

# **The significance of trust among users of social networking websites – study on construction and interior design portal**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Trust in e-business is a key factor because of impersonal contact, the need to use the IT systems and the need to disclose important information. Trust can influence on behaviour by motivating the audience to read the message, but also encourages Internet users to assess their usefulness. Therefore, the aim of the survey was to assess the significance of trust in the other website users for building general trust in online portals, as exemplified by construction and interior design portals

**Methodology:** The study was carried out in the form of an online survey consisting of a questionnaire sent to individuals by e-mail.

**Findings:** The study also revealed that most respondents exhibited a fairly passive approach, treating the portals as a source of information about trends in architecture, interior design or building and house decoration companies. There is a strong relationship between the total trust in the construction and interior design portal in general and trust the other members of this portal. This trust was manifested most strongly as confidence in the honesty of online community members, and in the skills and knowledge of people who recommend products or share their opinions on the portal

**Originality:** The majority of studies so far concerned online shops in the context of IT systems use of third-parties and privacy protection (Pavlou, 2003), the company's goodwill, the quality of websites and their influence on the decisions whether to participate in e-commerce or not (McKnight et al., 2002). The present study aims to assess the level of trust among the users of social networking portals, contributing to these with their recommendations, reviews or opinions.

**Keywords:** online trust, virtual community, social network, Poland

## **Znaczenie zaufania do członków społeczności internetowej na przykładzie portali budowlano-wnętrzarskich**

### **Abstrakt**

Zaufanie e-biznesie jest kluczowym czynnikiem wpływającym na wielkość sprzedaży i sukces firm prowadzących taką działalność. Bezosobowy kontakt, konieczność posługiwania się systemami informatycznymi oraz konieczność ujawniania istotnych danych sprawiają, że klienci czują się w środowisku internetowym wyjątkowo niepewnie. Warto więc zastanowić się jakie czynniki mogą budować zaufanie użytkowników do portali internetowych. W związku z tym celem badania było określenie znaczenia zaufania do użytkowników portali w budowaniu ogólnego zaufania do tych portali na przykładzie portali o profilu budowlano-wnętrzarskim. Respondenci deklarują raczej umiarkowane zaufanie do portali budowlano-wnętrzarskich, co jest związane z ograniczonym zaufaniem do ich użytkowników. Okazało

się bowiem, że istnieje silna zależność pomiędzy zaufaniem do portali a zaufaniem do osób tworzących społeczność tych portali.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zaufanie online, społeczność internetowa, Polska

## **Introduction**

Despite the growing interest in the problems of trust in the sphere of human relations in business management or in the knowledge-based economy it is continually adding new areas for further research. One such area is trust in the new technologies and activity of companies in the online environment.

Trust in e-business is a key factor in the sales and success of companies engaged in these activities. Impersonal contact, the need to use the IT systems and the need to disclose important information, make customers feel in the online environment extremely uncertain. It is worth considering what factors can build user confidence in Web portals. It seems that one of them is trust in other portal users. Therefore, the aim was present the significance of trust in online community members and to determine the level of trust in interior design portals and trust in users of these websites, as exemplified by construction and interior design portals.

## **Definition of trust**

Increasing choice and increased difficulties in making a rational decision make the growing importance of trust. Trust becomes a clue to help evaluate and choose among potential opportunities (Sztompka 2007). These options may include personal choices, products, service providers, but also building relationships. As Morgan (2000) states trust and engagement are the essential elements of creating relations. Trust is the decision to rely on another party under a condition of risk (Currall, Epstein 2003).

First of all, trust development is one of the main conditions of effective cooperation among people, groups and organizations, and consequently the common objectives can be achieved (Ashleigh and Nandhakumar, 2007, Rousseau et al., 1998). Thanks to cooperation based on trust, it is possible to stimulate creativity, generate innovative solutions, but also effective implementation of these innovations. Trust in fact reinforces one of the basic

conditions for innovation - knowledge acquisition and knowledge dissemination processes (Loon Hoe, 2007; Sveiby, Simons, 2002).

Trust can be defined as the „willingness to increase the resources invested in another party, based on positive expectations resulting from past positive mutual interactions” (Tzafrir and Eitam-Meilik 2005). It is the belief that neither of the parties will ever act to the partner’s detriment, taking advantage of their weaknesses (Morgan, Hunt, 1994). Trust results from positive notions being a consequence of current mutual interactions (Brockner, Siegel, 1997). Trust means expectation and faith that the partner will act to our mutual benefit. It occurs as a result of perceiving the other as a reliable partner in the relationship.

