ABSTRACT

The Acceptance and Effectiveness of Social Control on the Internet: A Comparison between Online Auctions and Knowledge-Sharing Groups

At times the users of online auctions, such as eBay, are regarded as a kind of community by observers, as well as the auction's management. In regard to the idea that eBay constitutes a community, I test the hypothesis that online auctions fundamentally differ from other communities on the Internet in the sense that they accept and need stronger forms of social control. Online auctions, it is argued, face problems of trust in such a way that they need *direct* forms of social control.

Knowledge-sharing groups, as another popular example of Internet communities, conversely rely on much more *indirect* forms of social control. The *theory of relational signals* explains the differential acceptance and effectiveness of social control in Internet groups due to differences in the members' interests. These differences are typically induced by the dissimilar functions that the groups have for their members.

Whereas users of knowledge-sharing groups (must) have some interest in maintaining a satisfying relationship with their group colleagues, such relational interests hardly exist among users of online auctions. The hypotheses are tested against data which compare the acceptance and effectiveness of different forms of social control by users of online auctions versus knowledge-sharing groups. Here, I find that members of eBay experience problems of trust more seriously than members of knowledge-sharing communities. Findings also suggest there is a lower degree of relational interest within eBay. Moreover, eBay members are much more willing to accept direct forms of social control which are unacceptable within knowledge-sharing communities. Conclusions are drawn about the preconditions for the successful application of social control on the Internet.

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