

Unveiling Trust Mechanisms in WeChat Tuangou: A Case Study of a Community-Based Tuangou Group in China

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Abstract

The advent of mobile internet has introduced many innovative transaction models, among which the Tuangou model on the WeChat platform is particularly noteworthy and calls for detailed insight. By analyzing a WeChat Tuangou group, “Foodie Group”, creatively established by community residents to meet their specific needs, this study delves into the trust-building mechanisms of this model. In the context of relatively lacking formal institutions, this WeChat group utilizes mobile internet technology to create a robust and adaptable network of relationships. This network integrates trust relationships among group members, between members and the group initiator, between the initiator and merchants, and between members and merchants, creating a stable and interconnected structure of trust. Consumers, initially dispersed, connect through the WeChat group to form a network with common needs. This connection empowers them in transactional relationships, enhancing their influence through mechanisms of reputation constraints and diffusion. This model constrains dishonest behavior from merchants and effectively addresses the loopholes in initiative-taking empowerment typically found in general internet companies. The successful implementation of the “Foodie Group” Tuangou model proves how the new characteristics of mobile internet fundamentally transform the dynamics between individuals and organizations. This model fosters a synergistic blend of social, corporate, and individual needs, offering valuable insights for addressing trust issues in internet companies and innovating trust production methods.

Keywords

Trust, Mobile Internet, WeChat, Tuangou Group, Self-Empowerment

1. Introduction

With the rise of mobile internet, a new transaction model has appeared: Tuangou (group buying) eased through WeChat groups, which is increasingly impacting people's daily lives in China. This model was unprecedented. How do businesses and residents set up contact and reach transactions? How do community residents connect to form a group with common goals? These questions all relate to trust.

Trust is commonly defined as "A believes that B will do C", where A is the "trustor", B is the "trustee", and C is the "specific action" beneficial to A. Here, A and B do not necessarily have to be individuals; they can also be organizations. Trust can be set up at various levels, such as "interpersonal", "individual-organization", and "organization-organization" (Wang, 2006). The trust relationships generated by community WeChat Tuangou groups extend beyond the commercial realm, reflecting both interpersonal trust and a deep embedding within the community.

From the connotation of trust, trust is derived from relationships and the cognition and evaluation of managing those relationships. Factors influencing the generation of trust primarily include the trustor's propensity to trust, the trustee's credibility, and the external environment. The trustor's (A's) propensity to trust is the starting point for trust. Regardless of the efforts made by the trustee (B), the final implementation depends on A, who must feel safe and willing to extend trust. If A's ability to withstand potential losses caused by B is stronger, meaning their "relative vulnerability" is lower, they are more likely to trust others (Alesina & Ferrara, 2002). The trustee's (B's) credibility involves evaluating B's ability, goodwill, and integrity (Mayer, 1995). The trustee can influence A's feelings and judgments by genuinely presenting themselves or by adopting strategies, such as expressive behaviors, to actively display trustworthy qualities, thereby enhancing A's sense of security and building a trust relationship (Zhou, 2014). The trustor usually acts cautiously, deciding whether B is trustworthy based on characteristics learned or perceived and experiences interacting with B (Doney & Cannon, 1997). Trust is not limited to the binary relationship between A and B. A's cultural background also influences their propensity to trust. For example, Chinese people tend to trust those close to them and use their social networks to obtain information, emotions, and help to achieve expected or satisfactory results (Zhai, 2003). With social development and the expansion of social interactions, system trust generated through institutions is more extensive and lasting than trust generated through specific interpersonal interactions (Luhmann, 2005). However, legal guarantees and enforcement costs are high, so people often use informal contracts or third-party intermediaries to replace and supplement formal contracts to address potential fraud in transactions (Camén & Alänge, 2011), thereby enhancing the trustor's sense of security.

In the strategic interaction between the trustor A and the trustee B, trust is linked to specific relationship structures and power dynamics, meaning that trust is most likely to be set up when the relationship between A and B is relatively

balanced.

