the following section (2.3) explains how interpersonal trust varies for different trusting relations. By summarizing the current state of the literature, the research gap (2.4) is identified. Based on the gap, the study's theoretical framework (2.5) is presented, which serve as the basis for the empirical background and analysis. An overview of the literature review chapter is visualized in Figure 2.

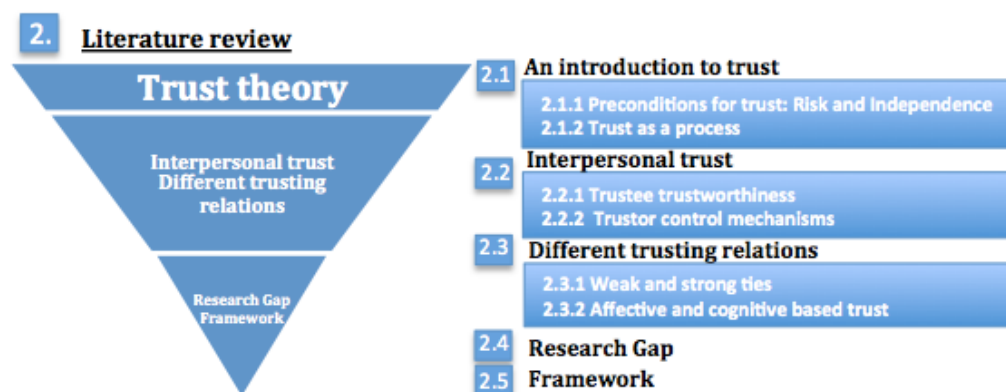


Figure 2: The thesis-road map presenting an overview of the literature review

2.1 An Introduction to Trust

Trust is and continues to be a relevant topic to study, none the least for the essential role it is thought to have in modern society. Among other things, trust enables cooperative behavior, network relations and commercial activity, reduces conflict and decreases transaction costs (Rousseau et al., 1998; Khodyakov, 2007). Even if trust has received a lot of interest, research remains “fragmented” (McEvily et al., 2003, p. 91), why giving a short and comprehensive introduction to the subject is a challenging, yet alone important, task to guide the reader through the study.

Research generally separates trust into two main fields depending on the context it is explored in: system trust and interpersonal trust (Rousseau et al., 1998). System trust is the trust a person has for structures and systems in the society, such as organizations and institutions, whilst interpersonal trust is the type of trust that exists between people (Ibid.). Although researchers argue on the relation between the two types of trust, it is clear that these interact and that one type of trust can facilitate the construction of the other (Shapiro, 1987, Khodyakov, 2007). Since this paper focuses on the trust that is built between people, the literature review will focus on an in-depth examination of the interpersonal dimension of trust (2.2), and not go any further into explaining system trust. The chapter starts by describing the circumstances under which trust can exist, the preconditions for trust (2.1.1), and how interpersonal trust is defined in the literature (2.1.2).

2.1.1 Preconditions to Trust: Risk and Interdependence

It has been argued that the complexity, speed and information discrepancies in the modern society make it a risk society (Beck, 1992). When complexity increases, so does the uncertainty surrounding peoples' every-day lives, leaving them with more risk to manage (McEvily et al., 2003). The main function of trust is therefore to manage this risk, reduce the complexity and uncertainty, by providing individuals with assurance that everything is "in order" (Sztompka, 1999; Luhmann, 1979). However, if the main function of trust is to manage risk, this presupposes that there must be risk to manage in the first place (Rousseau et al., 1998). Accordingly, risk is pointed out as a necessary precondition for trust (Ibid). Luhmann (1988) underscores this by stating that trust only exists in situations where the possible damage may be greater than the advantage you seek. The risk in trusting comes from the uncertainty regarding the action-taking of others, and opening up for the potential damage that may result from these (Rousseau et al., 1998). Research calls this a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to another person's actions (Mayer et al., 1995), which highlights the second precondition to trust: interdependence. Interdependence refers to the fact that trust only can exist in situations where one party is dependent on the actions of another in order to achieve an interest (Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust therefore has to do with expectations of how other people will behave in a certain situation (Rousseau et al., 1998; Mayer et al., 1995).

Based on these properties, Mayer et al., (1995, p. 712) define trust of one party for another as:

"the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party."

This definition of trust properly captures the important relation between trust, risk and interdependence, and is therefore the definition of trust that this study proceeds from.

2.1.2 Trust as a Process

Interpersonal trust is as a property of relationships (Mayer et al., 1995), and seeing that relationships is something that develop with time (Granovetter, 1983), researchers argue that trust should be seen as a process that evolves over time (Khodyakov, 2007; Boorman, 1975; Siegrist et al., 2007). Khodyakov (2007) means that the trust process consists of three stages: creation, development and maintenance. In this process, trust builds on routine behavior (Möllering, 2001; Nooteboom & Six, 2003), evaluation of available information and anticipation of future outcomes (Khodyakov, 2007). Hence, trust is a process that can evolve, but also diminish, depending on experiences from the past and expectations of the future (Ibid.).

2.2 Interpersonal Trust

The trust one party has for another party is thought to derive from different aspects such as personality traits, the other party's reflected characteristics, third-party corroborations and cultural norms (Sztompka, 1999; Rousseau et al., 1998). Mayer et al. (1995) claim that interpersonal trust builds on two dimensions: trustee trustworthiness and a trustor's propensity to trust. A trustee's trustworthiness is based on characteristics of the trustee that make them appear more or less trustworthy in the eyes of the trustor. The trustor's propensity to trust is referred to as their general willingness to trust others, irrespective of how trustworthy they perceive the other person to be (Mayer et al., 1995). It can be influenced by cultural backgrounds, past experiences and personality (ibid). They further

use blind trust as an extreme case of trusting propensity- referring to a person who would trust in situations that most other would agree not to (Ibid.).

Mayer et al.'s (1995) theory of interpersonal trust as a combined result of a both characteristics in the trustee and in the trustor is widely accepted by the current literature to explain the features of interpersonal trust (Gefen et al., 2003; McKnight et al. 1998). Although it is important to understand that interpersonal trust can be a result of both aspects, this study proceeds from the perspective of the trustor and explores how characteristics in the trustee made them perceive the trustee as trustworthy. This focus is supported by Gefen et al. (2008) who mean that the trustor's trusting personality rather can be seen as a *moderator* to trust.

2.2.1 Trustee Trustworthiness

When exploring characteristics of the trustee that create trustworthiness, researchers name a multitude of different antecedents to trustworthiness. Mishra (1996) conceptualizes trustworthiness to depend on the trustee's competence, openness, caring and reliability. Other researchers state that competence and integrity (Lieberman, 1981), benevolence and honesty (Larzelere & Houston, 1980), ability and value congruence (Siltkin & Roth, 1993) are drivers to trustworthiness. Mayer et al. (1995) provide a thorough review of previous literature's antecedent factors to trust, and argues that three characteristics are recurring in most of this literature: ability, benevolence and integrity. Each factor, they argue, contribute a unique perspective from which to consider the trustee, and taken together, provide a "solid and parsimonious foundation" for interpersonal trust (Mayer et al., 1995, p.717).

Ability, or what many scholars refer to as competence, represents the trust you place in another person's skills, competencies and characteristics (Mayer et al., 1995). Since people have skills in different domains, they are usually trusted for things that are considered to fall within their domains of skills. Trust is therefore known to be domain-specific (Sztompka, 1999). *Benevolence* is the extent of belief in the "goodness" of a trustee, meaning that he or she wants to do a particular trustor good, disregarding the potential economic reward. It is often related to the motives of the other party, and thought to stem from the intrinsic motivation to perform well (Mayer et al., 1995).

Integrity is the trustor's perception of the trustee's adherence to principles that the trustor finds acceptable, which also is known as value congruence between trustor and trustee. It is directly related to the moral integrity of the trustee in the eyes of the trustor. The trustee's integrity is usually evaluated based on their consistency of actions over time, congruence between actions and words, credible and communicated opinions of others and perceived sense of justice (Mayer et al., 1995).

It is argued that the relative importance of each factor may alter as the relationship between trustor and trustee develops and with it, the information made available on the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995). In early stages, the trustor may rely more on information about the trustor's integrity, as this can be found out through eg. own observations or third-party sources who have previous experiences of the trustee. The trustee's benevolence, however, is not thought to be properly assessed until later stages in the relationship when the trustee, through repetitive interactions, has shown concern towards that particular trustor (Ibid.). It is further argued that a lack of any of the three factors may undermine trust, but that if a trustee is assessed high in all three, they will be perceived as trustworthy (Ibid.).

2.3 Trusting Relationships

Many researchers agree that the trust varies with the duration and intensity of the relation (Siegrist et al., 2007; Khodyakov, 2007). Granovetter (1983) even argues that social relations and the obligations inherent in them is what primarily drives to trust in economic life. Depending on the relationship between trustor and trustee, the trust will take different forms (Putnam, 2000).

2.3.1 Weak and Strong Relational Ties

Much theory separates between two different strengths of relations, those with weak ties between the parties and those with strong ones (Granovetter, 1983; Putnam, 2007). Both kinds of ties are important as they fill different functions (Granovetter, 1983). It is further argued that the different ties embed different levels of trust (Putnam, 2007).

Weak ties, are the kind of relationships that exist between acquaintances or to a member of an out-group¹ (Granovetter, 1983; Zucker, 1986; Uslaner, 2002). These are important in the sense that they create bridges between different densely knit groups, and help collect information from distant parts of social systems (Granovetter, 1983). The interpersonal trust embedded in this type of tie is usually associated with a high risk since it is a form of relationship to a person whose real intentions may not be clear (Heimer, 2001; Luhmann, 1988). To deal with the risk and get help in the decision of whether or not to trust, trustors usually turn to an intermediary for information about the trustee. Interpersonal trust in weak ties can hence be affected by the *reputation* the trustee has (Zucker, 1986). Weak ties are argued to build on reciprocation between parties as well as predictions and assumptions that the trustee will comply with expectations as well as existing formal and ethical rules (Khodyakov, 2007).

Strong ties are those that typically exist between close friends, family and members of an in-group² (Granovetter, 1983; Khodyakov, 2007). Strong ties are beneficial as they usually give easier access to a person, along with greater incentives and motivation to assist each other (Granovetter, 1983). Many researchers agree that the creation of strong ties depends on how similar the trustor and trustee are (Granovetter, 1983; Khodyakov, 2007; Cook, 2005; Uslaner, 2002). Granovetter (1983) states that strong ties derive from the perceived *familiarity and similarity* between the trustor and trustee. It is further argued familiarity increases with the number of interactions between parties, since this allows their real intentions and beliefs to be revealed (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). Trust in strong ties is considered to be more reliable than in weak ties, resulting in that trustors are more prone to trust people to whom they have strong ties (Wellman, 1979). It is even argued that trust in strong ties becomes automatic to an extent where the parties do not even perceive it as trust any longer (Granovetter 1983). Strong ties require more time to be developed and maintained compared to weak ones (Boorman, 1975).

2.3.2 Affective- and Cognitive-based Trust

McAllister (1995) discusses another relational aspect of trust. His typology builds on two different evaluation processes that form either cognitive-based or affective-based trust. Cognitive-based trust builds on knowledge and impressions of the other party, whilst the affective-based trust builds on repetitive interactions and emotional responses (McAllister, 1995; Gefen et al., 2003).

¹ Out-group is a social group that an individual does not consider themselves belonging to (Brewers, 1999).

² In-group is a social group which a person psychologically identifies to and considers themselves a member of (Brewers, 1999).

