

Interpersonal trust erodes over time in the online world, experts say

March 19 2015, by Clifton B. Parker



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When people interact in an Internet community, they experience higher levels of trust initially. But as time passes and more information comes to light about other users, they are more wary, according to new Stanford research.

Technology reduces overall uncertainty and promotes trust between strangers. But at the same time, it erodes some of the serendipity involved in meeting new people, according to the article by Paolo Parigi and Karen Cook in Stanford's Sociology Department. Parigi, an assistant professor, studies social networks, trust and cooperation; Cook, the Ray Lyman Wilbur Professor of Sociology, researches social exchange, social networks and trust.

As Parigi and Cook describe it, the Internet has become a new realm for human interaction among people from different backgrounds, especially in [online communities](#) where members seek feedback from strangers on products and services – feedback that is, surprisingly, granted a lot of credibility.

"Remarkably, what appears to be a very difficult act in the offline world – creating interpersonal trust – is a routine activity for organizations operating within this segment of the economy," they wrote.

Roots of trust

For their research, Parigi and Cook examined Couchsurfing, a website that supports international travel and cultural exchange. Its members both host visitors and surf the site to find sympathetic lodging as they travel the world, all without exchanging money. Profile pages of members list Couchsurfing friends and other personal information.

The findings revealed, the researchers wrote, an interesting mechanism at the root of interpersonal trust: "The accumulation of ratings about [users](#) (whether guests or hosts) had a double-edged effect on trust and relationships: it made relationships easier to establish initially but it also weakened them after a certain threshold."

In other words, technology boosted interpersonal trust among users at

first, but it also made it more difficult to build stronger ties as users acquired more and more reviews.

For example, early on, social ties originated through a process of mutual discovery. As one user said, "He [the guest] would speak, and I would often listen. It was the first time I ever invited a stranger into my home, and the first time I ended up speaking to a stranger until the late hours of the night."

The researchers later interviewed users after the website had grown and more information about its community members was available online. By then, people were "more calculating about the types of strangers they hoped to meet," Parigi and Cook wrote. Their experiences with other users were mediated by the organization's reputation system.

"While they welcomed the rating system, in part because it allayed some safety concerns, it also made relationships more predictable," they wrote.

Parigi and Cook explain that in an online community, interactions between people are more normalized, less open to chance. "This is because trustworthiness is promoted not by interpersonal ties, but by the monitoring of one another in a network in which reputations are posted," they wrote.

It is unclear, they said, if technology operated in the same way for other communities in the "sharing economy" – the online world of reviews and feedback about products and services.

"What our research suggests is that Internet-mediated interactions tend to become less open-ended and unexpected the more information the community accumulates about its members," they wrote.

Societal implications

In an interview, Parigi said his and Cook's research on companies operating in the sharing economy is still in progress.

"We have some preliminary results that confirm the idea that people's levels of trust toward others can be modified through the experience of participating in this relatively new form of collective action. If confirmed in subsequent research, and this is a big 'if,' the main implication is that trust can be engineered and that technology can play a crucial role in the process," he said.

Parigi said that technology has made it easier than ever to build trust in ways not envisioned in the past. People who choose to participate in the [sharing economy](#) actually may have begun to experience the beginning stages of trust as fairly routine.

"Yet, it is precisely the fact that it has become routine that appears to pose limits to the meaning users attach to relationships that are mediated in the online world," he said.

As a result, he said, an interesting conundrum seems to be emerging: technology makes it possible for people to [trust](#) complete strangers, while at the same time it may be weakening the bonds that unite individuals.

The article was published in *Contexts*, a quarterly publication of the *American Sociological Review*. The content was based on earlier publications in *PLOS ONE* and a [book chapter](#).

More information: "A Community of Strangers: The Dis-Embedding of Social Ties." *PLoS ONE* 8(7): e67388. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0067388](#)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Interpersonal trust erodes over time in the online world, experts say (2015, March 19)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-03-interpersonal-erodes-online-world-experts.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.