In commercial relationships, the trust between customers (A) and merchants (B) first depends on the customer's confidence in reaching the transaction, followed by the goodwill and integrity displayed by the merchant, and the institutional guarantees for transaction completion. Due to the profit-driven nature of merchants, there are motives and possibilities for dishonesty, and the relationship between A and B is essentially unbalanced or unequal, with A naturally at a disadvantage. If customers perceive and evaluate the likelihood of merchants harming them and believe merchants will not, dare not, or cannot deceive them, they will trust the merchants, and trust behavior will follow (Zheng, 2019). Of course, if merchants judge that the reputation and profits gained from being trustworthy outweigh the consequences of dishonesty, they are willing to transfer or authorize part of the power to customers to show sincerity, easing the transaction. Clearly, the key to achieving trust in commercial transactions is whether customers have enough power to balance the possible dishonest behavior of merchants.

One of the most significant characteristics of online transactions is their freedom from time and space constraints. One of the most significant consequences of Giddens' concept of "disembedding" (Giddens, 2000) is the erosion of regional markets, leading to a reorganization of the relationship between goods and consumers. This means that the customer base merchants face is increasing, the potential for profit is rising, and the influence of customer evaluations is greatly enhanced. Successful internet companies, driven by strong profit motives, innovate in many ways to boost consumer confidence in transactions. For example, JD.com proves its self-restraint by displaying and controlling the quality of physical goods; Taobao ensures transaction credit by third-party escrow of transaction funds; other e-commerce companies influence consumer buying preferences through evaluation systems. The essence of innovative measures in online transactions is still to enhance A's sense of security, thereby increasing trust levels and stimulating purchasing behavior.

"Community" refers to people who come together into a community because they have commonalities; people in the community have commonalities because they can communicate with each other, making it easy to form social voluntary groups (Dewey, 2014). Social voluntary groups often use the community as a unit, with resource users setting their own rules, self-managing, and self-supervising to form self-organizing (Ostrom, 2008). It helps promote people's interactions and information communication, increase the cost of fraud, enrich the stock of social capital, and improve social trust (Putnam, 2011). Self-organizing trust research focuses on whether and how community groups have the capability for collective action (Luo & Zhang, 2012).

In summary, in commercial relationships, trust is most likely to occur when the relationship between A and B is relatively balanced. Therefore, finding ways to increase A's power becomes the key to solving trust issues in commercial transactions. Successful internet companies often empower consumers to enhance

their confidence, but this seller-oriented empowerment implies trust risks: first, the trust issue among scattered consumers. Can strangers temporarily grouped together based on a shopping intention be integrated to form a competitive relationship with merchants? Second, opportunistic merchants may abuse trust through hidden information and behaviors, causing consumers to doubt third parties and evaluation systems. Third, the governance costs of third-party intermediaries.

The rapid rise of mobile networks and WeChat groups, as the most popular social media today, embedded in social interactions, reconstructs actor networks. New media empower people, making the construction of community residents' subjectivity and power integration possible. The community WeChat Tuangou model provides a new research perspective for solving trust issues in internet transactions.

Since in China, most of the Wechat Tuangou group use a standard workflow for the transactions, this article selects a case study method and uses the LJ community WeChat Tuangou group—"Foodie Group" as a case to explore the generation and construction mechanisms of trust. For community WeChat Tuangou groups formed spontaneously and voluntarily due to common needs, our concerns are: first, can consumers form an integrative power sufficient to balance merchants, and how? Second, how do consumers and merchants construct a trust chain to achieve cooperative behavior? Third, how does the trust-building mechanism of this transaction model differ from general internet companies? Can it overcome trust issues in internet transactions?

2. The Formation and Development of Community WeChat Tuangou Groups

2.1. The Formation of Community WeChat Tuangou Groups

The first formation of the "Foodie Group" can be traced back to the homeowner group of LJ community. In 2012, when WeChat was just appearing, LJ community set up a homeowner WeChat group for better management. Each household had to join the group with their real name and address, resulting in 432 members (WeChat group limit is 500 members). Although they might not meet face-to-face, the homeowner group laid the foundation for mutual acquaintance among residents, who referred to each other as "Beautiful Neighbors". Besides discussing community management affairs, group members also exchanged, provided, recommended, compared, and reviewed various daily life information.

