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Consumer trust repair: A critical literature review

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ABSTRACT

Consumers are fundamental to organisational functioning and survival. Their loyalty, commitment, product acceptance and good long-term relationships with firms and brands are underpinned by their trust. Unfortunately, over the last decade or so, we have witnessed some of the more spectacular violations of consumer trust in the history of business. This has led to negative consequences, such as loss of competitive advantage, rage, lack of commitment and decrease in turnover. Consequently, study of trust repair has become an important theoretical concern for a growing number of trust scholars. This article reviews and synthesises existing theory and research on the topic. It first sketches general characteristics of the consumer trust repair literature, including its meta-theoretical underpinning. It then identifies specific strategies associated with consumer trust repair and synthesises them into five categories of trust repair strategies. In addition, this paper highlights theoretical processes that explain why/how trust repair strategies work. Third, the paper proposes six fruitful avenues for future research. This study contributes to the field of consumer trust repair research by critically reviewing and synthesising emerging theory and research on strategies associated with consumer trust repair, by showing why and how these strategies work and by identifying most fruitful research areas.

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1. Introduction

Consumers are key organisational stakeholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984). They provide organisations with a key ingredient necessary for their functioning and survival—financial resources. One element underpinning the relationship between consumers and organisations and brands is trust (Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 2009). Research shows that trusting consumers are loyal and committed (e.g. Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002) and more easily accept products (e.g. García-Marzá, 2005). Trust between firms and consumers fosters strong, quality and long-term relationships (e.g. Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Nooteboom, Berger, & Noorderhaven, 1997; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). Consumer trust is related to effective product branding (Keller & Lehmann, 2006) and is a source of sustainable competitive advantage (e.g. Barney & Hansen, 1994). Similarly, Castaldo, Premazzi, and Zerbini (2010) noted that consumer trust, for an organisation, is a strategic, relational asset. Trusting consumers face lower complexity related with their retail activities (Luhmann, 1979).

Unfortunately, over the last decade or so, we have witnessed a number of major organisational transgressions (e.g. the Libor rigging scandal, the FIFA corruption scandal, the Volkswagen emissions scandal) (see also Gillespie, Dietz, & Lockey, 2014). However, if Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, and Dirks (2004) are correct, these transgressions are the tip of the iceberg because only a small portion of transgressions are reported and become prominent. Such scandals among others represent events that damage employees' trust, investors' trust, the public's trust and the consumers' trust. Among others, a lack of trust damages established relationships and leads to customers' rage and disappointment, and organisations' loss of sales and competitive advantage (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Castaldo et al., 2010; Gargiulo & Ertug, 2006; Richards, Lawrence, & Burch, 2011).

Consequently, a study of trust repair became an important theoretical concern (Bachmann, Gillespie, & Priem, 2015; Dirks et al., 2009; Kramer & Lewicki, 2010). From the mid-1990s onwards, an increasing number of researchers started studying trust repair. There are several forums dedicated to the topic, special issues, reviews and persistent calls for more research. However, much of this work focuses on trust repair within organisational settings. Marketing research on the topic is less developed and lacks reviews that classify, critically assess and integrate the existing research on strategies that play a role in consumer trust repair.

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The time is ripe to address this research gap due to several reasons. First, existing literature on consumer trust repair spans various disciplines, making some works inaccessible or overlooked by marketing scholars. Second, existing literature reviews on the topic from organisational studies involving intra-organisational trust repair (e.g. Bachmann et al., 2015; Dirks et al., 2009; Kramer & Lewicki, 2010) do not apply to consumer trust repair because of the difference between employees and consumers. Employees and consumers differ in their expectations; they have conflicting interests and different proximities to trustees, e.g. organisations (e.g. Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984; Gillespie, Hurley, Dietz, & Bachmann, 2012; Schneper & Guillén, 2004; Poppo & Schepker, 2010; Gillespie & Siebert, forthcoming in 2017). Furthermore, employees and consumers face relational differences and different risks embedded in their relationships (e.g. Sheppard & Sherman, 1998). Employees and consumers differ in their vulnerabilities, interests, power levels and expectations, and have varying levels of access, exposure and hence insight into an organisation's conduct. Therefore, consumer trust repair as a body of literature warrants separate treatment. Third, the different strands of literature differ in their interpretations of the nature and causes of trust violation (e.g. Gillespie & Siebert, forthcoming in 2017). I address the gap by using principles of systematic literature review and focus on establishing general characteristics of consumer trust repair literature, identifying strategies that are associated with consumer trust repair, synthesising these strategies and identifying most important areas that can guide future research.

