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CONSUMER ONLINE (DIS)TRUST
A decade later

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Our chapter in the original edition of this volume described what was known at the time about consumer trust and distrust online. The overall picture then, as we saw it, might be described as negative, in the sense that consumers expressed a good deal of suspicion concerning online marketing. But there were also signs of greater promise, in that consumers also seemed to trust at least some recognized brands online (Benedicktus et al. 2010), and that, although online marketing was relatively new to many, the more experience consumers had with it, the more they seemed to trust it (Bart et al. 2005).

A good deal has changed in the decade since that original chapter, but other things have stayed remarkably similar. When we first wrote this chapter in 2013, only 58% of global respondents said they trusted business (Edelman 2013). This figure dropped slightly to 56% in 2019, before the first cases of COVID, and to 55% the following covid year (Edelman 2019, 2020). Although the majority of consumers (74%) say they trust the internet (CIGI 2019); social media (75%), search engines (65%), and e-commerce platforms (61%) were major reasons for online distrust. Finally, other polls suggest trust in persuasion agents is very low. Advertising executives (17% trusted) and social media influencers (6% trusted) are among the least trusted professions (Ipsos 2021), and trust in advertisers has been at low levels since at least 1983 (Ipsos 2019). Overall, there does not appear to have been much change in the levels of trust consumers express toward business in general or advertisers in particular.

The idea that trust is partially based on consumer experiences is well accepted (Boush et al. 2015). So what have been the online experiences of consumers in the past decade? First, consumers have seen a substantial increase in online persuasion attempts, as evidenced by the fact US ad revenues for online channels increased from 35% in 2013 to 54% in 2019 (Ad Age 2021). Fraud and scams have also continued to favor online communication, and the reported incidence of deceptive offers has increased from 22% of respondents in 2005 to 54% in 2017 (FTC 2019). The covid pandemic only added fuel to the problem. Fraud reports increased by 45% from 2019 to 2020 alone (FTC 2021), and social media scams tripled over the same period (FTC 2020). Online shopping and product reviews are now the third most common source of consumer complaints received by the FTC (7.5%). These statistics suggest consumers have plenty to be wary about online.

There have also been notable changes in the methods used by online marketing over the past decade, which raise new issues for consumer trust, including the problems of: fake

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or biased online reviews; data tracking, targeting, and privacy issues; increased financial incentives provided to online influencers; and the prevalence of native advertising on social media sites. Most recently, online platforms have become riddled with problems of fake news (Visentin et al. 2019), and some politicians seem to see these platforms as the "go-to" place for spinning misinformation.

This updated chapter examines developments in our understanding of consumer trust and distrust, and uses this theoretical background to examine more recent trends in online marketing. Current issues and areas for future research are highlighted throughout. We also refer readers to the previous version of this chapter for background information we do not repeat here.

Antecedents and consequences of online trust/distrust

Trust plays a central role in different aspects of consumer-marketer interactions, including sales (Morgan and Hunt 1994), service (Halliday 2004), advertising (Darke and Ritchie 2007), branding (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán 2005); and often mediates the effects of marketing tactics on consumer preferences, purchase, and loyalty (e.g., Bart et al. 2005; Kim and Peterson 2017). Bart et al.'s (2005) comprehensive study found that the most reliable predictors of online trust were: privacy (protection of individual information), navigation and presentation (site is engaging, clear, and easy to use), brand strength (familiar, good quality), website advice (virtual advisors and other features to guide choice), order fulfillment (order, mail, price and service information), and absence of errors (e.g., complete/correct information, site was fully operational). In addition, 80% of consumers belonged to two large segments that used a comprehensive set of all, or most, of these factors to judge trust, suggesting the majority use multiple trust cues online. More recently a meta-analysis by Kim and Peterson (2017) found the following antecedents had moderate-to-large effects on online trust: disposition to trust, security, privacy, reputation, risk, usefulness, and aspects of design and performance quality. The most reliable consequences of online trust included large positive effects on website use, satisfaction, attitudes, initial/repeat purchase, and loyalty.