In cognitive-based evaluations, the trustor assesses what he knows about the trustee's motives, abilities and reliability, and form predictions about the trustee's behavior (Gefen et al., 2003). McAllister (1995) does not find any evidence to what actually drives cognitive-based trust, but other researchers mean that these evaluations are influenced by illusions of control (Gefen et al., 2003). Illusions of control refers to a behavior when the trustor attend to cues that confirm the trustee's trustworthiness in order to gain a sense of personal control. Gefen et al. (2003, p. 63) calls this to "over-inflate trust beliefs" and means that this commonly happens when trust is based on observations.

Affective-based trust, on the other hand, builds on emotional responses to the other party (McAllister, 1995; Gefen et al., 2003). Dietz and Den Hartog (2006, p. 563) mean that affective-based evaluations are guided more by the "quality of the relationship over time than from observation of the other party's specific behaviors". For affective-based to be develop, McAllister (1995) argues that a minimum level of cognition-based trust is necessary. He further identifies that affective-based trust builds from repetitive interactions and citizen behavior, meaning that the trustee does more than what is expected from them and demonstrates care and concern for the other party. Affective-based evaluations are found to be very persistent feelings about the other party that once established, are not easily revoked (Ibid.). Zajonc (1980, p. 157) even claims that "affect often persists after a complete invalidation of its original cognitive basis". Motives become taken as permanent and left unquestioned, even when there is evidence to the contrary (McAllister, 1995). Dietz and Dean Hartog (2006) outlines identification-based trust as the strongest form of affective-based trust, in which a common identity is assumed and one party has full confidence in the other party's representation of their interest.

2.4 Research Gap

Research on trust-building in online environments has mostly been focusing on system trust by examining the "IT artifacts that help build trust" (Gefen et al., 2008, p. 282) and factors that build trust "in an environment that lacks the typical human interaction" (Gefen et al., 2003, p. 51). In contrast to previous research, social media (SM) has altered the dynamics of online environments where trust-building now takes place between people. Through personal SM accounts, people who have never met follow each other for years, creating a form of personal relationships. Looking at the two main types of trust that exist in the literature, system and interpersonal, this study proceeds from the assumption that the trust created in SM interactions is of an interpersonal character.

In contrast to earlier research on interpersonal trust, the relationships on SM lack the face-to-face interaction that many researchers claim to be one of the key features for building interpersonal trust (Granovetter, 1983; Gefen et al., 2003; Huotari & Iivonen, 2004). Hence it becomes interesting to study if the interpersonal trust created between people on social media is driven by the same characteristics as interpersonal trust in real life situations. Due to the absence of face-to-face contact, the base for the trust-building process differs compared to a real life context. The purpose of the study is hence to contribute to the literature on interpersonal trust by studying how it is built in the context of SM.

2.5 Framework

This section presents a summary of the three most relevant concepts for the study. These are merged into a theoretical framework that will guide the empirical background and analysis.

2.5.1 Khodyakov's Theory of Trust as a Process

In line with Khodyakov (2007) this paper adheres to the view of trust as a process as well as a property of relationships that range from weak to strong ties. Khodyakov (2007) means that the process of interpersonal trust builds on the stages of creation, development and maintenance, and that this process helps develop relationships from weak into strong ties. In this study, trust *building* is regarded as a process consisting of the stages of creation and development, whilst trust maintenance is thought to be a part of the trust process that starts operating when trust has already been built. The stage of maintaining trust is therefore excluded from the framework. Further, relating each stage to the different relationship ties, a successful creation stage is assumed to culminate in weak ties, which can then develop into strong ties in the development phase. The first building block to the framework is depicted in Figure 3.

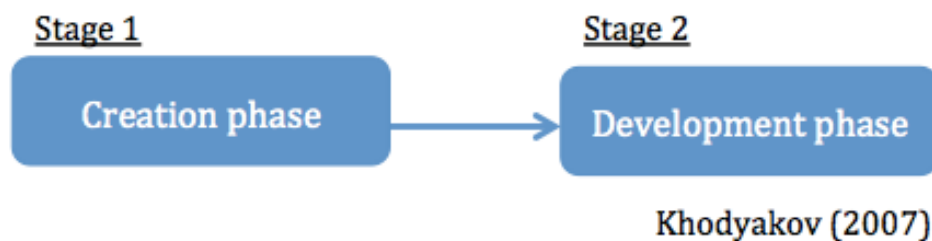


Figure 3: A visualization of Khodyakov's (2007) trust process excluding maintenance stage

2.5.2 Creation of Weak Ties: Based on Mayer et al.'s Factors of Trustworthiness

The creation stage builds on Mayer et al.'s (1995) three characteristics that drive trustworthiness. These are ability, benevolence and integrity. Ability refers to the trustee's skills and competences, benevolence is the "goodness" of a trustee; that he or she wants to do the trustor good in particular, and integrity is the extent to which the trustee adheres to values the trustor finds acceptable. The study proceeds from the assumption that these characteristics need to be in place for interpersonal trust to be established, also in the unexplored context of social media. These are found visualized in Figure 4.

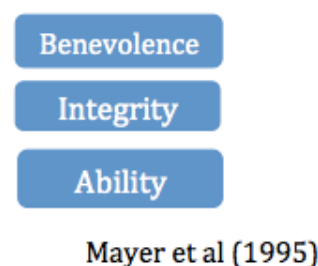


Figure 4: A visualization of Mayer et al.'s (1995) factors of trustee trustworthiness

2.5.3 Development into Strong ties: Based on Granovetter's Characteristics of Strong Ties

The development phase is thought to represent the other end of the trust building process, in which weak interpersonal ties may develop into strong ones, consequently strengthening the embedded trust level. Granovetter (1983) means that the nature of trust differs depending on the relationship between the trustor and the trustee, ranging from weak to strong relationship ties. Putnam (2000) further means that strong and weak relationship ties are respectively characterized by different degrees of interpersonal trust. The study hence explores what makes the relationships, and hence the embedded trust levels, develop from weak into strong ties. Granovetter (1983) identifies two underlying characteristics that need to be in place in order for relationships to develop from weak to strong ties: familiarity and similarity to the other party (see Figure 5).

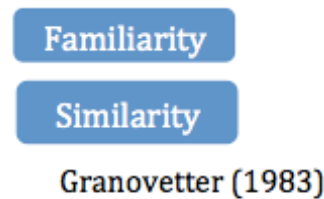


Figure 5: A visualization of Granovetter's (1983) characteristics of strong ties

2.5.4 A Merged Framework: Factors Driving Interpersonal Trust in Social Media

The analytical framework (Figure 6) proceeds from Khodyakov's (2007) view of trust as a process and that the building of trust incorporates the stages of creation and development. In phase one, the creation stage is analyzed through the lens of Mayer et al's (1995) theory of the drivers to trustee trustworthiness. In phase two, the factors driving the development of relationship ties are analyzed based on Granovetter (1983) drivers to strong ties. In this way, the study aims at answering the research question of how trust is built between people on SM.

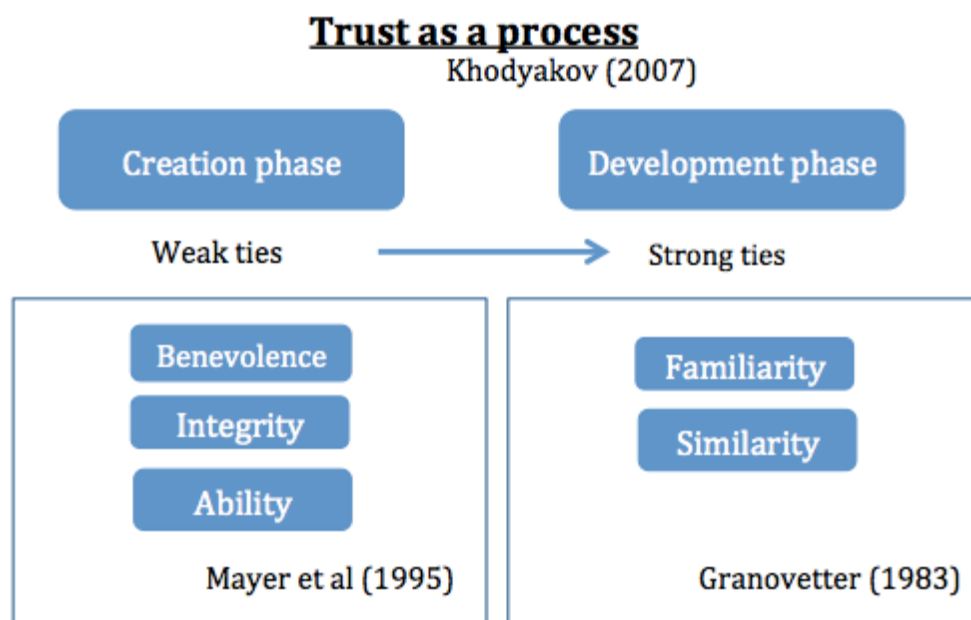


Figure 6: The theoretical framework

3. Methodology

The chapter provides a description of the methodological choices made for the study. It starts by presenting the research method used in the work (3.1). Next section looks at the data collection, including a description of the sample and interviews (3.2). The data documentation and analysis follows (3.3) and lastly, a discussion of the quality considerations are made (3.4).

3.1 Research Method

Due to the identified gap in the literature of interpersonal trust, the study uses a qualitative research method to explore how existing theory fits to a new context (Bell, 2006). Edmondson & This is supported by McManus (2007) who means that a qualitative method is preferred when studying a new phenomena. The research looks into the context of Sweden, and takes on an abductive approach to iteratively develop the theory on interpersonal trust for the specific context of social media.

3.1.1 Qualitative

Maxwell (2004) makes a clear distinction between the qualitative and quantitative methods, and highlights the importance of using the correct one when studying a question. The qualitative method focuses on descriptions (Maxwell 2013) and reflects the social construct of reality (Gephart, 2004). Due to the lack of existing literature on the topic, a qualitative study is rendered the appropriate approach, since the aim is to construct theory and not to test already existing one (Wilson and Vlosky, 1997). Yin (2013) confirms this by stating that a qualitative approach should be used when the study is of an explorative nature.

The strengths of a qualitative study is that it efficiently gathers rich data and takes on the perspective of the participants (Flick, 2007). By allowing the trustors to describe the meaning of specific events and how they made sense of these in their own head, the researchers can find out on what grounds the trustees were perceived as trustworthy (Maxwell 2013).

3.1.2 Context

The context has been limited to the geographical boundaries of Sweden. Sweden has one of the world's highest Internet usages where in 2015, 94 percentage of the population were connected through some device in their home. Out of the Internet users, 77 percent were present on one or more SM channels, occasionally or everyday (Findahl and Davidsson, 2015). Due to the high level of connectivity and the large fraction of the population that is using SM, Sweden is considered as a well suited country for the study. Further, due to the limited time frame and the desire to perform interviews face-to-face, the boundaries have been delimited to the scope of Sweden.

3.1.3 Approach

There are three main approaches to research: deductive, inductive and abductive. The deductive approach has its starting point in theory and uses the empirics to either prove or disapprove the previous findings. The inductive approach proceeds from the empirics and formulates new theory based on the findings. The abductive approach, which was used for this study, is designed by combining the inductive and deductive approaches (Bell, 2006).

An abductive approach is recommended when performing research in an unexplored field (Flick, 2009) as it enables an open mindset. The study starts by building a case from existing literature on trust, taking a deductive approach. Using this as a baseline, the empirics will in the next phase confirm or reject if existing literature is valid, which changes the approach into an inductive (Bell, 2006). Proceeding from the findings in the empirics, the aim will be to develop existing theory into a new theory explaining how interpersonal trust is built in the context of social media (Patel and Davidson, 2011). Figure 7 provides an overview of the abductive approach, describing the different phases of the research.

