

# INITIAL TRUST FORMATION IN NEW VIRTUAL WORK PARTNERS: THE IMPACT OF ONLINE REPUTATION BUILDING AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

## Abstract

Due to the increased usage of social media by the general population, social networking sites can change the way new virtual work partners meet each other for the first time, since secondhand knowledge about each of them is usually available *a priori* from their respective public profiles in social networking sites. Whether this scenario can have an influence on the initial formation of trust between them is still mostly an open question. The personal opinions and character judgements one individual has for the other based on their overall behavior of self-disclosure of information in social networking sites, i.e., their respective online reputations, seem to be an important element in this context. The objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of online reputation building and management practices in social networking sites on initial trust development in new virtual work partners. In order to achieve this aim, a theoretical model was developed and an experiment with undergraduate students was conducted for its initial empirical assessment. Results suggest that online reputation building and management practices have strong effects into stereotyping and unit grouping perceptions toward the new virtual work partner, however no evidences were found regarding the effect of online reputation building and management practices into the reputation categorization of the new virtual work partner. Unit grouping and reputation categorization have been found to contribute to initial trust development toward the new virtual work partner, both from an affect and cognition-based perspectives.

**Keywords:** Trust, Virtual Work, Social Networking Sites, Reputation Building and Management, Experiment.

## 1. Introduction

Information System (IS) literature on interpersonal trust usually distinguishes two different stages for trust development between individuals engaging in a new virtual work relationship: before and after the behavior of the person to be trusted – the trustee – is known to the person who trusts – the trustor (McKnight, Cummings & Chervany, 2002; Robert, Dennis & Hung, 2009). Before the trustee's behavior is known to the trustor, interpersonal trust is usually referred to as swift trust, a fragile type of trust mostly grounded on trustor's personality traits and cognitive categorization processes (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996; Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner, 1998; McKnight et al., 1998; McKnight, Cummings, Choudhury & Kacmar, 2002; Robert et al., 2009; Kuo & Thompson, 2014). 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 judgements made by the trustor in regards 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 swift trust is established, it can help foster knowledge-based trust (Robert et al., 2009). Therefore, swift trust is desired, not only because it allows new virtual work partners to engage and collaborate quickly (Meyerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; McKnight et al., 1998; 2002; Kuo & 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 (Jarvenpaa, Shaw & Staples, 2004).

Ten years ago, when this two-stage theoretical model was initially proposed, it made sense to consider interpersonal trust formation in virtual contexts as a process composed by two distinctive stages, since firsthand knowledge about the trustee's behavior would usually only become available to the trustor after the virtual relationship had started (Robert et al., 2009). However, nowadays, a specific IT artifact seems to be capable of blurring the frontiers between the two stages: the social networking sites.

The ubiquitous presence of social media technologies, especially social networking sites, in everyone's life has provided trustors with access to a considerable amount of personal information about almost any potential trustee around the globe (Kuo & Thompson, 2014; Cummings & Dennis, 2018). In that sense, social networking sites have changed the way virtual work partners meet for the first time: it is now relatively common for new virtual work partners to scrutinize each other's public profiles on social networking sites, like Facebook and LinkedIn, before the formal engagement starts (Cummings & Dennis, 2018). The overall impact that this behavior can have on the initial formation of trust between new virtual work partners is still mostly unknown. The few reported studies that have attempted to explore this issue so far have either focused at very specific features of public profiles from social networking sites, such as shared connections between the trustor and the trustee (Kuo & Thompson, 2014); or investigated the impact of public profiles from social networking sites on pre-stages of the trust formation phenomena, such as impression formation toward individuals (Cummings & Dennis, 2018). This leads to the following research question: Can the behaviors individuals display via their public profiles in social networking sites facilitate initial trust formation toward them in an eventual future virtual work relationship? If so, can this effect be managed by the owner of the public profile?

One way to approach this is to consider that public profiles in social networking sites can provide secondhand knowledge or signals that trustors can leverage to make trust decisions and facilitate initial trust development toward the trustee, as long as this last individual purposefully displays the expected cues in his/her public profile. To this aim, trustees can leverage a set of practices for self-disclosure of information and impression management using their public profiles for the goal of building and managing their online reputation (Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall & Lawson, 2018).

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

The main contribution expected from this study is the further development of the original two-stage paradigm of trust formation proposed by previous researchers (McKnight et al., 1998; Robert et al., 2009). It is expected that, by allowing the trustor to acquire secondhand knowledge about the trustee's behavior in early stages of a virtual relationship, public profiles from social networking sites can blur the frontiers between swift trust and knowledge-based trust.

The remainder of this paper is organized in four sections. In section two, the literature is reviewed to hypothesize a series of relationships between online reputation building and management practices and the development of initial trust. Section three contains a methodological discussion to empirically validate the hypothesis. Finally, section four presents the results of this study, followed by its concluding remarks in section five.

## 2. Theoretical background

The next sections review pertinent research in order to explore the potential impact of online reputation building and management practices on interpersonal trust in new work partners.