Theoretical perspectives of consumer trust online

Traditional persuasion models

Traditional dual process models of attitude, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty and Cacioppo 1986) and Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chen and Chaiken 1999), suggest that trust/suspicion can play multiple roles in consumer evaluations. Trust was originally viewed as a simple heuristic source cue, which allowed consumers to easily determine their level of agreement (e.g., "I should agree with a trustworthy source"). This view was later extended to include the idea that distrust can also increase the amount of deliberative thought consumers engage in when making judgments in order to be more accurate. For instance, the warning that a persuasive source may or may not be trustworthy led consumers to make better distinctions between strong and weak arguments from that source (Priester and Petty 1995). Finally, Chaiken and Maheswaran (1994) suggest trust can also act as a heuristic cue that *biases* attitudes. In their study, consumers had more positive thoughts and attitudes when arguments came from the well-trusted *Consumer Reports Magazine* compared to the less trusted *Kmart flyer*. Overall, dual process models suggest trust/suspicion of a persuasive

source can: (1) act as simple heuristic cue under low elaboration, (2) increase objective processing, and (3) bias thoughts and judgment under high elaboration.

Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM)

The PKM is essentially a dual process theory specific to consumer judgment, which concerns impressions of the marketing source, the tactics used, and the means by which consumers cope with persuasion attempts (Friestad and Wright 1994). The most unique aspect of the model is its focus on consumer lay theories concerning marketing tactics. Such persuasion knowledge (pk) includes not only beliefs about the tactics used, but also whether they are likely to be persuasive, or seem appropriate/acceptable. The main focus is on deliberative processing, but the PKM also recognizes consumers respond to persuasion attempts on the basis of tactic recognition heuristics concerning simple features of the persuasion attempt. For instance, a celebrity endorser may lead to the heuristic inference that the marketer is trying to gain trust. Finally, the PKM tends to assume the consumer's primary goal in using pk is to form a valid opinion (i.e. an accuracy goal), although there is some recognition that defensive goals can motivate consumer coping as well. The latter is said to lead to rigid generalizations concerning marketer untrustworthiness and broad dismissal of any persuasion attempts involving certain tactics.

The role of suspicion in the PKM was later specified by Campbell and Kirmani (2000). They found that flattery from a sales agent increased consumer suspicion when the ulterior motive that the compliment was simply a sales tactic was made salient. This occurred through deliberative processing. These findings not only support the PKM but are consistent with prior research by Fein (1996) suggesting distrust generated by a plausible ulterior motive leads consumers to make more accurate attributions in accordance with the normative attributional principle of discounting. Subsequent research showed such persuasion tactics can operate through a combination of heuristic and deliberative processing, and can lead to suspicion even when an ulterior sales motive is not plausible, in part because at least some aspects of suspicion operate automatically (Main et al. 2007). The main implication was that some tactics have the power to trigger automatic suspicion that can generate unwarranted suspicion of marketers.

Although the PKM predicts that consumer responses to persuasion tactics may be either positive or negative, when we last wrote this chapter, the vast majority of evidence indicated negative responses to pk (Campbell and Kirmani 2008). However, recent work by Isaac and Grayson (2017) identifies a number of marketing tactics primarily associated with positive pk (e.g., tactics consumers consider to be fair and credible), including: everyday-low-prices, product trial with free returns, online product ratings, expert sources, comparative ads, etc.). Additional experiments showed that priming pk (i.e., suggesting some marketers communicate truthfully while others try to mislead) led to more negative responses for negative tactics (paid actors imitating customers) but more positive responses for positive tactics (good product ratings, expert endorsements). These effects involved conscious deliberation about the trustworthiness of the marketer. These findings are reminiscent of Priester and Petty (1995), described above, where suggesting a source may or may not be trustworthy increased objective processing. In Issac and Grayson's case, priming objective concerns about trust/suspicion showed similar differentiation between positive and negative pk tactics.