In LJ community, many homeowners bought houses for their children's schooling, so they were of similar age. The mothers in the homeowner group were quite active, often discussing their children's education and daily household needs. Gradually, a new group called the "Spendthrift Moms" group appeared. Many residents were added to this group through acquaintances, friends, and family, reaching 473 members.

Due to the demand for more quality food, particularly in fulfilling the family's

daily needs, the “Spendthrift Moms” group branched out into a group specifically discussing various foods and strategies for buying them, forming the “Foodie Group”, with 439 members.

The use of WeChat groups in the community brought neighbors closer, reduced social costs, enhanced the accessibility of neighborly relationships, and significantly extended the space for neighborly interactions. Community residents spontaneously connected based on their needs and desires, forming a dense network of interactions within the community. This behavior was spontaneous, autonomous, and voluntary, reflecting the residents’ endogenous social needs, and gradually becoming an influential network for Tuangou.

2.2. The Impact of the Pandemic on the Development of Community

Since 2015, businesses began joining the “Foodie Group”, and the Tuangou model began to take shape, although it remained lukewarm. In early 2020, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire country entered a state of epidemic prevention and control. Grassroots communities implemented closed management, online shopping and delivery services were halted, public places were closed, the food service industry temporarily shut down, and supermarkets had limited opening hours. In this isolated state, people’s main concerns were: how to keep daily life, especially how to solve food problems, and where to get masks and disinfectant alcohol? When grassroots governments were overwhelmed, residents quickly found self-help methods, sparking a Tuangou frenzy through community WeChat groups.

The “Foodie Group” in LJ community was thriving. Due to the considerable number of members, it was divided into multiple sub-groups and extended to neighboring communities. Most members of the extended Tuangou groups came from the “Foodie Group”, actively taking part in multiple overlapping groups. The information and Tuangou activities in these extended groups largely overlapped with those of the “Foodie Group”. Even after the pandemic, this trading model did not disappear but became a routine part of community residents’ daily lives.

2.3. The Rise of Group Initiators

“Initiators” refer to capable and influential individuals within a group. The formation of long-term cooperative behavior in any small group requires a key person, Influencing the quality of interaction and actions among group members.

In the early days of community Tuangou groups, there were no formal initiators, and Tuangou was arbitrary and disorganized. As trading activities became more frequent, the diversity and scale of merchants increased, and there was an urgent need for someone to organize and manage. Within the “Foodie Group”, members could be roughly divided into four categories based on their participation frequency and enthusiasm: group owners, active members, senior members, and ordinary members. The first three categories formed the main members of

the Tuangou group, having transferred from the “Homeowner Group” and “Spendthrift Moms” group.

Back in the interactions within the “Homeowner Group”, three or four residents were particularly active; they were of similar age, had similar family backgrounds, cared about community affairs, and interacted offline often, contributing significantly to the community. One of these active members, “Yi Lu Huan Ge”, gathered some residents with similar interests to form the “Spendthrift Moms” group. As people’s attention to food increased, the “Spendthrift Moms” group proposed creating a resolute “Foodie Group”. “Yi Lu Huan Ge” suggested making another enthusiastic member, “Zi Yi”, the group owner. “Zi Yi” and “Yi Lu Huan Ge” were neighbors, familiar with other active members, and a lawyer by profession, knowledgeable about legal regulations. Thus, “Zi Yi” was unanimously chosen as the initiator of the “Foodie Group”. The initiator played a crucial role in keeping group order, mediating conflicts, and making Tuangou decisions, using her knowledge, status, and personal relationships with other members.

Between June 2022 and May 2023, the “Foodie Group” successfully facilitated over 7,000 transactions, resulting in sales exceeding 550,000 CNY. This remarkable performance underscores the efficient management of the Tuangou group. **Table 1** shows the detailed transaction record from that period. Despite the high volume of transactions, the return rate has been surprisingly low, averaging only 2.17%.

Table 1. Transaction record for “Foodie Group” Tuango.