### 2.1 The conceptualization of trust

Before a discussion on trust formation can happen, it is important to define what trust is, given its many perspectives and definitions available in the IS literature (Watanuki; Moraes, 2019). This study leverages McAllister's (1995) definition of interpersonal trust as the extent to which the trustor is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of, 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, dependability and reciprocal interpersonal concern and care (McAllister, 1995; McKnight et al., 1998; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002; Chowdhury, 2005; Robert et al., 2009).

The basic model from McAllister (1995) suggests that trust beliefs are composed by two fundamental dimensions: affect and cognition-based. The affect-based trust beliefs involve emotional elements such as reciprocal interpersonal care and concern; whereas the cognition-based trust beliefs refer to the calculative and rational characteristics displayed by the trustee (Altschuller & Benbunan-Fich, 2013). Based on its two dimensional defining characteristics, McAllister's model seems to be particularly useful in investigations that considers the emotional aspects from individuals involved in trust development in virtual settings, such as emotional bonds and care (Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002), perceived similarity (Lowry, Zhang, Zhou, & Fu, 2010), and social presence (Altschuller & Benbunan-Fich, 2013).

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; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002; 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 association memberships, professional certifications, and relevant experience (McAllister, 1995, Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002; Lowry et al., 2010). Lastly, if the trustee exhibits reliability in performing complex roles – i.e., reliable role performance; then it is also likely that the trustor will develop a high level of trust toward the trustee (Chowdhury, 2005).

The affective dimension of trust is grounded on the altruistic motives of the relationship between the trustor and the trustee. 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 and if both of them socially interact frequently, it is highly likely that the trustor would develop trust toward the trustee (Chowdhury, 2005).

### 2.2 Initial trust formation in new virtual work relationships

The investigation of initial trust formation in new virtual work relationships in IS literature

has its roots on the seminal works of Meyerson et al. (1996) and McKnight et al. (1998). Both researchers have dedicated efforts to understand the results of previous organizational studies that had unexpectedly identified high levels of trust in new organizational relationships or temporary groups. This unexpected finding, later explained by Meyerson et al. (1996) via the concept of swift trust, was originally considered paradoxical since the general understanding at the time was that interpersonal trust could only develop over time. Meyerson et al. (1996) and McKnight et al. (1998) have proposed that during the beginning of a relationship, since the behavior of the trustee is mostly or completely unknown to the trustor, a combination of cognitive processes on the trustor side, as well as his/her personality traits and institutional based elements would drive the initial trust development process. Given that initial trust between individuals is usually not based on any kind of experience with, or firsthand knowledge about the trustee; 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 (Meyerson et al., 1996; McKnight et al., 1998).

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 personal traits and mostly related to his/her beliefs in the human nature, i.e., a natural tendency to trust other people (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995; McKnight et al., 1998, 2002; Brown, Poole & Rodgers, 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).

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: involves the assignment of trustworthy attributes to the trustee;
- Unit grouping: refers to the classification of the trustee on the same category as oneself;
- Stereotyping: places the trustee into a general category of persons.

These three processes can be utilized together by the trustor and can 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 (such as a professional group) or because of his/her past actions. Regarding 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 about the other by generalizing from the favorable category into which the person was placed (McKnight et al., 1998).

The importance of Meyerson's et al. (1996) and McKnight's el at. (1998) work for the investigation of trust issues on virtual contexts relies on the fact that these authors have explored trust formation in a context that is usually common place for virtual relationships: brand new and temporary relationships. These authors have established the foundations upon which several virtual team researchers have investigated initial trust formation between virtual work partners (Jarvenpaa et al. 1998, 2004; Robert et al., 2009; Kuo & Thompson, 2014; Cummings & Dennis, 2018).

## 2.3 Reputation building and management practices in social networking sites

Social media technologies can be conceptualized as an IS artefact consisting of three components: the technological itself, supporting social interactions; the informational, consisting of user generated digital content; and the social, involving communication and collaboration among people (Spagnoletti, Resca, Sæbø, 2015; Wakefield & Wakefield, 2015).

Within this broad concept, a specific sub-category can be identified: the social networking sites. They 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 (Wakefield & Wakefield, 2016; Kapoor et al., 2018, Ryan et al., 2018). Popular examples of social networking sites are Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (Tsai & Hung, 2019; Wakefield & Wakefield, 2016; Jahng & Littau, 2016).

Social networking sites provide strangers with the possibility to exchange information in various forms, comprising not only the user-generated digital content (Spagnoletti et al., 2015; Lim & Van der Heide, 2014), but also the perception of social interaction (Wakefield & Wakefield, 2016; Jahng & Littau, 2016) which can potentially influence future virtual relationships between them (Kuo & Thompson, 2014). This is justified by the informational cues provided by social networking sites that can be interpreted as signals, as described by the signaling theory from informational economics studies (Chen, Lu, Wang & Pan, 2019). According to this theory, inequalities in access to information between two parties tend to make the exchange of goods and services between them difficult. Under these conditions, signals that reveal relevant and meaningful information purposefully emanating from one party to the other party can reduce uncertainty and shape a positive behavior from this last one toward the first party (Chen et al., 2019, Spence, 1973; Connelly, Certo & Ireland, 2011). The present study suggests that a similar mechanism can promote positive stereotyping, unit grouping and reputation categorization 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 social media public profiles (Kietzmann, Hermkens & McCarthy, 2011), potentially influencing the trustor's perceptions of trustworthiness.

