



## CATCHWORD

# Reputation Transfer

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© Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, ein Teil von Springer Nature 2019**Keywords** Reputation · Trust · Platforms · Signaling · Sharing economy · Data portability

## 1 Introduction

Peer-to-peer platforms for selling, renting, and servicing have become a popular alternative to conventional e-commerce channels (Sundararajan 2016). With billions in venture capital and significant market evaluations, the most prominent players in this platform economy have even entered the league of long-established industry incumbents in their respective domains (Stummer et al. 2018). Platforms such as *Airbnb*, *BlaBlaCar*, *eBay*, and many others enable users to take the roles of consumers and/or providers in transactions with other (private) individuals. With an estimate of €27.9bn in annual consumer spending in the EU, economic activity in peer-based online markets is substantial and growing (EU 2017). Importantly,

the transactions facilitated on such peer-to-peer platforms critically rely on a sufficient level of trust between the individual consumers and providers. To this end, users need to establish and maintain a reputation on these platforms, based upon which future transaction partners decide whether to engage in a transaction with them or not (Ert et al. 2016; Hawlitschek et al. 2016).

As each platform commonly specializes on only one particular peer-based online market (e.g., accommodation sharing), users increasingly need to manage separate reputation scores for each platform they use (Dakhliya et al. 2016). There is typically no technical integration across platforms, leading to increased transaction costs and intransparencies for consumers and providers alike (Botsman 2012). In this context, Puschmann and Alt (2016, p. 89) recently called for research on how consumers may “connect different identities on different sharing platforms towards a cross-platform identity management.” This raises the important question whether (and if so, *how*) reputation can be *transferred* between platforms. Instead of representing dark horses, new *Airbnb* users, for instance, could refer to their existing ratings on, say, *eBay*, and thereby build on their established reputation. Supporting this line of thought, a recent EU report identifies “cross-platform reputation portability” as an important concept to address issues of data ownership, prohibitive switching costs, lock-in effects, and platform competition (EU 2017, p. 93). Reputation usually resides within a single platform and hence constitutes a powerful lock-in that may be employed strategically by the platform to hamper user migration (Dellarocas 2010; Demary 2015). In fact, a platform’s user base is often seen as its most important asset (Eisenmann et al. 2006).

Notably, the advent of peer-to-peer platforms has introduced new paradigms to e-commerce which render the

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potential impact of transferring user reputation across platforms even more important than in conventional e-commerce channels (Huang et al. 2017). In particular, what is a novelty to most of these platforms is that it is not only the providers that need to cultivate a reputation. In contrast to traditional e-commerce, consumers need to establish and maintain a reputation to increase their chances for being granted permission to book or buy too. Note that a significant share of booking requests (about 50%) is in fact rejected (Teubner and Glaser 2018). Hence, the concept of reputation transfer does not only hold important potential for providers (e.g., hosts, drivers) but also for consumers (e.g., guests, passengers).

Despite several obvious issues and open questions, the notion of cross-platform reputation transfer bears the potential to significantly impact activity on peer-to-peer platforms. However, to the best of our knowledge, research has not yet systematically assessed cross-platform reputation transfer. With this paper, we intend to develop a conceptualization of *reputation transfer*, disentangle it from related terms (e.g., trust transfer), and present survey data on multi-platform usage that underlines its practical potential.

## 2 State of the Art

While there is by-and-large consensus in the literature on the notions of reputation and trust, the notions of reputation transfer and trust transfer have been used and understood quite diversely. In the context of peer-to-peer platforms, a user's *reputation* is usually referred to as the accumulated and documented evaluation of this user by prior transaction partners based on their experiences with the user (Jarvenpaa et al. 2000). Moreover, a user's *trust* into another user can be defined as “the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior” of this other user (Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 395). Based on these established definitions, Fig. 1 provides a rough differentiation between the concepts of reputation building, trust transfer, and reputation transfer, which we elaborate on in greater detail in the following.

