

First impressions matter: evaluating the importance of online reputation in social networking sites for initial trust in virtual work partners

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Received 1 August 2022
Revised 29 October 2022
16 January 2023
Accepted 30 January 2023

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify the practices that owners of public profiles in social networking sites can leverage to actively build online reputation and to evaluate the impact of the adoption of such practices on the initial formation of trust toward these individuals when they are presented as new virtual work partners.

Design/methodology/approach – A theoretical model was developed and an experiment with 233 participants was utilized to assess the model using partial least squares structural equation modeling.

Findings – The results suggest that individuals can build their online reputations in public profiles of social networking sites via a series of practices of self-disclosure of information and that the adoption of these practices has significant effects on the initial formation of trust toward the profile owner in virtual work contexts. Categorization mechanisms such as stereotyping, unit grouping and reputation categorization have been found to contribute to the initial formation of trust, both from an affect and cognition-based perspectives.

Originality/value – Little is known about the information disclosure practices in public profiles of social networking sites that new work partners can adopt to facilitate the formation of trust between them before they start working together. This study has contributed to the existing body of literature by clarifying these practices and the relative importance of online reputation to the initial formation of trust during the outset of a new virtual work relationship.

Keywords Trust, Virtual work, Social networking sites, Online reputation building and management, Experiment

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Initial trust refers to the early development stage of trust on the trustor's side before any firsthand knowledge about the trustee's behavior is made available to the trustor (Gardner *et al.*, 2020; McKnight *et al.*, 1998; Robert *et al.*, 2009). Initial trust is critical for new relationships between team members in virtual workplaces as it can indicate how team members will relate to one another in later phases of the teamwork, influencing not only the future levels of trust between them but also the performance of the entire virtual team (Gardner *et al.*, 2020; Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 1998; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002). This is due to the nature of work execution in virtual teams: once ongoing work starts, the focus of the interactions between work partners shifts to completing actions and further exchange of social information between them remains constrained due to the limited face-to-face interactions inherent to virtual work (Cummings and Dennis, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2015; Kuo and Thompson, 2014; Robert *et al.*, 2009).

Historically, the issue of initial trust development in organizational settings has been approached from the perspective that in the absence of firsthand knowledge about the trustee's behavior, much of the initial trust developed on the trustor's side is a consequence of his/her personal willingness to trust others and his/her perceptions of the organizational



systems and structures that surround the trustee (Gardner *et al.*, 2020; Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 1998; McKnight *et al.*, 1998, 2002; Meyerson *et al.*, 1996; Robert *et al.*, 2009). However, recent research has demonstrated that this assumption may no longer be totally valid as personal information disclosed in public profiles of social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn can serve as a comprehensive source of secondhand knowledge that trustors can leverage to start forming trust judgments toward trustees (Cummings and Dennis, 2018; Kuo and Thompson, 2014; Shareef *et al.*, 2020; Watanuki and Moraes, 2019). The question of how much influence this secondhand knowledge has on the initial formation of trust between new virtual work partners is still mostly open in the trust-related literature.

A second equally important question that follows is: what practices can trustees leverage to properly disclose personal information on public profiles of social networking sites aiming at initial trust formation? This question can be explored via the practices that individuals leverage to build and manage their online reputations. Traditionally, online reputation is known to help build trust between buyers and sellers in e-commerce relationships (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Gefen and Straub, 2004; Simpson, 2011; Sun *et al.*, 2018; Zhu *et al.*, 2020) and between doctors and patients in e-healthcare contexts (Shah *et al.*, 2021). However, the context of virtual work differs from the ones explored so far for two reasons. First, whereas in the context of e-commerce and e-healthcare, the effect of the online reputation on trust usually leads to a one-time decision such as to select a specific seller or a doctor, in the case of virtual workplaces, this initial trust can have long lasting effects on the trust levels between team members and therefore impact the overall performance of teams and organizations (Gardner *et al.*, 2020; Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 1998; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002). Second, the online reputation of sellers and doctors is usually constructed based on passive content written by other buyers and patients on review sites (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Lim and Van Der Heide, 2014; Shah *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, little is known about active best practices of self-disclosure of personal information that trustees can leverage to promote online reputation with the aims of building interpersonal trust at the workplace. Questions such as whether it is better to disclose too much or too little personal information on public profiles in order to facilitate initial trust formation at the outset of a new work relationship are still mostly open.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is two-fold: (1) to identify what are the self-disclosure practices that trustees can adopt to actively build online reputation via public profiles of social networking sites; and (2) to evaluate the impact of the adoption of such practices on the initial formation of trust in new virtual work partners. To this end, a theoretical model was developed and assessed using an experimental approach.

2. Theoretical background

This section reviews pertinent research to explore the impact of online reputation building and management practices on the initial formation of trust in new work partners. First, a conceptualization of trust is presented, followed by a review of initial trust models. Next, the phenomenon of initial formation of trust is investigated from the perspective of the information presented in public profiles of social networking sites. Lastly, a series of practices for the development of online reputation is presented, followed by the development of the theoretical model of this paper.

2.1 The concept of trust

This study leverages McAllister's (1995) definition of interpersonal trust as the extent to which the trustor is confident in and willing to act based on the words, actions and decisions of the trustee. This conceptualization of trust is also referenced as trust belief by some authors as it is grounded in individual beliefs about peer reliability, reciprocal concern and care

(Chowdhury, 2005; McAllister, 1995; McKnight *et al.*, 1998; Robert *et al.*, 2009). The basic model from McAllister (1995) also suggests that interpersonal trust is composed by two fundamental dimensions: affect and cognition-based.

Past research has suggested that the cognitive component of interpersonal trust can be facilitated via elements that help make the behavior of other individuals predictable, such as social similarity, reliable role performance and professional credentials (McAllister, 1995; Lowry *et al.*, 2010).

In McAllister's model, social similarity is defined as the cultural and ethnical similarity between the trustor and the trustee (McAllister, 1995; Lowry *et al.*, 2010), whereas professional credentials refer to the preparedness of the trustee for the role, as perceived by the trustor, and it can be reflected by the trustee's educational level and institutions, training, professional certifications and relevant experience (McAllister, 1995; Lowry *et al.*, 2010). Lastly, if the trustee exhibits reliable role performance, then it is also likely that the trustor will cognitively develop a high level of trust toward the trustee (Chowdhury, 2005).

The affective dimension of interpersonal trust is grounded on the altruistic motives of the relationship between the trustor and the trustee (Chen *et al.*, 2011). It can be facilitated via elements that demonstrate the willingness of the trustee to provide help and assistance conducive to effective organizational functioning without being directly rewarded, a concept known as citizenship behavior (McAllister, 1995). If the trustee exhibits a high level of citizenship behavior toward the trustor, it is highly likely that the trustor would develop trust toward the trustee (Chowdhury, 2005).

2.2 The initial formation of interpersonal trust

Literature on trust traditionally distinguishes two different stages for the development of trust between individuals engaging in a new virtual work relationship: before and after the behavior of the trustee is known to the trustor (Meyerson *et al.*, 1996; McKnight *et al.*, 1998, 2002; Robert *et al.*, 2009).

Before the trustee's behavior is known to the trustor, interpersonal trust is usually referenced as swift or initial trust, a fragile type of trust mostly grounded on trustor's personality traits, institutional judgments and cognitive categorization processes (Kuo and Thompson, 2014; McKnight *et al.*, 1998, 2002; Meyerson *et al.*, 1996; Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 1998; Robert *et al.*, 2009).

After the trustee's behavior is known to the trustor, interpersonal trust is usually referenced as knowledge-based trust and is heavily grounded on the perceptions and judgments made by the trustor in regard to the behavior displayed by the trustee (McKnight *et al.*, 1998, 2002; Robert *et al.*, 2009).

The interdependence between these two types of trust is that once initial trust is established it can help foster knowledge-based trust (Robert *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, initial trust is desired not only because it allows new virtual work partners to engage and collaborate quickly (Meyerson *et al.*, 1996; Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 1998; McKnight *et al.*, 1998, 2002; Kuo and Thompson, 2014), but also because it can have a positive influence for the development of knowledge-based trust in subsequent stages of the virtual relationship (Gardner *et al.*, 2020; Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 1998; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002).