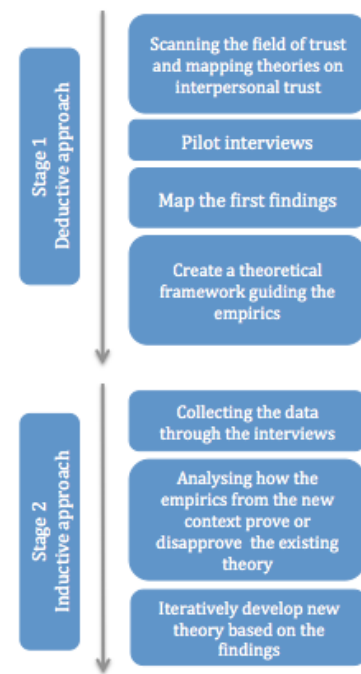


Figure 7: A description of the phases the study went through, forming an abductive approach

3.2 Data Collection

The data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected through 20 in-depth interviews³, and the secondary from SM trend reports.

3.2.1 Sample Logic

The sampling logic was based on the yearly report “The Swedes and the Internet” (2015) published by The Internet Foundation in Sweden (IIS). The sample was collected to be as representable as possible of the part of the Swedish population that in 2015 was using SM occasionally to everyday. However, the sample’s age group was limited to only include participants of 18 years old or above. This decision was based both on concerns about ethical as well as appropriate reasons. To secure an ethical approach in the study, it was decided not to include any participants under the age of 18 since it was regarded unsuitable without the parent’s permissions, which was difficult to ensure. Further, people under 18 are considered to have lower purchasing power as together with making less purchases. Criterias were created based on the statistics, including: gender, age, origin, where they live, and main occupation. The criterion in Table 1 guided the sample collection.

Main Criterias	
Gender	An even distribution of men and women
Age group	Mainly 18-35 years old, a couple of participants from older age-groups
Origins	The largest fraction of the sample with origins in Sweden
Occupation	A slightly higher fraction of workers compared to student
Living	An even distribution of participants from the countryside and the city

Table 1, The main criterias for the sample collection

³ Originally 23 interviews were performed but three of these were later excluded from the sample based on a misfit to the purpose of the study. The reason to this was that during the interviews, it came up that the purchase decision and the trust could not be attributed to one specific person. This contradicts Mayer and Davis' (1999, p.124) presupposition that the trustee must be “specific, identifiable and perceived to act with volition.”

3.2.2 Sample Collection

Overall, the sample selection was based on the researchers' extended networks, both in social media and in real life. To find the interviewees, three methods were used:

- Primarily, a general request was posted in the SM channels of the researchers, stating the key criteria for the searched sample. However, the response rate was low, generating only three interviews.
- In a second attempt, potential participants were targeted directly by asking people in the researcher's network and friends' networks if they fulfilled the sample criterion. This generated a large part of the sample, 15 out of 20 interviews.
- Lastly, the participants in the study were asked if they knew people that would fit the profile of the study, using the so-called snowball-effect method (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007). In this way, two more participants were found.

3.2.3 The Sample

Twenty interviews were considered sufficient to enable patterns and indications in the empirics to be identified (Bazeley, 2013; Guest et al., 2006).

All but one of the selected criteria were met by the chosen participants (an extensive description of the participants can be found in Appendix I). The unmet criterion was an even distribution of gender. Only six interviews were with men compared to 14 with women. During the sample collection process, some difficulties were experienced in finding men to interview. Although a lot of effort was made to get an even distribution of gender, it turned out that few men fitted the study's purpose. Many men stated that they had rarely been influenced by a SM account to make a purchase. The report "The Swedes and Internet" by Findahl and Davidsson (2015), shows that both genders are represented to nearly the same extent on SM, but that their activities differ. One such example is that females are more frequent content providers compared to men. Comparing this to the pattern encountered during the sample collection, there seems to be differences in the purchasing behavior between women and men. This sample is however too small to statistically confirm that such a difference exists.

3.2.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to match the nature of a qualitative study, to get an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon (Saunders, et al., 2009; Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The study was guided by a method called funneling. By starting with general questions, the interviewer continued by digging deeper into different aspects of each answer (Grbich, 1999). At a start, open-ended questions functioned to generate deep insights into the interviewees' perceptions and made the result reliable. These were followed by more specific questions that provided better in-depth understanding by pushing the participant into a state of reflection (Saunders, et al., 2009; Quader, 2007). Based on the advantages of funneling, a semi-structured interview form was considered the most appropriate method for making the result trustworthy (Sandberg 2015).

3.2.5 Pilot Study

Two sets of pilot interviews were conducted. The first included two interviews to test that the questions in the Interview Guide were framed in an understandable and

unbiased way. The second pilot study, consisting of four additional interviews, aimed at inductively developing a grounded theory (Maxwell, 2004).

The setting for the interviews was in the premises of Stockholm School of Economics, with both authors present. The first set of pilot interviews were successful, with the feedback that the questions were unbiased and understandably framed. Since there was no need to reframe the Interview Guide (presented in section 3.2.6), these interviews were included in the study.

The second round of pilot interviews aimed at creating an understanding of the concepts and theories held by the participants in the study. Light, Singer, and Willett (1990) explain that it is difficult to design a study without doing prior exploratory research. It also provides an understanding of the meanings of the participants' actions and the situations, which reduces the risk of the researchers getting blinded by existing theory. The ideas, meanings, and values, are essential parts of the studied context, why only looking at existing theories would increase the risk of making misleading and incomplete assumptions of the events (Maxwell 2004). The two set of pilot interviews worked as a first assessment in guiding how the research question should be addressed. Through a first assessment of the findings in the pilot studies, a framework guiding the rest of the empirics was created (see section 2.5).

3.2.6 Interview Guide

When conducting a qualitative study in an exploratory way, it is recommended to construct an Interview Guide (Flick, 2009). The Interview Guide used in this study can be found in Appendix II.

The Interview Guide was used as a basis for discussion rather than a manuscript, and was constructed in five sections, each focusing on different areas. Each section started with open-ended questions and continued with more specific follow-up questions, which were chosen based on how the participant answered. The questions were only shared with the participant at the specific time of the interview, in order to enable spontaneous reactions and avoid programmed answers (Flick, 2009).

3.2.7 Interview Setting

The interviews were carried out between February 26 and April 15, 2016. The length of the interviews varied between 28-49 minutes, with an average of 32.26 minutes. Before the start of each interview, the authors made a short presentation of themselves and the research topic. This took place before the recording and is hence excluded from the time log. 16 out of 20 interviews were conducted face-to-face. Two interviews were done through Skype, since the interviewees were located outside of Stockholm. An additional two more were made over telephone due to technical issues with Skype⁴.

The settings for the interviews varied, but were close to the participant's main location to make the atmosphere as little stressful as possible. The interviews were performed in the interviewees' homes, meeting rooms at their offices, or at Stockholm School of Economics.

To make the participant comfortable to share information as transparent as possible, the interviewers assured their anonymity.

⁴ An in-depth presentation of the interviews can be found in Appendix II

3.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were documented through audio-recording, and both researchers were present during all to decrease researcher bias (Silverman, 2010). The analysis was an ongoing process, where the researchers first interpreted the findings separately before these were discussed together to reduce the risk for interpretation bias (Flick, 2009).

3.3.1 Data Documentation

To ensure that the content of the entire interview was captured, audio-recording was used after the participants had given their permission. To regulate for bias (Silverman, 2010), two researchers were present during all interviews, one leading it and asking questions, and the other taking notes during the sessions. This task division between the researchers varied for the different interviews.

3.3.2 The Analysis

In accordance with the recommendations for qualitative researchers (Silverman, 2010; Maxwell, 2013) the data analysis was performed as an ongoing process during the whole period of the study. Through the abductive approach the findings were continuously reinterpreted. Hence, the data collection, analysis and writing, have been inseparable during the process of the study.

Silverman (2010) stresses the importance of starting the data analysis in an early stage, and also to think critically about the data. Within 24 hours after each interview, the data was summarized to have it fresh in mind and decrease potential bias (Flick, 2009). To further decrease bias, the researchers analyzed the data separately before discussing it together to not rush to the wrong conclusions (Ibid). Deviant cases were analyzed, and earlier identified patterns were questioned to see if any incorrect assumptions seemed to have been made. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, which led to the need to translate quotes. To avoid misinterpretations, these were tested thoroughly, but a risk in losing the underlying meanings when translating is always present (Flick, 2009).

The analysis was performed by a thematic method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), enabling identification of recurring patterns in data by using methods of categorization. The researchers began by listening to the recorded interviews and familiarizing with the data. In parallel to listening, the researchers translated identified patterns into initial codes. The researchers' individual codes were compared, followed by a search for patterns in how these related to each other and could be sorted into new categories. In instances where the researchers had different codings, these were thoroughly discussed and elaborated on in order to find the reasons behind the different interpretations. Risk for research bias and group thinking was hence somewhat controlled for (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The work was always performed within 24 hours from that an interview had taken place.

The analysis was an ongoing process of looking at how new data compared to older codes and themes. In this way, new codes and categories were developed, which captured both old and new patterns. In a next step, these categories were grouped into themes that would guide the making of the report. As the process went on, older themes were reviewed as newer ones were established. When all the interviews had been performed, the final themes were defined and named. These were: *appearance, image, consistency, trustee being familiar, identification, weak emotional ties* and *strong emotional ties*. A detailed presentation of the findings and how they relate to each other is made in Chapter 5. A simplified example of a coding process can be seen in Figure 8.

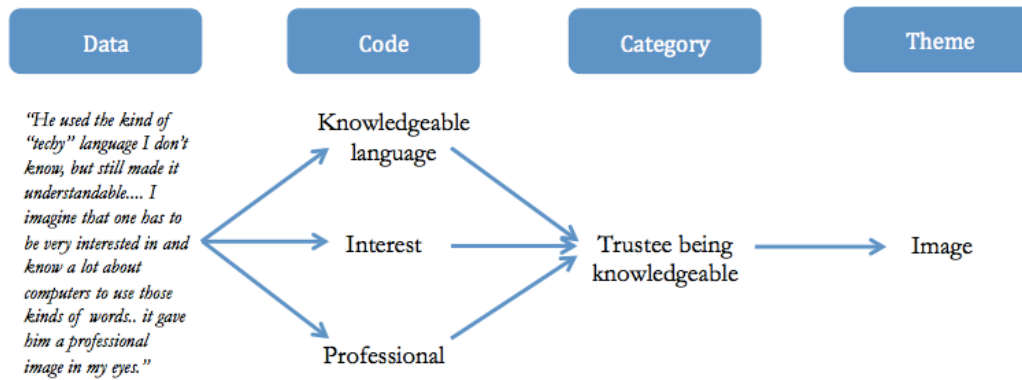


Figure 8: A simplified example of the process when using a thematic method

The thematic method has been considered particularly useful for dealing with a rich data set and identifying patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4 Quality Consideration

Although many methods have been developed for the purpose of evaluating qualitative research, none are considered better than the classical assessment of reliability and validity. Hence, the study's qualitative considerations will be assessed from these classical criteria (Flick, 2009).

3.4.1 Reliability

Reliability concerns the quality of a study's measurements (Trochim and Donnelly, 2008). A qualitative study is always affected by who the researchers are. All researchers carry with them past experiences, pre-existing ideas and interpretations of the surroundings, which risk affecting their interpretations of the data (Maxwell, 2013). The risk of researcher bias has here been addressed by having both authors present during all interviews. Further, the findings were first interpreted individually by each author, followed by a comparison and mutual discussion. This decreased the risk of misinterpretations, but researcher bias will always exist from the mere presence of the authors (Flick, 2009). To further increase the reliability of the study, pilot interviews were conducted (see section 3.2.5) to check for bias or potentially misleading questions in the Interview Guide (Flick, 2009).