Month	Number of Merchants	Number of Tuangou Items	Monthly Transaction Numbers	Monthly Sales (CNY)	Return Rate
Jun-2022	2	8	240	24,000	1.57%
Jul-2022	5	20	605	59,895	1.24%
Aug-2022	5	18	459	32,130	1.48%
Sep-2022	5	20	645	58,050	0.64%
Oct-2022	5	18	491	25,506	3.33%
Nov-2022	4	16	548	38,360	3.97%
Dec-2022	5	19	589	33,573	2.81%
Jan-2023	6	22	803	70,664	1.99%
Feb-2023	5	18	590	43,623	4.17%
Mar-2023	8	30	758	71,963	2.20%
Apr-2023	5	20	605	48,400	1.61%
May-2023	6	25	788	46,463	1.06%
Total	58	234	7119	552,626	2.17%

In conclusion, the widespread use of WeChat groups, the push from the pandemic, the rise of community initiators, and the tacit support from the government made the formation of community WeChat Tuangou groups inevitable. The

“Foodie Group” has been around for nearly 10 years, coinciding with the period when WeChat became a part of people’s daily lives. As a case study, it presents a relatively clear development trajectory and comprehensive events, providing valuable data for analyzing the trust-building aspect of transactional relationships.

3. Trust Building in Community WeChat Tuangou

3.1. Emotional Identification and Network Mobilization: The Trust Dynamics among Group Members

The “Foodie Group” originated from the community owner groups. Information about the community and residents is often shared within the “owner groups”, providing an indirect way for members to understand each other. Online interactions drive the transformation of virtual and real space relationships (Bian & Zhang, 2019). Neighbors who were previously strangers become familiar through communication in the “owner groups”, gaining some level of mutual trust. This online interaction fosters offline connections and emotional closeness. Cognitive and emotional bonds among neighbors set up a certain level of trust, laying the foundation for the formation of the “Foodie Group”.

Members share a common interest in health, safe food, and family life, which brings them together. This shared group identity shortens the social distance among members, enabling a high level of trust.

Core members of the “Foodie Group” engage in influencing and mobilizing others to join through their personal networks. New members invite friends with similar interests and participation intentions, expanding the group. This mobilization reflects the Chinese tendency to trust people within their relationship circles, incorporating friends into the trust boundary. WeChat groups offer a flexible public exchange and support platform for people with common interests and similar identities. Many neighbors who initially interacted formally or instrumentally set up deep emotional bonds through frequent group interactions and become offline friends. Trust based on mutual emotional bonds is intrinsic and profound (Zheng, 2003).

From the formation trajectory of the Tuangou groups, we can find that the Tuangou model combines mobile internet technology with elements of Chinese “Quanzi” culture (circle culture). A shared need eased by the “WeChat group” platform allows weak ties in the physical space to interact more often online. The expansion of the Tuangou group also enhances intimacy, forming a new type of interaction that integrates online and offline. This means that scattered consumers are integrated into valuable demand groups, altering the quantity and structure of buyers. Structured buyers become a closely-knit “demand community”, and their existence and choices, generating profits, become a potential source of power in the buyer-seller relationship.

3.2. Instrumentality and Emotionality: Members’ Trust in Group Initiators

Group initiators function as intermediaries between members and merchants,

serving as both trustees and agents. For members, group initiators fulfill the role of introducing trustworthy parties. Members trust the group initiator, who in turn sets up trust with merchants on behalf of the group, forming a chain of trust.

Members' trust in group initiators stems from long-term interactions and judgments of their professional characteristics, abilities, and qualities proved in group activities. There are dual relationships between members and initiators: an instrumental relationship and an emotional relationship. The instrumental relationship is based on mutual benefit. Members acknowledge the initiator's role in collecting a commission for the transactions, driven by the initiator's interest in Tuangou profits, providing the motivation to manage Tuangou efficiently. Members expect initiators to find high-quality, cost-effective products. This mutual benefit fosters instrumental trust. Initiators demand certain prices from merchants, emphasizing that Tuangou must offer discounts compared to store prices, reflecting the primary significance of Tuangou.

The emotional relationship is rooted in familiarity from online interactions and offline encounters before the group's establishment. This trust relationship is gradually built through repeated interactions, involving not only trusteeship but also genuine friendship. Emotional investment is both a driving force and a constraint in building trust between members and initiators.

3.3. Screening and Norms: Group Initiators' Trust Constraints on Merchants

Group initiators perform trustee and agent roles, responsible for selecting safe food producers and their products for members. The number of merchants in the "Foodie Group" has expanded from five or six to about 35. To keep order, group initiators have set up detailed and operational guidelines for merchants regarding Tuangou processes and services.