However, on the other hand, trust is connected with uncertainty about the partner's motives, intentions and actions (Gilson, 2003). As pointed out by Grudzewski and others trust is the belief on which the unit A in a particular case agree to a dependence on the individual B (a person, object, organization) having a sense of relative safety, even though negative consequences are possible (Grudzewski, Hejduk, Sankowska, Wańtuchowicz, 2009). Inspiration of trust is promoted by a consensus in respect of one's values, both in individual and corporate dimensions. This unanimity makes it possible to predict the attitude and behaviour of the participants in a relationship to a certain extent and it also allows for effective communication. Moreover, trust has the ability to inhibit opportunistic behaviour (Hampden-Turner, Trompenaars 2000).

### **Trust in the online environment**

Trust in e-business is a key factor in the sales and success of companies engaged in these activities. Impersonal contact, the need to use the IT systems and the need to disclose important information, make customers feel in the online environment extremely uncertain. Moreover, these uncertainties are enhanced because many online retail transactions represent consumers' first-time interactions with retailers (Grabner-Krauter and Kaluscha, 2003).

Internet users need trust as they need to reduce uncertainty, but also to facilitate their decision making process. Moreover, when end-users trust the parties they are dealing with, they are more willing to cooperate with them and believe that they will receive long-term benefits if they maintain that relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Thus, trust is an essential motivator for participation in the online community (McKnight et al., 2002). First of all, it encourages Internet users to a longer stay in the pages, reading articles and posts, and mobilizes them to activities such as knowledge sharing, referral sites and services, co-creation of products, etc. (Pavlou, 2003). The results of Hu et al. (2003) also indicate that trust can influence behaviour by motivating the audience to read the message, but also encourages Internet users to assess their usefulness. If the end-users know that a message is sent by a company they trust, they might feel that the message is relevant to their interests and therefore be more willing to take the time to read it.

End-users are usually more willing to work with the party they trust than a party with whom they have not developed any kind of a trust relationship, especially in an environment they are unfamiliar with or unable to control. All these uncertainties might increase the risks present in using online service and reduce the end-users' intention to participate in e-commerce (Pavlou, 2003; Salo, Karjaluoto 2007). The lack of consumer trust in online retail firms and Internet in general is considered as one of the most important factors limiting the full potential of e-business (Kim and Tadisina, 2007).

Therefore, it is essential to understand the factors that can help companies build initial trust and then maintain and enrich this trust (Salo, Karjaluoto, 2007). Dwyer believes that trust is important; he shows that people are more willing to share information on Facebook than on Myspace, due to greater trust in Facebook (Dwyer, 2007).

Trust is usually built based on previous experience. However, as regards Internet shopping, many authors emphasise the differences between first-time online buyers and

shoppers who have previously purchased online. Thus, the importance of building confidence of customers who are new to online transactions is underlined (Grabner-Krauter and Kaluscha, 2003; Kim and Tadisina, 2007). This initial trust is formed on the basis of assessment of the characteristics of a website or store, their perceived reputation, and institutional trust in online environment (McKnight et al., 2002). Moreover, it is also stimulated by signals transmitted by the company, including those about, for example, the size of the company, compliance with privacy policies and safety rules, or site usability (Grabner-Krauter and Kaluscha, 2003). According to McKnight et al. (2002) perception of these values implicates the appearance of trust, or a tendency to use the site or purchase making. But it seems that these factors are important not only for novice Internet users but also beginners in Internet services and industries that build their social capital online.

The literature identifies two groups of factors which affect the formation of initial trust. The first comprises cognitive factors, including: word-of-mouth or online opinions regarding the reputation and quality of products offered by a company. Reputation clues include: reliability, credibility, knowledge and expertise; whereas among quality guidelines are: information about the site's appearance and the way it works (Gefen et al., 2003, McKnight et al., 2002; Eastlick and S. Lotz, 2011). Of particular significance within this group is the protection of personal data, and how these data are used. Companies which publish terms for the collection and use of personal information about its customers and enable user control of personal data, seem more credible (Salo, Karjaluoto, 2007).

