Does personalisation affect trust in online advice?

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ABSTRACT
This report describes an experimental investigation of two factors which are believed to influence users trust and willingness to engage in online commerce. The factors are: (a) reputation (a factor related to brand), and (b) personalisation. One hundred and seven users were logged on to a mock travel insurance website and asked to fill in insurance forms online, to make a decision as to whether or not they wanted to purchase insurance and then to answer a follow-up questionnaire. Behavioural and subjective measures of trust in the site were taken. Personalisation was shown to favourably influence user judgments about the site, although not to directly influence trust.

Keywords
Trust, personalisation, advice, Internet, e-commerce.

INTRODUCTION
Successful computer mediated interactions are predicated on trust. Trust is a fundamental construct in technologically mediated transactions, and is a particularly crucial one for e-commerce. For some researchers, trust is essentially about issues of encryption and data security, but increasingly companies are recognising that trust involves a the establishment of some kind of psychological bond. Trust, for example, influences the extent to people follow health, investment and purchasing advice. Recent surveys in the USA, for example, show that people’s health decisions are influenced by Internet [1]. However the quality of online advice is very variable and so a question arises as to how do people decide whether or not to trust the advice they’re given – an issue related to information credibility [2-3].

One of the best models of trust in e-commerce is MoTEC (A MOdel of Trust for Electronic Commerce) [4]. Trust in this model is initially determined by three factors: (a) the users knowledge of the domain and reputation of the vendor, (b) the impression made by the interface, and (c) the quality of the informational content as assessed by the user. A fourth factor becomes influential over time, in the relationship that an organisation eventually builds up with its client – this latter factor is of course related to the construct of personalisation. Personalisation has increasingly been recognised as a key issue for the development of trust online. For example, in a recent study, involving a regression analysis of over three thousand responses to an online questionnaire the extent to which people trusted and subsequently followed the advice offered online was influenced by three major factors: source credibility, predictability and degree of personalisation [5].

The current paper reports an experimental investigation into the extent to which manipulations of reputation and personalisation can affect the extent to which people choose to follow advice online. It was predicted that users would show greater trust in an online organisation which incorporates some element of personal ‘tailoring’ of advice to an individual than in a site which does not so tailor advice. In other words users were expected to be more influenced by the advice given in the personalised website, than in the non-personalised site.

Method
The Experiment followed a 2 (reputation) x 2 (personalisation) factorial design. Four versions of a travel insurance website were created by UK-Premier.com Ltd. (see table 1, below), in which reputation was manipulated by providing introductory text which described the company as (i) long-standing and well-established versus (ii) a relatively recent start-up. Personalisation was manipulated by the inclusion of key questions which asked for personal details, which were then (i) incorporated or (ii) ignored in later screens.

There were several dependent measures, as follows:
1. A measure of disclosure in terms of the number of voluntary information fields omitted. Measures were also taken of preparedness to respond ‘yes’ to risky behaviours, although naturally this last measure was somewhat dependent upon individual differences.
2. A measure of ‘preparedness to take advice’. This was derived from the participants willingness to consult the ‘highly recommended’ site above the others.
3. A measure of commitment to the product. This measure simply reflected participants’ selection of one
of the three final options: ‘buy’ ‘reserve without commitment’ or ‘exit’.

4. A measure of participants’ attitudes to the site in the form of a 32 item questionnaire, which included manipulation checks as well as questions about trust.

Participants were students, recruited on a voluntary basis. In total 107 participants were recruited, 28 in the ‘known-nonpersonalised’ group, 27 in the ‘known-personalised’ group, 23 in the ‘unknown-nonpersonalised’ group and 29 in the ‘unknown-personalised’ group.

Participants were told that a travel insurance company wished them to help with research on their website. They were led to believe that the website was authentic, and were told that they should visit the site, filling in details of their travel insurance needs, where appropriate, and then fill in some questions about the site. They were also told that they could genuinely purchase the travel insurance on offer, if they felt it was worthwhile. Participants were then given a unique identity code and logged on to the front page of the website. They worked through the various travel insurance pages, and were then taken to a follow-up questionnaire. Individuals were unaware that four different versions of the site existed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All personal identity data was automatically deleted, but participants’ responses to all other fields were automatically logged, along with a record of their browsing behaviour prior to making their final selection of buy, reserve without commitment, or exit. Data from the follow-up questionnaires were also logged automatically.

There were no significant effects of the manipulations upon personal disclosure. In fact remarkably few people withheld any information at all. It is difficult to know whether such a willingness to offer information is tied to the experimental nature of this study (where participants are completing the online form in a laboratory setting which could lead to conformist behaviour) or whether it reflects a wider compliance in the real world.

The participants willingness to be steered by the advice offered on the website is represented by three measures: (a) a simple calculation of the percentage of participants who visited the ‘highly recommended’ option first, (b) the percentage of those people who looked no further and (c) a measure of whether or not participants browsed one, two or all three options.

Most participants took the advice and investigated the ‘highly recommended’ quote first, and this is consistent across condition. Of those people, about half looked no further for advice, although these figures do vary a little

across condition – but not significantly so as measured by a Chi² significance test.

Responses to the questionnaire indicated relatively positive feelings about the site. Thus for example, people tended to agree with statements such as ‘the advice appeared to be prepared by an expert’; ‘the advice came from a knowledgeable source’; ‘I was offered good advice’ and disagree with statements such as ‘I had to wait a long time for the insurance advice’ and ‘the site was hard to use’.

With regard to the with the personalisation manipulation, participants in the ‘personalised’ conditions did not specifically feel that ‘the insurance advice was tailored to me personally’, although they were significantly less likely to disagree with the statement ‘I didn’t feel involved in the way the site tried to find appropriate advice’.

However participants in the personalised condition differed significantly from others in that they felt that they had been offered a real choice in that ‘different travel insurance options or courses of action were suggested’. Why would this be the case? After all, the same options were offered irrespective of condition, but they were phrased differently in the personalised condition. Indeed the various options were phrased in terms which reflected back participants responses to earlier key questions. It may be that participants pay more attention to choices when they seem to incorporate information which they themselves have provided, and although ultimately this degree of personalisation may not affect their final decision, it might make the act of choosing somehow more salient.

Participants in the personalised condition also said they found the site easier to use and more predictable. These findings are harder to explain, although the latter may be related to the fact that the choices on offer reflected a predictable response to information participants had given earlier concerning the extent to which they safeguarded their valuables, and planned their itinerary carefully.

CONCLUSION

Manipulations of company reputation and personal tailoring of information had no effect on user behaviour, as measured by degree of disclosure, preparedness to take advice, or commitment to the product. Furthermore these manipulations had little influence on users’ subjective views of the website or the company it represented. The only reliable evidence from this study is that relatively small manipulations of personalisation can have significant effects on users judgements of the quality of the site, in terms of the number of choices they felt they were offered and the ease-of-use and predictability of the site itself.

REFERENCES:


