

Features of Trust in Online Guanxi among Malaysian Web-Forum Members

Alice Shanthi¹, Xavier Thayalan¹, and Jane Xavierine²

¹Universiti Teknologi MARA, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

²Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 50603

Tel: +6064832106, Fax: +6064842449

E-mail: alice_shanti@yahoo.com.my

Abstract: Studying the social behaviors in web-forums helped to understand how users behaved online, and why they remain committed to online interactions when there is little or no marked individual gain. The present study argues that online Guanxi that is made-up of discourse features of trust, social presence and face-saving acts played important roles in building online Guanxi in web-forums. Cumulatively these three aspects of online bonding together were termed as online Guanxi. However, this paper will discuss only one of the discourse features which is trust. Broadly speaking, Guanxi aided the web-forum interaction by getting forum members to indulge in return-action in a broader context of exchange, where an initial information seeking act necessitated responding messages. Guanxi was sought in web-forums not to profit or benefit, as in a contract or economic exchange, but rather Guanxi became the foreground that necessitated interactivity when forum members recognized the other forum members' need to share information.

Keywords: Web-forum, Online Guanxi, Language Strategies, Online Information Sharing

1. Introduction

In any online information sharing platform the members need to feel that being part of the virtual group is worth the while because they stand to benefit from the information shared. For that to happen the environment where the information is shared should be encouraging with not much bickering, or what is termed as flaming in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Studies have shown that flaming drives members away from any online information sharing sites. Therefore, a good information sharing environment will encourage a continuous flow of thought sharing, and this in return would ensure the continuity and maintaining members in any online group. We propose that one of the key ways for online interaction in web-forums to increased engagement among web-forum members is through the social behaviour of forming online Guanxi.

Guanxi generally refers to social connection based on the goal to achieve a common purpose within a group of people in Chinese face-to-face business, which stresses on relationship harmony in order to conclude any transaction in the most successful way. Therefore, Guanxi cannot survive without harmony between two parties in a relationship. It stresses on relationship harmony in order to conclude any transaction in the most successful way. Therefore, Guanxi cannot survive without harmony between two parties in a relationship. As such in web-forums effective information sharing strategies becomes integral to both parties; the writer and the reader who keep switching roles in order to seek and share information. Their relationship must be in harmony with one another be it in the manner they communicate or the quality of information shared. The study found that for online Guanxi to happen, three features: trust, social presence and face-saving acts. This paper will discuss only one of them: Trust.

1.1. State of the Art

Discussion via web forums is an asynchronous type of online communication; therefore it does not require instantaneous reply to messages but rather allows for forum members to check other resources for information and contemplate on it before sharing it online. Thus, web forums become a place where forum members bring resources, knowledge and expertise so that collectively they could



help one another to share information and gain better insight on the topic of discussion. However, when web-forum becomes a community whereby people come freely to seek and share information, the environment where the discussion is taking place must be encouraging and this is where online Guanxi becomes pertinent.

According to Gold, Guthrie, and Wank “Guanxi networks are flexible, efficient, available, and custom-tailored sources of social capital that are low in financial cost relationships”. A study conducted by Shanthi, found that Guanxi was needed in a web-forum interaction because too much negative behaviour like flaming and trolling, members dropped out as the negative behaviour is seen as a threat to freedom to share and exchange information. In addition the study also found that if information shared is of no value or of no quality forum members may look for other alternatives to seek information that they need; thus causing damage to the continued survival the web-forum interaction. Therefore, the study concluded that Guanxi was an essential factor in web-forum interaction in order for the have fruitful information sharing practice.

Ou, Pavlou, and Davison, explain that the primary motivation for creating a Guanxi based relationship is its ability to access to much more information and resources (e.g., equipment, land, large-scale projects). In short, in web-forums, the concept of Guanxi is about the formation of a mutually beneficial social relation to achieving a certain purpose. In this study, a certain purpose is defined as the act of information sharing practices that encompasses seeking, sharing and exchanging information for the common goal of finding an answer or solution to the forum members’ problems and/or queries. According to Gold, Guthrie, and Wank, “Guanxi is absolutely essential to successfully complete any task in virtually all spheres as Guanxi adds an element of humanity to otherwise cold transactions”.