The second group of factors is known as institutional factors arising from a variety of previous general experience with the activity in the online environment. These factors are not associated with a particular company, but they are the result of a person stereotypes and patterns of thought adopted on the Internet (McKnight et al., 2002; Eastlick and S. Lotz, 2011). In addition, a universal factor influencing on the level of trust in various conditions,

including the online environment, is the end-users' own general trust (dispositional trust) (McKnight and Chervany, 2002).

In summary, the trust encourages Internet users to cooperate with the company, greater activity with the company (writing the opinion, to suggest innovative solutions, co-products, such as the portal, through participation in forums) and take over some functions of promotion (recommending the company among potential customers). Most studies, however, focus on the study of trust in online stores or other companies doing e-business, but much less frequently the trust to social networking sites is studied.

The success of these portals does not only depend on the ability to inspire initial trust, but above all, mutual trust between users (trust in other Internet users), since it is them who publish articles, post messages, or recommend products on social networking sites. The degree of trust determines the strength of relationships both offline and online. It is this aspect of trust that is the focus of the present study.

Trust in social network is a multidimensional phenomenon. Frequently, the dimensions of trust are competence, honesty and benevolence (Ellonen, Blomqvist, Puumalainen, 2008; Grunig and Hon 1999, Dietz, Den Hartog, 2006; Gutierrez, Cillan, Izquierdo 2004, Blois, 1999). In the context of virtual communities competence refers to the skills of the community members with respect to that mutual interest (Ridings et al., 2002). In turn, honesty is the belief that the second party will keep their word, fulfil their promises and be sincere (Doney and Cannon, 1997). Finally, benevolence reflects the belief that one of the parties is interested in the well-being of the other. In the context of virtual communities, benevolence refers to the expectation that community members will have the intention and the desire to help, support and care for the other members of the virtual community (Ridings et al., 2002). Thus, honesty and benevolence help to guarantee that other community members will not carry out opportunistic behaviours in the virtual community (Casalo et al., 2008).

## **Social networks in Poland**

Prevailing view is that social media are used to build engagement and dialogue with consumers. Social networking can be of two kinds. The first group of portals are managed by one company or brand for customer communication. Two-way, regular and individualized communication can build long-term relationship between the parties, conduct large-scale activities to be much closer to their customers, build trust, commitment, loyalty and commitment to creating the image of the company. The second group consists of portals that collect users interested in specific issues, and companies representing the industry, such as: tourism, construction, medical, etc. or portals like Facebook, or Nasza-Klasa.

Social media is becoming more popular among users and potential new businesses that plan to create more sites. This is evidenced by the information contained on the website of PARP (Polish Entrepreneurship Development Agency), which in the Operational Programme Innovative Economy co-finances a number of projects of a website ([www.poig.parp.gov.pl](http://www.poig.parp.gov.pl)).

The authors of Social Media Report 2010 have attempted to estimate the market value of social networks in Poland. Total income of eleven biggest services in 2008 amounted to approximately 83.2 million PLN, a year later increased to 125.9 million PLN. In 2010 the market reached a total turnover of 144.1 million PLN ([www.socialpress.pl](http://www.socialpress.pl)). It should be stipulated that the authors considered in these estimates income of the largest portals, apart from many smaller companies and those yet expanding their business. Thus, these amounts are far too low and do not fully reflect the potential of this market. Nevertheless, these data indicate the increasing attractiveness of the social networks resulting from its dynamic growth.

Attractiveness of the social networking market is also due to the activity of Poles in these sites. GlobalWebIndex prepared a map of the world of social media, where countries with the greatest number of people using social media are listed. It turns out that with the

number of 12.03 million of active social networks members, Poland is the leading country in Europe. Naturally, ahead of Poland are: Russia (26 million), United Kingdom (19.2 million), Germany (18.8), France (15.9) and Italy (12.6; [www.socialpress.pl](http://www.socialpress.pl)). Poland is also at the forefront of social media penetration among active Internet users (ratio is 57%). This is above the global average which is about 51%, and the rate of which can boast of the United States, Canada, Australia or Western Europe. The highest levels of penetration exhibit the Philippines and Indonesia (about 76%) and Malaysia (68%; [www.socialpress.pl](http://www.socialpress.pl)).