3.4.2 Validity

Critics to qualitative research state that the method's limitation lies in its weakness to find generalized results (Yin, 2013). The sample sizes used in qualitative studies tend to be too small to be representative of a larger population, which will naturally limit the generalization of the findings (Ibid). However, since the purpose of this study is to find answers to a yet unexplored context, qualitative research is needed to create new theory. For this reason, it is an appropriate approach, but the findings can be tested in future quantitative studies to increase validity (Britain, 1978). Future, the context of the scope has been described in detail in order for future research to build upon similar grounds.

4. Empirical Background

This chapter provides a background to the analysis. It starts by giving a review on factors that confirm that the study has looked at trust (4.1). Next, the different types of relationships that existed between the trustor and trustee are described (4.2), which depended on the time frame and the type of social media channel(s) that the trustor followed the trustee in. Following section presents the purchases, which are divided into different product categories (4.3). Lastly, the types of risks are identified (4.4).

4.1 Evidence Showing that the Study Looks at Trust

In order to fulfill the purpose of the study, it is important that the studied situations have comprised “real” trust, and not other behaviors that often are confused with trust or just representative of something else. Many instances in the interviews provide strong indications that the research in fact is comprised of situations of trust.

4.1.1 Confirming the Preconditions of Trust

In order for trust to exist, there need to be risk and interdependence in the situation (Rousseau et al., 1998). The three identified types of risk, which will be described in detail in section 4.4, confirms that a risk component was apparent for all cases in the sample. Likewise, interdependence existed since the trustee’s recommendation was always a means for the trustor to achieve a desired outcome. The following quote clearly shows how the respondent (trustor) was dependent on the trustee to get certain information:

“Since my friends don’t know anything about computers, I had to turn to him to get the information I needed.”

4.1.2 Confirming the Functions of Trust

The main functions of trust are to manage risk and overcome uncertainties (Luhmann, 1979). This use of trust was detected in the sample, which shows how trust, unintentionally, was used to bridge the uncertainties that prevailed in the situations. When respondents were inquired about how they could be sure that the trustee was not making information up, they were surprised by the realization that they had not questioned this before.

“Wow [pause] I really don’t know why..It’s funny that you say that... Now I feel kind of stupid that I didn’t even have a thought that she could be making it up”

“I didn’t look into his background that much, I just trusted what he wrote. He might as well have written bullshit, I’d still believe him. I don’t really know why.”

These comments show how the trustors, without thinking about it, overcame uncertainties about the trustee by simply choosing to trust them.

4.1.3 Confirming Different Propensities to Trust

Trust is a combination of a trustee’s trustworthiness and a trustor’s propensity to trust (Mayer et al., 1995), but this paper only focuses on the first. For the validity of the study, it is therefore important to know that the built trust was not solely a result of exceptionally high propensities to trust (meaning cases of “blind trust”) (Ibid.), which would render the trust from trustee trustworthiness obsolete.

Many comments from the respondents reflect that they in fact had different propensities to trust, and that the sample hence was not made up of exceptionally credulous trustors. Some respondents even expressed a skeptical attitude towards trusting other people.

“I generally don’t trust..I like to know who the person is before I trust them”

“I don’t know if it’s because I’m Finnish..but for me, honesty is based on the fact that you can say bad things as well as good”

These respondents’ acknowledged that their own personalities may pose restrictions on their willingness to trust other people. This implies that the trust, at least to some degree, derived from trustee characteristics, which supports the focus of the study.

Having concluded that the focus of this study is trust, the following sections describe other important characteristics of the studied sample; their relationship to the trustee, their purchases and the types of risk they experienced.

4.2 The Relationship Between the Trustee and Trustor

The relationship between the trustee and trustor is important since it affects the strength of the trust (Granovetter, 1983) and the nature of the trustor’s assessment (McAllister, 1995). The sample’s relationship was highly affected by the time frame over which the trustor had followed the trustee on SM. This varied greatly among the respondents, ranging from first-time encounters with the trustee’s SM account to the trustor having followed the trustee up to 10 years.

The study is representative of five types of social media; blogs, Instagram, interactive forums⁵, Facebook, and podcasts. In 50 percent of the cases, the trustee was a “blogger” (a person running a blog); in 25 percent, an Instagram account and the remaining 25 percent were represented by another SM channel (interactive forum, Facebook or podcast). In eight instances, the trustor followed the trustee in more than one SM channels, which was not the influencer when purchasing the product. The channels have therefore been divided into “main influence” and “other influence”. The distribution among the different social media platforms can be seen in Table 2.

	Social media channel: Main influence	Social media channel: Other influence
Blog	11	1
Instagram	5	5
Interactiveforum	2	
Facebook	1	
Podcast	1	2
Total	20	8

Table 2: The social media channels the trustor followed the trustee in

⁵ An interactive forum is an online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages. The contents are often created by the users or members of the site, who use the forum for support, sharing of ideas etc
(http://www.vbulletin.com/forum/help?faq=vb3_board_usage#faq_vb3_forums_threads_posts, Retrieved 2016-05-14, 14:00)

4.3 The Product Categories

The respondents' purchases fall within different product categories. A more extended list, with exact purchases can be found in Appendix III. Table 3 below shows the purchases merged into different product categories. The most frequently made purchase related to fashion and makeup. Fashion includes both clothes and accessories, whilst make-up constitutes a separate category. Other categories were nutrition supplements, such as vitamins or gym supplements, body treatments, which relate to services (here hairdresser and shakra treatment), food products, sports equipment, technology and interior.

This study will not provide an in-depth analysis to why specific product types are more recurrent than others in the sample, since this is considered to fall outside the scope of the study. A simple reasoning to why women are overrepresented in the sample (see section 3.2.3) can be that women tend to care more about their looks and beauty compared to men (Gutierrez et al., 1999).

Product categories	
Fashion	7
Makeup	4
Nutrition supplement	2
Body treatment	2
Food	2
Sports equipment	1
Technology	1
Interior	1

Table 3: The product categories

4.4 The Types of Risk

All the interviewees perceived the purchase to be of importance to them and related to some risk. The type of risks experienced can be categorized into three groups: economic, quality, and image.

4.4.1 Economic Risk

The most frequently mentioned risk concerns were related to the economic factor of paying a high price. When the product came at a high cost, the participants seemed to be more keen that they made a good purchase. These are examples from two interviewees who had bought relatively expensive products (>7000 SEK).

"I think it is mainly the price that determines if I seek information or not. The price makes the risk higher. If it is an expensive product, you want to make the right investment and then you want to be well-informed before buying the product."

"I think information was important to me mainly for the high cost related to it. Good skis cost at least around 7-8 thousand (SEK)."

As can be seen, the economical risk came from worries about spending money on things that was based on the recommendations from an unknown person.

4.4.2 Quality Risk

The quality of the product was also an important risk factor when purchasing something based on a recommendation:

"I have had a lot of problem with my skin. It is very important for me that the foundation fits my skin tone, stays on for a whole day and doesn't give me rashes or pimples".

This risk derived from the uncertainty about the functioning of a product, and was especially high if bad quality could have other negative consequences than just "wasted" money.

4.4.3 Image Risk

Another identified risk related to the consequences a bad purchase could have on the trustor's image. This risk was particularly present in the cases of fashion. Participants of the study expressed that the trustee acted as a gatekeeper for good taste. One interviewee meant that her own disinterest in fashion made her rely on Instagram and blog profiles to give her hints on what was fashionable and consequently, what she could buy in order to align with current trends.

"I don't have a strong interest in fashion, but I still want to look good. .. I look at accounts to see what they are wearing, and if I think it looks good, I'll buy it. Then I don't have to do the work of finding the things [clothes] myself."

Another example of an image risk comes from a participant who himself was the owner of a popular fashion-account on Instagram, where he posted pictures of himself in different outfits. He explained that fashion purchases always entail a high risk for him, since they have to be perceived as "fashionable" by others and align with his image. Otherwise, his image and his Instagram account could take damage.

"I can't walk around and don't look good. It is against my image and I could lose followers. The clothes I wear need to be right (fashionable)."

As explained, the image risk came from how the purchase would, or would not, affect the trustor's image.

The three types of risk often interacted, meaning that one participant could experience more than one risk. The most common risk was the economic risk.

5. Analysis

In the following chapter, the findings are presented and analysed based on the existing theory on interpersonal trust. Trust in SM is found to depend on the type of relationship ties that are established between trustors and trustees, which can range from weak to strong ones. Between weak and strong ties, a spectrum of other possible ties can exist, which confirms trust to be a process (5.1). Three factors are found to be needed in the creational phase of trust-building - appearance, image and consistency - which creates weak ties and hence establishing interpersonal trust (5.2). Further, two additional factors are revealed to develop ties from weak to strong ones when these are established - trustee being personal and identification - strengthening the interpersonal trust (5.3). In the last section (5.4), the characteristics of the different levels of trust embedded in the relational ties are presented. Figure 9 captures a visualization of an overview of the analysis chapter.

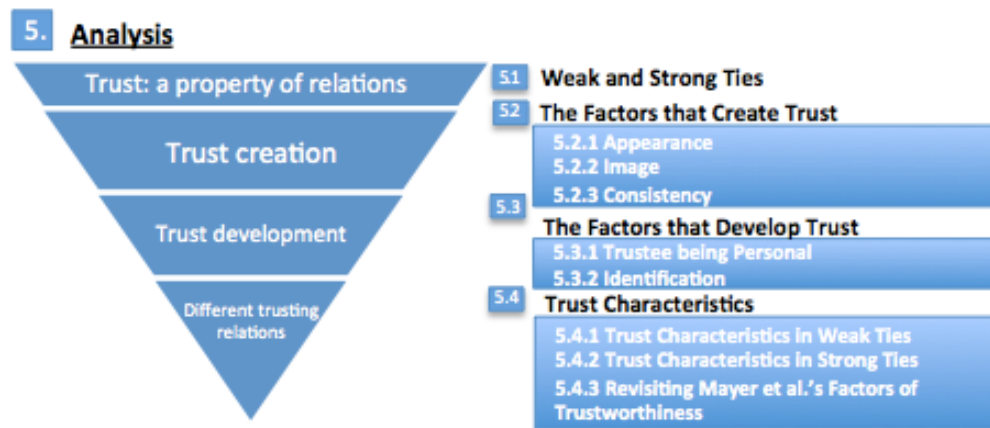


Figure 9: The thesis road-map presenting an overview of the literature review

5.1 Weak and Strong Relational Ties

The trustors described how close they perceived themselves to be to the trustees as well as how strong emotional ties they had towards them. These varied widely among the sample and could be divided into a spectrum ranging from weak towards strong ties (Granovetter, 1983).

"I have no emotional feelings for him. .. I trusted him because he seemed knowledgeable, but that is all. I am not sure I would recommend him to any of my friends, I can't even remember the name of his account."

This example represents a respondent who fell under the category of weak ties, defined here as *interpersonal ties that do not evoke any strong emotions in the trustor*. She does not show any emotional bonds to the trustee, nor does she seem to know anything about him. Participants in the study who described their emotional tie in the same, non-existent, way fell under the category of weak relational ties. In total, three participants were grouped into this category. On the contrary, the following quote is an example of a person who instead described positive feelings towards the trustee, who was an Instagram profile

"I really like him, I look up to him. I like that he shares pictures of his styles, but also of his private life. ... I know that he only wears clothes from his own brand, but I don't believe that his purpose is to primarily sell his products. Rather to make the world a little bit more fashionable. I think he is genuinely nice, he answers the comments on his pictures and seems to be very sympathetic.... I think that we would be really good friends in real life."

5.2 The Factors that Create Trust

In accordance with the proposed framework, this section draws on Mayer et al.'s theory (1995) on characteristics of the trustee that induce a trustworthy impression. When exploring trust-creation in social media, the respondents described different factors that had led them to perceive the “unknown” person as trustworthy. These factors are pinned down into three “creational factors” that were necessary for the establishment of weak ties and interpersonal trust. These were: *Appearance* (5.2.1), *Image* (5.2.2) and *Consistency* (5.2.3).