The present study focuses primarily on the first stage, as during the beginning of a new virtual work relationship the behavior of the trustee is mostly or completely unknown to the trustor. In this stage, according to the initial trust formation model proposed by McKnight *et al.* (1998), the trustor's disposition to trust, institutional judgments and categorization processes based on secondhand knowledge about the trustee are the main elements that enable the trustor to develop trust toward the yet unknown trustee.

An individual's disposition to trust is defined as dispositional trust and represents an element specific to each trustor. It is associated with the trustor's personality traits and mostly related to his/her beliefs in the human nature, i.e., a natural tendency to trust other people (Mayer *et al.*, 1995; McKnight *et al.*, 1998, 2002; Brown *et al.*, 2004). The institution-based trust is dependent on a context and on an impersonal system or institution whose perceived properties can inspire confidence in individuals (McKnight *et al.*, 1998, 2002; Sun *et al.*, 2018).

As for the categorization processes, according to McKnight *et al.* (1998), they are mainly supported by secondhand knowledge about the trustee and can be of three types: reputation categorization, unit grouping and stereotyping. These three mechanisms can be leveraged together by the trustor to enable high levels of trusting beliefs toward the trustee.

Regarding reputation categorization, those with good reputations are categorized as trustworthy individuals because reputation may reflect professional competence. In this case, a person may be perceived as a competent individual because he or she is a member of a competent group or because of his/her past actions. As for unit grouping, because those individuals who are grouped together tend to share common goals and values, they tend to also be perceived in a positive perspective, therefore being more likely for one individual to form trusting beliefs toward another group member. Finally, stereotyping may be done on a broad level, such as gender, or on a more specific level, such as occupation group. By positive stereotyping one can quickly form positive trusting beliefs toward the other by generalizing from the favorable category into which the person was placed (McKnight *et al.*, 1998).

A recent literature review by Gardner *et al.* (2020) indicated that most of the studies approaching the phenomenon of initial formation of trust have leveraged the traditional early trust development models without questioning if contemporary sources of secondhand knowledge such as public profiles of social networking sites could affect the original premises of these models. Therefore, it would be timely and opportune to reassess the relative importance of McKnight's *et al.* (1998) categorization processes from a social information processing theory lens.

2.3 Initial trust formation via social networking sites

Since the development of trust from the perspective of the trustor is a phenomenon deeply rooted in the processing of social information belonging to the trustee (Liu *et al.*, 2015), individuals tend to adapt and search for alternative ways of acquiring social information when they are faced with scenarios where social cues are limited or absent, such as the case of virtual collaborations (Kuo and Thompson, 2014; Shareef *et al.*, 2020; Watanuki and Moraes, 2019).

Nowadays, a specific technology artifact seems to be capable of acting as a rich source of social information: the social networking sites. The social networking sites correspond to specific types of social media platforms and Internet sites with common attributes, such as user profile, user access to digital content, a user list of relational ties and user ability to view and traverse relational ties (Ryan *et al.*, 2020; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016). Popular examples of social networking sites are Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Jahng and Littau, 2016; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016).

Social networking sites provide strangers with the possibility of exchanging information in various forms, including the perception of the social interaction (Chen *et al.*, 2021; Jahng and Littau, 2016; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016) which can potentially influence future virtual relationships between them (Kuo and Thompson, 2014). A similar mechanism can promote trustworthiness toward a new virtual work partner based on the exploration of his/her public profiles in social networking sites. In this case, positive signals such as identity, presence, reputation and relationships can emanate from the trustee's public profiles (Jiang *et al.*, 2021; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011) potentially influencing the trustor's perceptions of trustworthiness.

Such a diversified set of signals requires an equally diversified set of theories to account for their effects on interpersonal trust. Although the phenomenon of virtual collaboration can be approached from different theoretical perspectives, three theories have been most frequently leveraged to explain social aspects of virtual teams: social presence theory, social information processing theory and social identity or deindividuation theory (Schiller and Mandviwalla, 2007; Watanuki and Moraes, 2019).

Social presence theory suggests that the awareness of other social participants' interactions can be augmented in communication via ICT (Information Communication Technology) tools as more channels become available for the expression of nonverbal cues (Schiller and Mandviwalla, 2007; Short *et al.*, 1976). A high degree of social presence is important for the development of trust because the trustor's perception of human interactions with the trustee is a precondition for trust (De Vries, 2006), especially its affective dimension (Bente *et al.*, 2008; Gefen and Straub, 2004; McAllister, 1995). Despite the limited human contact at the virtual workplace, past research has suggested that signals of social presence can be embedded in technology artefacts, such as websites, as well as via images and biographical information that convey sense of personal and sensitive human contact (Bente *et al.*, 2008; De Vries, 2006; Gefen and Straub, 2004; Jahng and Littau, 2016). This is in agreement with the informational aspect of social networking sites, the focus of which is on user-created content, such as personal profiles, text, photographs and video streams (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016).

Social information processing theory proposes that when communicating solely via ICT tools individuals adapt and use available information to form impressions and evaluate others (Schiller and Mandviwalla, 2007; Walther, 1972). Therefore, social information processing theory suggests that in virtual environments people tend to rely on peripheral social information, such as language, written attitude and self-disclosure to form impressions about others (Jahng and Littau, 2016; Lim and Van Der Heide, 2014; Walther, 1972).

Social networking sites provide their users with generous identity signals to collect information about other individuals (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016). How these signals affect the different dimensions of interpersonal trust depends on whether they make salient aspects of personal identity or social identity (Tanis and Postmes, 2005). For instance, research has suggested that personal identity signals, such as the availability of an individual's work history information on a social media profile, can function as a set of cues that allow others to better evaluate this individual's professional credentials (Jahng and Littau, 2016; Lim and Van Der Heide, 2014) which can help to foster a cognition-based component of trust toward him/her (Bente *et al.*, 2008; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002; McAllister, 1995).

With regard to social identity, according to the social identity or deindividuation theory, in contexts where individuating cues about others are limited, individuals categorize themselves as part of social groups based on the information made available by other sources (Schiller and Mandviwalla, 2007; Spears and Lea, 1992). Therefore, when a trustee's signals of shared social identity with the trustor are available in a public profile of social networking sites, such as common interests, experiences, values and demographic traits, these signals may accentuate the perception of similarity between them, enhancing the trustor's feelings of attraction and identification toward the trustee (De Vries, 2006; Tanis and Postmes, 2005). These are elements that can help foster both affective and cognition-based components of trust (Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002; McAllister, 1995).

Supported by this overarching theoretical framework, some studies have suggested that specific informational cues about the owner of a public profile in social networking sites such as shared connections (Kuo and Thompson, 2014), basic demographics (Bacev-Giles and Haji, 2017), number of connections (Cummings and Dennis, 2018) and group membership (Shareef *et al.*, 2020) can affect the trust perceptions toward him/her. An opportune extension of these

studies would be to combine these findings and explore the active practices that individuals can adopt to properly display these informational cues with the aims of building trust. This can be done via the concept of online reputation as discussed next.

2.4 Online reputation building and management practices

An individual's online reputation can be thought of as this individual's track record of past trustworthiness that people can leverage as a form of evidence for their future trustworthiness, particularly in contexts where people have not met this individual before (Simpson, 2011).

Traditionally, online reputation has proven to be one of the key antecedents for building trust relationships in virtual contexts such as e-commerce and e-healthcare. For instance, several studies have explored how buying intentions can be impacted by the seller's reputation displayed on e-commerce websites and how the online reputation can be constructed based on buyer's reviews (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Gefen and Straub, 2004; Simpson, 2011; Sun *et al.*, 2018; Zhu *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, in the e-healthcare context, new patients have relied on doctor's reviews provided by previous patients to base their decisions when deciding for a medical provider (Shah *et al.*, 2021).