Additional research also suggests the valence of pk can be changed by educating consumers as to more legitimate purposes of the tactic. For instance, Germelmann et al. (2020) examined ad-medium incongruence as an attention getting tactic, which involves including

ads in media that are mismatched (vs. matched) in content (e.g., a computer ad in a car versus computer magazine). They found that consumers tended to respond negatively to this tactic due to the suspicion it evoked. However, providing consumers in advance with positive pk information about the tactic's more legitimate uses (e.g., helps make consumers aware of new and innovative products they might miss) counteracted the negative evaluations otherwise observed. Overall, it seems not only that some pk is naturally positive, but also that tactics otherwise associated with suspicion can be altered by educating consumers as to their more legitimate uses (but see Wilson et al. 2021).

A recent meta-analysis (Eisend and Tarrahi 2022) showed that pk generally had moderate effects in increasing coping responses and lowering evaluations. In particular, pk had moderate effects on consumer suspicion, but no reliable effects on cognitive responses, suggesting pk largely acted automatically to increase suspicion and lower evaluations. Finally, there were no reliable moderating effects of communication channel, meaning these pk responses were equally likely to occur in online and traditional communication channels. Overall, the PKM fared well, with perhaps some adjustment from its traditional emphasis on deliberative processes in preference for more automatic responses to pk. The meta-analysis also seems to suggest responses to pk are predominantly negative rather than positive. These theoretical tweaks are more consistent with the Defensive Suspicion Model (DSM) discussed next.

Defensive Suspicion Model

The DSM is a dual process model that deals specifically with the multiple roles that trust and suspicion can play in consumer judgment (Darke and Ritchie 2007). It recognizes this can involve deliberative processing (Campbell and Kirmani 2000), as well as more automatic processing using simple heuristics (Main et al. 2007). Moreover, while accuracy goals may at times drive judgment and information processing relating to trust (e.g., in the presence of plausible ulterior motives), the DSM suggests suspicion often serves more defensive, self-protective goals (e.g., the desire to avoid being fooled or ripped-off). The latter arises when consumer self-image or material interests are threatened, and tends to bias judgment in a direction that reduces such threats. In particular, defensive suspicion is said to evoke negative systematic processing (counterarguing) for direct or strong levels of threat, but more automatic heuristic processing for weaker, less direct threats. Finally, the model predicts defensive suspicion should induce a negative bias in judgment that is relatively persistent, self-reinforcing, and difficult to remedy.

A number of studies support the basic DSM predictions in both offline and online marketing contexts (Benedicktus et al. 2010, Darke and Ritchie 2007; Darke et al. 2008, 2010). In their initial research, Darke and Ritchie (2007) used advertising deception to evoke defensive suspicion and had consumers evaluate a second ad from either the same or a second-party advertiser. Consistent with DSM's predictions, consumers distrusted the same advertiser and actively counterargued the subsequent claims they made in order to avoid being fooled again (direct threat response). What was more interesting was that consumer suspicion also generalized to unrelated second-party advertisers, leading to more negative product evaluations (indirect threat condition). The latter operated through an automatic process known as *defensive stereotyping* (see Kunda and Sinclair 1999), where the initial deception evoked a broad stereotype that advertising could not be trusted. Evidence for the defensive nature of these effects was provided by the fact that ego-threat was a necessary condition for suspicion to generalize across marketing sources, whereas simply observing other consumers being deceived had no such effects. Other studies suggest that generalized

suspicion produces a persistent negative bias in consumer judgment (Darke et al. 2008, 2010). For instance, generalized suspicion had negative effects: (1) for both strong and weak arguments comparing competing products, (2) for both trusted brand name retailers and unbranded retailers, (3) despite the opportunity to directly test the product, and (4) 24 hours after the initial deception. The DSM would seem to have obvious implications for consumer responses to online marketing given the majority of consumer fraud and deception now occurs online (FTC 2020).

Additional research aimed at understanding the specific conditions required to produce generalized suspicion also provides evidence of a negative bias in trust judgments. Following Rotter's (1971) theorizing that distrust results when others fail to live up to the promises or commitments they make, Darke et al. (2010) hypothesized that suspicion should be more likely to arise when product performance specifically falls below explicit expectations created by the marketer (i.e., following negative expectancy disconfirmation), rather than poor product performance alone. This was confirmed in a series of studies that used online advertising to create positive expectations about product performance, and then had participants try the product involved (e.g., a stain remover) to determine its quality, where quality was manipulated to be high or low. Afterwards, under the guise of a different study, a second product from a different marketer (i.e., headphones) was tested. As predicted, negative expectancy disconfirmation, but not product failure alone, led to greater distrust of the second marketer and more negative product evaluations. In contrast, when the initial product exceeded expectations (positive expectancy disconfirmation) there was no impact on subsequent trust or product evaluations. That is, negative disconfirmation led to generalized distrust, but positive disconfirmation did not lead to generalized trust. This asymmetry may play a role in the prevalence of general suspicion observed toward marketers, and suggests general distrust may be maintained even if marketers are typically able to meet or exceed expectations.