5.2.1 Appearance

When assessing the trustee's trustworthiness, the trustors mentioned that the trustee's appearance was the first factor driving the creation process of trust. Appearance includes three aspects: 1) an appealing layout of the trustee's account which makes the trustor want to continue looking into the content, 2) that the person behind the account seems reasonable, genuine and professional, meaning that the trustee is perceived to be an actual person and not a company or a fraud, trying to deceive SM users, and 3) a profile that is clear from ads and does not seem to be sponsored, confirming that the trustee is not only recommending products for financial rewards. The importance of these aspects shows that the trustee's reflected integrity (Mayer et. al, 1995) is important for trust to be built in the context of social media: the trustor looks for cues that the trustee has values that the trustor can empathize with and does not want to harm the trustor.

When participants in the study were asked what had made them trust the trustee the first time they encountered the SM profile, many stated that the SM account's formatting, layout and design, were important. They stated that the account needed to be “visually appealing” to them, meaning that “nice-looking” pictures, structured text-formatting and an overall “clean” layout is what had made them continue looking through the content of the trustee's account in the first place.

If the trustor found the account visually appealing, other characteristics of the trustee's profile were laid out as important drivers to a trustworthy impression. Many respondents mentioned that the trustee appearing to be a reasonable person had influenced their impressions of the trustee's trustworthiness:

“I had not visited her SM account earlier, but I could tell from the stream of pictures that she looked genuine.”

“I had no relation to his blog before this encounter. The first thing (..) was that it appeared professional, which was very important in my decision to trust his advice.”

““I ended up on her side by accident really...I would never have bought exactly that jacket, from that website, if it wasn't for her.. Her account looked professional, she had many nice photos.”

It seemed important that the appearance of the profile gave a “genuine” or “professional” impression of the person behind the account. By further asking why this was important, the respondents explained how it made them believe that there was an actual person behind the account and not a company or anyone who wanted to do them harm.

“She seemed genuine... you could tell that it was a real person, a “normal” person, which makes it unlikely that they would do it to intentionally harm you.”

Moreover, respondents often emphasized that it was of importance for them that the trustee did not seem to be paid or sponsored to recommend products. This was often deduced from the fact that the trustee did not have many advertisements on their site. The trustors seemed to actively search for affirmation that the trustee was recommending the product or service out of goodwill rather than for money.

“When they just link a product without writing anything about it..then you know they probably just do it for money.”

“He had written texts about products, there were a few, but not too many, ads or things like that (..)”

It was shown that evaluations of the trustee’s appearance served as a “first control” that the trustee did not have any wrongful intentions with the recommendation. The trustor wants to confirm that the trustee is an actual person, and not a company or a fraud that is after financial rewards. By looking for affirmation that the trustee is not paid to do the recommendation, the trustor can be thought to be looking for cues of the trustee’s integrity. Looking into the theory, Mayer et al. (1995) take up integrity as a key driver to trustee trustworthiness. Likewise, the importance of the visual artifacts looking “genuine” and “professional” can be interpreted as the trustor wanting the trustee to be a person who, in their opinion, has sound values and good reasons for recommending the product or service. Perceived value congruence is in theory related to the integrity (Mayer et al., 1995) of the trustee. Similar to the findings, Mayer et al. (1995) suggest that integrity may be of relatively higher importance in beginning of trusting relationships, since it easily can be observed or found out through others. This study shows that integrity in fact is important for establishing trust, but, more importantly, it shows that integrity is the very first factor the trustor assesses in the special context of SM.

A consensus of the whole sample was that appearance, on its own, was never enough for creating trust. Another factor, which the trustors seemed to evaluate more thoroughly, was the trustee’s image, relating to how much knowledge the trustee seemed to have within the related product field.

5.2.2 Image

Once appearance had been assessed and the trustee’s integrity (Mayer et al., 1995) confirmed, the trustors seemed to search for cues in the SM contents that the trustee was knowledgeable within the product field. The signs were then collectively formed into an image of the trustee being “good at” something. The image was confirmed by three aspects: 1) the trustee used a “knowledgeable language” when describing the product or service, for example using “techy words” for a technology product, 2) the trustee described both advantages and disadvantages with the product, and 3) the trustee indicated that they were using the product themselves and that they had first-hand experience of it. By assessing the trustee’s image, trustors looked for signs that the trustee had competence (ability) within the related product, making the recommendation trustworthy (Mayer et al. 1995).

The notion of the trustee seeming to be “good at” something recurred in many interviews. When the respondents were inquired further about this, it was commonly developed into statements similar to *“he knew what he was talking about”*. Trustors described that if the trustee displayed a high level of interest within a specific field (health, fashion, and more), they were perceived as knowledgeable within that certain area.

“He seemed knowledgeable from the way he described the products... He used the kind of “techy” language I don’t know, but still made it understandable.... I imagine that one has to be very interested in and know a lot about computers to use those kinds of words.. it gave him a professional image in my eyes.”

Similarly, the trustee’s knowledge could be assessed from how they wrote about the recommended products or services. Descriptive information about product features and the ability to categorize these into pros and cons were perceived as trustworthy signs of the trustee’s knowledge.

“She wrote which situations it was good for – for example I want to know that it holds after a whole night dancing and that it fits my skin type.”

“The fact that she described how the different products suit different skin types made me believe that she really knew something. She wouldn’t have made such a thorough description otherwise.”

“Because he wrote both good and bad things about it. It gave the impression that he knew things about it.”

The trustee’s knowledge could further be reflected in pictures showing that the trustee had tested the product him/herself, which meant that they were basing their recommendation on personal experience.

“When they have before-and-after pictures you can tell that they have actually tested the product. You can see how it looks on the face, and if the result looks like they say it should.”

By assessing a trustee’s image, the trustor aimed at detecting how knowledgeable the trustee was of the recommended product. If the trustee was knowledgeable, he or she was assumed to provide a more trustworthy recommendation. Reflected knowledge can be translated into Mayer et al.’s (1995) characteristic of ability, which he means is an important driver to trustworthiness. In the case of SM, the trustor seems to assess the trustee’s ability based on their kind of pictures, way of writing, and the reflected effort spent on their interest, and thereby try to detect if the trustee was trustworthy.

In some cases, the respondents explained that third-party sources had been of help by confirming that their assessment of the trustee’s image:

“She has been featured in a lot of media channels so I figured her image was legitimate (..) I’ve seen her in Channel 4’s talk show, and they carefully pick whom they want on the show... And her stores are located on some of the best addresses in town.”

This shows how the trustee’s reputation among others could strengthen the trustor’s assessment of the trustee’s image. Zucker (1986) means that reputation is important for establishing trust in weak ties where the trustor has little information about the trustee.

This far, the study has discussed how assessments of the trustee’s appearance and image were used to find affirmation of the trustee’s trustworthiness. Appearance was found to reflect the trustee’s integrity, and image was found to reflect the trustee’s competence (Mayer et al., 1995). Relating to Mayer et al.’s (1995) discussion on the interrelativity of the three factors (integrity, ability and benevolence), these findings suggest that in SM, integrity is the first characteristic the trustor looks for by assessing the trustee’s appearance, followed by a search for ability by assessing the trustee’s image.

The study also shows that if a trustworthy appearance and image was continuously displayed, the positive impressions from these were repeated, resulting in the creation of a last factor of trustworthiness: consistency. Consistency therefore helped confirm the trustor's previous assessments (based on appearance and image) of the trustee, and hence further drive the trustor's perception that the trustee was trustworthy.

5.2.3 Consistency

Consistency relates to the trustee's congruence in actions over time, which was found to be assessed in two ways: either as a result of the trustor's own time spent following the trustee, or, unique for social media, by going back in the trustee's archives. A consistent theme in the SM account showed to strengthen the trustor's assessments of the trustee's appearance and image, since it gave them more foundation to base their assessments on. Consistency therefore acted as the last factor, needed to be in place, for creating trust and establishing weak ties.

Many respondents expressed how consistent patterns in the trustee's communication were important for creating a trustworthy impression, such as the theme of the account or the frequency of posting:

"She wouldn't post anything outside of fashion, she is unique in that way since she never deviate from her main theme of fashion."

"The continuity made it feel serious. There was a consistent theme in the pictures, fashion, and she uploaded pictures every other day."

"She had put a lot of effort into the account- the number of pictures and her frequency in posting showed that. All the pictures were beautifully capturing her "outfits of the day", and she is uploading new pictures at least every second day."

Perceived consistency contributed to the trustor's impression that the trustee was "professional" or "good at" something. This can be likened to the exact effects from the two other factors appearance and image. Appearance drove the impression of seeming "professional" and image drove impressions of seeming "good" at something. This is interpreted as the factor of consistency strengthening the assessments based on the other creational factors.

"I would probably never have trusted her or gone through with the purchase if she only had had 3 pictures on her account. But because she had a long archive of outfit-pictures, it made me believe that fashion was her thing and something she could be trusted for."

"Social media has strengthened his image, especially since you can go back in time and see what he's done before..You can make sure he's exhibiting the same values now as he was then."

In the last comment, the trustor explicitly confirms that he perceived the trustee's image as stronger due to the ability to observe congruence in actions over time (consistency). Moreover, it highlights an important feature of social media that highly affects the assessment of consistency: the ability to detect consistency by going back in archives and comparing previous activity with the current.

An important finding is therefore that in the special case of SM, consistency in trustee behavior was not something that had to be proven with the time of the relationship, but could be assessed up front by going back in the trustee's history of postings. This finding highlights the possibility that in the special case of SM, ability and integrity can be

assessed in earlier stages than in real life situations, where the trustor does not have the same abilities to go back in time during first-time encounters (Mayer et al., 1995).

However, assessments of consistency were also based on the length of the time the trustor had spent following the trustee's SM account. Consistency was hence shown to depend on the length of the relationship between the trustor and the trustee.

"I have followed her account for a long period of time, I know what type of field she acts within, and her way of writing and sharing photos."

"I have been following him for 1.5 years, but I know he's been doing it longer than so. This has built up my confidence for him. I have gone back in his feed and seen how long he has had this commitment, which in my eyes makes him legitimate."

The study finds that, if ability and integrity continuously are reflected in the trustee's appearance and image, consistency is created which further increases the trustee's trustworthiness. An explanation to why consistency was found to drive the creation of interpersonal trust can also be viewed in relation to theories of how repetition (consistent behavior) can make strengthen trust (Putnam, 2000) since it continuously confirms the trustor of their assessment (Ensminger, 2001; Good, 1988).

By seeking for consistency and confirming their previous assessments, the trustor can be thought to engage in what Gefen et al. (2003) calls "illusions of control". The trustor tries to look for cues that can confirm the trustee's trustworthiness, in order to gain a sense of personal control. This "over-inflation" of trusting beliefs (Gefen et al., 2003) typically occurs when trustors only base their judgments on observations, like in this case.

5.2.4 Summary Creational Factors

Aligned with the theory in the framework, the trustee's integrity and ability (Mayer et. al, 1995) are found to drive trustworthiness when weak ties (Khodyakov, 2007) are established. However, specific to the context of SM, integrity and ability are appraised in the form of appearance and image, since these are the online reflections that indicate that the trustee is a real person and knows what he or she is talking about.

