Online Consumer Trust: A Multi-Dimensional Model

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ABSTRACT

Consumer trust is widely heralded as an essential element for the success of electronic commerce, yet the concept itself is still clouded in confusion by the numerous definitions and points of view held across multiple disciplines. It is the aim of this paper to synthesise the viewpoints from across the disciplines and bring them together in a multi-dimensional trust model. It is hoped that in doing so, these broad assortment of views will highlight the true underlying nature of trust in the online environment. From these multiple disciplines, three dimensions of trust emerged: dispositional trust, institutional trust and interpersonal trust, each bringing its own influencing factors into the overall intention to trust. From this model emerged the notion that the consumer as an individual is central to the understanding of trust, and in turn that the individual's personality and culture form the foundation for the development of trust.

Keyword: electronic commerce; multi-dimensional model; trust.

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing acceptance that consumer trust is a key foundation for electronic commerce success. If the consumer cannot develop some sense of confidence in the vendor’s competence, predictability, benevolence and integrity, then they are likely to abort the purchase and simply look elsewhere for a more trustworthy alternative (McKnight & Chervany, 2002; McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998; Tan & Theon, 2001).

Much of the literature surrounding trust in electronic commerce looks to substitute trust by focusing solely on the aspects of consumer privacy and security (Belanger, Hiller, & Smith, 2002; Benassi, 1999; Dekleva, 2000; Huberman, Franklin, & Hogg, 1999).
also tends to lack a firm definition of trust and therefore often causes further confusion by presenting the belief that trust is a simple factor that can be explained by addressing these vendor specific factors. This does not however address the issue of trust as a whole and simply serves to look to deal with addressing the symptoms rather than the underlying issue.

The lack of scope in the Information Systems literature has been highlighted in Gefen (2002) where it was stated that there was a “need to establish the dimensionality of trust as it is applied to MIS topics and in doing so to recognise that although trust may occasionally be unidimensional as found by some research, it may also be multi-dimensional depending on the circumstances.” He went further stating that in addressing trust automatically as a one-dimensional construct, researchers may be oversimplifying their study, which in turn may prevent them from revealing the whole story (Gefen, 2002). However, as with much of the literature surrounding trust, Gefen (2002) addressed the attributes of trust rather than the nature of trust as a whole.

To further research in the field of electronic commerce, it is necessary to widen the research scope and bring in additional perspectives from outside of the information systems literature. Webster and Watson (2002) highlighted the need for information systems literature for this widened scope, when they commented: “IS is an interdisciplinary field straddling other disciplines, you often must look not only within the IS discipline when reviewing and developing theory but also outside the field”. This viewpoint is highly relevant in addressing the issue of trust, as it has long been theorised and argued across many disciplines. It is therefore necessary to take into account the numerous perspectives these disciplines attach to the topic of trust.

Taking a holistic view of trust that encompasses multiple disciplines is somewhat rare in research into trust in the electronic environment, yet it has the potential to yield the greatest insights into the underlying factors at work within the consumers’ mind in their assessment of an electronic retailer. Borrowing from the fields of psychology, sociology, marketing and management, as well as information systems, we can help to create a better understanding of the true nature of trust online.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to present a multi-dimensional insight into the nature of consumer trust online. We will firstly look to synthesise a broad literature base surrounding trust in relation to electronic commerce, and then look to identify gaps and inconsistencies in the current literature. These gaps will then be addressed through the development of a multi-dimensional trust model that can be applied to gain an insight into this commonly misunderstood construct and provide a better understanding of the true nature of trust.

Although the formation of trust holds similarities across differing business forms, this paper’s scope has been narrowed to focus primarily on the B2C (business-to-consumer) environment.
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