However, this doesn't seem to constitute a trivial accomplishment as improper disclosure of personal information in social media can also result in potentially negative signals (Xie & Kang, 2015; Ryan et al., 2018; Shareef et al., 2020). In this sense, a key behavior that can help promote positive signals is online reputation building and management.

According to Ryan et al. (2018), social media users build and manage their reputations online by taking into account general understandings of the functionality of the main platforms (i.e., using specific platforms for the sharing of specific types of information), managing their online connections (i.e., carefully managing what content is available to whom), and practicing censorship, particularly in respect of sensitive topics. These practices, therefore, 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.

Still according to Ryan et al. (2018), individuals can successfully build and manage their online reputations by managing the way in which their private and professional lives blur and by undertaking some level of self-censorship. This include deploying a number of tactics associated to online reputation protection, such as: using one platform for the private identity and another for the public identity; adhering to rules or guidelines to determine connecting practices on different platforms; undertaking varying levels of self-censorship across one or

more platforms; avoid publishing content that is excessively personal or intimate in nature or content that is viewed as bragging or “showing off”, or even offensive content. Table 1 summarizes key tactics suggested by Ryan et al. (2018) that individuals can leverage in social networking sites for building and managing their online reputation.

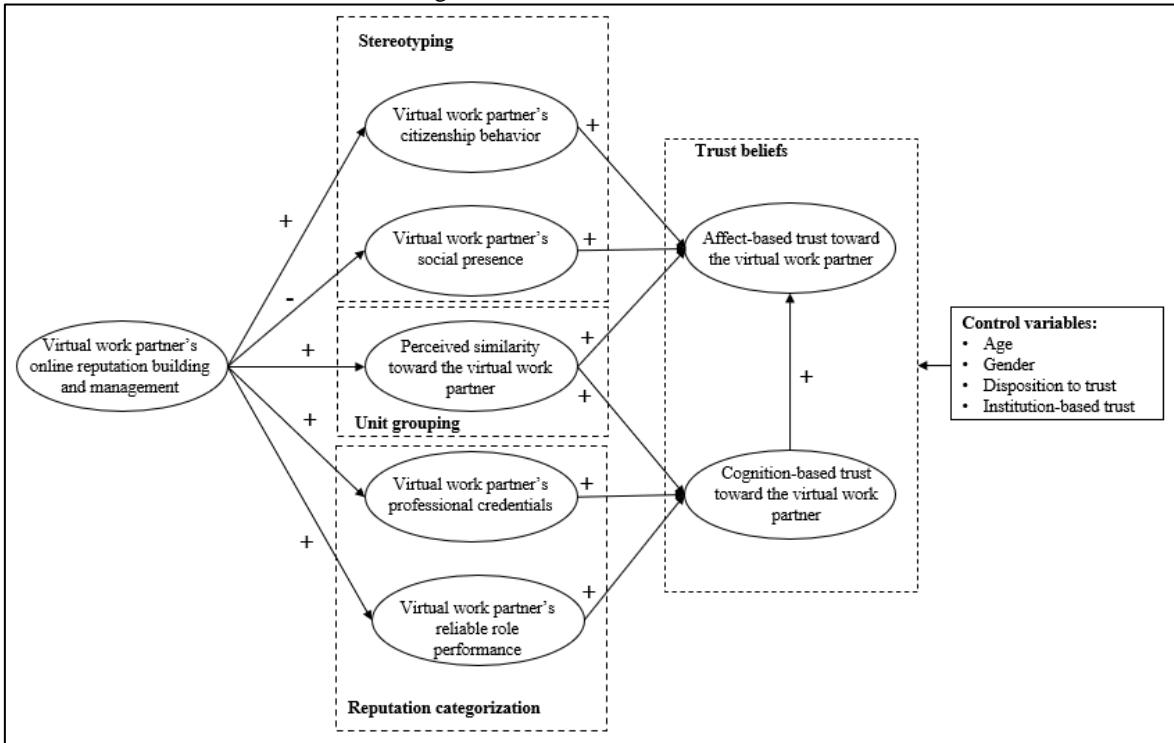
**Table 1 – Tactics for building and managing reputation in social networking sites (Ryan et al., 2018)**

Reputation building and management practice	Tactics deployed in social networking sites
Managing the blur between professional and private lives online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Maintenance of private account and professional account separately</li> <li>– Intimate information restricted to private account</li> <li>– Careful presentation of credentials in professional account</li> <li>– Concern of private account content leaking into professional account</li> <li>– 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)</li> <li>– Direct invites in the private account to the professional account in case the requestor is not familiar</li> </ul>
Managing online connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Provide replies and comments in posts to expand network and correct misunderstandings</li> <li>– Provide likes and comments to show support or to acknowledge achievements or life events of others</li> <li>– Tag individuals to make sure that information is viewed</li> <li>– Forcibly connect with people to acquire interesting content or to create an alignment with a knowledgeable person.</li> <li>– Hide posts from connections that are not appreciated instead of deleting them</li> </ul>
Practicing censorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Refrain from sharing information that conveys controversial views or is contrary to social etiquette</li> <li>– Avoid sharing overly personal or intimate information, information that is too controversial or unimportant or uninteresting information</li> <li>– Avoid interacting with contentious topics, inflammatory debates and fight with strangers</li> <li>– Deleting comments that may generate negative images or may have spelling or grammatical errors</li> </ul>

## 2.4 Research model and hypothesis development

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 initial trust development in new virtual work partners.