In this study the aspect of Guanxi is closely linked to trust. In CMC research, trust has been found to be positively related to performance. Gold, Guthrie, and Wank defined trust as “a characteristic for collaboration where members believe in character, ability, integrity, familiarity and morality of each other.” Among the concerns over virtual groups is how their members develop trust for online members whom they never see and with whom they do not share the same physical space. Studies have shown that online members gain trust in others in virtual communities when they feel the presence of others in the virtual world, for example when they get replies to questions, someone greets or calls then by name to name a few ways. Studies on online trust also reveal that the concept of trust is built over time, and once it is established in a virtual group it must be maintained with some forum members playing the role of gatekeepers to maintain harmony in online communities when discords erupt in the online interaction.

Understanding the role of feature of trust in online Guanxi in CMC especially in web-forum could lead to new understandings of the significant role that Guanxi plays in sustaining communication in web-forum.

2. Method

Data for the study was the actual instances of written messages collected from a public web-forum set in Malaysia. This particular forum website discusses issues pertaining to everyday Malaysian life. Data was purposively selected texts from the forum to identify Guanxi discourse features. This is done by searching for language strategies that are embedded in the data source that reveal how online Guanxi is developed. This method of studying computer mediated discourse is claimed by Goldman and Wiley, as “a method for describing the ideas and the relations among the ideas that are present in a text”. Therefore, during the process of coding and tagging, utterances that made up of a single word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph were tagged according to Searle’s. Speech Acts taxonomy to identify the language function the utterances were performing such as to express an opinion, to question, to make a suggestion and so on. Next, based on the language functions identified, the data was recoded and tagged to come-up with different language strategies that forum

members used in order to create an environment where the practice of sharing information was carried out in an encouraging environment.

3. Result

3.1. Guanxi for Sharing Information

It is possible to examine how participants offer information to potential readers by writing messages, and how the readers comment on them either by accepting, rejecting or questioning the validity of information shared. With the two-way nature of interaction found in web-forum, it has become a useful tool for sharing information on any issue. However, web-forum can only become a useful tool for sharing and exchanging of information if members participate in the web-forums collaboratively. The interaction should be “creating a climate that supports and encourages probing questions, expressing scepticism and the contribution of more explanatory ideas”. Thus the practice of sharing information should be done cordially and as a collaborative effort so that every member who comes to the forum seeking for answers gets their needs fulfilled. Therefore, it can be deduced that Guanxi connections constituted the core value of communication that was needed to order to have a fruitful information sharing practice via web-forums. This study found that online Guanxi that made-up of discourse features of trust, social presence and face-saving acts played important roles in building an encouraging environment to share information in web-forums. Broadly speaking, Guanxi aided the web-forum interaction by getting forum members to indulge in return-action in a broader context of exchange, where an initial information seeking act necessitated responding messages. The data revealed that one of the ways with which members of the web-forums encouraged Guanxi was by using different Trust Building Strategies.

3.2. Trust Building Strategies for online Guanxi

In a virtual community, it is hard to develop trust when members cannot see each other because in CMC members cannot see the central elements for gaining trust such as the motive and intention of the virtual members who are sharing their views and giving suggestions. According to Shaalan, Reast, Johnson, & Tourky, the absence and presence of trust affect the efficiency and the survival of any online social groups. Therefore, it can be assumed that for any social group to actively and continuously share information in web-forum; trust among fellow members is important.

This study found that forum members built their trust in the web-forum community through the following practices: revealing information about themselves, using a combination of reliable source and/or statistical fact, giving quick response to queries, giving positive reciprocal exchange.

