THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOCIAL NET ON CONSUMER TRUST OF COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this research is to explore the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies. The research seeks to investigate the connection between the corporate reputation factors important to consumers and the trust dimensions on which consumers assess trustworthiness, focusing on communications through Facebook as the largest social network. It looks at how the nature of the trust between the Facebook friends influences the assessment of trustworthiness and considers the role that Facebook mechanisms and a critical mass of engagement might have in this process. The research adopts Mayer, Davis and Schoorman's (1995) definition of trust. The data are collected using 44 semi-structured, in-depth interviews from a purposive sample of both genders, three generations and two socio-economic levels.

The findings reveal a connection between the reputation factors important to consumers and the trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness, providing a critical missing link between the stakeholder trust literature and the corporate reputation literature. The Consumer Trust Triage Model, developed from this research, shows how the level of interpersonal trust between Facebook friends affects the process by which consumers sort and assess information on corporate reputation that is posted on Facebook. These findings show how the Facebook mechanisms, along with a critical mass of engagement, also influence the assessment. Finally, the data reveals that trust is most often viewed by consumers as an act of purchase, not just a psychological state, thus advancing the discussion of the definition of trust.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>Reputation Factors:</u>

QV: **Q**uality and **V**alue of Products and Services

AC: Credibility of **A**dvertising **C**laims

CO: **C**ustomer **O**rientation

EE: Commitment to the **E**nvironment and **E**mployees

<u>Trust Assessment Dimensions:</u>

A: Ability

B: Benevolence

I: Integrity

TC: Technical Competence

VC: Value Congruence

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Importance of this Research

The rise of Internet-based social interaction (the 'social net') has fundamentally changed the nature of communications (Nielsen, 2014; Taylor, Doherty, Parker, & Krishnamurthy, 2014; Zickuhr, 2010), including how the public accesses news and information (Mitchel, Gottfried, Shearer, & Lu, 2017) and how consumers make decisions on what to buy (Hajli, 2014a). For companies wishing to build and maintain trusting relationships with their customer stakeholders, this could present both an opportunity and a concern. Not only the speed, but the ubiquity and accessibility of information posted to the social net, has potential implications for influencing consumer trust of companies positively or negatively (Hajli, Lin, Featherman, & Wang, 2014; Hong & Cameron, 2018). When coupled with the dependence on the social net for information, exhibited in particular by the more recent generational cohorts (Jiang, 2018; Nielsen, 2014), this raises questions about whether and how the mechanisms of the social net might be influencing consumer trust of companies.

The overall aim of this research is therefore to explore the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies. In the absence of an empirical link between the corporate reputation literature which identifies the reputation factors important to consumers, and the stakeholder trust literature which identifies the basis on which consumers assess company trustworthiness, this research first seeks to explore that connection. Hence the first research question is:

<u>RQ1:</u> How do consumers articulate the concept of consumer trust and does their perception of what consumer trust means provide an empirical link

between the reputation factors important to consumers and the trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness?

Thus, the first contribution of this research is to establish how a company's performance on the reputation factors important to consumers is assessed on the trust dimensions important to consumers, linking these two bodies of literature.

The second research question then looks at how consumers become aware of, and make sense of, content concerning the reputation factors that is reported on Facebook by friends in their network that could affect their trust of companies. The research focuses on the influence in this process of the main Facebook mechanisms, tagging, 'liking', trending, sharing links and commenting. Thus, the second research question is:

<u>RQ2</u>: How do consumers use the main Facebook mechanisms to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their trust of companies, and how might their use of these mechanisms be affected by different conditions of tie strength and critical mass?

Furthermore, to be explicit, in this thesis I use the following terminology. I am using the term 'research aim' to describe the overarching goal of the research in terms of understanding the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies. I am using the term 'research questions' to refer to the two specific points of interrogation that will be investigated through the conduct of this study to shed light on the research aim.

Research into trust, what it is, how it is formed, how it works, and how to build, maintain or restore it, is of practical as well as academic importance. Trust between a firm and its stakeholders is a valuable commodity for companies (Barney & Hansen, 1994; J. Choi & Wang, 2009; Cook & Schilke, 2010; Dyer & Chu, 2003; Zaheer, McEvily, & Perrone, 1998), and increasingly so as organizations move from the thick, localized relationships of 100 years ago to the fluid, global, thin relationships of today's world (Cook & Schilke, 2010, 2014; Zucker, 1986). Trust facilitates the smooth operation of the institutional systems that in turn facilitate and reinforce trust (Bachmann, 2001; Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; MacDuffie, 2011). In so doing, it allows productive relationships to form more smoothly reducing the cost of friction and lack of confidence (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Cook & Schilke, 2010; McEvily & Zaheer, 2006). When trust is embedded in the institutional systems and socio-economic mechanisms by which companies interact with their stakeholders, it provides a context, a shorthand to understanding, which enables actors to move forward with timely decisions in a cost-effective and productive way (Bachmann, 2011; Ingenhoff & Sommer, 2010). Such trusting relationships save companies both time and money (Cook & Schilke, 2010; Dyer & Chu, 2003)

In the last 20 years, public trust of business and economic systems has been eroded by corporate scandal (e.g. Enron in 2001; Madoff in 2008), corporate incompetence (e.g. BP Deep Horizons oil spill in 2010, United Airlines in 2009, 2017, 2018) and segment collapse (e.g. insurance with AIG in 2007, banking with Lehman Brothers in 2008). Public trust of companies hit a new low triggering a recession in 2008 (Ipsos MORI, 2009), and after a slight rise, started to turn down again in 2015 (Edleman, 2015) and has not recovered (Edelman, 2018). This lack of trust may be in part due to the observation by Cook and Schilke (2010, 2014) that where once local and/or regional business axes allowed for deeper, 'thick' relationships, the world is now increasingly shifting to 'thin' relationships that are globally dispersed and increasingly difficult to monitor

The study of trust has been approached from a number of perspectives and disciplines creating a rich and multi-layered exposition of theoretical and empirical research, but one that is still fragmented (Li, 2007; Schoorman, Wood, & Breuer, 2015). Indeed, as a collection of individual efforts rather than a coherent whole, the research on trust has so far failed to arrive at shared understanding, without which the practical application of the findings to the different operational disciplines of management has remained complex and disconnected (Bijlsma-Frankema & Rousseau, 2012; Schoorman et al., 2015). With this complexity of disciplines and perspectives, a number of different definitions of trust have emerged, with a recent count as high as 70 (Saunders et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there is now a general consensus emerging in the literature that there must be two parties to the trust, with one vulnerable to the actions of the other due to a lack of control over the actions of that other (Schoorman et al., 2015).

This research takes as a starting point the definition of trust put forward by Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995), who define 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" (Mayer et al., 1995, p.712). In the same article, Mayer et al. develop their Integrative Model of Organizational Trust, which identifies Ability, Benevolence and Integrity (ABI) as the three factors of perceived trustworthiness antecedent to trust. An important basis for this research is the work that has been done in the stakeholder literature to build on this model. This work identifies the key dimensions of Ability, Benevolence and Integrity that are important to consumer trust, namely Ability in the form of Technical Competence and Integrity, with Benevolence found to be less important but Value Congruence found to be important (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). Mayer et al., (1995) refer to Ability, Benevolence and Integrity as 'factors'. However, this research rests on specific dimensions of these factors, (technical competence, integrity, and additionally value congruence) that have been found in the stakeholder literature to be particularly relevant to consumers as the basis for consumer assessment of company trustworthiness. Therefore, in this thesis, these will be referred to as the ABI trust dimensions in order to distinguish them from the more expansive definition of the ABI factors as described by Mayer et al.

The marketing and corporate reputation literature shows that the Quality and Value of Products and Services, the Credibility of Advertising Claims, the Customer Orientation and the company's Commitment to the Environment and Employees are the reputation factors important to consumer trust (Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). The connection between the corporate reputation factors that affect consumer trust and the ABI trust dimensions on which consumers assess trustworthiness as an antecedent to trust has been theoretically argued in the corporate reputation literature (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2016; Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014). However, the connection has not yet been empirically established. This research study aims to explore this link empirically, thereby building on the theoretical relationship between these two bodies of research. This is the first contribution of this research.

Research into online social networks has shown that the consumer experience of company performance on the reputation factors important to them does not have to be direct; reported experiences by others through social networks influence consumer trust and action (e.g. Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007; Hajli et al., 2014; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). Therefore, it is important to understand how consumers view and interpret information relevant to these reputation factors that comes to them on the social net, and how the mechanisms of the social net might be playing a role. This has not been researched deeply, especially from the perspective of the receiver of the information on the social net, and there is a need for a greater understanding of how the influences might be occurring that shape consumer assessment of trustworthiness and influence consumer trust. This is the second contribution of this research study.