If an Internet user finds a web community and participates in discussions in the forums or participate in chats, and writes blog and looks to social networking sites, as based on the Net Track survey results, one can estimate the number of such people to be around 11.6 million. That is 58% of Internet users in Poland ([www.socialpress.pl](http://www.socialpress.pl)). This is confirmed by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center in Poland) test results, according to which almost one third of all adult Poles (32%, or nearly two thirds of Internet users) signed up in a social networking site, such as Nasza-Klasa, Facebook, GoldenLine.

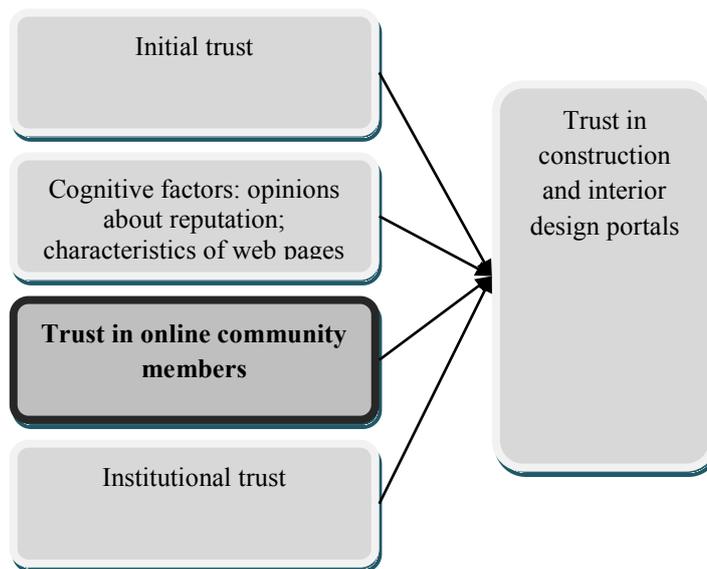
## **Methodology**

Assessment of social networks consists of two complementary dimensions. The first is the community, the people, forming a group, discussing, commenting, and having various interactions. The second aspect of this is platform, the place where the community operates, including (among others): page layout, functionality, usability of portal, technological advancement and privacy policy. The basic assumption of the survey conducted for the purpose of this article was that trust in construction and interior design portals is largely determined by the reliability of those websites' active users. The research shows that relationships with other people that use the same social networking strongly influence the perception and credibility of public advice and information shared. Internet users appreciate the opportunity to discuss openly and free exchange of opinions. Almost as important is the

quality and credibility of the comments. At the same time, information that Internet users recognize as the most reliable is that which has been posted by their friends.

Therefore, the aim of the survey was to assess the significance of trust in the other website users for building general trust in online portals, as exemplified by construction and interior design portals (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The model of the research



Expenses related to the construction or even redecoration of a house is so important in the household budget that decisions about purchasing products and services require considerable effort and time. Moreover, these decisions are associated with relatively high risk and uncertainty. Thus the majority of people making such decisions are looking for information both among friends, as well as among online resources. Unfortunately, the problem of trustworthiness of the information contained therein arises. Thus, in the study it was decided to measure confidence in the construction and interior design portal.

The Internet is an extremely dynamic environment. Not only social networking sites evolve, but also, as research shows, the attitude of users to the materials contained therein is changing. According to a report prepared by GlobalWebIndex , users of portals begin to focus

on the distribution of different materials, and drop out of their creation. This follows from the fact that Internet users have increasing trust in authorities and experts. As a result, throughout the world in 2011 compared to 2009 there was nearly 50% increase in confidence in the people-experts who recommend the product in social networks ([www.socialpress.pl](http://www.socialpress.pl)).

On the other hand, as stated in the report of Edelman "Trust Barometer", year 2011 was another period of decline trust in the recommendations received from so-called "people like me", with whom we contact every day in social media. In just two years, the level of trust dropped by 4 percent points - from 47% in 2009 to 43% in 2011. This decrease took place while trust in the experts with whom we have the opportunity to come into contact through social media increased ([www.socialpress.pl](http://www.socialpress.pl)).