The common characteristic of these studies is that the main outcome of the effect that the online reputation has on trust refers to an event relatively short in terms of duration, such as the decision to buy from an specific seller or schedule an appointment with a specific doctor. However, in the case of a virtual work partnership, the effect that the online reputation has on trust tends to be long lasting affecting not only the future trust levels between team members but also the overall performance of teams and organizations (Gardner *et al.*, 2020; Jarvenpaa *et al.*, 1998; Kanawattanachai and Yoo, 2002).

Also, most of the previous studies that investigated the effect of online reputation on trust have approached online reputation as a construct that is passively built based on information cues provided by third party individuals, such as written reviews provided by previous buyers and patients on review sites (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Lim and Van der Heide, 2014; Shah *et al.*, 2021).

Recent studies have taken a more active approach by exploring how an individuals' behavior of self-disclosure of information on social networking sites affect impression formation toward them (Bacev-Giles and Haji, 2017; Cumming and Dennis, 2018; Qin *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, a key trustee's behavior is the online reputation building and management.

According to Ryan *et al.* (2020), social media users build and manage their reputations online by considering:

- (1) General understandings of the functionality of the main platforms by using specific platforms for the sharing of specific types of information;
- (2) Managing their online connections by carefully managing what content is available to whom and
- (3) Practicing censorship, particularly with respect to sensitive topics.

These practices refer to an individual's overall behavior of self-disclosure of information in social networking sites aiming at impression formation and the proper presentation of identity. Table 1 summarizes key practices that individuals can leverage in social networking sites for building and managing their online reputation. The next item will explore the different ways that these practices can affect initial trust formation in a new virtual work partner from the perspective McKnight's *et al.* (1998) categorization mechanisms: stereotyping, unit grouping and reputation categorization.

Online reputation building and management practice	Tactics deployed in social networking sites
Managing the blur between professional and private lives online	Maintenance of private account and professional account separately Intimate information restricted to private account Careful presentation of credentials in professional account Concern of private account content leaking into professional account Decision to connect with others are made based on the platform (i.e., professional account for connecting with professional contacts, private account for family and friends) Direct invites in the private account to the professional account in case the requestor is not familiar
Managing online connections	Provide replies and comments in posts to expand network and correct misunderstandings Provide likes and comments to show support or to acknowledge achievements or life events of others Tag individuals to make sure that information is viewed Forcibly connect with people to acquire interesting content or to create an alignment with a knowledgeable person Hide posts from connections that are not appreciated instead of deleting them
Practicing censorship	Refrain from sharing information that conveys controversial views or is contrary to social etiquette Avoid sharing overly personal or intimate information, information that is too controversial or unimportant or uninteresting information Avoid interacting with contentious topics, inflammatory debates and fight with strangers Deleting comments that may generate negative images or may have spelling or grammatical errors

Source(s): [Ryan et al. \(2020\)](#)

Table 1.
Practices for building and managing online reputation in social networking sites

2.5 Hypotheses development

By carefully presenting their professional profiles in social networking sites, individuals practicing online reputation building and management go beyond displaying regular work behavior or work competence. Since these individuals also possess a superior understanding of a persona that is well accepted in society, they adhere to social guidelines and emphasize in their public profiles their positive achievements and collective attitudes in organizational settings ([Ryan et al., 2020](#)). For instance, these individuals are more inclined to include or emphasize in their professional profiles their positive achievements in society, such as altruism, serving legitimate needs and demonstrating interpersonal care and concern. Also, attitudes highlighting assistance conducive to effective organizational functioning and exceeding their roles to facilitate organizational effectiveness also increase the perception of citizenship behavior toward them ([McAllister, 1995](#)). Citizenship behavior can be interpreted as a form of altruism or positive stereotyping from the perspective of affect-based trust formation. As being extra-role can be viewed as personally chosen and not being directly rewarded, altruistic behavior displayed by the trustee is rarely attributed to negatively perceived self-interest and, by being positively stereotyped, there is an increased likelihood that the trustor will develop interpersonal care and concern toward the trustee ([Chen et al., 2011](#); [Chowdhury, 2005](#); [McAllister, 1995](#)). Therefore:

- H1a.* An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the perceptions of the virtual work partner's citizenship behavior.
- H1b.* An increased level of perceived citizenship behavior has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

Social presence was originally conceptualized to refer to an individual's perception of interacting with another (Bente *et al.*, 2008; Biocca *et al.*, 2003) and this concept has been extended to the social media domain to refer to the extent to which a profile from social networking sites is perceived as personal, intimate, or sociable by others (Jahng and Littau, 2016; Shareef *et al.*, 2020; Watanuki and Moraes, 2019). Despite the limited presence of human contact in virtual workplaces, research has suggested that social presence can be embedded in technology artifacts, such as websites and public profiles from social networking sites via images, posts and biographical information that convey sense of personal and intimate human contact (Jahng and Littau, 2016; Shareef *et al.*, 2020). A high degree of social presence in public profiles from social networking sites is important for the development of trust not only because people evaluate information more cognitively and deeply if they feel social presence (Jahng and Littau, 2016; Shareef *et al.*, 2020), but also because the trustor's perception of social presence is frequently considered a precondition for interpersonal trust in virtual settings (Lowry *et al.*, 2010), especially its affective dimension (Bente *et al.*, 2008; McAllister, 1995). Because affect-based trust is grounded in a trustor's attribution concerning the motives for the trustee's behavior, it should be limited to contexts where there is sufficient trustee's social presence to allow the making of confident attributions by the trustor. However, the trustee's online reputation building and management practices often implies limited disclosure of overly personal or intimate information as this individual practices censorship in his/her public profile (Ryan *et al.*, 2020). Also, by keeping the private account restricted to family and friends, and avoiding private account content leaking into professional account, individuals practicing online reputation building and management practices will display fewer personal content, thus, reducing the sense of warmth and intimacy of their public profiles. Taken together, individuals practicing online reputation building and management tend to limit their amount of social presence, reducing the chances of positive stereotyping and formation of affect-based trust toward them. Thus:

- H2a.* An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a negative effect on the perceptions of the virtual work partner's social presence.
- H2b.* An increased level of perceived social presence has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

Similarity between individuals arises from shared attributes, such as demographic characteristics, background, experience and interests (Chen *et al.*, 2019; Lowry *et al.*, 2010; McAllister, 1995). At first acquaintance, individuals tend to naturally decrease uncertainty by looking for evidence of similarity using the informational cues that are frequently more directly made available, such as gender, age and basic demographics. Research has suggested that, over time, as more informational cues and perceptual knowledge is acquired between the parties, the chances of identifying dissimilarity increases, and once evidence of dissimilarity is identified, subsequent information is more likely to be interpreted as further evidence of dissimilarity (Lowry *et al.*, 2010; Norton *et al.*, 2007). These findings have led to the conclusion that, in virtual contexts, increased perceptual knowledge in short period of time of another individual's traits negatively impact perceived similarity and liking, whereas more ambiguity about another person's traits cause more similarity and linking (Bacev-Giles and Haji, 2017; Norton *et al.*, 2007).

Since individuals practicing online reputation management and building practices deploy censorship behaviors in social networking sites by avoiding sharing overly personal or intimate information, usually their public profiles only contain minimal descriptive demographics, such as birthplace and living city, or other categorical demographics that can be inferred from the profile photo, such as gender and approximate age. This limitation of informational cues is further enforced by these individual's tactics of preventing access to their private personal profiles in case the requestor is not familiar. Additionally, by avoiding interacting with contentious or polemic topics, individuals practicing online reputation building and management face a smaller chance that conflicting points of view are identified against them (Ryan *et al.*, 2020). According to Chen *et al.* (2019), people with similar interests may feel a closer bond with one another, which affects individual's perceptions of benevolence. Similar view is proposed by McKnight *et al.* (1998) from a unit grouping perspective. Therefore, similarity can lead to enhanced affective trust. This is because perceived personality similarity affects trustor's perceptions of the trustee's benevolence (Chen *et al.*, 2019).