1.2 Research Overview and Structure of the Thesis

The exploratory nature of the research aim and research questions are best suited to a qualitative study, which is an exploratory paradigm of research that allows inductive insights and interpretation of data to address the research question (Fielding, 2012; J. A. Maxwell, 2010). Further justification for this approach is discussed in Chapter 4. The research study consists of 44 in-depth interviews of Facebook users across three generational cohorts, two socio-economic levels and both genders, in order to understand relatively comprehensively how this might be happening. The three generations examined in this study are the Boomers, born 1946-1964, Gen X, born 1965-1980, and Gen Y or the Millennials, born after 1980 (Doherty, Kiley, Tyson, & Jameson, 2015). In April 2018, The Pew Research Center made the decision to define the ending year of the Gen Y cohort as 1996 (Dimock, 2018), prior to which the birth years for Gen Y were loosely defined as 'those born after 1980' (Doherty et al., 2015). This research was conducted using the earlier definition for Gen Y (those born after 1980) since that was the definition in place at the time of the data collection. Further details on the selection of the target and the breakdown by cohort can be found in Chapter 4, but this explanation of the generation birth years is included here because it is relevant to the discussion in Chapters 2 and 3.

The thesis is structured into seven substantive chapters. These are as follows:

Chapter 2 – Review of Trust Literature

This chapter begins with an overview of the trust research to identify the relevant threads and situate this research within this context. It then discusses different dimensions and definitions of trust and identifies the definition of trust that will be used for this research, which is based on the Mayer et al. (1995) definition, as discussed above. Trust is then discussed at the stakeholder level, specifically the point of view of the consumer, to identify the specific dimensions of the ABI trust factors (Mayer et al., 1995) that have been found to be of particular importance to consumer trust and to how consumers assess corporate trustworthiness. The chapter concludes by situating the research in the convergence of research threads and showing the contribution this research makes to the literature (figure 2.7).

Chapter 3 – Consumer Trust of Companies and the Influence of Facebook Mechanisms: Theoretical Model and Research focus

This chapter establishes the specific research questions and grounds them in the literature. It begins in section 3.2 with an overview of the context of the research regarding social networks and consumer trust. The discussion that follows in section 3.3 establishes the basis for RQ1: **How do consumers articulate the concept of consumer trust and does their perception of what consumer trust means provide an empirical link between the reputation factors important to consumers and the**

trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness? This part reviews the corporate reputation literature and concludes with a diagram of the proposed connection between the corporate reputation factors important to consumers and the ABI trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness. The chapter continues in section 3.4 with the development of RQ2: **How do consumers use the main Facebook mechanisms to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their trust of companies, and how might their use of these mechanisms be affected by different conditions of tie strength and critical mass?** This discussion includes the role of Facebook as a platform and the issue of credibility, the social context of the friend connections (tie strength), the influence of a critical mass of engagement and preponderance of opinion (critical mass). It then looks at each of the main mechanisms on Facebook, tagging, 'liking', trending, linking and commenting. The chapter concludes with a summary of the scope of this research and the relationship between RQ1 and RQ2 (figure 3.4).

Chapter 4 – Methodology

This chapter begins with a summary of the approach to the research undertaken here. It continues in section 4.3 with a discussion of the methodology that has been selected for this research and the reasons for this. Section 4.4 discusses the pilot study which was conducted with a small sample of Gen Y participants. The results from that study informed the design of the main study, in particular leading to the use of vignettes and the change in research design regarding the sample population, which was expanded in the main study to include three age cohorts and two socio-economic levels. The next section discusses the selection of the target population and the sampling method. Section 4.6 discusses the main study research design for data collection, including the structure of the interviews and the vignettes. As explained in section 4.7, the method used for analysis was inductive, following the Corley and Gioia (2004) method, using in-vivo coding and then grouping the codes into higher order themes. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Chapter 5 – The Link between Company Reputation Factors and Trust Dimensions (RQ1)

This chapter covers a detailed report and discussion of the findings in response to RQ1 on the connection between the corporate reputation literature on reputation factors important to consumers and the stakeholder trust literature on the trust dimensions by which consumers assess company trustworthiness. The chapter discusses the participants' articulation of the concept of consumer trust for each of the reputation factors and shows which trust dimensions participants were using to evaluate company trustworthiness on that factor. Building on figure 3.2 in chapter 3, it concludes with a revised overview of these connections (figure 5.2).

Chapter 6 – Research Findings on The Influence of Facebook Mechanisms on Consumer Trust (RQ2)

This chapter covers a detailed report and discussion of the findings in response to RQ2 on the influence of communications on Facebook on consumer trust. The chapter is divided into three main sections. Overarching findings regarding Facebook as a platform, credibility, and tie strength are discussed in section 6.2. The chapter continues in section 6.3 with a report on the findings for each of the Facebook mechanisms individually. The chapter concludes with a summary (section 6.4) that integrates the data and explain how, when viewed all together holistically, they reveal a new picture of what's happening. A new model called the Consumer Trust Triage Model for Facebook Communications (figure 6.2) captures that new picture of how the triage the consumers appear to perform at both the awareness and sense-making stages using Facebook mechanisms may be influencing consumer trust.

Chapter 7 – Discussion, Conclusion and Implications, Limitations and Future Research

This chapter situates the findings in the literature and discusses how the findings relate to the nature of trust as discussed in chapter 2 and their contribution to the research. Section 7.1 discusses the relationship between corporate reputation and company trustworthiness, as informed by the findings from this research, and how that builds on and contributes to the trust and corporate reputation literature. Section 7.2 looks at the influence of Facebook communications and Facebook mechanisms as indicated by the research findings and shows how the resulting Consumer Trust Triage Model builds on the trust literature. Conclusions and implications for theory and practice are covered in section 7.3, with limitations and future research indicated in section 7.4.

Appendices

The appendices contain a copy of the memo stating Birmingham's willingness to accept the Wake Forest University ethics approval and sample documents used in the research, such as the informed consent document and the interview discussion guides. They also include additional charts from the findings.

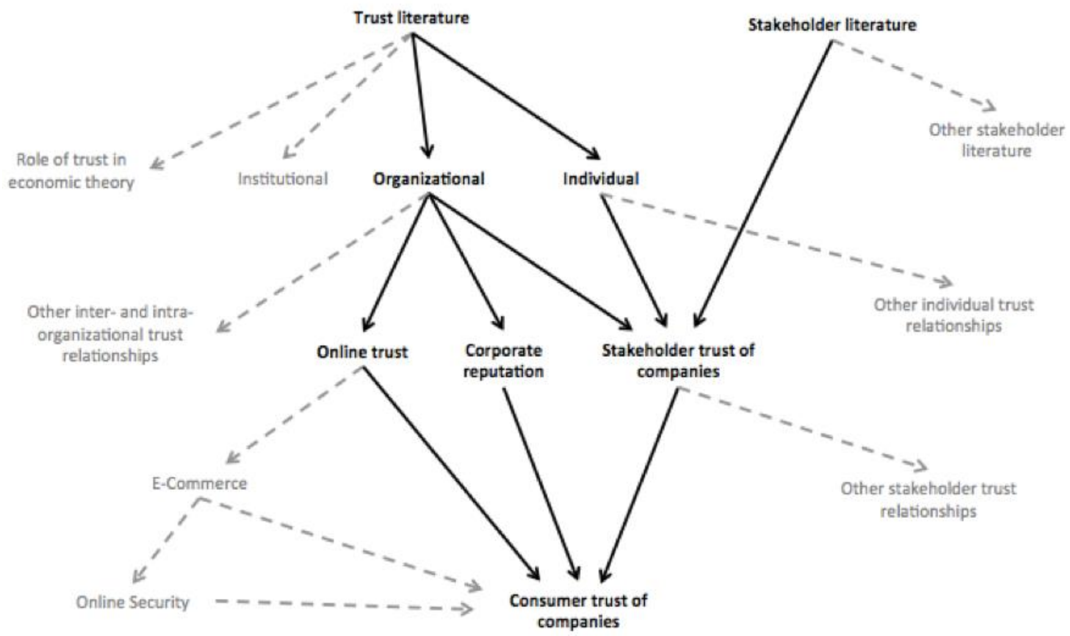
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF TRUST LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this research is to explore the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies. This chapter situates this enquiry within the trust literature, bringing together the relevant threads of the research on the nature of trust and trust dimensions in stakeholder relationships. This review combines well-established seminal works with more recent threads and emerging topics specifically regarding consumer trust to establish the basis in the trust literature for this research, and to identify the definition of trust that is used along with the reasons for this decision. Since the context for this exploration of consumer trust is through corporate reputation and consumer experiences as reported on online social networks, this chapter also situates this study within the context of the corporate reputation literature and the online literature.