The study was carried out in the form of an online survey consisting of a questionnaire sent to individuals by e-mail. To participate in the study was invited people who, two years prior to the survey, had had a house/flat built, refurbished or redecorated, and who used interior design websites for that purpose. Respondents in the vast majority were people familiar with the author of study or recommended, often well known by name. The establishment of requirements for the participants of the study and the chosen sampling method (intentional selection) ensured reliability of obtained answers. Because of the diverse preferences of the respondents and the variety of social networking portals available, no specific website of this kind was suggested in the survey. Rather, the aim was to examine the level of respondents' trust to the activity in the online environment, including the recommendations and reviews posted on the portals.

Apart from the trust scale, the questionnaire contained questions to evaluate respondents' attitude to Internet use and 5 personal data questions. Particular questions consisted of several statements, each of them followed by a five-point Likert scale.

The study involved 57 people. The small sample size results from the difficulty of reaching the respondents due to: the number of housing completions, the percentage of Internet users and a tendency to use the portals of interior design. Therefore, the study is rather distinctive and explaining the test problem. It also served to verify the research tool.

The average age of respondents was 35 years old. This is a rather specific target group, which has relatively little free time because of the strong commitment to their careers and family life. It is also the segment of people who most often purchase real estate and are particularly interested in any facilitation of the furnishing of apartments or houses. Approximately half of the respondents spend nearly 3 hours a day at the computer using the Internet, while 20% up to 8 hours. During this time, as much as 76% of respondents spent about half an hour using social networks, and the remaining 24% up to 3 hours. The characteristic of this group of respondents, which distinguishes it from other demographic groups, is the purpose of using the Internet. As many as 59% of respondents said that they use the Internet primarily for business purposes, which is consistent with the results of research conducted by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Mathematical and Computational Modelling. The authors of this study indicate that better educated people and people of the ages of 25 to 64 spend more time using the Internet in an instrumental way - work-related way. In addition, almost 44% of respondents were looking for entertainment on the Internet, and 26% said they use the Internet for education.

## **Findings**

The respondents were not keen online shoppers. Although 73% of respondents stated that tend to trust companies offering Internet sales, but none of them expressed this opinion in a decisive manner.

They were even less enthusiastic about the level of privacy and personal data protection in the Internet. Only 20% of respondents believe that they can trust in how to comply with

privacy rules described by social networking pages (again, no answers „definitely trust"). At the same time as many as 50% have an ambivalent attitude to this issue.

The respondents had limited trust in Internet portals, even though their confidence in online directories - construction and interior design portals - was slightly higher than in the case of social networking websites. Nearly half of respondents stated that trust towards construction and interior design portals and only 35.3% of respondents expressed trust in the other social networking sites (summed responses "agree" or "strongly agree").

It is worth noting that there was a relationship between time spent in the network and the level of trust. The more time respondents spent on Internet pages browsing, the higher the level of trust declared ( $p = 0.01$ ).

The level of trust was researched in two ways. First respondents were researched by using Likert scale consisting of particular items. Items used were in accordance with three dimensions of trust towards portals users: competence (3 items), honesty (3 items) and benevolence (5 items). The items were based on a literature review or earlier research (Casalo et al. 2008; Yu-Hui Chen, Barnes 2007) and modified by the author and adapted to the specific field in question. Table 2 shows the results of Cronbach's alpha for all dimensions of trust in users. The alpha coefficients portray satisfactory results, with Cronbach's alpha ranging between 0.60 and 0.82. Next respondents presented again their general attitude to others users of portals and to construction and interior design portals in general, but this time by answering one question.

Table 1. Cronbach's alpha for dimensions of trust

	Cronbach's alpha
Competence	0.82
Honesty	0.60
Benevolence	0.67

Source: Author.

Respondents declared the highest level of trust in the benevolence of portals users and expressed the belief that the community created the desire to link their activities in the

common interest (mean 3.6). A little below is certain trust in the competence of the members of the community (mean 3.54). The lowest level of trust respondents declared in relation to the integrity of other users (mean 3.49).

The answers received by using particular scales were summed up. In order to determine the relationship between various dimensions of trust in the members and the general trust in the construction and interior design portal the correlation coefficient was calculated (table 2).

Table 2 Effect of the dimensions of trust on trust in construction and interior design portal

	Trust in construction and interior design portal
Trust in portal users	0.81
Competence	0.76
Honesty	0.89
Benevolence	0.72

Correlation coefficients are significant with  $p < 0.05000$

Source: Author.