Before launching a group buy, initiators select and review merchants' qualifications, prioritizing large chains and using public ratings as references. Initiators recommend that merchants prepare relevant documents and evaluate their advantages and readiness for Tuangou.

During the transaction, initiators offer step-by-step guidance for managing group interactions, editing group orders, limiting daily merchants, and managing payments. They emphasize professional conduct and adherence to agreed procedures, suggesting learning from experienced merchants.

After Tuangou initiators mediate between buyers and sellers, coordinating prompt delivery, resolving issues, and broadcasting merchant lists to promote transactions. Initiators remind buyers to cooperate and pick up goods promptly and advise merchants on packaging and delivery practices, ensuring clarity and quality control. Initiators address complaints and implement measures for non-compliance, enhancing the predictability of interactions and fostering trust.

The rules and norms set by the "Foodie Group" support information transparency, reducing transaction uncertainties and risks, and easing trust production

through recognition, encouragement, and sanctions.

3.4. Trust Verification: Sustaining Trust between Members and Merchants

In Tuangou groups, members trust merchants through the intermediary role of the group initiator, forming a chain of trust. Trust must be continuously verified and ensured to sustain and strengthen the relationship.

Members use sensory and experiential feedback to verify product quality, providing direct and emotional evidence of trust in merchants. Positive feedback and subjective experiences reinforce consumer trust in product quality, while group discussions about purchases serve as real-time supervision, testing and enhancing trust in merchants.

Both buyers and sellers adopt strategies to increase mutual trust. Merchants prove trustworthiness through transparent production processes, gaining buyer confidence. For instance, a merchant might share videos of product preparation to highlight freshness and hygiene, earning a good reputation. Merchants also provide detailed product information to build trust.

Buyers use distrust strategies to strengthen trust, understanding that active distrust can complement and even enhance trust (Zheng, 2001). In the “Foodie Group”, members highlight consequences of untrustworthy behavior to merchants, creating a deterrent effect.

3.5. Trust System Construction in Tuangou

In the “Foodie Group”, members form a community through shared identification. Core members’ network mobilization increases membership, setting up cognitive and emotional trust, completing the first step of trust building.

Members select group initiators based on mutual benefit and familiarity, entrusting them to find suitable merchants, completing the second step of trust building.

Group initiators function as information intermediaries, setting and enforcing rules, selecting merchants, and easing transactions, completing the third step of trust building.

Members trust merchants through the group initiator, further verified by subjective experiences and feedback. Merchants use strategies to prove trustworthiness, enhancing mutual trust, completing the fourth step of trust building.

These independent but interconnected trust-building steps create a comprehensive trust system in Tuangou groups. The “Foodie Group” integrates members, initiators, and merchants, forming a flexible yet stable trust structure. WeChat’s communication features ease trust-building at every stage, enabling strangers to become familiar and smoothing communication among known individuals, with mobile internet acting as a catalyst in every trust-building phase.

4. Trust Maintenance in Community WeChat Tuangou Model

4.1. Autonomous Empowerment

In WeChat Tuangou, dispersed buyers are integrated into a collective with common

needs. Various technical supports allow individual buyers' needs to be highlighted, aggregated, evaluated, and resisted. Due to the high efficiency, low cost, and zero delay of information storage and dissemination in WeChat groups, members can at once evaluate each merchant and receive feedback. This instant consensus formation among scattered consumers reduces repeated games between buyers and sellers and significantly lowers the possibility of individual fraud. Therefore, it empowers buyers with authority they lack (or insufficiently have) in traditional society.

The focus of empowerment is whether it is started by the seller (merchant) or run by the buyer (group member). General online transactions are directionally empowered by the merchants, and buyers passively accept this authority. If the seller or a third party is unwilling to empower, trust risks arise. In the community Tuangou model, buyers shift their empowerment from passive to active within their relational structures. Merchants face not scattered individuals, but a group integrated through the WeChat platform. Group members trust each other, are highly bound by interests, and their close relational network amplifies individual power, enabling collective resistance against violations.