Individuals tend to trust others who are similar to them and have more confidence in a similar trustee. Hence, one group member will be more likely to form trusting beliefs toward another group member (McKnight *et al.*, 1998). Prior empirical studies show that similarity between individuals positively influence trust development. For example, McAllister (1995) revealed that cultural or ethnical similarity between individuals affects cognition-based trust among managers and professionals in organizations. Therefore, similar interests or experiences may serve as social-based cues that individuals use to reduce uncertainty and facilitate cognition-based trust building. Therefore:

- H3a.* An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the perceived similarity toward the virtual work partner.
- H3b.* An increased level of perceived similarity has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.
- H3c.* An increased level of perceived similarity has a positive effect on the cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

Previous research has suggested that personal identity signals such as an individual's work history information on his/her public profile in social networking sites can function as a set of cues that allow others to better evaluate this individual's professional credentials (Jahng and Littau, 2016). By managing private and professional profiles separately, individuals practicing online reputation building and management will provide facilitated access to their professional credentials (Ryan *et al.*, 2020), thus promoting positive reputation categorization. Organizations, through formal role specifications, specify boundaries for trust relationships and professional credentials can represent signals of role preparedness. Educational institutions, professional associations and credentialing agencies promote trust by providing evidence that their members or accredited individuals meet standards from a professional community. Professional standing or reputation can be maintained over time through continued membership and participation in relevant professional associations (McKnight *et al.*, 1998). Therefore:

- H4a.* An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the perceptions of the virtual work partner's professional credentials.
- H4b.* An increased level of perceived professional credentials has a positive effect on the cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

Also, by managing private and professional profiles separately, individuals practicing online reputation building and management carefully tailor their professional profiles providing stronger evidence of relevant work experience (Ryan *et al.*, 2020) and promoting positive reputation categorization. Evidence that the trustee's behavior is consistent with norms and that the trustee follows through on commitments tend to be critical for the development of trust in the trustor's side. In working relationships involving high interdependence, individual performance can have a determining impact on personal productivity and evidence that individuals carry out role responsibilities reliably tend to enhance a trustor's assessments of a trustee's trustworthiness (McAllister, 1995; Chen *et al.*, 2011). In short, if an individual possesses good professional reputation, one will tend to quickly develop trusting beliefs toward him/her (McKnight *et al.*, 1998). Thus:

H5a. An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the perceptions of the virtual work partner's reliable role performance.

H5b. An increased level of perceived role reliable performance has a positive effect on the cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

Chen *et al.* (2019) indicate that cognition-based trust is the foundation of affect-based trust because the latter is more likely to develop when an individual is perceived to be reliable. As cognitive reactions form the basis for affective reactions, cognition-based trust may influence affect-based trust. A higher level of cognition-based trust in the trustee serves to reduce uncertainty and encourage the trustor to develop emotional attachments to the trustee, thus leading to affect-based trust:

H6. An increased level of cognition-based trust beliefs has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

Based on the discussion presented so far, Figure 1 summarizes the proposed research model regarding the impact of online reputation building and management practices in social networking sites on the initial trust formation in new virtual work partners.

3. Research methodology

To validate the hypothesized relationships, a between-subjects experiment was designed.

3.1 Participants

Data were collected using participants from undergraduate and graduate specialization courses of a large public University in Brazil between May of 2020 and April of 2022. This sample differs from other basic student samples reported in previous studies (Cummings and Dennis, 2018) by the fact that it covers a wide range of working professionals with different levels of experience and professional backgrounds that have enrolled into specialization courses for a complementary skill, such as project management, business administration or data analysis. In total, 233 individuals have participated on the study during the period of approximately two years of data collection. According to an assessment conducted by using the G*Power 3.1.9 software (Faul *et al.*, 2009), this sample size allows for a statistical power of approximately 95% when a significance level of 5% and a medium effect size (f^2) of 0.15 are selected, as suggested by Hair *et al.* (2014). The demographic characteristics of the participants were reported in Table 2.

3.2 The experiment scenario

A vignette was used to place participants in a fictitious scenario in which they would be introduced to a new virtual work partner. The vignette informed the participants that they were being victims of untrue claims of wrongdoing at work and that an external auditor

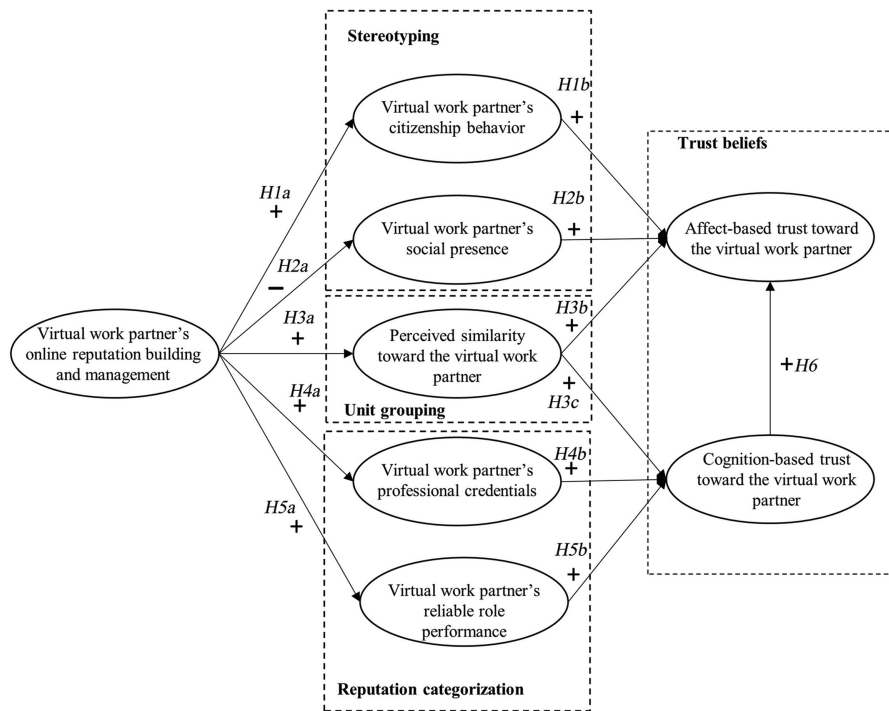


Figure 1.
The theoretical model

Items	Demographics	Sample	%
Gender	Male	164	70.39
	Female	69	29.61
Age	18–20	38	16.31
	21–25	58	24.89
	26–30	55	26.61
	31–35	30	12.88
	>35	52	22.32
Frequency of usage of social networking sites	Daily	179	76.82
	Few times a week	34	14.59
	Few times a month	14	6.00
	Few times a year	6	2.58
Years of usage of social networking sites	<5	26	11.16
	6–10	143	61.37
	>10	64	27.47

Table 2.
Demographic statistics

(i.e., the fictitious new virtual partner) had been hired to assist the participants to contest the unfounded allegations. The vignette also informed the participants that all the interactions with the external auditor would need to be made via ICT tools and that the collaborative work between them should last approximately two months. At the end of the vignette, the participants were given the opportunity to meet their respective new virtual work partners via two hyperlinks that directed the participants to the public profiles of fictitious personas in

Facebook and LinkedIn. An English translated version of the original text of the vignette is provided in [Appendix 1](#).

Facebook and LinkedIn were chosen as the targeted social networking sites for this study because they provide the unique combination of being highly popular among overall population ([Jahng and Littau, 2016](#); [Wakefield and Wakefield, 2016](#)) while they provide the proper combination of personal and professional information capable of providing not only a more comprehensive view of the individuals, but also a clear distinction between individuals practicing online reputation building and management or not.

The characteristics and the duration of the collaborative work described in the vignette were carefully selected and tailored to generate a perception of realistic interdependence between the participant and the fictitious persona ([Cummings and Dennis, 2018](#)) and to avoid a time pressure situation where the participant had no choice other than trusting the new work partner right away ([Kuo and Thompson, 2014](#); [Robert et al., 2009](#)). Also, since the professional background of the participants of the experiment was not known, the context of the collaborative work described in the vignette was purposefully made as generic as possible.