Figure 1 – The theoretical model



#### 2.4.1 The effect of reputation building and management on categorization processes

This section explores the impact of online reputation building and management practices (Ryan et al., 2018) on the categorization processes for initial formation of trust, as proposed by McKnight et al. (1998).

Social information processing theory (SIPT) (Walther, 1992; Schiller & Mandviwalla, 2007) proposes that, when communicating solely via ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools in which nonverbal cues are not available, individuals adapt and use available information to form impressions and evaluate others. Therefore, SIPT 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 & Littau, 2016; Lim & Van der Heide, 2014; Walther, 1992). In this sense, social networking sites provide its users with generous identity signals to disclose information about other individuals (Spagnoletti et al., 2015; Wakefield & Wakefield, 2016).

By managing private and public identities, the individuals that practice online reputation building and management will tend to adhere to social guidelines and emphasize in their public profiles their positive achievements and attitudes, such as supporting initiatives for the well-being of the environment, campaigns to alleviate poverty, among others. Individuals practicing online reputation building and management possess an increased perception of what is ethically acceptable in social networking sites (Ryan et al., 2018), and by publishing only their positive achievements, they tend to increase the perception of citizenship behavior, or positive stereotyping, toward them. Therefore:

H1a – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the virtual work partner's citizenship behavior.

Social presence theory (SPT) (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976; Schiller & Mandviwalla,

2007) suggests that the awareness of other social participants' interactions (i.e., social presence) can be augmented in communication via ICT tools as more channels become available for the expression of nonverbal cues. Despite the limited presence of actual human contact in virtual workplace environments, 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 (Gefen & Straub, 2004; de Vries, 2006; Bente, Rüggenberg, Krämer & Eschenburg, 2008; Jahng & Littau, 2016; Shareef et al., 2020.). This is in agreement with the informational component of social media technologies, whose focus is on user-created content, such as personal profiles, text, photographs, and video streams (Spagnoletti et al., 2015; Wakefield & Wakefield, 2016).

A higher level of online reputation building and management practices often implies limited disclosure of personal or too intimate information (Ryan et al., 2018). By reducing the amount of personal information online, individuals practicing online reputation building and management tend to also limit their amount of social presence, thus reducing the chances of positive stereotyping:

H1b – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a negative effect on the virtual work partner's social presence.

According to the social identity or deindividuation (SIDE) theory (Spears & Lea, 1992; Schiller & Mandviwalla, 2007), 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. Therefore, when a trustee's signals of shared social identity with the trustor are available in a public profile, 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 & Postmes, 2005), i.e., the trustor's perception of unit grouping toward the trustee (McKnight et al., 1998). By limiting the amount of personal information and avoiding polemic content, individuals practicing online reputation building and management face a smaller chance that conflicting point of views will be identified against them (Ryan et al., 2018). Also, past research has demonstrated that less information about the individual increases the likelihood of perceived similarity or unit grouping toward him/her (Norton, Frost & Ariely, 2007; Lowry et al., 2010). Therefore:

H1c – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the perceived similarity toward the virtual work partner.

With regard to identity, previous research has suggested that personal identity signals, such as the availability of 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 & Littau, 2016; Lim & Van der Heide, 2014). 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., 2018), thus promoting positive reputation categorization:

H1d – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the virtual work partner's professional credentials.

Also, by managing private and professional profiles separately, individuals practicing online reputation building and management will carefully tailor their professional profiles, providing stronger evidences of relevant work experience (Ryan et al., 2018), once again promoting positive reputation categorization. Thus:

H1e – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the virtual work partner's reliable role performance.

#### 2.4.2 The effect of categorization processes on trust beliefs

This section explores the impact of categorization processes on trust beliefs, by forging the original trust belief model proposed by McAllister (1995) with the categorization processes proposed by McKnight et al. (1998), and also by adapting them to the context of a virtual relationship.

Altruistic behavior or positive stereotyping can provide an attributional basis for affect-based trust. As being extra-role can be viewed as personally chosen and not being directly rewarded, altruistic behavior is rarely attributed to negatively perceived self-interest (McAllister, 1995; Chowdhury, 2005). By displaying citizenship behavior and, therefore, being positively stereotyped, there is increased likelihood that the trustor will develop interpersonal care and concern toward the trustee:

H2a – An increased level of citizenship behavior has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

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 interpersonal trust (de Vries, 2006; Lowry et al., 2010; Shareef et al., 2020), especially its affective dimension (McAllister, 1995; Gefen & Straub, 2004; Bente et al., 2008). 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 social information to allow the making of confident attributions. Thus:

H2b – An increased level of social presence has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

According to Chen et al. (2019), people with similar interests may feel a closer bond with one another, which affect 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). Therefore:

H2c – An increased level of perceived similarity has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

Similarity arise from shared attributes such as demographic characteristics, background, experience, and interests (McAllister, 1995; Lowry et al., 2010; 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:

H2d – An increased level of perceived similarity has a positive effect on the cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

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 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). In short, if an individual possess good professional reputation, one will tend to quickly develop trusting beliefs toward him/her (McKnight et al., 1998). Thus:

H2e – An increased role reliable performance has a positive effect on the cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.