### 2.1 Reputation Building

The e-commerce literature has theorized on the relationships between reputation and trust by applying a variety of different perspectives, one of which is signaling theory (Connelly et al. 2011). Signaling theory provides a theoretical grounding to describe how sellers can employ signals to positively affect the perceptions of potential buyers regarding the seller's (and/or their products') quality and trustworthiness. In online transactions, there is typically an

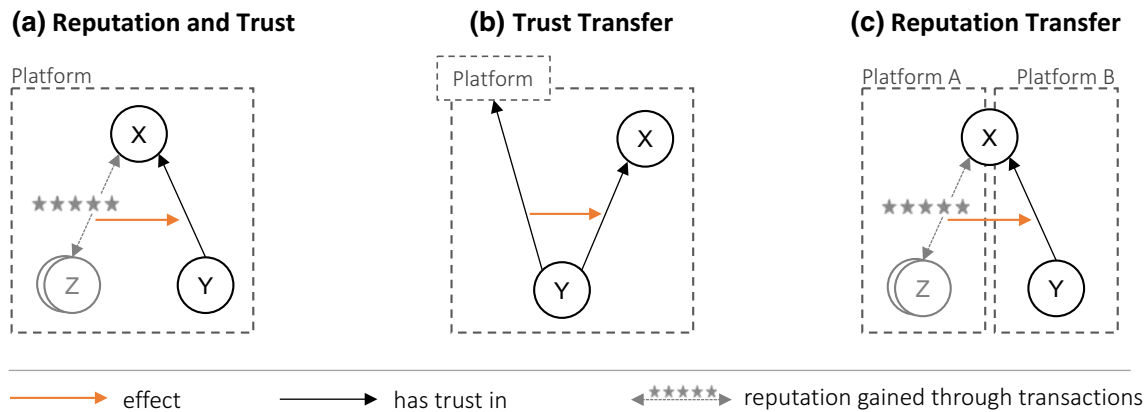
asymmetry of information between providers and consumers, rendering signaling theory a well-suited perspective on peer-to-peer platforms (Basoglu and Hess 2014; Kim et al. 2004; Koh et al. 2012). Within the context of platforms, as illustrated in Fig. 1a, third party assessments (i.e., ratings and reviews) represent the most common type of signal (Dunham 2011; Mavlanova et al. 2012).

As the success of platform users depends on how well they are regarded by prospective transaction partners, platform operators make use of a variety of signals, tools, and systems to support users in creating and maintaining a positive reputation (Jøsang et al. 2007; Resnick et al. 2000). This includes mutual text reviews or numerical scores such as the 1 to 5-star rating system (Teubner et al. 2017; Zervas et al. 2015). Such systems also deal with the aggregation, processing, and visualization of reputational data (Lis and Neßler 2014). Extant research has shown that ratings function as an important antecedent of trust which, in turn, represents a critical factor for virtually all forms of e-commerce transactions (Bolton et al. 2013; McKnight et al. 2002).

### 2.2 Trust Transfer

Beyond such means for managing reputation and building interpersonal trust based on transactions, additional antecedents of trust in platform ecosystems have been identified (ter Huurne et al. 2017). As illustrated in Fig. 1b, the notion of *trust transfer* refers to the notion that a consumer's trust in the platform is inherited by providers offering their services on that platform (Chen et al. 2015). For instance, if a user has a high level of trust in the platform *Airbnb*, this trust transfers to the trusting beliefs this user holds in other users on *Airbnb*. In this sense, hosts on *Airbnb* or sellers on *eBay* can “inherit” trustworthiness from the platform environment. Various studies have found empirical support for the transfer of trust from platform to users, for instance, in the contexts of *Airbnb* (Möhlmann 2016) and *eBay* (Verhagen et al. 2006). Importantly, it is well-conceivable that what is commonly considered a trust transfer from platform (i.e., institutional trust) to individual (i.e., interpersonal trust) may also have the opposite or even both directions. In this sense, a platform may be perceived as trustworthy due to the presence of particularly trustworthy users – especially since most studies have measured both targets of trust simultaneously without manipulating the reputation of one while holding the other's fixed, which would allow for unequivocal causal inferences (Chen et al. 2015; Kim 2014; Mittendorf 2017; Möhlmann 2016; Verhagen et al. 2006).