3.3 Measures

Items to measure the variables were carefully carved out from previous studies to increase the reliability of the measures.

3.3.1 Independent variable. The manipulated independent variable is the work partner's online reputation building and management practices. This variable was treated as a categorical variable: one fictitious persona profile was created in Facebook and LinkedIn based on the behavior expected from an individual practicing online reputation building and management, whereas another fictitious persona profile was constructed on the same social networking sites displaying the opposite behavior.

[Table 3](#) details the manipulations that were made on the public profiles of the two fictitious personas to operationalize the online reputation building and management practices proposed by [Ryan et al. \(2020\)](#).

[Appendix 2](#) contains the images illustrating the public profiles of the two fictitious personas and hyperlinks to directly access their profiles in Facebook and LinkedIn.

3.3.2 Mediating variables. The mediating variables of the model are the virtual work partner's citizenship behavior, social presence, perceived similarity, professional credentials and reliable role performance.

The measurement items for the mediating variables are displayed in [Table 4](#). The measurement items were originally available in English and were translated to Portuguese for Brazilian respondents. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (5) was utilized to measure the items.

3.3.3 Dependent variables. The dependent variables are affect-based and cognition-based trust beliefs. The items to measure the dependent variables were taken from [McAllister \(1995\)](#) and are displayed in [Table 5](#). These items were originally available in English and were translated to Portuguese for Brazilian respondents. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (5) was utilized to measure the items.

3.3.4 Control variables. The participant's age and gender were added as control variables since prior research has shown that these demographics can impact the perceptions of interpersonal trust ([McAllister, 1995](#); [Robert et al., 2009](#)). Similarly, disposition to trust and institution-based trust were controlled as they have been considered to impact initial trust formation ([McKnight et al., 1998](#); [Sun et al., 2018](#)). Items to measure the constructs of disposition to trust and institution-based trust were taken from previous studies ([Cummings and Dennis, 2018](#); [Jarvenpaa et al., 1998](#); [McKnight et al., 2002](#); [Robert et al., 2009](#)) and are

Online reputation building and management practices (Ryan <i>et al.</i> , 2020)			First impressions matter
	Presence of online reputation building and management tactics	Absence of online reputation building and management tactics	
Managing the blur between professional and private lives online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Maintenance of private account in Facebook and professional account in LinkedIn – Intimate information about personal health and family life or opinions related to politics or social issues restricted to private account – Careful tailoring of the presentation of professional credentials in LinkedIn – Concern of private account content leaking into professional account, by limiting public content available in the Facebook account to demographics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Maintenance of Facebook and LinkedIn accounts with no apparent distinction – Mixture of private and professional information being shared indistinctly in either accounts – Minimal presentation of professional credentials in LinkedIn – No overall concern of private content being mixed with professional content by granting full access to information in the Facebook account 	
Managing online connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provide likes and comments to posts in LinkedIn to expand network – Provide likes and comments to posts in Facebook to show support or to acknowledge achievements or life events of others – Tag individuals to make sure that information being posted is viewed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Loose interaction with LinkedIn posts – Loose interaction with Facebook posts – Mainly just reposting with no further mentions to target individuals 	
Practicing censorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Avoid sharing overly personal or intimate information – Refrain from posting unimportant or uninteresting information – Avoid sharing information that could be interpreted as controversial or extremist point of view – Refrain from interacting with contentious debates or adopting behavior that is contrary to social etiquette – Deleting comments that may generate negative images or may have spelling or grammatical errors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Openly exposing personal issues such as romantic partnerships and parent's illness – Excessively posting banal information such as how the individual is feeling today or what the individual is eating on every meal – No overall concerns of making a political statement or expressing a religious or sexual bias – Arguing with strangers in controversial or inflammatory debates – No overall concerns with controversial or provocative posts and typing issues 	

Table 3.
Manipulations made on the public profiles of the two fictitious personas

presented in Table 6. All measurement items were originally available in English and were translated to Portuguese for Brazilian respondents. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (5) was utilized to measure the items.

It is important to highlight that the information about the employment history of the new virtual work partner was totally fictitious to minimize the effects of institution-based trust. In order to minimize the effect of the work partner's demographics and physical appearance, the

Table 4.
Items to measure
mediating variables

Construct	Items
Citizenship behavior (McAllister, 1995)	My partner takes time to listen to people's problems and worries My partner assists people, even though it is not an obligation My partner takes people's needs and feelings into account when making decisions that affect them
Social presence (Bente et al., 2008)	My partner remained a stranger to me. (reversed item) I felt I got to know my partner well I experienced the interaction as impersonal. (reversed item)
Perceived similarity (Zellmer-Bruhn et al., 2008)	My partner and I share similar ethic My partner and I share similar habits My partner and I share similar interaction styles My partner and I share similar personalities My partner and I share similar cultural backgrounds
Professional credentials (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998)	I feel very confident about my partner's skills My partner has much knowledge about the work that needs to be done My partner has specialized capabilities that can increase our performance My partner seems well qualified My partner seems very capable of performing his/her task My partner seems to be successful in the activities (s)he undertakes
Reliable role performance (McAllister, 1995)	My partner adequately completes his/her duties My partner performs all tasks that are expected of him/her My partner fulfills responsibilities specified in job description My partner meets formal performance requirements of the job

Table 5.
Items to measure the
dependent variables

Construct	Items
Affect-based trust beliefs (McAllister, 1995)	I feel we can have a sharing relationship where we can both freely share our ideas, feelings and hopes I feel I can talk freely to this individual about the difficulties I am having and know that (s)he will want to listen I feel that if I shared my problems with this person, I know (s)he would respond constructively and caringly I feel that we will both make considerable emotional investments in our relationship
Cognition-based trust beliefs (McAllister, 1995)	This person appears to approach his/her job with professionalism and dedication Given this person's track record, I see no reason to doubt his/her competence and preparation for the job I can rely on this person to not make my job more difficult by careless work I trust and respect him/her Based on the information about this individual and his/her background, I would be more concerned and monitor his/her performance more closely. (reversed item)

same birthplace, living city and similar fictitious photos were chosen to provide similar judgments from participants, especially in regard to age and gender.

Lastly, one question at the end of the electronic questionnaire was utilized to assess the experimental manipulation. In this question, the participants were asked to indicate, by using a no/yes scale, if they had relied on the following items to assess their new work partner:

Construct	Items
Disposition to Trust (Jarvenpaa <i>et al.</i> , 1998; Robert <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Cummings and Dennis, 2018)	<p>Most people are honest in describing their experience and abilities</p> <p>Most people tell the truth about the limits of their knowledge</p> <p>Most people can be counted on to do what they say they will do</p>
Institution-based Trust (McKnight <i>et al.</i> , 2002)	<p>Most people answer personal questions honestly</p> <p>Social networking sites have enough safeguards to make me feel comfortable using them to get information about others</p> <p>I feel assured that the technological structures of social networking sites adequately protect me from getting misleading information about others</p> <p>I feel confident that the technology advances on social networking sites make them safe for me to acquire information about others</p> <p>In general, social networking sites are now a robust and safe environment to get information about others</p>

Table 6.
Items to measure the
constructs utilized as
control variables

- (1) Work partner's public profiles in both Facebook and LinkedIn.
- (2) Work partner's comments and interactions with other users in Facebook and LinkedIn.
- (3) Work partner's publication and (re)posts in both Facebook and LinkedIn.

The main goal of the manipulation check was to make sure that the participants of the experiment evaluated both the content of the information being disclosed and also the overall disclosure behavior of the profile owner, since together these elements help maximize the difference on the manipulation of the independent variable of the model. Only 4 participants or 1.7% of the total number of participants reported that they have not relied on the items listed on the manipulation checks in order to answer the questionnaire.