This chapter is organized as follows. Section 2.2 summarizes the major threads within the trust literature that provide context for this research. This is followed by a discussion of the definition of trust in section 2.3, and the reasons for selecting the Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) definition as the basis for this research. Section 2.4 brings in the stakeholder literature to understand the nature of consumer trust in particular. At the end of this section, the Mayer et al. definition of trust is contextualized for consumer trust specifically. In Section 2.5, different typologies of trust are discussed that inform the understanding of consumer trust, including research both from the interpersonal trust literature and the organizational trust literature. These discussions provide the academic context for this research by addressing the nature of consumer trust. In addition, the discussion on interpersonal trust provides a basis in the literature for the potential influence on consumer trust of the interpersonal trust between friends on the social net. This is followed in section 2.6 by a discussion of the corporate reputation literature factors on which consumers assess trustworthiness of a company, and in section 2.7 by an outline of the context for this research within the online trust literature. Figure 2.1 visually represents the relevant threads of literature for this research.

1 Figure 2.1: The relevant literature threads for this research



The corporate reputation literature and the online trust literature are both discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 during the development of the research questions, therefore they are only discussed at a summary level in this chapter to provide the overall context. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary and statement of the specific contribution of this research in Section 2.8.

2.2 Overview of Relevant Threads in the Trust Literature

Trust has been researched from many perspectives. Commentators have argued the field is convoluted and multi-dimensional , with each lens offering only a partial understanding of the concept of trust (Bhattacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998; Eikeland & Saevi, 2017; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006). Discussions on the nature of trust date back over 2000 years, but modern trust research has developed mainly over the past 50 years (Möllering et al., 2004). As depicted in figure 2.1 above, the two threads of the trust literature that have the most relevance to this enquiry are the threads relating to organizational trust and to individual or interpersonal trust. Consumer trust is individual but impersonal, i.e. trust by an individual of an impersonal group entity. As such its nature does not appear to be either interpersonal nor organizational. Yet, some of the research that has contributed to the understanding the nature of both interpersonal trust and organizational trust is relevant to understanding consumer trust.

The study of interpersonal trust in the early part of the modern era contributed mainly to the understanding of trust at the individual level as an interpersonal dynamic between parties known to each other in person (e.g. Barber, 1983; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). The study of interpersonal trust has tended to focus on the relationship between individuals as the basis for trust. From this research has emerged a better understanding of the role of knowledge, emotion, identification and reciprocity in trust formation (e.g. Barber, 1983; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006; Lewis & Weigert, 2012; Rotter, 1971, 1980) which are elements that have relevance to understanding consumer trust, as discussed in section 2.5 below.

The study of organizational trust has generally focussed on two main streams, intra-organizational trust (employee trust) and inter-organizational trust (trust between companies or organizations). The understanding of organizational trust as a separate form of trust arose from the work of Luhmann (1979) and Zucker (1986). This work has sharpened the understanding of trust both in an organizational and in an institutional context. Research in the organizational trust literature that built on this line of thinking made efforts to articulate the distinction (in simplistic terms) between trust as the outcome of a relationship (interpersonal perspective) and trust as the input to a relationship (organizational or institutional perspective) (e.g. Bachmann, 2001; Bhattacharya et al., 1998; Luhmann, 1979; Rousseau et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986). Some researchers in this area of study have looked at trust as a mechanism for managing risk and controlling the outcome when power to control is not an option, the successful practice of trust having constitutive properties than enables further deeper trust (Bachmann, 2001; Bachmann & Kroeger, 2017; Bhattacharya et al., 1998; Das & Teng, 2001; Möllering, 2005). The understanding of risk as a parallel construct to trust integrally connected to it (Das & Teng, 2004), is relevant to this research, as discussed in section 2.5.

From the organizational trust literature, a relatively recent thread of research has emerged in the stakeholder literature that considers the assessment of trustworthiness and its impact on trust from the level of different stakeholder relationships (Harris, Moriarty, & Wicks, 2014; Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007, 2011; Pirson, Martin, & Parmar, 2017). This line of research identifies how assessment criteria and trust are affected by differences in the degree of the relationship to a company, which is a line of research fundamental to this study, as discussed in section 2.4 below.

Just as the nature of trust is subject to a number of different perspectives, so too are there different perspectives on the definition of trust. Researchers have argued that trust is a psychological state or disposition of an individual (Rousseau et al., 1998; Sitkin & Roth, 1993). A different view moves beyond simply a disposition to define trust as the decision to make oneself vulnerable to the actions of another influenced by an assessment of the other's trustworthiness (e.g. Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). There are those that have gone further to argue that the decision to trust is not sufficient, and trust is only meaningful if that decision is acted upon (e.g. Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Li, 2012). Even beyond trust as an act, researchers see trust as an active agent having constitutive properties of its own (e.g. Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006; Sekhon, Ennew, Kharouf, & Devlin, 2014).

In the business and management literature the range of perspectives from trust as a state of mind to trust as an active agent has been translated into the different operational disciplines (such as organizational behaviour, leadership, marketing, finance, sales etc.) creating a rich and multi-layered exposition of theoretical and empirical research but one that has yet to coalesce into a coherent whole (Eikeland & Saevi, 2017; Li, 2007; McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003). In an effort to organize and sort the prolific body of research that is developing, scholars have been compiling, categorizing, and challenging the collision of perspectives, including, for example, applying category classifications based on different disciplines (e.g. Rousseau et al., 1998), different definitions (e.g. Das & Teng, 2004), different approaches to conceptualization (e.g. Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006), different levels of analysis (e.g. Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012), different outcomes (e.g. Eikeland & Saevi, 2017). In addition to organizing and categorizing, scholars are increasingly seeing the value in considering multiple perspectives at the same time, in order to understand the interplay between the perspectives (e.g. Caldwell & Clapham, 2003; Currall & Inkpen, 2006; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012). This brief high-level overview serves to illustrate two aspects of the literature on trust: firstly, the breadth of interest in the topic across multiple disciplines and the scope of the literary base that has arisen as a result, and secondly, the complexity of the endeavour to understand and define trust.

Within the broad array of the trust literature just outlined, the threads that are most relevant to understanding the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies include research on trust from the organizational and stakeholder literature regarding how trust of a depersonalized entity is formed. Moreover, since this research aim includes the additional dynamic of communications through the social net, the interpersonal trust literature is likely also relevant to how the trust between friends might influence awareness and adoption of information passed between them on the social net, thus potentially influencing consumer trust.

The definition of trust for this research is discussed next, followed by a discussion of the stakeholder research which contextualizes the definition for the consumer stakeholder. With the definition of consumer trust established, section 2.5 picks up these relevant threads from the organizational and interpersonal literature in order to help illuminate the nature of consumer trust more fully.

2.3 Definition of Trust for this Research

In spite of – or perhaps because of – the breadth of interest in trust research, a universal definition of what trust is and how it functions remains elusive. A recent count put the number of definitions at over 70 (Saunders et al., 2015). Yet it has also been argued that a single universal definition would have to be so generalized and flexible in order to accommodate all the different lenses, conditions, and levels of intensity that account for trust in all the various situations, that it might not be very useful (Bhattacharya et al., 1998; Bigley & Pearce, 1998; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Nevertheless, there is some consensus as to the generic conditions of trust occurring across the literature (e.g. summaries in Das & Teng, 2004; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Li, 2007; Möllering et al., 2004; Rousseau et al., 1998), which some trust researchers have argued are inextricably bound up with each other such that there is importance in considering the interplay between them (Caldwell & Clapham, 2003; Currall & Inkpen, 2006; Fulmer & Gelfand, 2012; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). These conditions are as follows:

1. For trust to exist there must be a minimum of two actors, the trustor (the one doing the trusting) and the trustee (the one being trusted).
2. The trustor anticipates that the trustee's actions will result favourably for the trustor.
3. This dependence on the trustee for a favourable outcome renders the trustor vulnerable to the trustee.
4. Thus, the act of trusting carries an element of risk that the trustor willingly assumes.