Firstly, forum members revealed details about themselves like where they work and/or what they do, revealing their feelings, what they are looking for in the threaded discussion etc. as depicted in Example 1.

Example 1:

a) Hi, I saw your post in Finance section about insurance. I'm a full time Unit Sales Manager from Great Eastern life Assurance, I'm sure you will soon received a lot of PM regarding insurance policy.

(F7INS#100ExpZero)

b) went to SI today. Nothing changed. Same format like before. ice- braking[sic]> case study > CBI > role play. HR person said result within 2 weeks from today. I'm [sic]not doing well especially during role play. Hope for some miracle happens. Insyallah!

(F5PETRO#296don_kass)

c) I passed my SI and now subject to job placement. Good luck don_kass. Don't give up

(F5PETRO#297omaigad)

As seen in Example 1a, Member ExpZero revealed details about his/her area and scope of work so that fellow forum members who have any questions regarding insurance products can refer or direct queries to him/her. In Example 1b, member don_kass expresses apprehension that he/she might not get employment with PETRONAS. S/He seems to trust the members of the forum by sharing his/her feelings. This could be that member don_kass trusted that someone will give some comments or feedback to ease his/her disappointment. True enough Member omaigad (Example 1c) comes in and shares with them some words of encouragement < Good luck don_kass. Don't give up>

Next, forum members gain trust from fellow forum members by using appropriate and reliable examples which can be in the form of articles from the Internet, expert opinion and/or statistical facts from recent studies that can add credibility to the forum member's argument. Therefore, in a threaded discussion it appears that the more forum members used such sources to back-up their claims; better the chances were to convince others to see the credibility of their stance over an issue. This is because when evidence is used to backup one's claim it seem to portray that the arguments or comments put forward are not just a flip-shot comment that carried little weight. Example 2 depicts this.

Example 2:

a) Govt receives more revenue with GST because GST is levied on final consumer price (RM24.41 * 0.06), whereas SST is levied on manufacturer's selling price (RM10 * 10%), ie, consumer selling price is higher (after all the value add) so tax levied on it is higher. But as I explain consumer price go down -- look at the table Retailer -> Consumer at row Sale by Retailer: SST= 200.00, GST = 192.73.....GST itself reduces business cost. profiteering goesbeyond GST

(F3GST#28coolsarawwak)

b) coolsarawak, I really appreciate your answer, and i have to admit my misunderstanding on these calculations. Now i do get it,...

(F3GST#35sasivarman)

In Example 2, member coolsarawak used mathematical equations to explain how the government will increase its revenue with the implementation of GST and at the same time the price of goods which goes down the chain of distribution should also see a reduction in price because <GST is levied on final consumer price (RM24.41 * 0.06), whereas SST is levied on manufacturer's selling price (RM10 * 10%) >. Hence when some members claim that all price of goods will increase it is because of some manufacturer who are profiteering; <GST itself reduces business cost. profiteering goes beyond GST>. Such clear explanation and backed by statistical facts seem to have made forum member sasivarman (Example 2b) understand the whole picture of why some members of the group (including coolsarawak) were arguing that with GST some products should see a reduction in price, by concluding <Now i do get it ...>. Based on the example given by using statistical figures member coolsarawak appears to have gained the trust of fellow members like sasivarman by showing that the argument put forward by members who say GST will bring down the price of some goods does carry weight.

The third trust building strategy is by giving quick response to questions. Forum members post queries in web-forums in the hope that someone in the forum will read and respond to it. Hence, when members who posted messages get a response, they know that their messages have been read, and that appears to build their trust in the forum members of the community. This trust in return keeps the online relationship afloat because they appear to trust that the forum members will somehow respond to their comments as depicted in Example 3.

Example 3:

a) Hello @ExpZero

Thanks you for your reply. I had received your Proposal (Quote). The Coverage + Premium are indeed attractive

(F7INS#275weirdguy)

b) Hello @ChrisGood&@roystevenung ,

You are indeed correct on those experience. Hence, I did write in my previous post, that I am hoping to learn - a GUARANTEED Fully Paid Up 10 or 20 Years Traditional Insurance with Life + CI.