3.4 The experimental procedure

The experiment utilized a between-subjects design with random assignment to each condition: presence or absence of online reputation building and management practices in the public profiles of the new virtual work partner. The participants were invited to participate on the experiment during online lectures that occurred between May 2020 and April 2022. Each class had in average 33 participants. During the lecture, the participants were instructed to go to a website hosting the questionnaire that self-guided them through the experiment. The entire experimental process took, in average, 30 min and was divided in three main stages.

The experiment started with participants being allowed 5 min to complete an initial questionnaire to capture their age, gender, habits of usage of social networking sites, dispositional trust and institution-based trust. Next, a description of the nature of the collaborative task was presented, along with the links to the public profiles of their fictitious virtual work partner. By clicking on the links, the website randomly directed half of the participants to the public profiles displaying online reputation building and management practices, and the other half of the participants were directed to public profiles not displaying online reputation building and management practices. The participants were allowed a maximum of 10 min to inspect the public profiles.

Lastly, a second questionnaire was then applied to evaluate the participant's perceptions of the virtual work partner's citizenship behavior, social presence, perceived similarity, professional credentials and role reliable performance. The final part of the second questionnaire has also captured the participant's affect and cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner. At the conclusion of the second questionnaire and after responding all the questions related to the measurement variables, the participants had to reply to the questions related to the manipulation checks. A maximum of 15 min were allocated for the participants to complete the second questionnaire.

4. Results

Partial Least Squares (PLS) was used to assess the theoretical model. The analysis was supported by the ADANCO software (Henseler and Dijkstra, 2015) and included the assessment of the measurement and structural models (Henseler *et al.*, 2016).

First, the reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed. Table 7 presents the standardized outer loading values for the reflective indicators in the model after the removal of one indicator from the cognition-based trust construct (CBT5) and one indicator from the social presence construct (SP3). Following recommendations from Hair *et al.* (2014), these indicators were removed because they presented outer loadings below the threshold of 0.70 and their removal contributed to an increase in construct's reliability and validity.

For each reflective variable, Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (ρ_c) and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated. For the two reliability measures, the utilized reliability criteria required values exceeding 0.70 (Henseler *et al.*, 2016). For the AVE, the convergent validity criteria required values exceeding 0.50 (Hair *et al.*, 2014). The obtained results confirmed the reliability and convergent validity of the reflexive constructs (Table 8), except for the Cronbach's alpha of social presence ($\alpha = 0.493$). Given that social presence was measured by only two indicators and Cronbach's alpha is sensitive to the number of items in the measurement scale (Hair *et al.*, 2014), this result did not represent a concern, especially when considering that composite reliability value for social presence ($\rho_c = 0.818$) was above 0.70.

The constructs' discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. All latent variables satisfied the HTMT criteria, as all values were smaller than the 0.85 threshold value (Henseler *et al.*, 2016). This finding confirmed the constructs' discriminant validity.

After the measurement model was validated, the structural model was submitted to the bootstrapping sampling procedure (5,000 samples) to determine the t-values associated with the statistical significance of the path coefficients of the model (Hair *et al.*, 2014). The path coefficients (β) and their statistical significance are displayed in Figure 2.

5. Hypotheses testing

The results obtained from the assessment of the structural model were utilized for the evaluation of the hypotheses. This section presents the results of the test of the hypotheses grouped by each categorization mechanism type: stereotyping, unit grouping and reputation categorization.

From a stereotyping perspective, the results suggest that online reputation building and management practices increase the perceptions of citizenship behavior toward the new virtual work partner ($\beta = 0.319, \rho < 0.001$), thus supporting H1a. However, no support was found for H2a, regarding the effect of online reputation building and management practices on social presence ($\beta = 0.054, \rho = 0.462$). Citizenship behavior ($\beta = 0.195, \rho < 0.05$) has found

	Affect-based trust	Cognition-based trust	Citizenship behavior	Social presence	Perceived similarity	Professional credentials	Reliable role performance	Disposition to trust	Institution-based trust
ABT1	0.846								
ABT2	0.847								
ABT3	0.885								
ABT4	0.834								
CBT1		0.807							
CBT2		0.866							
CBT3		0.868							
CBT4		0.825							
CB1			0.884						
CB2			0.924						
CB3			0.912						
SP1				0.636					
SP2				0.937					
PS1					0.827				
PS2					0.825				
PS3					0.841				
PS4					0.867				
PS5					0.798				
PC1						0.771			
PC2						0.869			
PC3						0.866			
PC4						0.832			
PC5						0.887			
PC6						0.849			
RRP1							0.885		
RRP2							0.919		
RRP3							0.938		
RRP4							0.893		
DPT1								0.885	
DPT2								0.919	
DPT3								0.938	
DPT4								0.893	
IBT1									0.776
IBT2									0.829
IBT3									0.873
IBT4									0.872

First impressions matter

Table 7. Outer loadings

Table 8.
Reliability and validity
values

	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Composite reliability (ρ_c)	AVE
Affect-based trust	2.695	0.896	0.875	0.914	0.728
Cognition-based trust	3.333	0.808	0.863	0.907	0.709
Citizenship behavior	2.787	0.868	0.892	0.933	0.822
Social presence	2.203	0.935	0.493	0.775	0.642
Perceived similarity	2.538	0.860	0.890	0.918	0.692
Professional credentials	3.406	0.811	0.921	0.938	0.717
Reliable role performance	3.526	0.722	0.930	0.951	0.827
Disposition to trust	2.847	0.830	0.761	0.841	0.571
Institution-based trust	2.588	0.956	0.860	0.904	0.703

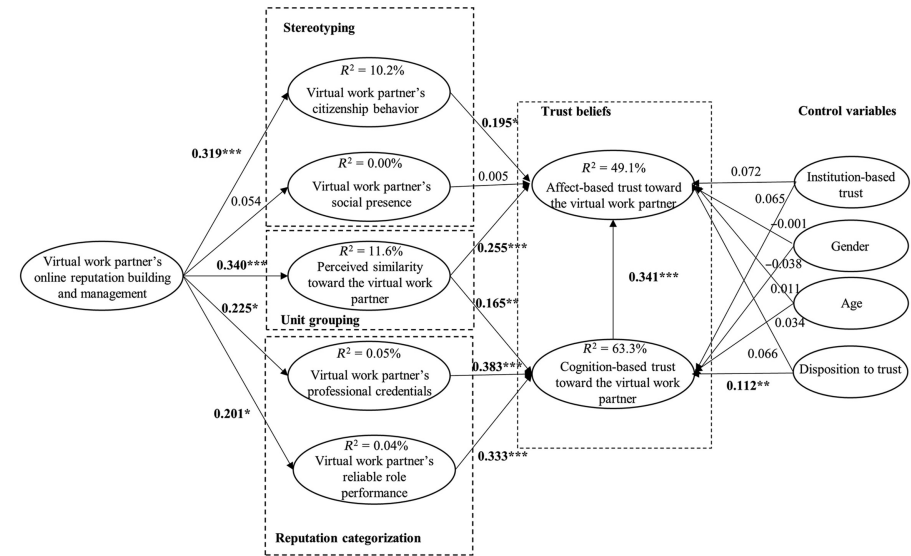


Figure 2.
Path coefficients and
their statistical
significance

Note(s): $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$

Lastly, the effect of cognition-based trusts belief on affect-based trust beliefs ($\beta = 0.341$, $\rho < 0.001$) has also been confirmed (H6).

As for control variables, no significant statistical effects were identified for gender, age and institution-based trust. Disposition to trust has shown a positive effect ($\beta = 0.112$, $\rho < 0.01$) on cognition-based trust, although its effect size ($f^2 = 0.031$) was the lowest among all the other relationships with statistical significance in the model. This indicates that disposition to trust has the lowest impact on predicting cognition-based trust when online reputation and management practices are present.

6. Discussion

The empirical analysis of the theoretical model has provided support for most of the hypothesized effects, except H2a and H2b.