The first of the four conditions for trust listed above requires a minimum of two actors and therefore rejects the notion that trust can be the state of mind of one actor. This is in contrast to the position of Sitkin and Roth (1993), Rousseau et al. (1998) and others who see trust as a belief, a disposition, a psychological state, rather than an action taken in relation to another party. Conversely, Lewis and Weigert (1985), building on Luhmann (1979) and Barber (1983), argue that trust has no meaning except in the context of a relationship between two actors. In other words, trust is a 'collective attribute' (Lewis and Weigert, 1985, p.968) that needs both a trustor and a trustee to exist, and thus cannot be simply a psychological state. Mayer et al. (1998) agree and explicitly include reference to both trustee and trustor in their definition. In translating this to the context of the consumer and the company, the 'collective attribute' (Lewis & Weigert, 1985, p.968) that exists is the trust each has in the other that they will act for the benefit of the both and the maintenance of the relationship, even though the relationship is depersonalized. The consumer expects the delivery of goods and services from the company. The company expects payment from the consumer. In this context the company is an active participant in the trust relationship, even while being a depersonalized entity. Thus, this research adopts the position of Lewis and Weigert (1985), Mayer et al. (1995) and others, that trust requires both a trustee and a trustor even in the depersonalized context of consumer trust.

One of the more frequently used definitions of trust as a basis for research is Rousseau et al.'s (1998) definition trust (cited over 2900 times as of December 2018). While Rousseau et al.'s definition includes vulnerability and the potential dependence on another, it does not move beyond trust as a psychological state of intention. Yet, trust as a psychological state does not consummate the relationship (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). It is the act of submission to the vulnerability that is the real moment of trust (Li, 2012). Moreover, Rousseau et al.'s definition does not explicitly capture the source of the vulnerability, which is the risk due to the lack of control over the other party's actions.

A fuller definition of trust, and the one on which this research will be based, is the one developed by Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995), namely "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" (Mayer et al., 1995 p.712). This definition as the basis for this research meets all four of the conditions listed above and has also been frequently cited (over 5,500 citations as of December 2018). While this definition contains most of the conditions later reflected in Rousseau et al.'s (1998) definition, it is different in that it includes the lack of oversight or control that the trustor has. At the same time, it reinforces the element of risk consequently engendered for the trustor with use of the word 'important' applied as a descriptor of the desired outcome. However, in my opinion it is not fully adequate in that it does not define trust as an act but rather as a decision. Indeed, a later article by Schoorman et al. (Schoorman et al., 2015) explicitly confirms that Mayer et al. (1995) did not intend action to be a part of their definition. In my view, the "willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party" (Mayer et al. 1995 p.712, my emphasis) describes only the positive assessment of trustworthiness. A favourable assessment of trustworthiness is necessary to consumer trust (Sekhon et al., 2014), but in order for the trust to become manifest, there must be an action associated with it which actually puts the trustor in the vulnerable position vis à vis the trustee. Otherwise it remains simply a latent and untested potential. The decision to trust resulting in the trust action is the only context in which trust matters (Li, 2012). For the consumer this is the act of purchasing a company's product or services.

Cohen and Dienhart (2013) argue that this definition of Mayer et al.'s (1995) is inadequate as a definition of trust for a different reason. Cohen and Dienhart's conception of trust requires the circle to be closed. In other words, if one party trusts another to do something, this is not a moral obligation on the part of the other party unless they accept the 'contract' to do so. Thus, trust for Cohen and Dienhart is a relationship that carries a moral obligation, actively acknowledged by the trustee. Unless the circle is closed by that acceptance thus forming the bond of trust, the so-called trust remains morally bankrupt with a uni-directional application. Therefore, the definition that Mayer et al. developed is, to them, inadequate and amoral as a definition of trust because it does not account for whether the trustee knows of the trustor's trust and has agreed to the obligation to fulfil that trust. Thus, it fails to explain the sense of betrayal on the part of the trustor when the expected outcome is not manifested.

The application of this line of reasoning to interpersonal trust is clear, where the parties have personal knowledge of each other and can come to such an understanding. Its application to organizational or institutional contexts, however, is more opaque. With regard to the latter, following the logic of Cohen and Dienhart (2013), regulations that govern trade and commerce could provide the closure of the circle institutionally with regulatory or legal channels of recourse if the obligation is not fulfilled. However, those situations fall under Rousseau et al.'s (1998) definition of deterrence-based trust, which Rousseau et al. dismiss as being more of a contractual obligation than a type of trust. Most of the examples Cohen and Dienhart give to illustrate their concept of trust in an organizational or business context are examples with individuals who either know each other and have an on-going relationship, or who come together on a personal basis for a single transaction. To accept Cohen & Dienhart's rationale, therefore, appears, implicitly, to restrict the concept of trust to situations in which the actors have personal knowledge of each other and direct contact with one another (or possibly indirect contact through a 3rd party known to both who is facilitating the exchange). This is too restrictive because it relegates many other relationships in which Mayer et al.'s definition of trust would apply to a basis of cooperation, confidence or predictability; but as Mayer et al. explain, trust goes beyond these and the differentiating element is the element of risk.

Mayer et al. (1995) say that for one party to cooperate with another only requires that they work together towards a common goal, not necessarily that they trust each other. With cooperation, each party could have significant verification and control mechanisms in place, precisely because they need to work together yet don't trust each other. Moreover, cooperation can be involuntary (coercion), and/or need not involve much, if any, real risk (e.g. cooperation with a neighbour on property maintenance). Thus, trust is not just cooperation.

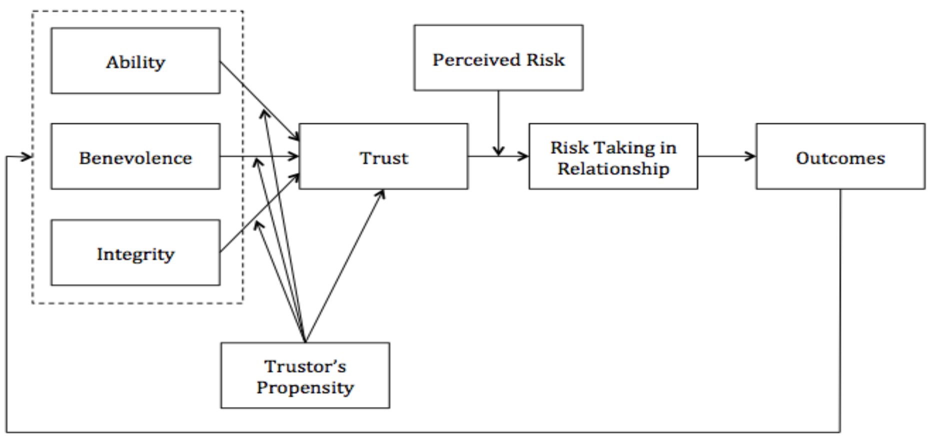
Confidence also does not have the same element of risk as does trust, according to Mayer et al. (1995). Mayer et al. cite Luhmann's (1988) differentiation between confidence and trust, wherein Luhmann argues that trust necessarily involves putting oneself at risk of being let down and yet deliberately choosing to accept that risk. If one is not taking the risk of the decision into account and acting with deliberate choice in selecting a potentially risky route, then one is acting simply with confidence (Luhmann, 1988). Confidence, then, assumes that there is little to no risk in the decision, whereas the dependence on the performance of others does create risk because of the lack of control. Therefore, trust and confidence are not interchangeable concepts.

Finally, a person or company can be predictable or unpredictable, but that doesn't necessarily mean the trustor will trust – i.e. expect – the other to "perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party," (Mayer et al., 1995, p.712). Rather, someone considering entering into a trusting relationship with another person or company may find that the other party is predictable in a dimension directly opposed to the action they would like to see. In this case they are unlikely to take the risk of making themselves vulnerable to that party's decisions and actions by trusting them. Therefore, while predictability may influence the assessment of whether to trust, predictability and trust are not the same thing.

In effect, there remains a factor defined by Mayer et al. as trust which is not cooperation, nor confidence, nor predictability, nor a moral contract of obligation agreed to by both sides (as described by Cohen and Dienhart), but something which is multidimensional and can derive from different bases. They go on to articulate these bases in their Integrative Model of Organizational Trust (Mayer et al., 1995). The model (see figure 2.2 below) is developed in a way that can explain trust in an individual, group or inter-organizational context, and can also be applied in the context of one individual trusting the collective of the organization (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007), which is important to this research study.

The Integrative Model of Organizational Trust developed by Mayer et al. (1995) bases the trustor's assessment of the trustee's trustworthiness on three main attributes: ability, benevolence and integrity (ABI). As explained below in section 2.4, the different attributes affect trust formation differently depending on the stakeholder relationship. Ability refers to managerial competence or technical competence of the trustee in achieving a given outcome desired by the trustor. Benevolence refers the disposition of the trustee to do good for the trustor and others regardless of the benefit to the trustee. Integrity refers to the level to which the decisions and actions the trustee takes are seen by the trustor to be governed by those principles that the trustor values. These three attributes are assessed independently of each other, can vary independently and each have a significant, unique relationship to trust (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Mayer et al., 1995). The degree to which the trustee (individual or collective) is deemed by the trustor to have these attributes governs how trustworthy they appear to be. The assessment is then moderated by the trustor's propensity to trust (Colquitt et al., 2007; Mayer et al., 1995), which is inherent in the trustor's nature and is independent of the knowledge of the level of risk. A rendering of this model is reproduced in figure 2.2 below.