Described as a process, the trustor first makes an assessment of the appearance – wanting the trustee to appear "professional" and "genuine" - in order to make sure that they are a "real" person behind the account who does not want to do the trustor any harm. This mirrors integrity (Mayer et. al, 1995), which thereby becomes the first factor in the trust-building process (Khodyakov, 2007). Secondly, the trustor assesses the trustee's image to see if he/she is "knowledgeable" within the area of recommendation. Ability (Mayer et al., 1995) is hence the second factor of trustworthiness that is assessed in the trust creation phase (Khodyakov, 2007). Lastly, consistency strengthens impressions of both integrity and ability (Mayer et al., 1995) by confirming what the trustor already believes to know about the trustee. Consistency provides the trustor with an illusion of having control over the trustee (Gefen et al., 2003) and therefore facilitates the idea of trusting someone who is of unknown character, which commonly is the case in weak ties (Granovetter, 1983).

Interestingly, the trustee's benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995) did not seem to be assessed anywhere in the creational phase of the trust building process (Khodyakov, 2007). This can be explained by the one-way communication on SM that create "personal yet

impersonal” relations between the trustor and the trustee. Trustors turn direct to a trustee for advice, whilst the trustee communicates in a one-directed monologue to a mass of people. Since the trustor is just one of many, as good as invisible to the trustee, they cannot get any indications of the trustee’s benevolence, i.e. that the trustor wants to do them good in particular. Therefore, benevolence is missing in the creation of weak ties in SM (Granovetter, 1983). Mayer et al. (1995) state that absence of one factor may undermine trust, but that perceived existence of all three likely indicates trustworthiness. This study suggests that perceived integrity and ability suffices to consider the trustee trustworthy, despite an absence of benevolence.

The study shows that all the three creational factors- appearance, image and consistency- had to be in place in order for weak ties to be established. Once trust in weak ties was established, these could develop into strong ties with help from two additional factors.

5.3 The Factors that Develop Trust

This section focuses on the factors that were found to strengthen trust by developing weak ties into strong ones (Granovetter, 1983). Once consistency was established and all three creational factors were in place, the development stage of the trust building process (Khodyakov, 2007) could begin.

Two additional factors were found to develop the interpersonal trust by strengthening the perceived relationship between trustor and trustee. These “developing factors” were *trustee being personal* (5.3.1) and *identification* (5.3.2)

5.3.1 Trustee being Personal

Trustee being personal was the first identified developing factor that could move weak ties toward stronger ones. The empirical findings show that when the trustee shared content from their private life, the trustor could relate more to the trustees, which strengthened the emotional bounds the trustor felt towards them.

In weak ties, the trustors did not know much about the person behind the account, nor did they talk about their relation as something that could be considered a real relationship. The following quotes came from two participants in the extreme end of weak ties:

“I don’t know anything about him. I know his name, that is all.”

““I have no clue who is behind the account more than that his name is Benjamin.”

Digging deeper into the findings, it turned out that the more the trustor knew about the trustee, the more they considered it to be a relationship between them.

Trustee being personal functioned as a driver towards stronger ties by giving the trustor a sense of knowing a lot about the trustee.

““I know a lot about him, social media is very transparent and self-omitting. .. I like him as a person.”

“She is still quite private; there are pictures of her travels, their children and family photos. In the past I did not know too much about her life outside of her image.. but the image I had of her before was enhanced by her social media profile. I think she is nice, real and genuine.”

“Comparing to other bloggers, I think she is much more transparent and closer to the truth. She is open about problems she has, everything from birth control pills to weight gains and relationship issues. I know I’m one of those people who create relationships by being open with my shortcomings....when another person then recognize their own shortcomings, I start considering myself close to this person. It’s because I do the same thing when I want to bond with another person – I show them my weaknesses.”

These comments were from trustors who fell in the spectrum in-between the weak and strong ties, moving towards stronger ones. This behavior can be explained by Granovetter’s (1983) view of ties. He states that familiarity with the trustee is an important factor in developing the relationship between the trustor and trustee. In the study, the more the trustor knew about the trustee, the stronger the ties seemed to be. However, an essential difference is identified between the context of SM and the context Granovetter’s (1983) definition builds on. The difference is that in SM, the perceived familiarity to the trustee is partly dependent on how actively the trustor seeks for this information.

“I don’t want to know about her personal life, so I don’t read it.”

One can assume that some of the information still reaches the trustor, but compared to real life situations, even over a long period of time, the trustor can chose not to familiarize with the trustee. Lewis and Weigert (1985) base their research on Granovetter’s (1983) theory of ties, and mean that the strength of relationship ties depend on how often parties interact. They describe how people in the same surroundings become familiar with each other simply by interacting with each other on a repetitive basis, even if it is not intended. In SM, familiarity can be translated to the trustee being personal by sharing personal content in texts, photos and audios. However, in contrary to real world interactions, the shared personal information also needs to be received by the trustor, who more actively can filter away information they do not want to see. This means that given that the trustee shares personal information on their SM, the trustor still has a choice of whether or not to familiarize with them.

5.3.2 Identification

The second factor found to drive the development of weak ties towards stronger ones was how much the trustors could see themselves resembled in the trustees, which is named identification. For identification to be accomplished, the previous factor, trustee being personal, had to be in place. Therefore, identification builds on trustee being personal and is represented by a stronger emotional connection to the trustee as it drives the process closer to strong ties.

To reach the strongest form of ties (Granovetter, 1983) *identification* was found to be the critical factor needed to be in place. In the sample, it was apparent that those trustors who could more strongly relate to the trustee, were more emotionally attached to the person. This factor relates to how well the trustors can see themselves resembled in the trustee. Many in the sample described that they could relate to the trustee because they shared the same interest, style or characteristics.

“I could see myself wear all the things in her wardrobe.”

“She is also that typical “girl next door” type. That is why I always turn to her for advice, even if there probably are other bloggers who know more about makeup that she does.”

“We share an interest for food, and she likes to keep things real. I do too.”

By relating to a specific interest, style or other characteristic of the trustee, the trustors described themselves to identify with the trustee on a personal level. In the six cases who fell under the category of strong ties, the identification factor was so prominent that the trustee seemed to be more of an idol in the eyes of the trustor: the ideal view of who the trustor wanted to become. This form of idolization appeared in five of the six cases categorized to strong ties (the sixth case was characterized by a very strong identification, but not as high level of idolization).

"The similarity between us matters. I see many of his characteristics in myself, such as our strong interest in exercising and how we both care much for our well-being. It is something we share. "

"I am inspired by her lifestyle. She lives such a wonderful life that captures so many different components. I like that she can juggle everything so well; for example she once said, "I worked all weekend, more than anyone does in a week". I like how she can do that but at the same time can go out and get shit drunk in the evening. She has a nice chaos around her, she is beautiful, sprawling, funny, and also successful. I do not want her job, but she seems like a cool modern girl who can be a real babe, yet a chief editor. She can work the shit out of herself but still have a boyfriend, and somehow makes it all work. She has some form of balance. I like to see that. Young girls who succeed in their careers, have a balanced life outside work, and manage to do it all in a glamorous style. "

The last quote came from a trustor who explained that she was in a similar same phase of her life, she was about to start her career and had very high ambitions, but at the same time wants to make it work with her private life. The trustor also cared a lot about her looks and enjoyed the glamorous lifestyle the trustee seemed to have:

"She always looks good, her style is always so right. Just like how I want to be. Then she also dares to be different. She is not wearing any leggings, even though it's in the middle of the winter. That is power! It's awesome with someone who is as dedicated to her own look that much."

These quotes show that the trustee represented a lifestyle that the trustor wants to achieve herself. She described the person as someone she looks up to and can identify with.

Another respondent, who fell under into category of the strongest form of ties, was a relatively famous blogger herself, and described her relationship to another blogger whom she had followed over ten years in the following way:

"I remember seeing her in a magazine when I was young, and felt comforted by the fact that she had the same outwards bellybutton as I had. Then I started following her on social media during a time when she had a lot of problems with guys, which I also had at that time.. A lot of bad ones. Then she moved to the states, got married, had children and started her own fashion brand. Now she opened up her first own store and it is going really well. I just moved to the states with my boyfriend, and I have my own clothing line. She designs things that are just so simple and clean, which is exactly how I find my own style. She is older than me, and since I'm getting older I want to know how I can develop my business. I get inspired by her.. She could give me any advice and I'd follow it without even blinking."

Another interviewee described his strong positive feelings towards a popular fashion Instagrammer in Milan. The trustor has his own Instagram account, inspired by the Italian style, and has forty thousand followers himself.

“Becoming like him would be a dream come true. I don’t consider him to be a celebrity but he has really succeeded within the field of fashion. .. I think he seems really down to earth and genuine. We are kind of the same age and have the same style. He lives the life I’d like to live and aim for. If you can’t get the weather and the coffee they have in Milan, then at least you can have as nice style.”

Many of the researchers on relationship ties agree with Granovetter (1983) that strong ties are built from similarities (Cook, 2005; Uslaner, 2002; Khodyakov, 2007), which seem to happen also in the case of social media. Similarities in the SM setting ranged from very simple aspects, such as skin tone, age and gender, to deeper level values and interests. Aligned with existing theory, the study finds that identification (what Granovetter (1983) calls similarity) results in that those who have a lot in common are more likely to build strong interpersonal ties, and a form of strong trust towards each other (Cook, 2005). Further, relating to network theories, identification to the trustee seem to only happen if the trustor would consider the trustee to fall within their “in-group” in real life, meaning that they probably would be close friends. Existing research also explains this phenomenon in regards to risk, stating that it is less risky to trust someone with similar background to oneself (Uslaner, 2002).

Similarities in background and interests are in theory also outlined as perceived signs of value congruence (the trustee’s integrity) (Mayer et. al, 1995). This can explain why trustors who identified to the trustee also seemed to take the trustee’s integrity for granted.

“Wow I haven’t even thought that he could be lying about this..it didn’t even cross my mind.”

The two development factors were not isolated from each other, but seemed to strongly influence one another, depicted in Figure 11. If the person behind the account (trustee) was being personal in their communication, the tie between the trustor and trustee could grow stronger. When the trustee opened up about their life, the trustor could in many cases relate more to them, and, in the strongest ties, even identify to them.

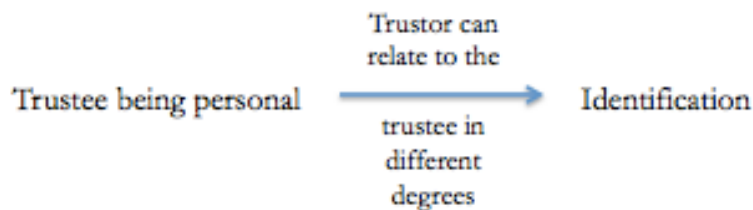


Figure 11: A depiction of how the development factors relate to each other

Relating these factors to the different kind of ties, there seem to be a barrier that only could be passed through strong identification. The strongest ties were only found to exist in cases where the trustor identified to the trustee, and if identification was not present, the relationship seemed to fall somewhere in the “in-between” spectra of ties. This means that the time of the relationship was not sufficient to get the strongest trusting relationships, and that the parties could remain in weak ties forever. In real life, it is argued that repetitive interactions automatically strengthens ties (Lewis and Weigert, 1985) even if this is not intended, but in SM, the trustor could have known the trustee for several years but still not reach strong ties. Moreover, in the very strongest ties, the trustors nearly seemed to idolize the trustee. The study therefore shows that in the context of SM, strong ties could only be established if the similarities were perceived

high to the extent that the trustor identified, or looked up to, the trustee (see visualized in Figure 12). It created feelings of being friends with, or wanting to be, that person.