The main assumption about relationship between trust in members of community and trust in portal in general has been confirmed. There is a strong statistical correlation between the trust to other portal users and the general trust in portal (0.81). Of all the dimensions of trust, the most crucial are the integrity of its users (0.89) and their competence (0.76), while benevolence is slightly less important (0.72).

The study also revealed that most respondents exhibited a fairly passive approach, treating the portals they used merely as a source of information on trends in architecture, interior design or building and house decoration companies.

Respondents treat Internet portals primarily as a source of information about companies from the field of construction and interior design (mean 4.29) and trends in construction and interior design (mean 4.05). Confidence in construction and interior design portal is also expressed by trust in the skills and knowledge of users of these sites. First of all, the respondents were convinced about the suitability of reviews of active users of these portals (mean 3.74). In addition, research portals had had relatively high trust in the information they provided about companies from the field of construction and interior design (mean 3.73).

However, the strongest belief in the competence of the website users expressed the belief that they should actively shape the portal sharing their knowledge (mean 4.15).

Although they considered the information contained on the portals as a reliable and rather declared trust in them, it had absolutely no impact on their market behaviour. The vast majority said they did not use the services of a repair crew or a construction company under the influence of people recommending them via the portal (mean 1.68). Similarly, few people took into account other members' opinions as regards building materials, or were going to make purchases influenced by those opinions (mean 2.91).

The following table show the results of the Spearman rank correlation (R) to verify which statements evaluated were most closely associated with the overall mean in particular areas (table 3). The higher the correlation coefficient the greater the impact of individual answers on the overall index. It should be noted that almost all coefficients were statistically significant. That means that almost all tested aspects affect the overall level of trust in the area.

Table 3 Factors affecting trust in construction and interior design portals

	Spearman correlation coefficient
1. I often use information concerning field of construction and interior design published in the Internet.	0.54
2. Information given by other Internet users on construction teams and other construction and interior design firms are very important source of knowledge to me.	0.60
3. Construction and interior design portals users have a vast knowledge in the field.	0.43
4. Social networks members of construction and interior design portals give useful information to other users.	0.46
5. I asked construction/renovation crew to work for me because they were recommended by other portal/forum users.	0.54
6. Generally, most of construction and interior design sites users do not post false opinions.	0.51
7. I generally trust skills and experience of other users of construction and interior design portals concerning field in discussion.	0.61

Source: Author.

According to the results, it turned out that the biggest impact on the trust in construction and interior design sites have:

- confidence in the ability of the users of construction and interior design portals on the subject under discussion,
- belief in the value of information provided by other Internet users about the renovation and construction crews and others in the industry of construction and interior design;
- using the services of a construction company under the influence of recommending them to the online forum;
- tendency to be guided by information about the companies from the construction and interior design;
- belief that most users of construction and interior design portal abstain false opinions.

## **Conclusion**

The majority of studies so far concerned online shops in the context of information systems (Lee and Turban, 2001), use of third-parties and privacy protection (Pavlou, 2003), the company's goodwill, the quality of websites and their influence on the decisions whether to participate in e-commerce or not (McKnight et al., 2002). The present study aims to assess the level of trust among the users of social networking portals, contributing to these with their recommendations, reviews or opinions.

The study shows that, in addition to cognitive and institutional factors, a strong relationship between the total trust in the construction and interior design portal and trust in the other users of this portal. This trust was manifested most strongly as confidence in the honesty of online community members, and in the skills and knowledge of people who recommend products or share their opinions on the portal. Slightly less important was benevolence, i.e. acting in the interest and to the benefit of others. Interestingly, these two most important dimensions of trust: competence and honesty are the lowest rated, which

means that the respondents have reservations about the reliability and expertise of members of the Internet community.

At the same time, the study revealed that the participants were not particularly active users of the portal; their activity was confined to following, or publishing on the website, the latest news on trends in construction and interior design. Perhaps this low activity is due to the limited confidence in the construction and interior design portals. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of those studied stated that they used the Internet primarily for professional purposes. This indicates the specific character of Internet users aged 30 and over. They learned to use the Internet as adults and so treat it as a tool rather than a source of entertainment. Thus, their activity as members is rather limited to viewing the information contained therein, which consequently means that they have little opportunity to build stronger ties based on trust.

Because of the small sample size, the presented findings, although they describe the problem of trust in construction and interior design sites, should be regarded as preliminary to further research into the problem.

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