2 Figure 2.2: Integrative Model of Organizational Trust
(Source: Mayer et al., 1995, p.175, figure 1)



This model has been criticized by Li (2007) for conflating two different bases for trust, the depersonalized basis and the personalized basis. Li contends that the objective conditions of ability, benevolence and integrity are depersonalized bases for trust, while the "shared interests, shared values and shared affects" (Li, 2007, p.426) embedded in the definition and on which the assessment of the ABI attributes depend are subjective and reciprocal conditions and are therefore personalized bases for trust. However, this challenge can be argued to be based on a false distinction as depersonalized elements are only relevant in the context of the personalized elements and vice versa. It is only how the consumer perceives the company's ability, benevolence and integrity that matters in the context of the consumer's assessment of a company's trustworthiness. This perception, I contend, is informed by the consumer's interpretation of company's performance on the interests, values and affects important to the consumer (see discussion in Chapter 3). Thus, I believe that for the consumer these two bases, the depersonalized and the personalized, are inseparable and can only be considered together in the decision to trust a company.

In summary, the definition of trust put forward by Mayer et al. (1995), namely "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" (Mayer et al., 1995 p.712), provides the foundation for the definition of trust that will be used as the basis for this research. Mayer et al.'s (1995) definition of trust is a widely used and well-tested definition that explicitly captures the nature of the vulnerability inherent in trust, and the socialized context of trust as necessitating two actors, meeting all of the conditions generally agreed to be necessary for trust to exist. Importantly for this study, Mayer et al.'s Integrative Model of Organizational Trust based on that definition has engendered some recent work on how the trust dimensions in organizational trust vary by stakeholder relationship. This body of work on stakeholder trust, discussed in detail in the next section, is an important foundation for understanding consumer trust as it relates to this research. At the end of the section, the Mayer et al.'s definition of trust is restated to contextualize it for the consumer-stakeholder relationship.

2.4 Trust at the Stakeholder Level

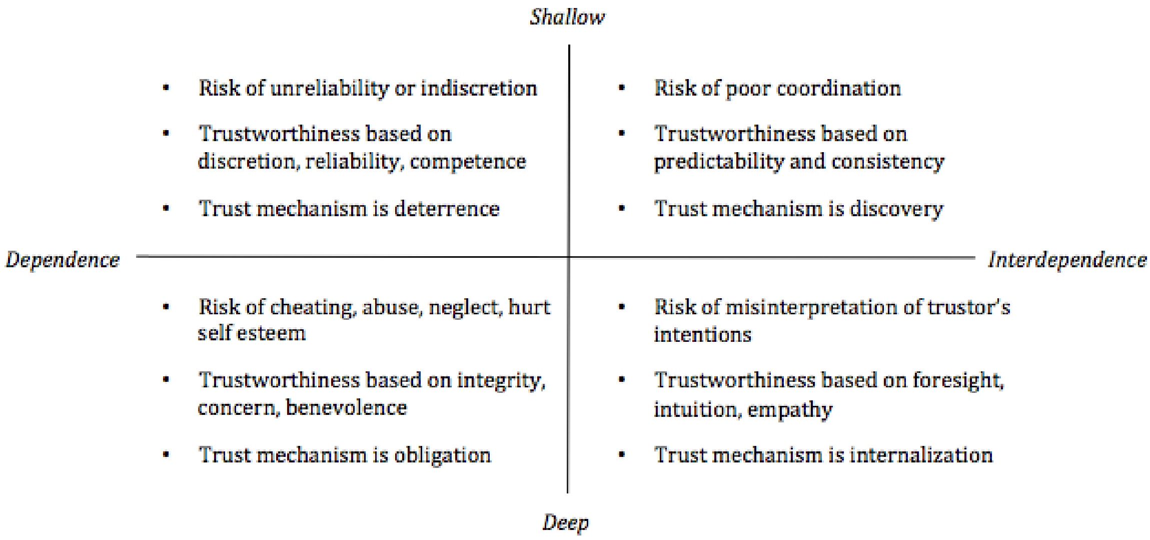
Stakeholder theory, generally held to have been launched by Freeman (1984) in his seminal book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, is based on the argument that, while managing for the benefit of *share*holders is desirable and a fiduciary responsibility, a company that pays attention to managing for all its *stake*holders, (including investors, customers, employees, suppliers, and community) is going to perform better over time. Every company is ultimately dependent on their relationships with their stakeholder groups and these relationships are not bi-lateral, but multilateral and interrelated. Building and maintaining these relationships over the long term is important for survival of the company and sustainable positive financial returns (Freeman, 1984; Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002). So understanding how to engender trust and create value with each group of stakeholders, while at the same time blending the competing interests of all the groups and sharing resources and decision-making equitably among the groups is key to success (Freeman, 1984; Parmar et al., 2010). A stakeholder approach to management is characterized by fair distribution of the value that the company creates to each stakeholder constituency along lines important to that stakeholder group, and it has been shown to create value and improve performance (Harrison, Bosse, & Phillips, 2010; Harrison & Wicks, 2013).

The stakeholder perspective is important for this research because it has been shown that the importance to the trustor of the different Mayer et al. (1995) ABI trust attributes varies with the stakeholder relationship (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Harrison & Freeman, 1999; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). Policies and actions on the part of the company will impact trusting opinions among the various stakeholder groups differently according to which of the ABI dimensions is most affected (Harrison et al., 2010; Harrison & Wicks, 2013). Understanding the nature and influencers of trust at the stakeholder level is therefore important to understanding how the consumer might the assess trustworthiness of a company.

An emerging body of work specifically addresses the intersection of the threads of stakeholder theory and organizational trust to understand the drivers of trust in different stakeholder relationships (e.g. Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007, 2011; Wicks et al., 2014). Pirson and Malhotra used as a starting point the concepts developed by Sheppard and Sherman (1998) in their Grammars of Trust model (figure 2.3). Sheppard and Sherman's (1998) theoretical model explains how risk varies by the level and depth of dependence and interdependence, and establishes that these dimensions govern trust formation, assessment of risk and trusting behaviours in interpersonal relationships. They identified two axes, dependence-interdependence, which has to do with the level of contingency on outcome (dependence) vs. active coordination towards a common goal (interdependence), and shallow-deep, which has to do with the intensity of the relationship.

In situations of shallow dependence, the main influencers of the perception of trustworthiness are discretion, reliability and competence. When the dependent relationship moves from shallow to deep dependence, trustworthiness is assessed more on the dimensions of integrity, concern and benevolence. Similarly, in cases of interdependence, the governing factors for shallow relationships are predictability and consistency, whereas for deep relationships the assessment of trustworthiness is based on foresight, intuition and empathy. This is summarized in figure 2.3 below.

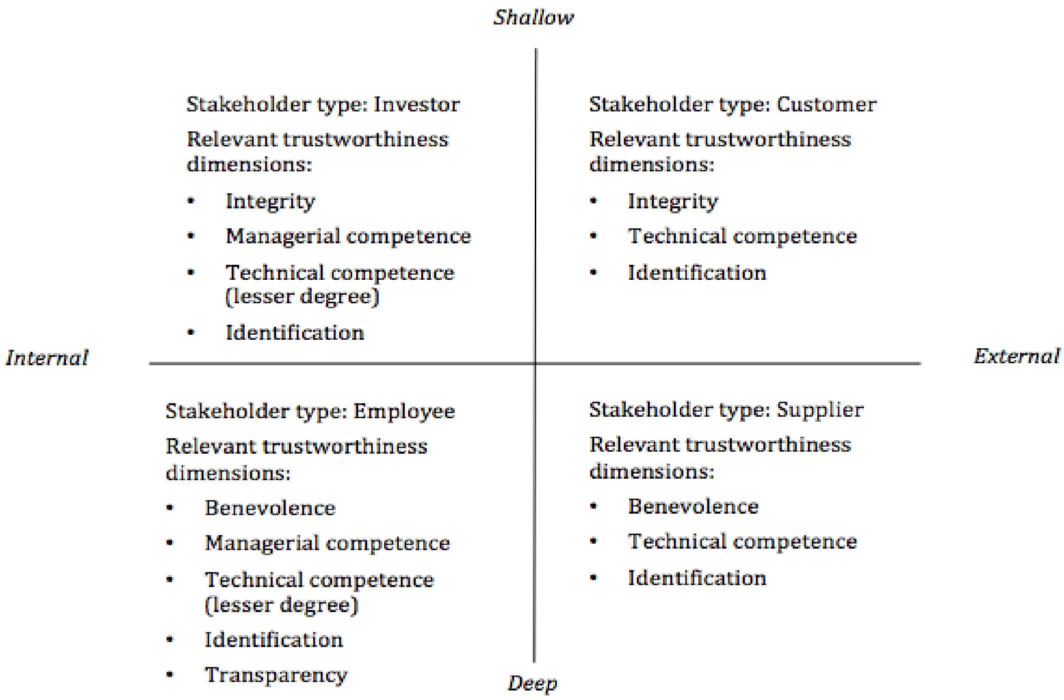
3 Figure 2.3: Partial Representation of Grammars of Trust Model
(Source: developed from Sheppard & Sherman, 1998, p.431, Table 3)