Organizations, through formal role specifications, specify boundaries for trust relationships and professional credentials serve as clear signals of role preparedness. Educational institutions, professional associations, and credentialing agencies promote trust by providing evidences that its member 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:

H2f – An increased level of professional credentials 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 will serve to reduce uncertainty and encourage the trustor to develop emotional attachments to the trustee, thus leading to affect-based trust. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3 – An increased level of cognition-based trust beliefs has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner

### 3. Research methodology

In order to validate the hypothesized relationships, a between-subjects experiment was designed.

#### 3.1 Participants

Data were collected using undergraduate students from a business course in a large, state University in Brazil during the month of May 2020. Participation was voluntary and no financial or grade incentives were provided to the students. The only prerequisite was for students to have an active Facebook or LinkedIn account, in order to ensure they were familiar with the goal of each social networking site (Kuon & Thompson, 2014). Also, the students were informed about the general goal of the study, but specific details such as different profiles being used were not disclosed to avoid potential bias.

In total, 88 students have participated on the study. According to the G\*Power 3.1.9 software (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner & Lang, 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). Most of the respondents were male (86%) and their average age was 22 years old. Majority of the respondents also reported that they had more than five years of experience in the usage of social networking sites (97%) and make use of them on a daily basis (78%).

### 3.2 Task

A vignette was used to place participants in a scenario in which they would be interacting with a new virtual work partner. In this method, subjects are presented with written descriptions of realistic situations and then requested to provide responses on rating scales that measure the dependent variables of interest (Trevino, 1992). This method has been proven to effectively capture individual perceptions like trust (Robert et al., 2009; Kuo & Thompson, 2014) and, similar to Cummings and Dennis (2018), the use of vignettes was chosen to provide control by placing all subjects in the same scenario with the only change being the manipulation of the public profiles from social networking sites. The vignette utilized in this study places participants in a fictitious virtual partnership beginning work on a new collaborative task. Participants (trustors) were presented with the public profiles from social networking sites of a fictitious work partner (trustee) and asked to assess trust beliefs toward the new work partner.

The experiment utilized a between-subjects design with random assignment to each condition. The students were invited to participate on the experiment during the lecture of a business class. The students were instructed to go to a website hosting the questionnaire that self-guided them through the experiment.

The experiment started with participants completing an initial questionnaire to assess their demographics, habits of usage of social networking sites, their disposition to trust and institution-based trust (control variables). The website then randomly directed students to one of the two treatment vignettes (presence or absence of online reputation building and management practices) describing the nature of the collaborative task and the link to the public profiles of their fictitious virtual work partner in Facebook and LinkedIn, respectively. A second questionnaire was then used to evaluate the mediating and dependent variables of the theoretical model.

After the students have completed and submitted the second questionnaire, they were informed about the goal of the experiment on a subsequent lecture, and presented with a summary of the data analysis.

### 3.3 Measures

#### 3.3.1 Independent variable

The manipulated independent variable is the work partner's online reputation building and management practices.

The work partner's reputation building and management practices were treated as a categorial variable: one fictitious public profile was constructed respectively on Facebook and LinkedIn based on the behavior expected from an individual practicing online reputation building and management, as suggested by Ryan et al. (2018); whereas another fictitious public profile was constructed on the same social networking sites displaying the opposite behavior. Table 2 depicts some of the divergent characteristics of the two fictitious profiles. 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 at the same time that they are capable of providing clear distinction between profiles practicing online reputation building and management or not (Ryan et al., 2018).

Table 2 – Characterization of the public profiles utilized in the vignette

Online reputation building and management practices (Ryan et al., 2018)	Presence of reputation building and management tactics	Absence of reputation building and management tactics
Managing the blur between professional and private lives online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maintenance of private account in Facebook and professional account in LinkedIn</li> <li>- Intimate information about personal health and family life or opinions related to politics or social issues restricted to private account</li> <li>- Careful tailoring of the presentation of professional credentials in LinkedIn</li> <li>- Concern of private account content leaking into professional account, by limiting public content available in Facebook account to demographics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maintenance of Facebook and LinkedIn accounts with no apparent distinction</li> <li>- Mixture of private and professional information being shared indistinctly in either accounts</li> <li>- Minimal presentation of professional credentials in LinkedIn</li> <li>- No overall concern of private content being mixed with professional content by granting full access to information of Facebook account</li> </ul>
Managing online connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide likes and comments to posts in LinkedIn to expand network</li> <li>- Provide likes and comments to posts in Facebook to show support or to acknowledge achievements or life events of others</li> <li>- Tag individuals to make sure that information being posted is viewed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loose interaction with LinkedIn posts</li> <li>- Loose interaction with Facebook posts</li> <li>- Mainly just reposting with no further mentions to target individuals</li> </ul>
Practicing censorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Avoid sharing overly personal or intimate information</li> <li>- Refrain from posting unimportant or uninteresting information</li> <li>- Avoid sharing information that could be interpreted as controversial or extremist point of view</li> <li>- Refrain from interacting with contentious debates or adopting behavior that is contrary to social etiquette</li> <li>- Deleting comments that may generate negative images or may have spelling or grammatical errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Openly exposing personal issues such as romantic partnerships and parent's illness</li> <li>- Excessively posting banal information such as what the individual is eating for every meal</li> <li>- No overall concerns of making a political statement or expressing a religious or sexual bias</li> <li>- Arguing with strangers in controversial or inflammatory debates</li> <li>- No overall concerns with controversial or provocative posts and typing issues</li> </ul>