My literature analysis reveals the following results. First, research on consumer trust repair is a relatively recent phenomenon. Literature on the topic is predominantly underpinned by positivist/post-positivist research philosophy (Blaikie, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011), which involves ontologically objective reality, objective epistemology, deductive logic of inquiry and predominantly quantitative methodology (e.g. experiments and surveys). Researchers explore trust repair in the context of ability-, integrity- and benevolence-based trust violations and largely focus on consumer trust repair with organisations, industries and a system (i.e. macro perspective). Second, I identify a number of strategies that are associated with consumer trust repair and synthesise them into five categories of strategies for consumer trust repair: verbal responses, organisational restructuring, penance, hostage posting, and involvement of/role of third parties. Third, I establish six theoretical mechanisms used to explain why/how trust repair strategies work. These are as follows: resolving negative emotions, shift of trustor's attributions, improved familiarity, understanding of the scandal and reparative actions, constraining or eliminating the untrustworthy behaviour and transference of trust from a third party. Finally, building on my preceding analysis, I identify six areas for future research that have the potential to advance knowledge on the topic: process research, the role of time in trust repair, a non-positivist approach to studying consumer trust repair, theoretical mechanisms of trust repair, possibility of trust repair and extent of trust repair and factors that lead to consumer trust repair.

This article aims at trust repair researchers and contributes to emerging theory and research on consumer trust repair by critically reviewing and synthesising theory and research on strategies that lead to consumer trust repair. In addition, it identifies processes that explain why/how specific strategies work. The paper also flags what needs to be done to advance this research field.

This paper is structured as follows. I start by defining key concepts used in this study. Then, the methodological approach followed to collect and analyse the relevant literature is explained. Third, I report the findings of my analysis. I identify general

characteristics of consumer trust repair theory and research, including meta-theoretical underpinnings of this body of literature. Then, I review and synthesise individual strategies associated with consumer trust repair and establish theoretical processes that show how/why they work. Finally, I build on my findings to identify the six most fruitful areas for future research.

2. Definitions of key concepts: trust, trust repair, trustor, trustee and consumer

Trust is an elusive, multiplex concept (e.g. Castaldo, 2007; Castaldo et al., 2010; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998; Dietz and Hartog, 2006; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; McKnight & Chervany, 2001; Seppänen, Blomqvist, & Sundqvist, 2007). The most influential definitions (based on the number of citations of papers where these definitions are proposed (according to Google Scholar at the time of writing) and on how often trust scholars use them in their research (see Castaldo et al., 2010; for example)) include those developed by Moorman et al. (1992, 1993), Morgan and Hunt (1994), Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) and Rousseau et al. (1998). Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman (1993: 82) defined trust 'as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence'. Morgan and Hunt (1994: 23) defined trust as a trustor's 'confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity'. In the context of organisation studies, Mayer et al. (1995: 712) defined trust as 'the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party'. Similarly, Rousseau et al. (1998: 395) conceptualised trust as 'a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another'. The majority of researchers agree on one or both of the following central elements of trust: (1) behavioural intention (or willingness) or behaviour; (2) expectation (or confidence, belief). For the purpose of clarity, I need to note that trust is not cooperation, predictability, legitimacy or corporate reputation (see e.g. Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006; Gillespie et al., 2014; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Lamin & Zaheer, 2012; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998; Suchman, 1995). In this study, I employ Rousseau et al.'s (1998) cross-disciplinary definition of trust.

Understanding of trust repair phenomenon varies with the definition of trust concept used and with the nature of trust repair itself. However, in essence, trust repair or trust restoration entails improvement in a trustor's trust after it was damaged by a trust violation (e.g. Dirks et al., 2009; Kim, Dirks, & Cooper, 2009; Xie & Peng, 2009; Gillespie et al., 2012; Gillespie & Siebert, forthcoming in 2017).

In this study, I use the terms 'trustor', 'trustee' and 'consumer' as follows. *Trustor* refers to individuals whose trust has been damaged (in this study, individual consumers). I use the term *trustee* for the target of a trustor's trust (e.g. another individual or an organisation). I use the term *consumer* as broadly defined by the American Marketing Association (American Marketing Association, 2016) as, 'Traditionally, the ultimate user or consumer of goods, ideas, and services.' This definition also states that the term also is used to imply the buyer or decision maker and the ultimate consumer. So, for example, 'a mother buying cereal for consumption by a small child is often called the consumer although she may not be the ultimate user.'

3. Methodology

I use the principles of systematic literature review, including a

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