TRUST IN HOSPITALITY SOCIAL NETWORKS: SHIFT FROM ONLINE TO OFFLINE TRUST

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Online hospitality service networks are a particular type of social network services, used by its members to offer and seek accommodation in exchange for non-monetary benefits: communication, cultural exchange, etc. Although the popularity of such networks increased steadily over the last decade they still do not receive enough attention from the scholars. The number of internet users who participate in the hospitality social networks is estimated to be around 5 million users, distributed among a dozen of different services in the area dominated by CouchSurfing.com (4 million users) and HospitalityClub (330 000 users). The distribution of users of the hospitality networks is similar to that of the "traditional" networks. Hospitality networks are already a worldwide phenomenon. And while the phenomenon of traditional social networks like Facebook and Twitter are already a subject of extensive research, hospitality services are studied scarcely.

One important difference between usual networks like Facebook and hospitality networks is the management of trust by their users. Whilst Facebook is primarily used as a mean to maintain existing relationships and remain connected with acquaintances through time and space, participation in hospitality exchange networks is built upon the interaction with absolute strangers. As the final goal of interactions through the hospitality exchange site is to host (or be hosted), a significant shift in trust should occur so that such networks would function at all. Any successful interaction on such networks should go all the way from the no-trust between actors to the high levels of trust that allow inviting a person to one's house for a night or two. Such change in trust that happens exclusively online is a focus of present paper. Why the trust shift happens, why do people trust strangers online and whether such behavior is due to the difference between the way people manage their online and offline trust? These are the main questions to be answered in the paper, attempting to explain how and why people transfer online trust into offline trust and vice versa.

The number of online interviews with members of CouchSurfing.com community was conducted for the purposes of the present paper. Interviews reveal interesting tendency for the hospitality exchange members to exercise more trust towards other members online, than to strangers, whom they encounter offline. It reinforces the previous findings (based on the study of Facebook users) that people actually tend to manage online trust differently and evaluating online encounters as more trustworthy.

Another aspect discussed in the paper is hospitality service profiles as the subjects of trust. This is one peculiar aspect of online social networks:all users are represented through their profiles. Profile is medium or rather an interlocutor through which the communication is mediated. So in hospitality social network service the trust is exercised towards a profile but not towards an actual person. Similarly it is trustworthiness of a profile, which is measured. The questions of whether the members of such networks distinguish profiles from actual people and whether this duality affects the management of trust in such networks are other issues discussed in the present paper.