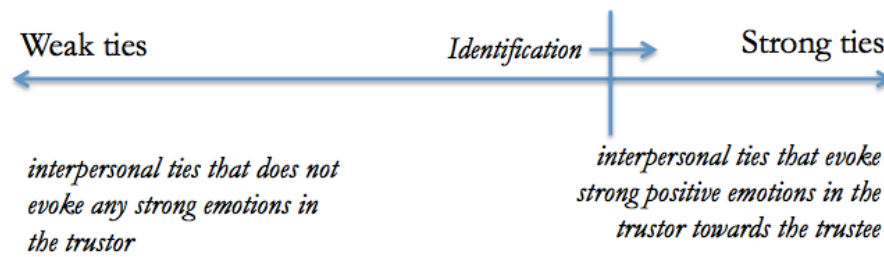


Figure 12: The barrier against strong ties could only be passed through *identification*

5.3.3 Summary Development Factors

To move from weak towards strong ties in the process of trust-building (Khodyakov, 2007) in a SM context, two factors were found to be needed: *trustee being personal* and *identification*. If the trustee was personal in his/her shared content, the ties could grow stronger, which aligns with the framework on Granovetter's (1983) strong ties and how these develop through familiarity. Further, identification matches Granovetter's (1983) second driver to strong ties, similarity, but the study also finds that in five of six cases of the strongest form of ties, identification seemed to be expressed as a form of idolization.

5.4 Trust Characteristics

By looking further into how the trust differed in weak respectively strong ties, this study find characteristics in trust that were specific to these two ends of the relationship spectrum. The main finding was that the different trusting relations correlated to different strengths of emotions the trustor felt towards trustee, consequently relating Granovetter's (1983) weak and strong ties to McAllister's (1995) cognitive- and affective-based trust. An interesting finding is that Mayer et al.'s (1995) last factor of trustworthiness, benevolence, appears in the context of strong ties (Granovetter, 1983), explained by the strong emotions in affective-based trust (McAllister, 1995).

5.4.1 Trust Characteristics in Weak ties

The study shows that in order for weak ties to be established, the three creational factors were assessed based on observations and information the trustor could find on the trustee. McAllister (1995) defines assessments based on knowledge of the other party as cognitive-based evaluations. It therefore suggests that cognitive-based trust was the form of trust that characterized weak ties.

In the most extreme cases of weak ties, the trustors knew almost nothing about the trustee and had no feelings towards them. Since there were no strong emotions involved, it further suggests that the trust was cognitive-based rather than affective-based (McAllister, 1995). Another finding was that in weak ties, the trustor's perception of the trustee's knowledge was limited to the specific area the recommendation related to. This shows that the trust in weak ties was domain-specific (Sztompka, 1999).

The trustors in weak ties also commonly explained that they used the trustee more for "inspiration" than to get that specific trustee's advice. This can be related to how Granovetter (1983) explains that trustors in weak ties may use the trustee for information collection rather than reliable advice. Relating to network theory, the trustee in weak ties

can be thought as an out-group member whom the trustor turned to if people in their real life in-group did not have the information they needed.

"I was on the outlook for a computer, but since all my friends used Macs and I wanted a PC, I needed to turn for advice somewhere else."

In weak ties, trustor's tended to confirm their previous assessments of the trustee's trustworthiness by looking for consistency. To "over-inflate trusting beliefs" in this way, and search for information that confirms the trustee's trustworthiness, is according to Gefen et al. (2003) a common property of cognitive-based trust.

Weak ties were found to develop into stronger ones if the trustee shared personal information. This increased the trustor's knowledge of the trustee, and with that also the emotions placing the relations "in-between" ties, moving from weak towards strong ones. Moreover, if the trustor could identify to the trustee, the emotions to them were very strong. This represents the other extreme of the relationship spectra, strong ties.

5.4.2 Trust Characteristics in Strong ties

In strong ties, trustors felt emotionally attached to the trustee, feeling a form of "real" friendship and considering the trustee to personally be letting him/her down if they would give a bad advice. The trustor believes that the trustee wants him/her good in particular, showing how strong emotions guided a behavior of attributing benevolence (Mayer et al, 1995) in the trustee. Strong ties were hence characterized by strong emotional feelings to the trustee and a persistent form of trust in which the trustor took the trustee's trustworthiness for granted (Ibid.).

In the strong ties, the trustor's assessment of the trustee seemed to be based more on the emotions that the trustor felt towards the trustee.

"I like him, so I trust him. It feels like he is my friend and friends don't lie to each other."

This comment shows how trustors let emotions, and the character of their relationship, guide their assessment of the trustee. Assessments guided by emotional responses is in theory outlined as features of affective-based trust (McAllister, 1995; Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). The trustors then base their judgments more on qualities of the relationship than on observations of the trustee's behaviors (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). The findings hence indicate that strong ties (Granovetter, 1983) embedded affective-based trust (McAllister, 1995). This is further indicated by the strong identification that pertained to strong ties (explained in section 5.3.2), which in theory is argued to be the strongest form of affective-based trust⁶ (Dietz & Dean Hartog, 2006). However, the findings indicate that, in the special case of SM, the highest form of identification occurred when the trustor looked up to the trustee, resembling a form of idolization.

The strong emotions further made the trustors feel that they could trust the trustee for other recommendations besides what they defined as the trustee's core competences (Mayer et al., 1995). This suggests that affective-based trust was of a more general character compared to the domain-specific (Sztompka, 1999) cognitive-based trust.

"I believe that he likes the same things that I do. So yes, I would trust him for matters concerning other areas than fashion. For example travels, restaurants. I believe we like similar things."

⁶ Dietz and Dean Hartog (2006) define identification-based trust as a trust where a common identity is assumed, and argue that it is the strongest form of affection-based trust.

“If it is good enough for her, then it is good enough for me.”

Since affective-based trust builds on cognitive-based trust (McAllister, 1995), this more general form of trust can be explained by how previous assessments of the trustee’s trustworthiness, from earlier encounters with them, has created a “base” level of trust that remained when the relationship developed. The trustor’s assessments therefore became more “automatic” in strong ties, meaning that the trustor took the trustee’s trustworthiness for granted. Accordingly, McAllister (1995) argue that affective-based is very persistent to the nature since the trustor already has formed a stable picture of the trustee that is not easily revoked.

Further, the strong emotions in affective-based trust seemed to introduce a new dimension to how the trustor experienced the trusting relationship. An interesting finding was that the trustors in strong ties explained that they would feel personally “let down” if the trustee would do something unaligned with their expectations.

“Had it turned out to be bullshit – which I don’t think it is – then it would have hurt ...for the sake of the trust he’s built up in me..had he not been truthful it would be a setback for me”

Feelings of being let down are thought to derive only if the trustor initially thinks that the trustee wanted to do them good in particular, i.e. if they believe that the trustee is benevolent (Mayer et al., 1995). Taken together, this finding interestingly suggests that in strong ties, Mayer et al.’s (1995) last factor for trustee trustworthiness, benevolence, has appeared. The trustee’s benevolence was however not something that the trustor found out from experience or from observations of the SM account, but rather something the trustor constructed in the trustee in order to feel more certain of their decision to trust. By attributing benevolence to the trustee, the trustor created an illusion of having a “real” two-way relationship to the trustee. It can be thought that the trustor tried to reconstruct an offline, interdependent relationship in the online world.

5.4.3 Revisiting Mayer et al.’s Factors of Trustworthiness

This sudden appearance of benevolence is an interesting finding that does yet not find any match in the current literature. Whilst Mayer et al. (1995) suggest that benevolence may be of more importance later in the relationship⁷, this study more precisely finds that benevolence only exists in affective-based trust. Moreover, compared to the literature that means that benevolence is reflected in the trustee’s actions (Mayer et al., 1995), the study finds that in SM, the trustor constructs benevolence as a result of their strong emotions. It therefore shows that strong emotions are prerequisite for benevolence to exist. Moreover, it finds that whilst integrity and ability can be *observed* in the trustee’s content, benevolence is *constructed* to make the trustor feel more confident in the trusting relationship. This relationship is depicted in Figure 13.

⁷ Mayer et al. (1995) define benevolence as the result of the trustee having shown that they care for the trustor in particular, and that this cannot be identified until they have engaged in repetitive interactions.

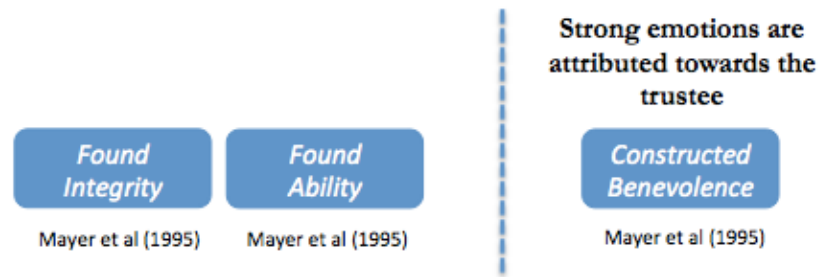


Figure 13 Mayer et al.'s (1995) trustee characteristics in a sequential order

5.4.4. Weak and Strong Emotional Ties

The analysis has visited and revisited Khodyakov's (2007) theory of trust as a process, Granovetter's (1983) theory of weak and strong ties, McAllister's (1995) theory of emotional embeddedness in cognitive-and affective-based trust as well as Mayer et al.'s (1995) factors of trustworthiness, and found a relationship between these. It can be concluded that the weak ties, as they are established, embedded cognitive-based trust whilst strong ties embedded affective-based trust. It is therefore suggested that these independent theories are merged into the concepts of *weak emotional ties* and *strong emotional ties*, respectively. Seen at the next level, weak emotional ties enabled assessments of Mayer et al.'s (1995) factors of integrity and ability, whilst strong emotional ties had to be established in order for the trustor to be able to construct a feeling of benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995). Relating trust to a process (Khodyakov, 2007) that develops weak emotional ties to strong emotional ties, it can further be concluded that the factors of trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995) can be placed in a sequential order, starting with assessments of the trustee's integrity, then ability and lastly, the construction of benevolence. Figure 14 presents a summary of the study's main findings in a model.

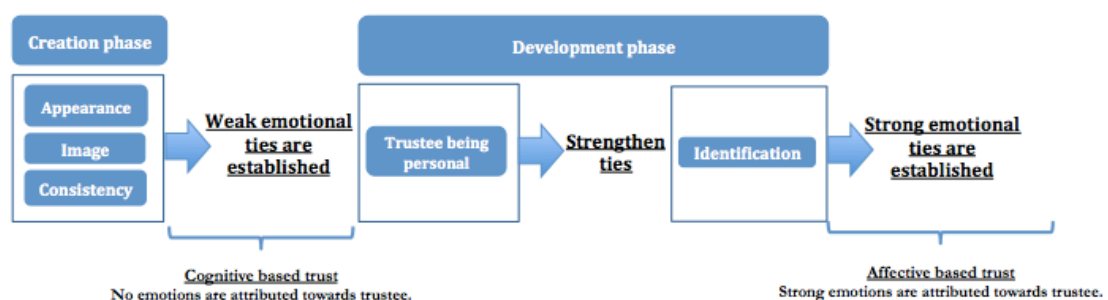


Figure 14: A summary of the study's main findings

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the study has been to fill the theoretical gap in the literature of interpersonal trust by studying the up until now unexplored context of social media. The work was accomplished by performing a qualitative study, consisting of 20 in-depth interviews with trustors. This chapter will provide an answer to the research question:

How is trust built between people on social media?

The study finds that trust between people in SM is built through a creation and a development phase. Trust is further confirmed to be a property of relationships, and that there are different characteristics of the trust embedded in the different relations. The level of emotion seemed to be the main determinant to how the trustor trusted the trustee, ranging from cognitive-based trust in weak ties to affective-based trust in strong ties (McAllister, 1995). The trusting relationships were hence, by this study, conceptualized as weak emotional ties respectively strong emotional ties.

A set of five factors was found to determine which type of relational ties that existed between the trustor and trustee during the process of interpersonal trust-building on SM. The creational factors were those that needed to be in place in order for interpersonal trust to be established in the first place. These were the trustee's reflected *appearance, image* and *consistency*, which helped create trust by enabling the trustor to assess the trustee's integrity and ability (Mayer et al., 1995). Two additional factors were found to affect the trust building process by developing the trust once it was created (Khodyakov, 2007). These developing factors were *trustee being personal* and *identification*, which helped strengthening trust by evoking feelings of familiarity and similarity to the trustee (Granovetter, 1983).