According to H2a, it was expected that an increased level of online reputation building and management practices on the trustee's side would diminish the perceptions of social presence toward this individual on the trustor's side (Bente *et al.*, 2008; Ryan *et al.*, 2020). This is an interesting finding that could be associated to the challenges of measuring changes in perceptions of social presence by using a single communication media. So far, most research on social presence in virtual contexts has tried to assess changes in perceptions of social presence by comparing different communication media conditions, such as face to face vs computer mediated settings (Lowry *et al.*, 2010) or synchronous vs asynchronous media (Bente *et al.*, 2008). Instead, this study has tried to explore the possibility of changes in perceptions of social presence by using the same communication media and manipulating access to personal information made available asynchronously in public profiles of social networking sites. It may be possible that in such scenarios of low interactivity and reciprocity between the individuals, the perceptions of social presence might not change significantly as a result of the availability of asynchronous information.

This lack of perceptions in changes of social presence, therefore, might also help explain the absence of statistical significance for H2b, which deals with the positive impact of social presence in the affect-based trust. The attempt of generating changes in the trustor's perceptions of social presence by varying the trustor access to trustee's personal information being disclosed asynchronously on social networking sites might have not resulted in the intended differences in the trustor's perceptions of intimacy required to cause a significant effect on the affect-based trust beliefs, despite this effect being already reported in previous research (Bente *et al.*, 2008; Lowry *et al.*, 2010).

Based on the combined findings of the hypotheses testing, the final conceptual framework proposed is presented in Figure 3.

This framework suggests that the initial trust formation in a new virtual work partner can be affected by the information this individual discloses via public profiles in social networking sites. This effect can be managed on the trustee's side via his/her overall behavior of self-disclosure of information in social networking sites that are aimed at impression formation and the proper presentation of identity. Once practices for online reputation building and management are established on the trustee's side, a combination of stereotyping, unit grouping and reputation categorization mechanisms on the trustor's side can foster positive trust beliefs toward the trustee.

Finally, these results also suggest that public profiles from social networking sites have a comprehensive and significant impact on the initial formation of trust between new virtual work partners, even higher than the trustor's disposition to trust. The explanation for this finding could be on the superior informational and relational capabilities of the social networking sites, facilitating the communication and processing of social information from the perspectives of both the trustor and the trustee. From the trustor's side, the authorship

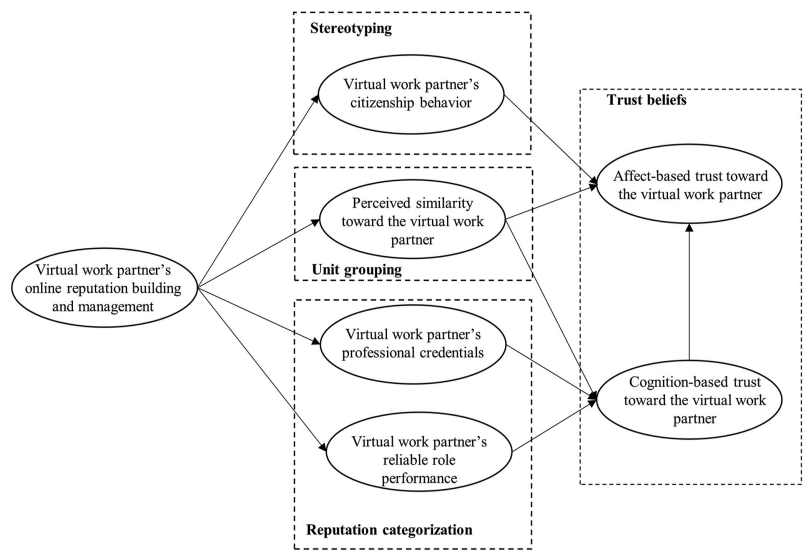


Figure 3.
The conceptual
framework proposed

and characteristics of the information being disclosed via social networking sites allow the trustor to have direct and continuous access to a wide set of informational cues about the trustee. From the trustee's side, he or she can now play an active role in the trust formation process by managing his/her self-disclosure of information and by consciously framing his/her online behavior toward facilitating the development of interpersonal trust on the trustor's side.

7. Concluding remarks

The objective of this study is to identify and evaluate the impact of online reputation building and management practices in social networking sites on the initial formation of trust in new virtual work partners. In order to achieve this aim, a theoretical model was developed and an experiment was conducted for its empirical assessment.

Results suggest that the online reputation building and management practices have significant effects on the three categorization mechanisms of initial trust formation: stereotyping, unit grouping and reputation categorization. These three processes have been found to contribute to initial trust development toward the new virtual work partner both from an affect and cognition-based perspectives. By combining these findings, a final conceptual framework was proposed for the effect of online reputation building and management practices in social networking sites on the initial formation of trust in new virtual work partners.

7.1 Contributions

The contributions from this study are as follows. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to a review of the traditional early trust models utilized in research and by the proposition of a trust formation framework that combines two theoretical perspectives: the knowledge-based trust development model from McAllister (1995) and the initial trust formation model from McKnight *et al.* (1998). The results of this study have suggested that the three categorization mechanisms for initial trust formation proposed by McKnight *et al.* (1998) are positively affected by online reputation and management

practices, and that these three mechanisms allow knowledge-based trust antecedents from McAllister (1995) model to come into effect even before firsthand knowledge about the trustee's behavior is known to the trustor. Taken together, the results suggest that public profiles from social networking sites can facilitate the creation of a continuum for trust development where trust can initially be formed based on secondhand knowledge about the trustee's behavior and, over time, be complemented by firsthand knowledge acquired via direct interaction with the trustee. It is important to highlight that this initial trust already possess an affective-based component, an often-neglected dimension of interpersonal trust in virtual contexts, but critical for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal trust (Chen *et al.*, 2011).

From a practical perspective, this study can guide remote workers to properly disclose information via their public profiles on social networking sites aiming at facilitating trust development toward them in virtual work contexts. This is a welcome support due to the increased adoption of virtual workplaces over the last few decades (Cummings and Dennis, 2018; Lowry *et al.*, 2010). This study has also a practical implication to society, in general, regarding the potential negative impact of personal information being disclosed in public profiles from social networking sites. Given that the lack of online reputation building and management practices on the trustee's side has been associated with lower levels of trust beliefs in the trustor's side, individuals should become concerned about their information disclosure behaviors in social networking sites. Due to the increase trend toward virtual work in the near future, the online reputation building and management practices could become a desired skillset that human resources recruiting organizations could start pursuing in professionals to fulfill positions that involve a large degree of virtuality in work relationships.

7.2 Limitations and future opportunities

It is important to note that the results and contributions discussed so far need to be considered together with the research limitations presented next, which also enables opportunities for future research.

First, from a practical perspective, questions can arise about the authenticity of the information disclosed in public profiles of social networking sites. Given that previous research has suggested that individuals can create virtual identities in social networking sites that differ from their real identities (Wilson *et al.*, 2014), this could potentially undermine the practical value of the model proposed in this paper. This study has tried to minimize and control this potential risk both at the level of the trustor and the trustee. On the trustee's side, even though in real life one cannot ensure total authenticity of the information disclosed in public profiles of social networking sites, the concept of online reputation building and management practices proposed in the paper tries to overcome this reliability risk by focusing not only on the content of the information being disclosed by the trustee but also on the overall disclosure behavior of the trustee, which tends to be more difficult to be artificially manipulated on the long term. On the trustor's side, the authors have controlled for any potential influence of the trustor's lack of trust on the information contained in public profiles of social networking sites by including institution-based trust as a control variable in the theoretical model. This control variable has been operationalized to assess the level of trust individuals have on social networking sites as a reliable source of information. During the experiment, this control variable has shown to not have statistical significance on the initial formation of trust.

Second, this study did not find evidences regarding the effect of online reputation building and management practices on the perceptions of social presence and its consequent effect on the affect-based trust, as predicted by the theoretical model. This lack of evidence does not necessarily indicate that this mechanism is not relevant for initial trust formation toward the

new virtual work partner, but it might indicate that the proper change in perceptions of social presence required for initial trust formation is difficult to convey based solely on public profiles of social networking sites. More exploratory research is suggested to clarify this and alternative mechanisms to generate and measure variance on trustor's perceptions of trustee's social presence based solely on the trustee's overall behavior of self-disclosure of information seem to be a particularly promising area to be explored.