Finally, as mentioned, the central assertation of the DSM that trust/suspicion often involves a robust negative bias in judgment is consistent with the recent meta-analysis described above (Eisend and Tarrahi 2022), which suggested pk has reliable negative effects on suspicion, credibility, and consumer evaluations. The fact these negative responses occur without any reliable cognitive deliberation effects is also consistent with the DSM's focus on more automatic forms of suspicion.

However, of note, Isaac and Grayson (2017) suggest the predominantly negative effects of pk on suspicion may be due to a bias in the kinds of pk that researchers have examined. This may be true to some extent, but there are numerous sources of evidence supporting the DSM's suspicion bias, and some of this suggests a negative bias can occur even in cases that Isaac and Grayson identify as involving positive pk (e.g., suspicion generalized to advertisements with strong comparative arguments and to otherwise reliable and credible brands; Darke and Ritchie 2007). There is also ample evidence for negative bias in the advertising skepticism literature. Ad skepticism correlates with negative attitudes toward a broad range of common advertising strategies and tactics (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998; Obermiller et al. 2005). Importantly, all the items included in the ad skepticism scale ask about *trust* in advertising, rather than distrust. This was by design, and was intended to eliminate the potential for artificially inducing skepticism among respondents. Yet, despite this, ad skepticism consistently leads to a negative bias in advertising evaluations. Finally, Pyle et al. (2021) recently used a qualitative approach to examine trust toward online reviews, and observed skepticism at all levels (i.e., platforms, reviewers, and reviews). Participants were also found to rely on a broad set of idiosyncratic lay-theories to explain and cope with the skepticism

involved. Overall, there is a variety of evidence to support the idea that pk is readily associated with skepticism, and that consumers show a prevalent negative bias in distrusting marketers and their tactics.

While a good deal of evidence speaks to the robust nature of defensive suspicion, other research has identified important moderators. For instance, while a trusted brand name alone is insufficient to protect against generalized suspicion, multiple trust cues (i.e., brand name *and* online satisfaction ratings) are more effective (Benedicktus et al. 2010). Other studies show that independent information sources (e.g., *Consumer Reports* or *BBB*) can buffer against generalized suspicion (Darke et al. 2008). Finally, a series of studies examining online sales promotions found that while defensive suspicion led to lower evaluations of promotions associated with trickery and manipulation (e.g., discounts) it actually increased evaluations for promotions associated with providing honest value (e.g., everyday-low-prices; Main and Darke 2014).

Construal Level Theory (CLT)

CLT is a broad theory that predicts the effects of psychological distance on information processing and judgment (Maglio 2020; Trope and Liberman 2010). Psychological distance is defined as the degree to which an object is perceived to be tangible or immediately present. This framework suggests that spatial distance (physical distance of retailer), temporal distance (timing of interaction), social distance (social connection with retailer), and hypotheticality (physical tangibility of retailer) are interchangeable facets of psychological distance and impact judgment in similar ways. Psychological distance, in turn, is said to lead consumers to construe judgment at a higher, more abstract level (versus lower concrete level), which can impact judgment in a number of ways. Darke et al. (2016) extended CLT to include the idea that psychological distance has implications for online trust. The reasoning was that, given stereotyping was known to be a form of judgment individuals are more likely to engage in under abstract construal (McCrea et al. 2012), and suspicion is a common aspect of marketer stereotypes (Darke and Ritchie 2007), it followed that greater psychological distance should evoke higher levels of construal, and thereby make consumers more likely to stereotype marketers as untrustworthy. In contrast, factors that decrease the psychological distance of a marketing source should increase consumer trust.