The term *trust transfer* has also been used differently in the past, especially before the advent of today's platform economy. Stewart (2003, p. 5), for example, investigated



**Fig. 1** User Y trusts user X because of **a** X’s reputation on the platform based on past transactions with user(s) Z or **b** Y’s trust in the platform. In case (c), user Y trusts X on platform B because of X’s reputation gained on a different platform (A)

how trust may be transferred from different sources and conceptualized trust transfer as the existence of “a hyper-text link from one website to another,” which was found to have a positive effect on trust towards the referenced site. Others considered consumer trust for different modes of access to products and services (e.g., online/offline, web/mobile) in the contexts of retail and banking, generally finding support for cross-mode trust transferability (Lee et al. 2007, 2011; Lin et al. 2011; Lu et al. 2011). Further, scholars investigated the notions of trust *transitivity* (Delgado-Márquez et al. 2012, 2013; Falcone and Castelfranchi 2012) and proposed theoretical models for cross-community trust and reputation aggregation (i.e., the aggregation of a user’s reputation scores from several platforms into a single metric; Gal-Oz et al. 2010; Grinshpoun et al. 2009).

### 2.3 Reputation Transfer

While the above-mentioned contributions provide a diverse theoretical, technical, and empirical background on the roles of reputation, trust, and trust transfer within a given, enclosed platform environment, the question of how reputation is actually transferable from one platform to another has received only little research attention thus far. As illustrated in Fig. 1c, we refer to *reputation transfer* as the effectiveness of a user’s reputation on a source platform (e.g., a star rating score) in building trust on a different platform. Practically speaking, reputation transfer reflects the question whether, for instance, a user’s impeccable eBay seller rating is of any worth to them when attempting to book or offer an apartment on *Airbnb*.

The availability of reputation functions as a signal of trustworthiness to prospective interaction partners within a given platform environment and, similarly, it may do so across platform boundaries. After all, elements such as excellent star ratings represent reliable index signals, that

is, signals for which the signaler needs to actually possess the indicated trait (Shami et al. 2009). For the effectiveness of cross-platform signals, however, additional factors such as contextual overlap may exert a moderating influence and should hence be taken into account.

While overall the concept of reputation transfer has received limited attention in the literature, there is some research on the trust-building potential of reputation across platform borders. For example, crowd workers’ performance in a certain knowledge work category (e.g., web development, writing, or translation) is well-predicted by prior feedback scores from different task categories (Kokkodis and Ipeirotis 2016). Similarly, existing social media data (e.g., *Facebook*, *Twitter*) can be employed to infer a user’s authenticity on novel platforms (e.g., *Pinterest*), thus distinguishing trustworthy from untrustworthy users (Venkatadri et al. 2016). Despite these studies, however, the literature has not yet considered whether and how reputation on peer-to-peer platforms may be subject to transference.

### 2.4 Practical Approaches

It is noteworthy that a number of initiatives have attempted to facilitate reputation transfer across platform boundaries. Today, *Deemly* and *Traity* offer services to manage reputation online, for instance, by means of reputation passports which gather “ratings and reviews from across P2P marketplaces” (Deemly 2018), and hence enable users to “own [their] reputation” (Traity 2018). Further, there have already been several attempts by previous platforms to address the potential of reputation transfer. Hence, the two mentioned services look back on a list of unsuccessful predecessors (e.g., *Connect.me*, *Legit*, *TrustCloud*, *TrustRank*, *WhyTrusted*). Importantly, the very idea of reputation transfer does not hinge on aggregation services or a technical integration across platforms. Indeed, taking up

the above example, new users on *Airbnb* may simply provide textual references to their *eBay* ratings in their *Airbnb* profile and thus point to a transactional history (of good conduct and reliability, naturally). Given the outlined state of the art, strictly speaking, platforms such as *Deemly* and *Traity*, as well as their unsuccessful predecessors, have been operating in a research lacuna so far.