Lastly, although the focus of this research was on the initial stage of trust formation between new virtual work partners, an intriguing research question arises on whether the trust beliefs initially identified as an outcome of the model proposed can be next materialized on concrete trusting actions between the work partners or sustained in the long term as the work relationship between them evolve. Therefore, extensions of this study could include an experiment where participants, after evaluating the public profile of the future work partner, could be asked to execute a certain action that reflects their trust on the new work partner, such as sharing a financial incentive received as part of their participation on the experiment. To investigate the long-term effects of these initial trust beliefs, researchers could adopt a qualitative approach and develop a longitudinal study where real relationships between new work partners are monitored since before their inception until few months after the formal engagement starts.

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Appendix 1

Text from the vignette

To answer the questionnaire below, please consider that over the next two months you will need to collaborate remotely with an auditor responsible for conducting a thorough investigation into a report of potential failure associated with your work.

You know that there were no failures in your work and that the allegation is unfounded, but you and the auditor will have to work together to demonstrate that there was no failure, and for that you will need to trust each other.

All interaction between you and the auditor in the next two months will be done through information and communication technologies (e-mail, chat, instant messaging, video conferences, etc.).

Thus, beforehand, to start familiarizing with your new work partner, you are being provided with links to his public profiles in Facebook and LinkedIn.

First
impressions
matter

Appendix 2

Public profiles of the two fictitious personas utilized in the vignette

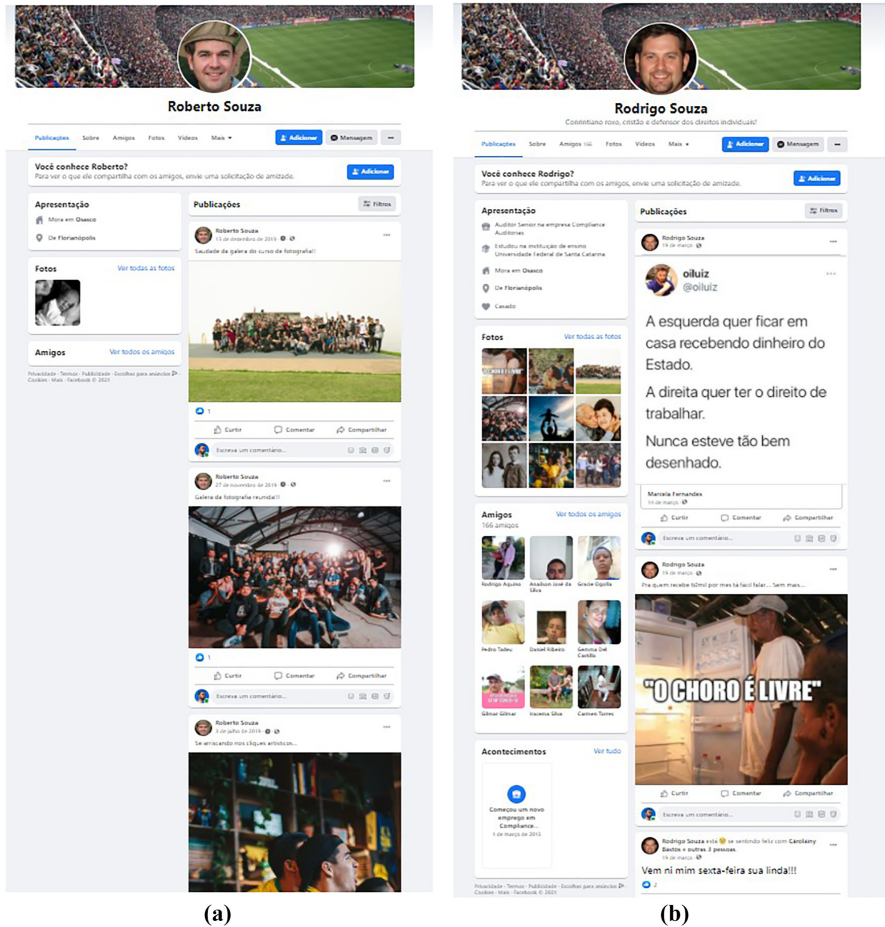


Figure A1. Facebook public profiles for fictitious personas (a) practicing online reputation building and management practices and (b) not practicing online reputation building and management practices

Note(s): Facebook profile (a) can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/rsouza.contr> and Facebook profile (b) can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/rsouza.trat>

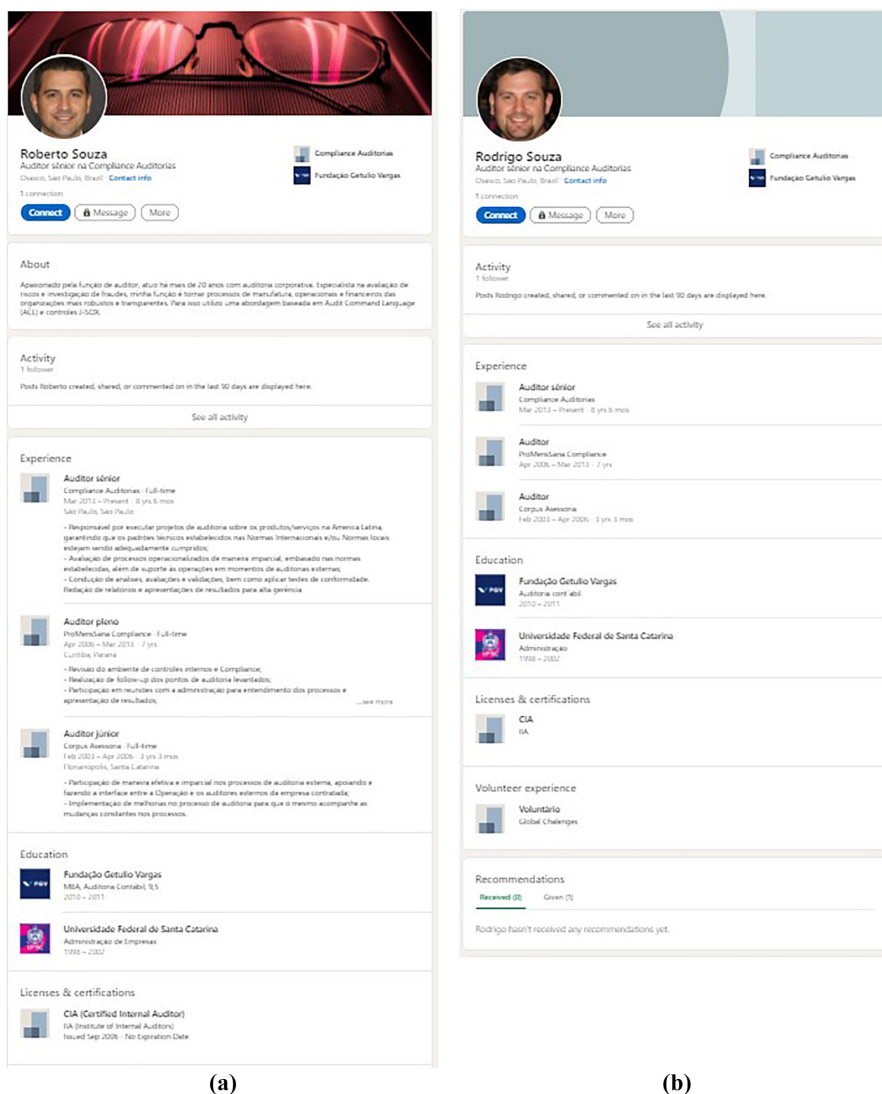


Figure A2. LinkedIn public profiles for fictitious personas (a) practicing online reputation building and management practices and (b) not practicing online reputation building and management practices

Note(s): LinkedIn profile (a) can be accessed at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/roberto-souza-auditor/> and LinkedIn profile (b) can be accessed at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rodrigo-souza-2b219a1a6/>

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