



Consumer trust in tourism and hospitality: A review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

As a vital element in developing and maintaining any forms of relationship, consumer trust has attracted increasing attentions from hospitality and tourism researchers since the 1990s. As a fairly new topic, it requires frequent and critical monitoring which would shed light on current research status and make needed adjustments in terms of methodological process and inquiry focus. However, up until now, there has been little systematically review of this body of work. As such, the current study aims to fill this void by conducting a content analysis of publications on consumer trust in the domains of tourism and hospitality since 1998, when the first article on trust was published. Articles were analyzed in terms of conceptualization and operationalization. Findings reveal that research of consumer trust is still at the stage of borrowing constructs from other established disciplines and developing research models to test its compatibility in selected industrial sectors. Theories from social science in general and social exchange theory in particular are used as the underlying theoretical framework. Consumer trust is generally treated as a multidimensional concept and it is measured at individual level. In consistent with how it was conceptualized, consumer trust was commonly examined empirically. Data of consumers' perceptual responses was collected by onsite survey, main survey, or online survey. Also, mixed data-collection techniques were also spotted in the reviewing process. Statistical analysis especially Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was mainly adopted which implies large sample size used in relevant studies. Indeed, qualitative methods like focus group and interviews were also existed, functioning to dig out context-based information of consumer trust in a certain domain. From this perspective, studies reviewed in this study had methodological rigor. Based on the research results, implications and future research directions were suggested.

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1. Introduction

The marketing literature has constantly emphasized the importance of relational aspects in commercial transactions and advocated developing a mutually beneficial relationship with customers (e.g. Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998). Indeed, ongoing relationships between businesses and their customers could achieve the ultimate goal to increase repeated customer patronage (Ok, Back, & Shanklin, 2005). For service businesses like tourism and hospitality industries, the unique nature like intangibility and inseparability of production and consumption further highlights the consequential roles played by building and maintaining strong relationships with customers (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; McCole, 2002). Additionally, the existence of intense competition in the market on the supply side makes business operations more challenging as switching costs for

consumers are greatly lowered (Álvarez, Casielles, & Martín, 2009). In order to gain an advantageous edge in this competitive environment, tourism practitioners have turned to relationship marketing and treated it as a strategic tool. For example, airlines' frequent flyer programs (Gilbert, 1996), hotels' frequent guest programs (Palmer, McMahon-Beattie, & Beggs, 2000), and car rental firms' consumer preference schemes (Chadee & Mattsson, 1996).

The growing recognition of the importance of relationship marketing has cultivated interests from academicians and practitioners in consumer trust. Urban, Sultan, and Qualls (2000) suggested that customer trust is the essential element in fostering customer relationships and sustainable market share. Likewise, Spekman (1988) posited that trust is the cornerstone of long-term relationships. Frederick and Scheffer (2000) went even further to suggest that "to gain the loyalty of customers, you must first gain their trust" (p. 107).

While there are many benefits in implementing trust as a marketing tool, not all industries are suitable for utilizing it. There exist some factors that industries have to satisfy before

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implementing practices arousing customers' trust. Among the various factors, one could be generally agreed upon by researchers is the existence of an uncertain and risky environment (Grabner-Kräuter & Kaluscha, 2003). This requirement of environment typically favors the tourism and hospitality industries in adopting trust as the key mediating variable in successful long-lasting relations. Zillifro and Morais (2004) pointed out that the inherent nature of tourism services like intangibility of service performance as well as lack of services transparency may lead to information asymmetry and opportunistic behavior. Such view could also be found in several other studies like those conducted by McCole (2002) as well as Singh and Sirdeshmukh (2000). This explains why many academic efforts have been devoted to examining trust in the context of tourism and hospitality industries. Generally speaking, these studies have discussed trust construct in two exchange processes: business-to-consumer (firm end consumer) and business-to-business (inter-firm). These two processes imply two relationships vertically and horizontally. Vertical relationships refer to relations and connections between sellers and customers, while horizontal relationships are inter-organizational partnerships and strategic alliances (Seppänen, Blomqvist, & Sundqvist, 2007).

Further examination reveals that most studies empirically investigated the role of trust in a specific sector like hotels and restaurants. Therefore, it would be of academic significance to summarize and compare the results of different studies as it can clarify certain issues involved. More specifically, construct clarification is mainly relating to two research questions: how was the contrast theorized and operationalized in the past studies? Answers to these two questions call for a review inquiry into recent trust studies which is absent in the current research body. In order to fill this void, this study attempts to provide an integrative review of existing research of consumer trust from perspectives construct conceptualization and operationalization in the tourism and hospitality industries.