### 3 Practical Relevance and Potential of Reputation Transfer

As of today, there exists hardly any insight on the number and multiplicity of peer-to-peer platforms users are active on. To assess the practical potential of reputation transfer, we thus conducted an online survey on the familiarity and usage of such platforms. The survey was conducted in 2018 using the online survey recruitment system Prolific.ac (Palan and Schitter 2018). Overall, we invited 505 participants for the survey and received 494 valid responses (249 female, 245 male). Age ranged between 16 and 70 years with a median of 29 and an average of 31.6 years. Participants were mainly residing in Western countries but quite international, that is from the UK (38%), US (18%), Portugal (11%), Italy (7%), Spain (4%), Canada (3%), Poland (3%), Germany (2%), other European countries (11%), and other countries such as Mexico, Turkey, Australia, Israel, Japan, and Chile (3%).

Building upon and extending the shortlist from the EU 2017 survey (10 platforms from 5 domains), we considered a total of 28 internationally operating peer-to-peer platforms. These comprised the categories accommodation sharing (*Airbnb*, *Homestay*, *Wimdu*), car rental (*Drivy*, *easyCarclub*, *Hiyacar*, *Turo*, its predecessor *RelayRides*), crowd work (*TaskRabbit*, *Yoopies*), ride sharing (*BlaBlaCar*, *Nimber*, *Zimride*), peer lending (*FundingCircle*, *RateSetter*, *Zopa*), resale of goods (*eBay*, *eBid*, *CQout*, *Gumtree*, *Preloved*, *Wallapop*), sharing and renting of goods (*Borroclub*, *FatLama*, *Peerby*, *Zilok*), and taxi services (*Lyft*, *Uber*). In a first step, subjects reported which platforms they had heard of at all (recall). Then, for each recalled platform, participants stated which platforms they had used as a consumer (i.e., guest, passenger, buyer, tenant, borrower, principal) and/or as a provider (i.e., host, driver, seller, landlord, lender, freelancer) at least once over the past 10 years. Note that even past usage may be useful since a once-built reputation usually remains accessible and may be leveraged on other platforms in the future.

The results of the survey are summarized in Table 1. Overall, only *eBay*, *Airbnb*, and *Uber* are recalled by more than half of the sample, while the remaining platforms exhibit much lower prominence. With regard to usage, the set of relevant platforms extends to *Lyft*, *Gumtree*,

*BlaBlaCar*, *Preloved*, and *Wallapop*, while all other platforms represent niche players, exhibiting usage rates of 2% and less.

As a second step, we now turn toward *overall* and *multi-platform usage*. Considering both consumers and providers, we find that 5% of all participants have not used any platform yet, 34% have used exactly one, 28% have used two platforms, and the remaining 33% have used three or more platforms. Thus, 65% of all participants that use platforms at all, have used more than one platform, clearly illustrating the potential and applicability of reputation transfer. In other words, multi-platform use represents the rule rather than the exception. Interestingly, more than half of all participants have used at least one platform as a provider (54%). Summarizing across all platforms, virtually all providers are also active as consumers (97%) while about half of all consumers are also providers (56%), suggesting that side switching strategies (i.e., focusing on users who are active on both market sides) may represent a promising approach for platform launch and upscaling (Stummer et al. 2018).

Lastly, we queried participants' familiarity with the reputation aggregation services *Deemly* and *Traity*. We find that these services were hardly known at all (recall of 1.4% each), suggesting that they do not play a considerable role in practice (yet).

### 4 Opportunities for Future Research

In view of the increasing bearing of today's platform economy, the multiplicity of platforms, and users' reliance on reputation, several opportunities for future research emerge that bear important theoretical and practical implications.