It is important to highlight that the information about the current employer of the new virtual work partner was totally fictitious in order to minimize potential effects of institution-based trust. For similar reasons, no information was disclosed about the work partner's connections on both social networking sites.

In order to minimize the effect of the work partner's demographics and physical appearance, the same gender (male), hometown, education, and similar fictitious photos were chosen to provide similar judgements from participants in regards to age, race, and dress code.

### 3.3.2 Mediating variables

The mediating variables are: citizenship behavior, social presence, perceived similarity, professional credentials, and reliable role performance.

Items to measure the mediating variables were carefully carved out from previous studies in order to increase reliability of the measures (McAllister, 1995; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Bente et al., 2008; Zellner-Bruhn, Maloney & Bhappu, 2008). The mediating variables, their originally reported reliability values, and their respective items are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3 – Items to measure mediating variables

Construct	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Items
Citizenship behavior (McAllister, 1995)	0.81	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)	0.91	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 (Zellner-Bruhn et al., 2008)	0.88	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)	0.90	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)	0.77	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.

### 3.3.3 Dependent variables

The dependent variables are affect-based and cognition-based trust beliefs. Items to measure the dependent variables were taken from McAllister (1995). The originally reported reliability values for the dependent variables and their respective items are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4 – Items to measure the dependent variables

Construct	Cronbach´s $\alpha$	Items
Affect-based trust beliefs (McAllister et al., 1995)	0.89	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 et al., 1995)	0.90	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)

### 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 perceptions of interpersonal trust (McAllister, 1995; Robert et al., 2009). Similarly, disposition to trust and institution-based trust were controlled as they have shown to impact initial trust development (McKnight et al., 1998). Lastly, duration and frequency of usage from both social networking sites were also controlled (Cumming & Dennis, 2018).

Items to assess the constructs of disposition to trust and institution-based trust were carefully carved out from previous studies in order to increase reliability of the measures (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; McKnight et al., 2002; Robert et al., 2009; Cummings & Dennis, 2018). These two control variables, their originally reported reliability values, and their respective items are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5 – Items to measure the constructs utilized as control variables

Construct	Cronbach´s $\alpha$	Items
Disposition to Trust (Jarvenpaa et al. 1998; Robert et al. 2009; Cummings & Dennis, 2018)	0.83	Most people are honest in describing their experience and abilities. Most people tell the truth about the limits of their knowledge. Most people can be counted on to do what they say they will do. Most people answer personal questions honestly.
Institution-based Trust (McKnight et al., 2002)	0.94	Social networking sites have enough safeguards to make me feel comfortable using them to get information about others. I feel assured that the technological structures of social networking sites adequately protect me from getting misleading information about others. I feel confident that the technology advances on social networking sites make them safe for me to acquire information about others. In general, social networking sites are now a robust and safe environment to get information about others.

### 3.3.5 Manipulation checks

One question was utilized to assess the experimental manipulation. In this question, the participants were asked to indicate, by using a no/yes scale, if they have relied on the following items to assess their new work partner:

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

The participants were also allowed to enter assessment items not listed above into a text box.

## 4. Results

Partial Least Squares (PLS) was used to test the theoretical model. The analysis was supported by the SmartPLS3 software (Ringle et al., 2015) and included assessment for the measurement and structural models (Henseler et al., 2016).

First, the measurement model's reliability and validity were assessed. Table 6 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 two indicators from the social presence construct (SP1 and SP2). 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 reliability and validity.

Table 6 – Outer loadings

	Affect-based trust	Cognition-based trust	Citizenship behaviour	Social presence	Perceived similarity	Professional credentials	Reliable role performance
ABT1	0.811						
ABT2	0.782						
ABT3	0.847						
ABT4	0.725						
CBT1		0.768					
CBT2		0.837					
CBT3		0.860					
CBT4		0.756					
CB1			0.866				
CB2			0.873				
CB3			0.862				
SP3				1.000			
PS1					0.820		
PS2					0.744		
PS3					0.851		
PS4					0.842		
PS5					0.709		
PC1						0.752	
PC2						0.856	
PC3						0.821	
PC4						0.784	
PC5						0.872	
PC6						0.758	
RRP1							0.824
RRP2							0.879
RRP3							0.916
RRP4							0.865

For each reflective variable, Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), composite reliability ( $\rho_c$ ), Djikstra-Henseler's  $\rho$  ( $\rho_A$ ), and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated. For all three 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 confirm the reliability and convergent validity of the reflexive constructs (Table 7).