An interesting finding was how Mayer et al.'s (1995) factors of trustworthiness related to the different stages of the trust-building process and hence, different emotional ties. Integrity and ability are found to be components of the creation-phase and early-stage trust, whilst benevolence does not enter the evaluations until later phases when emotions have become involved. However, the special case of social media implies that the assessment of benevolence are not based on reflections of the trustee's "goodness" towards the trustee, but rather is something constructed by the trustor in order to feel more confident in their trust decision. Strong emotional ties on SM are therefore thought to better resemble real life trusting relationships, where the trustor creates an illusion of the interdependence that characterizes offline relationships by attributing benevolence to the trustee. The study concludes with a model of how the different findings relate to each other further to the existing theory (see Figure 15).

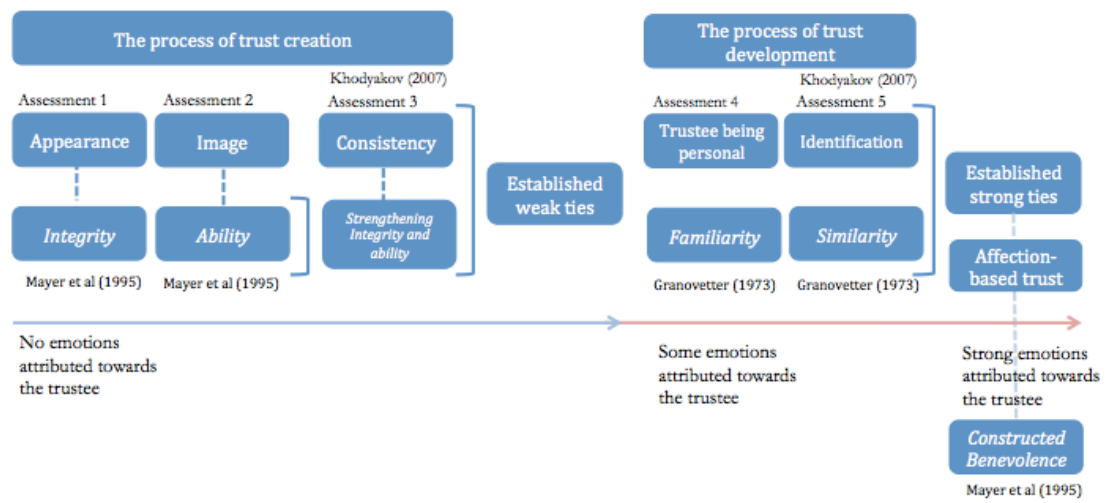


Figure 15: A concluding model of how the findings relate to existing literature

7. Discussion and Suggestions for Future Research

This chapter will start by presenting the theoretical (7.1) and practical (7.2) contributions of the study. It continues by describing the study's limitations (7.3), which partly guides the last section of suggested future research (7.4).

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

Firstly, the study contributes to theory by concluding that the trust built between people, in the previously unexplored context of SM, is of interpersonal character. This adds to existing research by showing that trusting relations can be built between people who are unknown to each other in real life. Although existing theory can help explain some of the dynamics in the online trust building, this paper contributes with unique findings that are applicable to the special context of SM.

This study finds that there is a barrier between weak and strong ties that only can be overcome through identification to the trustee. Moreover, that in strong ties there is a construction of benevolence.

Another contribution derives from the findings on how the factors of trustworthiness relate to different phases of trust-building and consequently, different relationship contexts. It gives a sequential order to the assessments of the three factors, where integrity is assessed first, followed by ability and later benevolence. It shows that benevolence only could be established in later stages of the trust building, once strong emotional ties had been established, and that it then was a construct of the trustor rather than a reflection of the trustee. Hence, it adds to the existing theory by seeing that, in SM, strong emotions are prerequisite for benevolence to exist. This further gives a context under which circumstances benevolence can appear in SM; context of strong emotional ties, which seem to resemble a reconstruction of real life relationships in the online world.

This way, the study contributes to create an in-depth understanding of how the trust-building process work in the up until now unexplored context of social media and further how existing theories on the trust process, factors of trustee's trustworthiness, characteristics of affective-and cognitive-based trust, as well as characteristics of strong and weak ties work together. To summarize, the study's main contribution to the theory is the understanding of how the current literature in an integrated manner explain trust-building in an unexplored context.

7.2 Practical Contributions

The power of controlling information has been shifted away from the companies towards customers. This study can guide commercial companies in creating an understanding of how trust is built on a personal level through the interactive social network platforms. This opens up for opportunities for the commercial industry to understand how one of the most important drivers to purchasing behavior is created on SM. The study's main practical contribution is hence in its usage for companies, providing them with a "handbook" on how to stimulate commercial activity through SM. The companies can guide their actions on SM and focus on creating weak ties to potential customers, since these are found to be sufficient in order to establish trust that drives purchasing decisions.

7.3 Limitations to Contributions

The main limitations are important to highlight in order for the reader to keep in mind that the results should be interpreted with carefulness.

Since this study is of qualitative nature, the problem of generalization will always be present (Yin, 2013). This problem particularly applies to studies that explore a new field of research, and where the findings only relate to the specific case studied (Ibid). The conclusions drawn from this study may nevertheless provide a base for generalization, but cannot be confirmed by this study alone.

Another limitation may derive from any potential researcher bias that could have affected the results of the study (Maxwell, 2013). Section 3.4.1 described the measures that were taken to decrease this potential bias, among them having two researchers present in each interview and recording the interviews. However, researcher bias can never be controlled for completely (Flick, 2009).

Having acknowledged the shortcomings of the study, the researchers are content with the study and its methodological approach. Due to the nascent stage of the existing research in the field, these limitations are assumed to be part of a qualitative study of this kind (Flick, 2009).

7.4 Future Research

Since this study can be seen as the first of its kind, it would be interesting for future research to make a more comprehensive study on the topic to get more information on the dynamics and different nuances of online interactions. One such example could be to further examine the different trusting relationships that fell in the spectra in-between weak and strong ties. Another area for research could be the factors that may deter the trust building process in SM, or even make trust diminish. This could be further evolved into studies of distrust and how factors of SM discourage trust building. The finding that idolization represented a form of very strong emotional ties provides yet another topic to explore in more detail, and how this finding compares to trust and emotions towards idols in real life.

Moreover, it would be valuable to make a comparative study of how interpersonal trust on SM relates to system trust in online environments, to distinguish how these interact. By finding that integrity is the first factor assessed in SM, the study indicates that people are educated about the frauds that lure in online environments. It would therefore be interesting to look into whether systems that guarantee “personal identification” of Internet users could facilitate the establishment of interpersonal trust in SM.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Interviewee Background

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Occupation	Origin	Lives in
Int_01	male	1992	Student	Swedish	Countryside
Int_02	male	1993	Working	Swedish	Countryside
Int_03	female	1997	Student	Swedish	City
Int_04	female	1954	Working	Swedish	City
Int_05	male	1990	Working	Swedish	Countryside
Int_07	female	1990	Student	Swedish	City
Int_08	female	1995	Student	Swedish	Countryside
Int_09	female	1994	Working	Foreigner (Afghan)	Countryside
Int_10	female	1990	Student	Swedish	Countryside
Int_11	female	1992	Student	Foreigner (Finish)	City
Int_12	female	1992	Working	Foreigner (Lebanon)	City
Int_13	female	1991	Student	Swedish	Countryside
Int_15	female	1989	Working	Swedish	Countryside
Int_17	female	1997	Student	Swedish	City
Int_18	female	1961	Working	Swedish	City
Int_19	female	1989	Student	Swedish	City
Int_20	male	1985	Working	Foreign (Lebanese)	City
Int_21	male	1989	Working	Swedish	Countryside
Int_22	male	1988	Working	Swedish	City
Int_23	female	1989	Working	Foreigner (Polish)	City

Appendix II: Interview Setting and Purchase Information

Interviewee	Setting	Purchase	SM channel primary	SM channel secondary
Int_01	Face-to-face	Gym supplement	Instagram	
Int_02	Face-to-face	Fresh fish	Interactive forum	
Int_03	Face-to-face	Facemask	Blog	
Int_04	Skype	Handbag	Blog	
Int_05	Face-to-face	Suit	Instagram	
Int_07	Face-to-face	Marble sofa table	Blog	
Int_08	Face-to-face	Jacket	Instagram	
Int_09	Face-to-face	Foundation	Blog	Instagram
Int_10	Face-to-face	Foundation	Blog	
Int_11	Face-to-face	Laptop	Blog	
Int_12	Face-to-face	Food supplement	Instagram	
Int_13	Face-to-face	Hairdressing service	Blog	Podcast, Instagram
Int_15	Skype	Leather jacket	Blog	
Int_17	Face-to-face	Concealer	Blog	Podcast, Instagram
Int_18	Telephone	Shakra treatment	Facebook	
Int_19	Face-to-face	Necklace	Instagram	
Int_20	Face-to-face	Sunglasses	Blog	Instagram
Int_21	Face-to-face	Vitamines	Podcast	
Int_22	Telephone	Skiis	Interactive forum	
Int_23	Face-to-face			

Appendix III: Interview Guide

Background information

- Name?
- Age?
- Origin?
- From which city are you?
- Which city are you living in now?
 - For how long has you lived in that city?
- Occupation?
- What have you purchased?
 - When did you make it?
- Which social media account influenced you to make the purchase?
 - Through which social media channel?

Starting question (general), the rest of the interview depended on the respondent's answer to this these two questions

- Describe the purchase process in as much details as possible (from the first information collection to the final purchase)
- What was it that made you decide to proceed with the purchase?

Risk-information about the purchase

- What was your emotions prior the purchase toward the product?
- Why did you make the purchase?
- Was information important to you?
 - Did you collect a lot of information before the purchase?
 - Through which channels?
- Was the purchase important to you?
 - Was it important that the purchase lived up to your expectations?
 - What could happen if it didn't live up to your expectations?
- How much did it cost?

The purchasing decision

- Guide us through when you decided to make your purchase?
- Which factors were contributed the most to the purchase decision?
- How crucial was the trustee for the buying decision?
- How crucial was social media for the buying decision?

The trustee

- Who is he/she?
- Can you describe his/her account?

General trust (Mayer et al.'s framework)

- Can you guide us through when you decided to trust this person's advice?
 - Why did you decide to follow this person's recommendation?
- Was the trust specific to this person or could the recommendation had come from anyone?

Specific trust (Mayer et al.'s framework)

Knowledge

- Do you think this person is knowledgeable within this area?
 - Why/why not?

- What do you know about his/her background within this field?

Integrity

- What do you think is the purpose of this person's account?
 - Why do you think so?
 - Sponsored? Business-driven?
- Can you relate to her/him?
 - Privately/Interests?
 - Do you think you share values?

Benevolence

- Do you think this person has good intentions?
- Does did person wants to do you good?

Relationship ties (Khodyakov)

- Did you have any prior relation to this person? (control)
- How long have you followed his/her channel?
 - Do you follow him/her in other medias?
- What do you know about this person?
 - Private/Background/Work etc
- What is your impression of the his/her personality?
 - Further describe and specify if necessary
- What are your feelings toward this person?
 - Further describe and specify if necessary
- Do you think you are similar to each other?
 - Can you identify yourself with him/her?
- Would you listen to his/her advice again?
 - For another type of purchase as well?
 - What kind? (outside it's main knowledge)
 - Would you recommend his/her account to anyone else?
- Do you like him/her?
 - Do you think he/she is a nice person?
 - Do you think you could be friends in real life?
- What do you think would make you stop follow him/her?