The work of Sheppard and Sherman was situated in the context of interpersonal relationships. Pirson and Malhotra (2011) took this work concerning variance by degree of relationship and applied it to trust in the context of a stakeholder/organizational relationship. They combined this notion with Mayer et al.'s (1995) ability, benevolence and integrity framework, adding a fourth dimension, identification, to account for the influence of value congruence. The pilot study of 32 semi-structured interviews across employees, customers, suppliers and investors yielded support for these dimensions, but resulted in a distinction in the ability dimension between managerial competence and technical competence. These interviews also highlighted the importance of adding transparency as a fifth dimension (Pirson & Malhotra, 2011).

In their development of a new framework in the company stakeholder relationship context, Pirson and Malhotra found that the depth axis from Sheppard and Sherman translated easily, but with regard to the dependency axis, Sheppard and Sherman's definitions would place all company stakeholder relationships towards the dependence end of the axis. Therefore, Pirson and Malhotra took as the other axis for their framework what they called 'locus' (p.1091), meaning an internal vs. external relationship, based on the stakeholder literature. The framework that resulted and which they then tested empirically through surveys shows how the relationship of the stakeholder to the company makes a difference in the way trustworthiness is assessed and trust maintained (figure 2.4) Sorting stakeholders by the intensity (depth) of the relationship and the locus of the relationship (i.e. internal vs. external), Pirson and Malhotra found that in less intense relationships (e.g. investors & customers) integrity was key to building or maintaining trust, while in more intense relationships (e.g. employees & suppliers) benevolence was key. Similarly, in internal relationships (e.g. investors and employees) managerial competence was key, while in external relationships (e.g. customers and suppliers) technical competence was key. Their study also found that transparency was only a predictor of employee trust and had no significance with the other stakeholder groups, and that identification or value-congruence was a predictor of all four relationships. This is summarized in figure 2.4 below.

4 Figure 2.4: Relevance of Trustworthiness Dimensions Across Stakeholder Types (Source: developed from Pirson & Malhotra, 2011, p.1099 figure 1, reformatted)



Pirson and Malhotra's (2011) study confirms that not all types of relationships are equally concerned about each of the ABI attributes and their stakeholder relationship to a company governs which ABI attribute is most relevant to trust formation and trusting behaviour. This is important as a basis for this research because it shows that consumers, who are in a shallow external relationship to the company, are most sensitive to integrity, technical competence and identification/value-congruence.

Building on an earlier working paper of Pirson and Malhotra's (Pirson & Malhotra, 2007), Harris and Wicks (2010) reveal that the needs of, and reasons for, the relationship itself engender different perspectives, and trust is not just governed by locus and intensity. They developed a theoretical framework that specifically looks at the ABI dimensions of competence (ability) and benevolence for four stakeholder groups: shareholders, customers, employees and (in a departure from Pirson and

Malhotra) community members, who are those in whose locality companies have physical operations. They argue that with shareholders and customers, competence rather than benevolence would be primary, though with customers the two would be fairly evenly weighted; and that with employees and community members, benevolence would be primary, though with employees the two would again be fairly evenly weighted. Thus for the consumer-stakeholder, the ABI dimensions that are important to trust of a company are integrity, technical competence and value-congruence (Pirson & Malhotra, 2007, 2011), with benevolence thought to be somewhat less important (Harris & Wicks, 2010). Gefen (2002) applied the ABI dimensions to the context of consumer trust online and found that intention to browse certain companies' offerings or make enquiries of a company (essentially online window-shopping) was influenced by trust in the company's ability, where intent to purchase was influenced by trust in the company's integrity. This indicates the importance of ability (competence) and integrity to consumer trust of companies in an online context.

In summary, taking the discussions of sections 2.3 and 2.4 together, the Mayer et al. (1995) definition of trust ("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" p.712) can be restated to contextualize it for the consumer-stakeholder relationship as follows (changes highlighted by italics):

> Trust is the willingness of a *consumer, through their purchases as a customer,* to be vulnerable to the actions of *a company* based on the expectation that the *company* will *demonstrate technical competence and integrity, congruent with the*

values important to the consumer, irrespective of the *consumer's* ability to monitor or control *the company.*

This modification adapts the Mayer et al. definition to incorporate the stakeholder trust work to focus the definition specifically on the trust dimensions that govern the consumer-stakeholder relationship. It does this by substituting consumer-company specific language for trustor-trustee general language, through including the consumer's expectations of the company using the terminology emerging from the stakeholder literature, and by adding in the reference to the act of trust, namely the purchase of goods and services from a company.

The next section addresses the nature of consumer trust. This section draws on typologies in the interpersonal and organizational trust literature and connects them back to the discussion in sections 2.3 and 2.4.

2.5 The Nature of Consumer Trust

Consumer trust is the trust by an individual of an impersonal corporate entity, and therefore it appears to reside in the space between interpersonal trust and organizational trust, drawing on elements from both types of trust. This section shows how literature from the study of interpersonal trust and of organizational trust can be applied to the context of consumer trust. The typologies in the interpersonal and organizational literature discussed here overlap, but they don't quite align, as elements are grouped differently by researchers. To add to the complexity, in some cases researchers have attributed different meanings to the same terms within their classifications.

This section discusses papers from the interpersonal and organizational trust literature which, together, offer insights into shape to the nature of consumer trust by providing typological frameworks for understanding trust in their respective disciplines that can be interpreted for consumer trust. These papers base their typological frameworks on the processes through which trust is formed.

2.5.1 Relevant typologies of interpersonal trust

The two key papers on interpersonal trust that provide a basis for understanding the nature of consumer trust as it pertains to this research are the work of Lewis and Weigert (1985) and the work of Lewicki and Bunker (1995). The former is important because the typology aligns with the three components of attitude that govern consumer behaviour. The latter is important not only with regard to understanding the nature of consumer trust of companies, but also in helping to establish the context for understanding the potential influence of the interpersonal trust between friends communicating on the social net.

Lewis and Weigert's (1985) work is based on the work of Luhmann (1979) and describes three types of trust, cognitive, emotional and behavioural. According to Lewis and Weigert, these three bases for trust are present in all relationships of trust, though the balance between them can vary causing one or other to be dominant. For them, trust has "distinct cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions which are merged into a unitary social experience" (p.969). These are inextricably linked and experienced together. These three bases for trust are relevant to this research on consumer trust because they correspond to the three components of attitude that govern consumer behaviour, the cognitive, the affective and the behavioural (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016). Moreover, the theory of Attitude Component Consistency, which states that any change in one of these components will effect change in the other two (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016), supports the argument that these three are inextricably linked.

Cognitive trust, as defined by Lewis and Weigert, is based on rational evaluation, but it goes beyond the limit of where rational evaluation can go [see also McAllister's (1995) cognition-based trust]. They argue that a certain amount of knowledge of the other party is necessary for trust to exist. If there is no knowledge, then subjecting oneself to the actions of another is a gamble not an act of trust. If there could be complete knowledge (omniscience), then the decision would be one of rational choice not trust. Cognitive trust is therefore that element that bridges the gap between partial knowledge and the decision to act. In the context of this research on consumer trust, cognitive trust could describe the type of trust that results from reports seen on online about a company's reputation. Consumers might evaluate the knowledge that these reports provide on the company's technical competence, integrity and value congruence, and form trusting opinions from them based on a rational and cognitive process of evaluation. If this evaluation is positive, the consumer might then manifest their trust by making a purchase.

