

Trust Building in Virtual Salespersons Versus in Human Salespersons: Similarities and Differences

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ABSTRACT

Customer trust in a salesperson is important in generating sales and managing customer relationships. In online stores, recommendation agents (computer agents) can serve as virtual salespersons who advise customers on what to buy, just as human salespersons do in physical stores. This study compares the similarities and differences between customer trust in virtual salespersons and customer trust in human salespersons. In this exploratory study, 44 participants used the services of both virtual and human salespersons in the same commercial store. Written protocols were collected by asking the participants open-ended questions regarding their comparative trust. This paper finds that similar to trust in human salespersons, trust in virtual salespersons contains trusting beliefs in competence, benevolence, and integrity. However, the processes of trust building in virtual salespersons, trust building in human salespersons, distrust building in virtual salespersons, and distrust building in human salespersons differ. This paper theoretically outlines to what extent research on trust in computer agents can draw from literature on interpersonal trust. It contributes to our practical understanding of how to better design trustworthy recommendation agents as virtual salespersons.

Keywords: trust, electronic commerce, computer agent, protocol analysis, process tracing.