Consistent with this CLT trust model, Darke et al. (2016) showed that consumers were more likely to make online purchases from retailers who also maintained a physical store (hybrids) over purely virtual sellers (no physical store), because the intangibility of the latter increased psychological distance and distrust. One particularly interesting finding was that even the presence of a store at a physical distance too great to be of any practical benefit (1,500 miles) was sufficient to increase online trust over a pure etailer (*mere presence effect*). Other evidence suggested hybrids with physical stores in familiar cities evoked greater online trust than stores in unfamiliar locations at the same physical distance (Benedicktus 2008), consistent with the idea that familiar locations are more tangible and thereby decrease psychological distance. Finally, website images showing office buildings (increased tangibility), employees (social proximity), or the business owner (social proximity) also improved trust in pure etailers (Benedicktus 2008, Darke et al. 2016). In fact, these simple strategies were successful enough to elevate trust and purchase intentions to a level comparable to hybrid sellers with a local physical store. Interestingly, since our original chapter, Amazon, which exclusively sold online at the time, has opened a variety of physical stores (Petro 2021). The CLT model suggests this may serve to further improve trust perceptions for Amazon

by shrinking its perceived psychological distance. While not all online retailers can afford to start their own line of physical stores, the CLT framework suggests a number of other less expensive strategies that can be used to shrink psychological distance and increase trust. For instance, other aspects of website design may improve online trust by increasing perceived tangibility, such as the interactivity of the site (Lee 2005) or simulation of a physical shopping environment (Bonnin 2020). Or social distance may be reduced by using computer agents (chatbots; Chung et al. 2020) or other social website tactics (Bleier et al. 2019).

Current research areas in online consumer trust

Our original chapter described a number of online tactics consumers were known to distrust. This updated chapter instead focuses on more recent areas of online research that are highly relevant to consumer models of trust and pk, including: native advertising, online influencers, data-tracking and targeted advertising, and fake online reviews.

Native advertising

Native advertisements blend in with surrounding online content (Aribarg and Schwartz 2020), and can include sponsored social media posts, sponsored news content (e.g., advertisements that appear as new articles on news websites) and sponsored hyperlinks (e.g., advertisements that appear while using search engines).While online native advertising has been viewed by some as a means of minimizing disruption to consumers' online experiences (Campbell and Marks 2015), consumers themselves often view it as a deceptive marketing tactic due to its covert nature (Jung and Heo 2019).

Existing research has examined consumer responses to native advertising, including the impact of providing disclosures to prevent consumer confusion and deception (Jung and Heo 2019). A meta-analysis by Eisend et al. (2020) suggests mixed results as to whether disclosing native advertisements leads to positive brand outcomes, suggesting a need for further research. Disclosure can lead to activation of pk amongst consumers who may not initially recognize such content as advertising (Eisend et al. 2020). In contrast, as consumers become better able to detect native advertising, the negative implications of inadequate disclosure may become more pronounced (Lee et al. 2016). Additionally, there may also be a need to delineate between different digital platforms or contexts. For example, sponsored content on Instagram may be viewed as conflicting with goals to connect with others, whereas sponsored content on Yelp while searching for a restaurant may not be viewed as conflicting with the goal of finding somewhere to eat. Future research should examine how perceptions of native advertising can vary by platform, prior experience with such advertisements, and other factors that contribute to pk. It would also be of interest to examine whether perceptions of manipulation by native advertising impact specific trust in the brand involved and/or reinforces generalized distrust.

Online influencers

The use of celebrities to persuade consumers is not a new marketing strategy (Erdogan 1999). However, the internet has given rise to a new form of celebrity in the form of everyday individuals who create user-generated content (UGC) and are viewed as opinion leaders (Hughes et al. 2019). Marketers have increasingly recognized the potential for these online influencers to spread word-of-mouth (Hughes et al. 2019). However, there are also recent concerns that consumers are being inundated with sponsored influencer content, leading to

increased suspicion toward influencers (*influencer fatigue;* Petro 2019). In response, some marketers have shifted toward micro-influencers, who have fewer followers but more intimate relationships with their audience (Hosie 2019), potentially signaling greater authenticity compared to influencers with larger followings.