Emotional trust is described by Lewis and Weigert (1985) as complementary to cognitive trust, not an alternative to it. It also helps to bridge the gap or can even override some cognitive elements that might otherwise inhibit action. This basis for trust is grounded in the emotional attachment that exists between the parties. The human disinclination to suffer the pain that damage to this emotional attachment would cause is the governing mechanism in emotional trust (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). This basis for trust is considered by Lewis and Weigert to be considerably more prevalent in interpersonal relationships [see also McAllister's (1995) affect-based trust]. Emotional trust is likely to be important to this research because consumers have been found to rely more on emotion than rational evaluation in making the decision to trust, especially when conditions of risk are higher (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007). Moreover, consumer brand loyalty has been linked to affective bases for trust, such as brand identification, brand comfort and brand delight (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016). When consumers are brand loyal, the emotional considerations that support that trust can override the cognitive ones, resulting in continued trust even when adverse circumstances provide cognitive reasons that rationally should reduce trust and loyalty (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007).

Finally, behavioural trust "should be conceptualized as situationally activated cognitive and/or emotional trust" (Lewis and Weigert, 1985, p.977). They say it is not a type of trust independent of the other two, but rather "the constitutive medium for doing trust" (Lewis and Weigert, 1985, p.977). As acts of trust occur, the results are assessed both cognitively and emotionally, and this assessment changes the level of cognitive or emotional trust, which in turn affects the willingness to act on that trust again. Thus, the constitutive properties of behavioural trust influence cognitive and emotional trust. The relevance of behavioural trust to this research is through the consumer experience. Prior experience informs cognitive and emotional perceptions of that company which result in increased trust or distrust (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007; Johnson & Grayson, 2005). In addition to a consumer's personal experience, when consumers report their experiences on their social networks, these reports may influence the trust of others in their networks. In this way, reported instances of behavioural trust may change a consumer's level of cognitive or emotional trust of a company, even though their experience of the trust act was only vicarious in nature. Research into these bases for trust, the cognitive, affective and behavioural, in an online context has confirmed that for e-commerce the assessment of trustworthiness is governed in part by affective elements, such as corporate reputation, in part by cognitive elements, such as quality of information, privacy and security, and in part by situational elements such as prior experience with the company and the consumer's own disposition to trust (D. J. Kim, Ferrin, & Rao, 2008). Thus, this typology appears relevant to the formation of consumer trust of companies online.

Lewicki and Bunker (1995) identified three different kinds of trust in interpersonal relationships, calculus-based trust, knowledge-based trust and identification-based trust. Lewicki and Bunker understand trust as having a dynamically evolving nature progressing through three types of trust over time (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006). Trust for them evolves from a calculus basis for trust, to a knowledge basis, to an identification basis. In the process of this evolution, Lewicki and Bunker argue that trust transitions readily from a calculus basis in the early stages, to a knowledge basis as the experience of trusting unfolds, but only a few relationships mature to the identification basis for trust. Even as this evolution occurs, elements of the lower levels can continue after the transition to a higher level.

Lewicki and Bunker (1995) define calculus-based trust as an economic cost-benefit analysis of preserving or violating the trust within the relationship. It is a transactional type of trust that evaluates the positive as well as the negative. The case has been made that this type of trust is not really trust at all since it has its foundation in distrust and rational cost-benefit analysis, therefore there is no positive expectation involving uncertainty (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006). Knowledge-based trust is described as grounded in the knowledge the trustor has of the trustee, and thus the level to which the trustor can have confidence that their knowledge of the trustee will accurately predict outcome. Predictability is a key component of knowledge-based trust as defined by Lewicki and Bunker (1995). These first two bases for trust are similar to Lewis and Weigert's (1995) cognitive trust, depending on rational evaluation of available information. As such they may have relevance to consumer assessment of company trustworthiness on matters of technical competence and integrity. Lastly, identification-based trust is grounded in a deep mutual understanding between the parties to the trust, such that each knows and understands the other's desires and intentions, and can be confident that each knows the interests of the other. This type of trust therefore appears to align more with the affective bases for trust, described by Lewis and Weigert (1995) as emotional trust, and thus may have relevance to consumer assessment of company trustworthiness on matters of value congruence. This type of trust is also important to this research because of the potential for influence on consumer trust of the nature of the trust between the friends on the social net. Where tie strength between the friends is weaker, that trust may be only at the knowledge-based stage of Lewicki and Bunker's evolution of interpersonal trust, but where tie strength is strong it may have evolved to the identification-based stage. These different levels of interpersonal trust between the friends may have impact on whether consumers engage with information on the social net and how they interpret it. This is discussed further in Chapter 3 section 4.

2.5.2 Relevant typologies of organizational trust

Zucker's (1986) typology that introduces the concept of institutional-based trust, and Rousseau et al.'s (1998) paper that attempts to combine prior discussions on the nature of trust in order to develop a more comprehensive typology of trust, provide insights into the nature of trust in an impersonal context.

Zucker (1986) discusses three types of trust: process-based, character-based and institutional-based. Process-based trust is tied to a transactional exchange and is dependent, therefore, on the fulfilment of that exchange. It is also dependent on knowledge and information about the company, specifically including reputation (Zucker, 1986). Reputation and stereotypes have been shown to be antecedents to trust (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998), and can influence consumer assessment of trustworthiness on perceptions of competence, integrity, and value congruence (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Mayer et al., 1995; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). Companies develop reputations and trust of their brands based on their past performance. This provides information to the trustor in their decision to trust on the next occasion of exchange. Moreover, the experiential component of process-based trust does not have to be first hand. Process-based trust can form based on second-hand information (Zucker, 1986). This is important as a context for this research since it supports the trust derived from the consumer's direct experience, as well as the trust derived from corporate reputation and reported experiences on the social net.

Zucker (1986) also describes a form of interpersonal trust she calls character-based trust which is tied to the individual. Zucker describes this type of trust as dependent on the characteristics of the individual as a person and on the interpersonal cultural alignment between trustor and trustee. Zucker argues that character-based trust does not need much information beyond what she calls "social similarity" (p.61). Such trust is attribute-based (Sitkin & Roth, 1993) and has shared elements with Lewicki and Bunker's (1995) identification-based trust. Character-based trust does not appear to be as relevant to the nature of consumer trust as process-based trust. However, like Lewicki and Bunker's (1995) concept of identification-based trust, character-based trust could relate to consumer trust in regard to brand identification, and the assessment dimension of value-congruence (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). Since character-based trust is very relevant to interpersonal trust, it could also provide a basis for trust between friends on the social net and thus potentially impact consumer trust through trust of friend.

In addition to these two forms of trust that are based on knowledge, information or personal identity, Zucker introduces institutional-based trust which she argues is tied to social structures such as professional or regulatory institutions and is dependent on the generally universal application of the rules or guidelines for interaction that govern those institutions. Zucker's identification of institutional-based trust as a new construct arises from her study of the changes in business and economic activity that came about at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, as a result of improvements in technology, faster communications and the consequent expansion of business networks. In earlier times, the thick relationships between parties to commercial transactions mitigated the exposure to this vulnerability by providing a solid foundation in process-based and character-based trust to assess it (Cook & Schilke, 2010, 2014; Zucker, 1986). However, with the industrial revolution relationships became thinner as transactions became more global and more automated.

Thus, universal rules and guidelines were needed to supply a structure to replace the foundation provided before by the process-based and character-based trust of the thick relationships (Cook & Schilke, 2010, 2014; Rousseau et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986). This in turn gave rise to institutional-based trust which develops as a result of the institutional structure for regulation and mitigation of vulnerability (Rousseau et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986). This type of trust is relevant to consumer trust of companies today in that the institutional framework that regulates trade and commerce provides for mutual understanding and norms of operation which can reduce consumer concerns regarding their vulnerability in the relationship.

Rousseau et al. (1998) introduced a variation on this typology reclassifying some of the elements attempting to combine the economist view on trust (calculation and transaction based) with the psychologist view (attribute and personality based) and the view of the sociologists (socially embedded in relationships) to derive a more comprehensive typology that spans disciplines (Rousseau et al., 1998). They discuss four different types of trust which they call calculus-based trust, relational trust, institutional trust and deterrence-based trust.

Calculus-based trust is based on rational analysis of available data as input to the decision to trust. These data can be derived from the constitutive process of trusting in limited exchanges and evaluating results, and also on reputation or certification. Such trust is a very context specific and limited form of trust that is dependent on having enough knowledge to make a calculus on the risk and return of each exchange. Calculus-based trust relates to Zucker's process-based trust, but also shares elements with Lewis and Weigert's (1985) concepts of cognitive trust (derived from rational evaluation) and behavioural trust (derived from experiential evaluation), along with

Lewicki and Bunker's (1995) calculus-based trust (the economic cost-benefit analysis of the transaction) and knowledge-based trust (the predictability of outcome based on knowledge of the trustee). The relevance of calculus-based trust to consumer trust and to this research lies in the cognitive evaluation of a company's trustworthiness based on knowledge and information obtained either through personal experience or through reported experiences and shared information on the social net.