Table 7 - Reliability and validity values

	Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Composite reliability ( $\rho_c$ )	Djikstra- Henseler's $\rho$ ( $\rho_A$ )	AVE
Affect-based trust	0.802	0.871	0.810	0.628
Cognition-based trust	0.819	0.881	0.821	0.650
Citizenship behaviour	0.837	0.901	0.849	0.752
Social presence	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Perceived similarity	0.855	0.895	0.881	0.632
Professional credentials	0.894	0.919	0.901	0.654
Reliable role performance	0.894	0.926	0.894	0.759

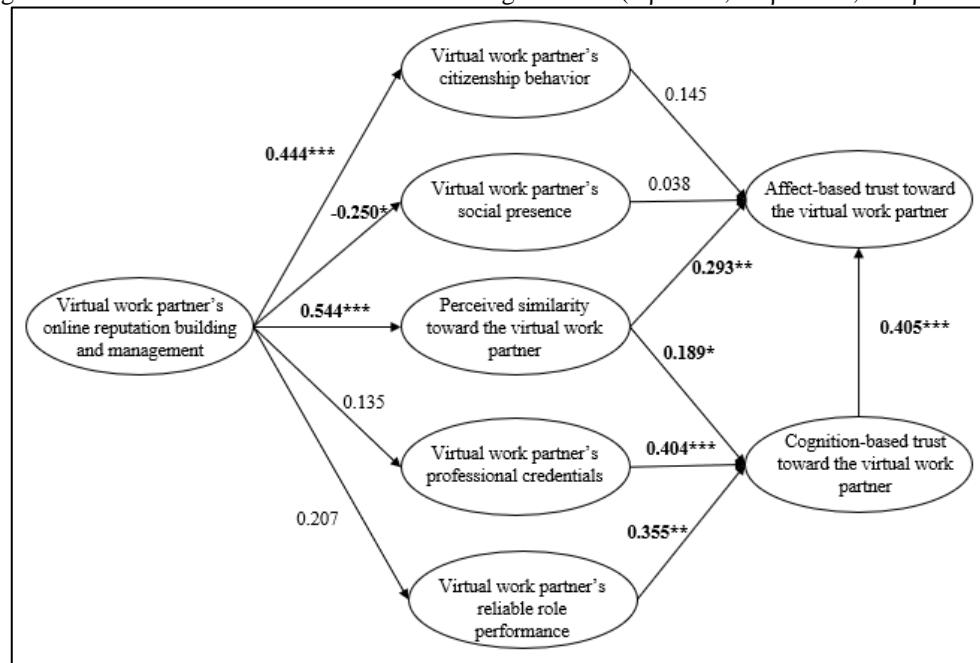
The constructs' discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations, which represents the average of the correlations of indicators across constructs that measure different phenomena relative to the average of the correlations of indicators within the same construct. The most conservative criterion of discriminant validity using HTMT criteria requires values below the threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 8 presents the HTMT values for each pair of constructs in the measurement model. All latent variables satisfied the HTMT criteria, as all values were significantly smaller than the 0.85 threshold value. This finding confirms the constructs' discriminant validity.

Table 8 - HTMT criterion analysis ( $p < 0.001$ )

	Affect- based trust	Cog- based trust	Citz. Behav.	Social presen.	Perceiv. similar.	Profess. credent.	Rel. role perform.	Reput. build. mgmt.
Affect-based trust								
Cognition-based trust	0.734							
Citizenship behavior	0.684	0.698						
Social presence	0.071	0.113	0.142					
Perceived similarity	0.640	0.444	0.765	0.143				
Professional credentials	0.331	0.781	0.464	0.092	0.297			
Reliable role performance	0.457	0.775	0.337	0.106	0.303	0.727		
Reputation building and management	0.363	0.163	0.479	0.250	0.568	0.138	0.218	

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 ( $\beta$ ) and their statistical significance are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Path coefficients and their statistical significance (\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ).



The results obtained from the structural model assessment were utilized for the evaluation of the hypotheses. Table 9 summarizes the results of the tests of the hypotheses.

Table 9 - Test of hypotheses

Hypothesis	Result
H1a – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the virtual work partner's citizenship behavior.	Supported
H1b – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a negative effect on the virtual work partner's social presence.	Supported
H1c – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the perceived similarity toward the virtual work partner.	Supported
H1d – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the virtual work partner's professional credentials.	Not supported
H1e – An increased level of online reputation building and management practices has a positive effect on the virtual work partner's reliable role performance.	Not supported
H2a – An increased level of citizenship behavior has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.	Not supported
H2b – An increased level of social presence has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.	Not supported
H2c - An increased level of perceived similarity has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner	Supported
H2d - An increased level of perceived similarity has a positive effect on the cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner	Supported
H2e - An increased role reliable performance has a positive effect on the cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner	Supported
H2f - An increased level of professional credentials has a positive effect on the cognition-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner	Supported
H3 – An increased level of cognition-based trust beliefs has a positive effect on the affect-based trust beliefs toward the virtual work partner.	Supported

The structural model explained 58.6% and 48.3% of the variance of the dependent variables of cognition-based and affect-based trust beliefs, respectively. As for the mediating variables, this model also explained 29.5% of the variance of perceived similarity, 19.7% of the citizenship behavior, 6.2% of the social presence, 4.3% of the role reliable performance, and 1.8% of the professional credentials. According to Hair et al. (2014), these values indicate an explanatory power ranging from low (considering the  $R^2$  values of the mediating variables) to moderate (considering the  $R^2$  values of the dependent variables).