Prior research on influencer marketing has examined factors that contribute to their persuasiveness, including: perceived level of expertise, homophily, physical attractiveness and credibility (Hughes et al. 2019; Lee and Watkins 2016; Lou and Yan 2019). Other research has examined the ethicality of influencer marketing due its potential to serve as a covert marketing tactic (De Jans et al. 2020). However, there appear to be gaps in our understanding of consumers' experiences with influencer marketing and how they cope with such persuasion attempts. While some insights can be drawn from the existing pk literature (e.g., ulterior motives), prior work might be extended by examining new factors that impact pk activation, such as characteristics of the social media platform. For example, Facebook has been viewed as more distracting and less involving than other social media platforms (Hughes et al. 2019), which may mean that any pk relating to influencers is less likely to be activated compared to more involving platforms (e.g., YouTube). Comments on social media posts might also serve as informational cues that activate pk. For example, consumers sometimes comment on the authenticity of sponsored influencer posts, which may then activate pk for other consumers. It may be beneficial for future research to examine the potential impact of such online commentary in response to sponsored influencer posts. It may also be important to delineate between sponsored influencer content that raises awareness versus specifically encouraging trial (Hughes et al. 2019). Encouraging an audience to purchase a product may be viewed as a more overt persuasion tactic than simply raising awareness. Finally, it may also be of interest to examine whether bad experiences with influencer recommendations have negative implications for brand trust or generalized distrust toward marketers. It is not clear whether influencers are immune to the negative effects of generalized marketer distrust or not, given they are not clearly independent from the brand. Using influencers to market products may or may not insulate marketers from the broader implications of generalized distrust.

Data privacy concerns and targeted advertising

The internet has provided marketers with access to vast amounts of data regarding consumer preferences and behaviors (Appel et al. 2020). This has facilitated opportunities to develop personalized marketing strategies that can lead to positive brand outcomes (Aguirre et al. 2015). Yet, these advances have also heightened concerns surrounding data privacy and privacy violations (Boerman et al. 2017). For example, a recent consumer survey found that 75% of consumers had concerns regarding their data being used without their consent (CIGI 2019). Data privacy concerns appear to be central to digital trust (Appel et al. 2020), and it has been suggested that consumers are becoming increasingly selective in terms of the data they share online (Anant et al. 2020). For example, a global survey by Edelman (2018) found that 40% of respondents reported deleting a social media account due to privacy concerns. Policymakers, brands, and social media platforms are also adjusting to these concerns by developing measures to better regulate privacy (Martin and Murphy 2017).

The privacy literature has also examined remedies that brands can use to help alleviate privacy concerns and promote brand trust (Hoffmann et al. 1999, Martin and Murphy, 2017). These include better disclosing privacy policies and providing consumers with control over the collection of their data (Martin et al. 2017, Tucker 2014). Prior work has also examined consumers' feelings of vulnerability when sharing information, the appropriateness of

information requests, and reactions to privacy violations (Martin et al. 2017). For instance, Martin et al. (2017) found that personal data breaches led to a range of negative consumer responses via feelings of violation and distrust in the focal company, and also that a competitor's data breach could lead to spillover effects on distrust in the focal firm. These findings fit well within the Defensive Suspicion Model.

Targeted online advertising is central to the debate surrounding privacy concerns (Boerman et al. 2017). It can result in more positive consumer responses, and plays an important role in many firms' digital marketing strategies (Boerman et al. 2017). The sophistication of targeted online advertising has increased with the development of complex algorithms that better utilize data to provide insights about consumer preferences. However, targeted advertising may: "creep consumers out," inadvertently target vulnerable populations (Callanan et al. 2021), and has been identified as a dangerous political tool that can spread misinformation (Chen 2018). Concerns about targeted online advertising have also resulted in the EU enforcing strict regulations on consumer data collection, which has unfortunately reduced the effectiveness of digital advertising (Goldfarb and Tucker 2011).