Just so you guys know,I did being offered by AIA - US\$ 8 Guarantee for Life + CI. The policy did clearly indicate 8 Years Payment only, and coverage until my Age 101. But the Premium is super gila USD10K @ USD735 Annually

(F7INS#279weirdguy)

In Example 3a, when member weirdguy posted his/her query about an insurance product, s/he received replies from member ExpZero, ChrisGood and roystevenung. The replies seem to have built his/her trust in the forum community that s/he went on to share his/her hope; <I am hoping to learn - a GUARANTEED Fully Paid Up 10 or 20 Years Traditional Insurance with Life + CI> and shared his/her future plan to purchase an insurance plan where premium is paid in US Dollars (Example 3b). According to Dewar (2006), “timely responses between members lead to greater levels of trust in virtual communities”.

The final trust building strategy is to have positive reciprocal exchange. Reciprocity is important to understand social behaviour of building Guanxi where trust is a concern in web-forum communities. Reciprocity in CMC involves the exercise of posting and responding to queries raised in the web-forum; the more respond a message gets, higher the level of reciprocity for that particular query. Forum members usually share their personal experience and professional skills when answering questions. It was observed in the data that forum members who have benefitted from such acts normally returned to the web-forum to post more messages probably because the forum member has trust on the other forum members to will read and respond to his/her question. Example 4 depicts that.

Example 4:

a) Hi guys, I have a question related to MLTA. As far as I know, it is essentially a life insurance that designed to pay off your debt for property (and perhaps some cash too). However, I don't really get the part where people say it can actually be 'transferred' when you buy another property. As I'm reviewing my policy, I don't see any mention of my property in it so how do I know it is 'linked' to my property? Please enlighten me.

(F7INS#115wiind)

b) Hi wiind,

I have to tell you the whole picture of MLTA including MRTA so that you will understand the reason why people will say MLTA is "transferable" and how it "linked" to your property.....(went on to explain using another 600-650 words)

(F7INS#116ExpZero)

c) Thank you very much for your reply!

This is definitely much clearer than most explanations I could find on the internet! Not only that you answer my question clearly and precisely, you also gave me insight on how will can come into play. I really appreciate this and I shall literally note this down for future reference!

(F7INS#117wiind)

In the exchanges member wiind wanted some clarification about MLTA (mortgage level termed assurance) as seen in Example 4a. Member ExpZero who is also an insurance agent answered the question by giving a detailed explanation not only about MLTA but also on MRTA (mortgage reducing term assurance): <I have to tell you the whole picture of MLTA including MRTA so that you will understand the reason why people will say MLTA is "transferable" and how it "linked" to your property>. Member ExpZero gave a detailed explanation of about 650 words of which part of it was shown as Example 4b. This act of explaining was appreciated by member wiind (Example 4c) who returned to the forum to thank and praise member ExpZero for the effort <Thank you very much for your reply and I really appreciate this>.

In short, in order to encourage Guanxi in web-forums, it is essential to build trusting relationship among forum members. When the seed of trust has been successfully planted in a virtual community, the relational and cooperative behaviour would follow. Forum- members especially those who have the knowledge or special skills in the area of discussion willingly share information for the benefit of members of the virtual community.

4. Conclusion

In short, in web-forums the concept of Guanxi is about the formation of a mutually beneficial relation to ensure the information sharing process in web-forum is successful. This paper reported on one of the elements of online Guanxi-Trust. When trust is forged in CMC it enacted and produced responses to the initial gesture of asking for information. Guanxi was sought not to profit or benefit, as in a contract or economic exchange, but rather Guanxi became the foreground that necessitated interactivity when forum members recognised the other forum members' need for reliable information. Trust in Guanxi is looked as a group level practice that defines the relationship built within the web-forum community.

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