4.2. Reputation Constraints and Dissemination

Autonomous empowerment by buyers is realized and strengthened through reputation constraints and dissemination. In the Tuangou model, a crucial link in trust construction is the trust members place in the group initiator, which then extends to the merchants. Hence, the primary trust risk for members stems from the group initiator. The success of the "Foodie Group" lies in using a relatively close-knit network as a carrier to constrain the initiator's behavior and coordinate actions through a reputation mechanism. Trust relationships between members and the initiator originate from neighborhood relations in physical space and shared online shopping beliefs. Members autonomously elect the group initiator, who is entrusted to find high-quality and affordable merchants and charge service fees to those merchants. The more the merchant's products meet members' needs, the better the initiator's reputation, increasing members' trust in both the initiator and the merchant, thereby boosting sales. This creates a virtuous credit chain among members, initiators, and merchants. Conversely, any breach of trust or deception by the initiator or merchant can lead to collective resistance, instantly nullifying trust. If the initiator's reputation in the community is damaged, merchants must cease transactions and exit the Tuangou group. This reputation mechanism arises from the WeChat Tuangou groups.

Merchants are fundamentally rational actors motivated by profit. The outbreak of the pandemic forced merchants (especially in the service and food industries) to face severe sales crises. WeChat Tuangou groups offer them the opportunity to find a large, stable, high-quality customer base. The substantial commercial benefits motivate merchants to prove credible quality. If their quality or reputation is substandard, they risk losing not just scattered customers but an entire group of

customers. Emotional personal evaluations by consumers are projected into various WeChat groups or friend circles, and friends further share these evaluations. Once a merchant loses trust, they lose not just a single shopping group but a large community of customers, causing immeasurable losses.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the trust construction mechanism in the “Foodie Group” Tuangou model, discovering similarities with successful internet companies: altering the power dynamics between the evaluator and the trustee, empowering and increasing the authority of the evaluator in the trust relationship, making the trustee (merchant) unable or unwilling to deceive the evaluator (group member), thereby facilitating transactions. However, the WeChat Tuangou model differs significantly from general internet companies in trust production processes:

Firstly, the subject of empowerment differs. In the Tuangou model, trust is generated from the relationships among members and between members and the group initiator, which are tighter than general shopper relationships. Once relationships are close, evaluations of a product are more effective than those from scattered consumers. Members of Tuangou groups often share similar emotions and consumption philosophies, and established trust relationships lead to evaluation consistency. Members’ introductions and evaluations in the trust construction of Tuangou groups are highly initiative-taking and autonomous. Members may promote what they want and resist what they don’t, a buyer-oriented autonomous empowerment.

Secondly, the boundaries of Tuangou groups are not defined by a specific social organization; they are both stable and flexible with overlapping characteristics. This means any deceit by a merchant is easily transmitted among potential customers associated with group members, realizing an alternative repeated game mechanism in transaction governance. This leads to merchants losing not just many buyers but also facing defeat in competition with other merchants. This enhances members’ ability to constrain merchants.

Thirdly, the success of the Tuangou model lies in breaking the necessity of intermediaries from traditional trust-building to internet transactions. It closely approaches the node issues discussed in social capital theory (Burt, 2008). Members autonomously elect group initiators, creating a structural hole that creatively replaces third-party intermediaries. Familiarity and mutual benefit between members and initiators subject initiators to dual entrustment. Initiators’ profit motives also motivate them to adjust the trust relationship between group members and merchants, promoting fair transactions. Rules set by initiators compensate for formal orders (laws) and third-party intermediaries, resolving trust crises due to the lack of third-party supervision, and saving substantial governance costs.

In commercial relationships, legal norms and institutions are crucial but not indispensable for constructing trust relationships when they are inadequate. The Tuangou model enables autonomous transactions without external constraints. It

relies on the group's trust network, coordinating buyer-seller actions through reputation mechanisms. This extends traditional local network reputation constraints and is a new form of internet transactions. Integrating previously dispersed consumers into a connected network group with common needs through WeChat creates a new trust relationship in their interactions with merchants. This model effectively avoids vulnerabilities in general internet company empowerment, constrains merchants' breaches of trust, and offers new insights for addressing internet company trust issues and innovating trust production methods.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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