The literature suggests consumers can experience feelings of vulnerability when they encounter targeted advertising, and that these feelings can be accentuated after becoming aware their personal data was collected covertly (Aguirre et al. 2015). The degree and accuracy of personalization, privacy disclosures, trust in the advertised brand and related website, are all factors that can impact consumer responses to targeted advertising (Boerman et al. 2017). However, prior research suggests the majority of consumers have little knowledge of the extent to which their online behavior is tracked and hold misconceptions about targeted advertising (Smit et al. 2014). This is partly attributed to the difficulty in identifying which companies collect their personal data.

There are additional opportunities for research concerning pk and trust in targeted online advertisements. The feeling that marketers are constantly watching us online, looking for an opportunity to influence us, potentially has broad implications for distrust and even paranoia toward marketers. Alternatively, tracking has the potential to be of benefit to consumers by bringing useful information to their attention rather than bombarding them with irrelevant noise. Responses to tracking may ultimately hinge on this aspect of pk (Germelmann et al. 2020), that is by making the consumer benefits of such technology more apparent to consumers themselves (i.e., providing truly useful suggestions). Future research might also examine other factors relating to pk, such as variables that activate pk (e.g., extent or accuracy of advertising personalization), or what level of personalization consumers find acceptable versus unacceptable (e.g., suggesting movies versus medical treatments).

Fake reviews

The internet has played a valuable role in facilitating consumer-to-consumer interactions and serves as a repository for socially-sourced information about products and brands (Lamberton and Stephen 2016). Online word-of-mouth can be a reliable resource for consumers to gather unbiased information to help inform their judgment and behavior (Lamberton and Stephen 2016). In fact, it has been estimated that 82% of adults read online user reviews before making a purchase decision (Smith and Anderson 2016). However, the reliability of online word-of-mouth can be undermined when consumers get the sense it has been manipulated (DeAndrea et al. 2018). It has been estimated that 15–30% of reviews are fraudulent (Ananthakrishnan et al. 2020). For this reason, fake reviews have become of central importance to consumer trust in online reviews.

Prior research suggests consumers are less influenced by reviews on websites that are perceived to have control over user-generated content (DeAndrea et al. 2018), due to concerns that negative reviews may have been removed. In contrast, consumers are more influenced by reviews with cues that signal authenticity, such as the reviewer's real name, length of membership on the platform, and ability to be contacted (Rosario et al. 2016). Furthermore, review platforms can increase trust by flagging but not deleting fake reviews (Ananthakrishnan et al. 2020). This is particularly effective because it signals the platform is transparent and is taking initiative to prevent reviewer fraud. Prior work has also examined linguistic cues that objectively identify fake reviews, such as: details unrelated to the product, use of shorter words, and extreme evaluations (Anderson and Simester 2014).

Despite the recent literature on fake reviews, there appears to be a gap in our understanding of how pk and consumer trust relate to the ability to accurately identify fake reviews. Pyle et al. (2021) note a prevalence of skepticism concerning online reviews, and a wide range of idiosyncratic strategies for identifying and coping with fake reviews. Additional research should further explore the links between fake reviews, pk, and distrust. For instance, it would be interesting to examine how effective consumers are at identifying fake reviews (true positives), and what cues potentially aid accuracy versus lead to errors in identifying bonafide reviews (false positives). It seems likely that motivation and ability to identify fake reviews may depend on existing pk knowledge and the activation of pk. For example, it would be interesting to examine whether consumer awareness of the prevalence of fake reviews impacts their ability to correctly identify fraudulent reviews or instead leads to a negative bias that is insensitive to their authenticity. Furthermore, it would be interesting to know the impact that negative experiences with a review platform (e.g., instances where relying on past reviews led to a bad purchase) have on trust and future accuracy. Overall, there appear to be many avenues for future research that could provide important insights to maintain consumer trust in online reviews.

Summary

Trust is a critical predictor of positive marketing outcomes both online and offline. Initial trust in online channels is derived through a wide variety of factors. However, trust is fragile and can dissolve, or at least weaken, with even a single instance of deception or manipulation. The current paper describes a number of consumer-oriented theories that have proven useful in understanding trust both online and offline. In turn, the online environment continues to offer a particularly relevant context for testing consumer models of trust, given the premium that trust still provides to online marketers.

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