1. **Platform Strategy** Reputation transfer entails a range of strategic considerations for platform operators. Entrant platforms may consider providing a reputation *import* functionality that allows their users to readily refer to the reputation they have gained on incumbent platforms. As such, this competitive move may facilitate switching or, at least, multi-homing. It is striking that independent aggregator services such as *Deemly* and *Traity* have thus far experienced limited success – despite an apparent economic potential suggested by the high share of multi-platform users and the tangible value of reputation (Teubner et al. 2017). A possible explanation might be found in the services' substantial trust requirements, where users need to provide credentials (including passwords) for all platforms they wish to connect. This prompts the question whether reputation transfer should rather be

**Table 1** Platform recall and usage (R = recall, C = usage as consumer; P = usage as provider; ordered by recall)

Platform	R (%)	C (%)	P (%)	Platform	R (%)	C (%)	P (%)
eBay	96	82	45	Wimdu	4	2	0
Airbnb	86	31	6	Turo	4	0	0
Uber	76	36	5	RateSetter	4	0	0
Lyft	44	8	1	CQout	2	0	0
Gumtree	42	19	10	Hiyacar	2	1	0
BlaBlaCar	24	6	2	Borroclub	2	0	0
TaskRabbit	23	1	0	Peerby	2	0	0
Preloved	17	5	2	FatLama	2	0	0
Homestay	13	2	1	Drivy	1	0	0
easyCar Club	12	2	1	Nimber	1	0	0
Funding Circle	9	1	1	Zimride	1	0	0
Wallapop	8	4	2	Yoopies	1	0	0
eBid	8	2	1	RelayRides	1	0	0
Zopa	7	2	1	Zilok	1	0	0

addressed *in-house*, that is, by the target platforms themselves, and what the potential opportunities and threats are for the platforms involved.

2. **Legal Considerations and Data Ownership** Naturally, these strategic considerations prompt the question of how incumbents could counteract reputation transfer (*drainage*, from their perspective) legally and – for that matter – who actually owns the reputational information, particularly when considering that the user base represents a key asset for any peer-to-peer platform. The latter is a much and controversially discussed topic in jurisprudence, particularly against the backdrop that the EU General Data Protection Regulation has recently introduced a right of data portability. In particular, Article 20 grants users the right “to receive the personal data concerning him or her, which he or she has provided to a controller, in a structured, commonly used and machine-readable format and have the right to transmit those data to another controller without hindrance from the controller to which the personal data have been provided” (European Parliament 2016, p. 144). While the regulation intends to reduce prohibitive switching costs, associated lock-in, and to ensure platform competition by stipulating data portability, it is not explicitly geared towards reputational data and it is unclear whether individual data such as star ratings and text reviews are covered under the regulation since they are not provided by the users themselves but by *other* users on the platform (Graef 2016).
3. **Effectiveness of Reputation Transfer** Empirically, it is still an open question whether providing users with transferred reputational information would be instrumental for trust building and, if so, *how useful* this information is in settings with no reputation at all and

in settings with an existing reputation on the platform in question. While it seems likely that cross-platform reputation will fall somewhere in between these poles, there is a need for research to explore which factors and boundary conditions are involved. In this regard, user perceptions of the source platform (e.g., in terms of quality) as well as source-target fit come to mind as potential drivers of cross-platform trust building. After all, a reputation on a well-established platform might be considered more meaningful by prospective transaction partners than referring to existing ratings on an unknown platform.

4. **User Interface Design** Finally, one obvious question pertains to how platforms and/or third-party services can design reputation transfer in terms of the user interface. Hence, research should explore the effectiveness of different architectural paradigms for the seamless technical integration across platforms and mechanisms to enable reputation transfer through the user interface. For instance, distributed reputation may be aggregated within a single score or by means of a more fine-grained overview allowing insights into where the reputation stems from specifically. Moreover, designing transfer services such that only positive information is conveyed may create issues of credibility. Also, the question emerges whether negative reviews may be subject to a “right to forget” and how this could be realized by information systems design.

## 5 Concluding Note

Today, users manage reputation on an increasing number of platforms which introduces at least two challenges. First,

since the platforms operate as silos, friction and inefficiency emerge. Second, due to the existence of network effects, there exists a natural tendency for few platforms to grow large, acquire overwhelming market power, and hence to impede competition. Notwithstanding challenges relating to data ownership, reputation transfer may be an important factor to meet both challenges.

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