As stated above, the trust concept involves two relationships which involve different trustors (the subject to trust) and trustees (the object to be trusted). Correspondingly, divergent stakeholders are involved leading to the presence of diverse viewpoints of and approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing the trust concept. In order to highlight the inquiry focus and also for the consideration of methodological rigor, only literature centering on consumer trust in the offline environment was included in this paper.

2. Literature on customer trust

Initiated by psychologists in the 1950s, the concept of trust has made its way into many other areas like sociology (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Zucker, 1986) management (Das & Teng, 1998; Hosmer, 1995), and marketing (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992). In the context of marketing, consumer trust appears when one party in a commercial transaction has confidence in certain special features of the other party. From a psychological perspective, trust functions to reduce customers' anxiety in decision-making dilemmas which then leads to reduction in transaction costs caused by information search and inspection (Kramer, 1999). Gwinner et al. (1998) suggested that the psychological benefits of belief and trust are more important than special treatments or social benefits in relationships between service firms and customers.

Researchers generally agree upon the precondition for consumer trust: risky and uncertain environment. That is why consumer trust has been studied widely in services marketing. In service industries, customers constantly have to make purchase decisions or even payment before they actually experience the

service (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991), which potentially leads to vulnerability and risk as the service encounter may not meet guests' requirements. These potential undesirable outcomes reflect the risk contingency implied in consumer trust. However, even though service providers fail to provide quality service, they still can decrease customers' perceived risk if they respond in a way that builds customer trust (DeWitt, Nguyen, & Marshall, 2008). It is exactly the existence of vulnerability that makes individuals in low-status position are more concerned about trust (Kramer, 1999). From this perspective, service firms can use consumer trust as a powerful marketing tool to obtain customer loyalty.

Being a feeling of being relatively secured in a risky situation, customer trust has been studied generally from two distinctive perspectives. First, considerable research treats trust as a subjective belief or expectation about certain attributes of an exchange partner (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Lee & Back, 2008). In addition, these attributes act as cues to evaluate the trustworthiness of seller. Such attributes include perceived credibility and benevolence of an exchange partner, with the former referring to "the buyers' belief in the seller expertise to do the job effectively" while the latter meaning "the buyer' belief in the positive intention of the seller" (Shankar, Urban, & Sultan, 2002, p. 327). Second, consumer trust signifies a behavior intention to rely on a partner in a vulnerable situation (Coleman, 1990).

Over the past several decades, consumer trust has made a significant inroad into disciplines and research fields far beyond psychology and sociology. Researchers from tourism and hospitality began to study it in late 1990s and used research findings from other fields as the theoretical foundation. With the research progressed, more scholars have realized its signification in marketing and integrated it into their research efforts. In this field, consumer trust have been treated as a key element in customer relationship management. For example, Crotts, Aziz, and Raschid (1998) suggested that consumer trust is a pivotal factor in suppliers' commitment to wholesale buyers in the international travel trade.

3. Methodology

To accomplish the objectives stated above, trust-related articles were retrieved in January 2013 from EBSCOHost (<http://search.ebscohost.com>) and Science Direct (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/>), which are major academic and most comprehensive databases for tourism and hospitality research journals (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Hung & Law, 2012). In addition, for review rigorous concern, Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com.hk/>) was utilized to search articles for it covers many fields and is used as an alternative for citation counts (Law & van der Veen, 2008; Walters, 2007).

Keywords used for retrieving literature included trust and tourism, trust and hospitality, as well as trust and destination. Due to its complex nature, the concept of trust has been discussed in various contexts while this study solely focuses on consumer trust. As such, a careful screening was needed to identify articles that were specifically related to consumer trust in tourism and hospitality. The screening process started with reading titles and abstracts of each article. Any unrelated papers would be omitted from further analysis. Only full-length research articles were included while editors' notes as well as book reviews were excluded in the review process.

This study attempts to identify how researchers in tourism and hospitality conceptualized and operationalized the concept of consumer trust. As construct conceptualization and operationalization are vague terms, rendering the need to further specify them. In consistent with previous studies (e.g., Lau, Shaffer, & Au, 2007; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007), conceptualization of consumer trust was examined in terms of theoretical approaches adopted,

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