The effect sizes ( $f^2$ ) for each hypothesized relationship is provided in descending order in Table 10. The lowest effect sizes were obtained for the four hypothesized relationships that did not achieve statistical significance during the validation of the theoretical model, suggesting that the exogenous constructs of these hypothesized relationships do not have a substantial impact on their respective endogenous construct (Hair et al., 2014). All effect sizes greater than 0.15 were associated to relationships with statistical significance, as predicted by the statistical power of this sample size.

Table 10 – Effect sizes ( $f^2$ ) for the hypothesized relationships

Hypothesized relationship	Effect size ( $f^2$ )
Reputation building and management practices → Perceived similarity	0.419
Reputation building and management practices → Citizenship behavior	0.246
Professional credentials → Cognition-based trust beliefs	0.225
Cognition-based trust beliefs → Affect-based trust beliefs	0.209
Role reliable performance → Cognition-based trust beliefs	0.173
Perceived similarity → Affect-based trust beliefs	0.092
Perceived similarity → Cognition-based trust beliefs	0.079
Reputation building and management practices → Social presence	0.067
Reputation building and management practices → Reliable role performance	0.045
Reputation building and management practices → Professional credentials	0.019
Citizenship behavior → Affect-based trust beliefs	0.018
Social presence → Affect-based trust beliefs.	0.003

As for control variables, no significant statistical differences were identified for gender, age, frequency or years of usage of social networking sites. Disposition to trust has shown a positive and significant statistical difference ( $diff=0.374$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) in regards to the effect of reputation building and management practices on perceived similarity. Institution-based trust has shown a positive and significant statistical difference for both the effect of reputation building and management practices on professional credentials ( $diff=0.561$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and the effect of reputation building and management practices on reliable performance ( $diff=0.466$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

## 5. Concluding remarks

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

From a stereotyping perspective, results suggest that online reputation building and management practices possess the dual effect of increasing the perceptions of citizenship behavior towards the new virtual work partner, but also decreasing the perceptions of social presence toward this same individual. From a unit grouping perspective, online reputation

building and management practices have also been confirmed as a strong contributor to perceived similarity toward a new virtual work partner.

Surprisingly, from a reputation categorization perspective, none of the hypothesized relationships between online reputation building and management practices and the virtual work partner's professional credentials or reliable role performance have found empirical support. One possible explanation for this unexpected result could be the fact that the sample of respondents might not be used to rely on social networking sites for professional purposes. Given the relatively low average age of the participants, it is possible that most of them have not yet been exposed to a real work context, therefore, not giving importance to professional information displayed in social networking sites. Additional support for this suspicion is provided by the fact that participants scoring higher in institution-based trust indeed presented a statistically significant coefficient for these relationships. For further confirmation, a new experiment utilizing more experienced business professionals as participants is suggested.

From an initial trust formation perspective, all the hypothesized effects from perceived similarity, professional credentials, and reliable role performance on cognition-based trust beliefs have been supported (McAllister, 1995; McKnight et al., 1998); including the strong effect of cognition-based trusts belief on affect-based trust beliefs (Chen et al., 2019).

However, neither citizenship behavior nor social presence have found support for their hypothesized effect on affect-based trust beliefs. Only perceived similarity has shown a significant effect on affect-based trust beliefs. This is an important finding, as it demonstrates that initial levels of affect-based trust can be fostered *a priori* even without firsthand knowledge about the new virtual work partner. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first reported evidence suggesting that swift trust might have an affective component along the well-known cognitive component.

The potential contributions expected from this study are as follows. From a practical perspective, it is expected that this study will assist business professionals with general guidelines to practice online reputation building and management on social networking sites and alert them about the potential impact that their online information disclosure behaviors can have on eventual new virtual relationships at the workplace. From a theoretical perspective, this study helps enhance the understanding of the phenomenon of initial trust formation in new virtual relationships by suggesting that, nowadays, given the ubiquity of social networking sites, the two-stage paradigm for trust development originally proposed in the literature (McKnight et al., 1998; Robert et al., 2009) might be better represented by a continuum where trust can initially develop based on secondhand knowledge about the trustee's behavior displayed in social networking sites. More importantly, this initial trust can already possess an affective-based component.

Main limitations identified so far in this study are mainly related to empirical decisions made by the authors. As detailed in the description of the sample of participants, most of the participants are male and relatively young. This might have introduced a potential bias into the final results and prevented more in-depth analysis regarding the effect of the control variables of age and gender into the hypothesized relationships. The frequent usage of reversed items to measure the construct of social presence has also not proven to be an appropriate methodological decision as respondents apparently became confused by the alternating logic of the measurement items. This has forced the authors to eliminate two out of the three original items proposed for the measurement of the social presence construct. Finally, the execution of the same experiment with a sample composed by more experienced business professionals may provide further and more reliable evidences in regards to the

effect of online reputation building and management practices into the reputation categorization phenomenon. These constitute opportunities for future research.

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