Relational trust is based on the personal relationship the trustor has with the trustee, being governed by information and the emotional commitment that arises from that relationship. Since this type of trust requires that a relationship exist, it is more common in interpersonal relationships and less possible where the relationship between the parties is transactional and impersonal in nature. Relational trust relates in part to Zucker's character-based trust, but also includes some of the elements of Lewis and Weigert's (1985) emotional trust (derived from the closeness of the emotional bond) and Lewicki and Bunker's identification-based trust (derived from a deep mutual understanding of the other's desires and intentions). This type of trust is rooted in emotional connection and relationship and is based on shared values, serving to facilitate trust in absence of other information (Sekhon et al., 2014). As such, it is relevant to this research in situations where the consumer relationship with the brand is based on affective reasons. This can be the case, for example, with brand loyalty and brand identification, when consumers may be making judgements based on value-congruence or self-concept (see discussion above in section 2.5.1). Ring (1996), who considers this type of trust 'resilient trust' (p.155) says that this type of trust will survive friction and allows for deeper, longer interactions, since it rises above context or situation and is based instead on relationship. In the context of consumer trust of companies, brand loyalty functions in much the same way, allowing for deeper, longer associations and helping to insulate against friction (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007). Therefore, this type of trust is also helpful in explaining the nature of consumer trust by providing context regarding how loyalty and brand identification influence consumer trust.

Like Zucker (1986), Rousseau et al. (1998) identify system-based forms of trust that have arisen to support and govern the transactions of trade and commerce. In this they make a distinction between institutional-based trust and what they call deterrence-based trust. Deterrence-based trust is trust based on contractual obligations with high negative consequences for betrayal. This they dismiss as a type of trust since the element of contractual control reduces the risk of a negative outcome for the trustor by involving a threat of repercussions for the trustee if the trust is betrayed or abused. This renders unnecessary the need for trust because it ensures a satisfactory outcome (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; Rousseau et al., 1998).

Drawing on Zucker (1986), institutional trust for Rousseau et al. is a form of support for trust creation and development based in the socially created institutions that support and regulate exchange between individuals and organizations. Institution-based trust is not trust in the institution itself, but rather trust formed within, and as a result of, the context and structure that the institution provides (Rousseau et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986). First hand interactions or personal encounters between parties are not necessary for trust that is institution-based to develop and to function (Bachmann & Inkpen, 2011; Rousseau et al., 1998; Zucker, 1986). Thus, as with Zucker, this type of trust is relevant to consumer trust by providing a mutually understood context for commercial transactional exchange, and has likely become more important with the rise of e-commerce and online buy/sell sites such as e-Bay (Botsman, 2018). While this type of trust does help to provide context for consumer trust, it is not as relevant to this research.

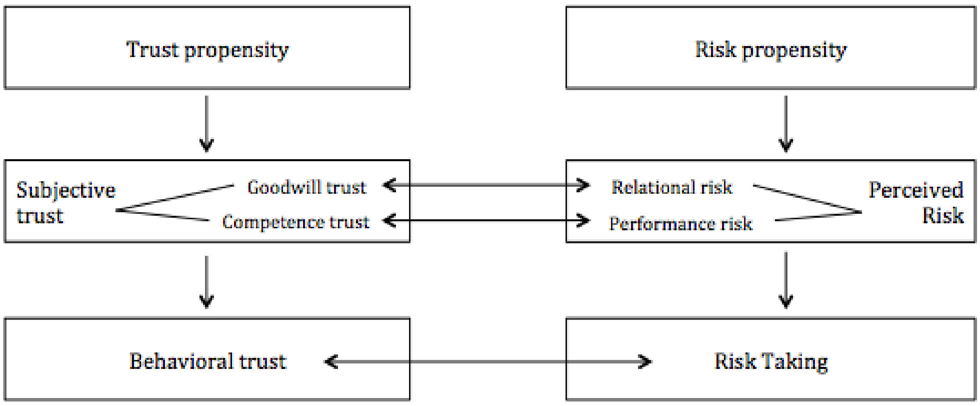
2.5.3 The relationship of trust and risk

Vulnerability is an essential condition of trust, deriving from the lack of control over the risk that the other party will not fulfil the expectations of the trustor (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). This element of risk is integrally bound up with trust, and the assessment of whether the trustee will deliver on the trustor's expectations is part of what defines the trustworthiness of the trustee (Das & Teng, 2004, 2001; Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). While trust is an action relating to the trustor, trustworthiness relates to the trustee and incorporates the expectation that the trustee will act in a certain way but without certainty that this will be the case (Hardin, 2002; Mayer et al., 1995; Sekhon et al., 2014). This uncertainty, the risk that the expectation might not be fulfilled, is what separates trust from rational choice (Bachmann, 2001). If there were no risk, the decision to act would be a matter of rational choice. The outcome would be known and the need for trust would not be necessary (Bachmann, 2001).

If trust is not equivalent to rational choice, then for a person to be willing to trust another party (in this case a company) and assume the risk of dependence, that person must make some level of assessment of the trustworthiness of the other party. Das and Teng (2004) developed a conceptual framework to explain this notion of trustworthiness in terms of the relationship between trust and risk. They base their concept on 'subjective trust' (p.95), which they separate from both the antecedents to trust (personality and context) and the outcome of trust (the trust act). They take as their definition of subjective trust the definition by Sitkin and Roth (1993, p.398) that trust is "a belief, attitude, or expectation concerning the likelihood that the actions or outcomes of another individual, group or organization will be acceptable or will serve the actor's interests" (quoted in Das and Teng, 2004, p. 95). In contrast to the definition of trust adopted for this research, this defines trust as the disposition to trust, rather than an act of trust. Nevertheless, the Das & Teng (2004) framework of trust and risk is relevant to this research because of the alignment with the trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Mayer et al., 1995; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011).

In the Das & Teng (2004) model, the risk aspect of the framework aligns with the trust aspect of the framework such that subjective trust corresponds to perceived risk. Das and Teng identify two sub-dimensions of subjective trust that correspond with the two sub-dimensions of perceived risk (see reproduction of the model below in figure 2.5).

5 Figure 2.5: Framework of Trust and Risk (Source: Das & Teng, 2004, p. 97, figure 1)



Goodwill trust results from an affective assessment of the relational risk based on the perception by the trustor of the trustee's willingness to act in accordance with the expectations of the trustor (Das & Teng, 2004). In the depersonalized context of consumer trust, the company might not know of a given individual consumer's existence independently from the market segment they represent. Nevertheless, it is in the company's interests to act in accordance with the normal expectations of its customers in order to develop a loyal base (Hannah, Treen, Pitt, & Berthon, 2016). Failure to do so may negatively impact consumer assessment of the company's trustworthiness due to lack of integrity, one of the key dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011).

The second sub-dimension of subjective trust in Das and Teng's (2004) model is competence trust, which results from a cognitive assessment of the performance risk associated with the trustee's potential ability or inability to fulfil the expectations of the trustor. This type of trust and associated risk may well have significant influence on the consumer's assessment of the company's trustworthiness as technical competence is a key dimension on which consumers assess trustworthiness (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). In some cases the lack of performance could be due to a situation outside the trustee's control (Das & Teng, 2004). In these cases, the way in which the company handles that situation may affect the consumer's perceptions of integrity or value-congruence as well as competence, also key assessment dimensions for consumers (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). This line of discussion is developed further in Chapter 3 when discussing the specific basis in the literature for the research questions.

2.5.4 Summary of nature of consumer trust

In summary, consumer trust is a form of trust that describes the relationship between an individual and a company or brand. As such, its nature draws on elements of both interpersonal trust and organizational trust. Consumer trust that is based in brand identification and brand loyalty appears to have roots in the nature of interpersonal trust, governed more by the influence of emotion and identification (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Sekhon et al., 2014). Conversely, consumer trust that is based on performance appears to have roots more in the nature of organizational trust, governed more by the influence of calculation and process, supported by the institutions and systems that surround it (Rousseau et al., 1998; Sekhon et al., 2014; Zucker, 1986). Thus, the nature of consumer trust, which is trust by an individual in an impersonal entity, appears to be a hybrid that sits between interpersonal trust and organizational trust. The review of interpersonal trust, in addition to defining the nature of consumer trust, also provides relevant context for understanding how the trust between friends might influence consumer trust through communications on the social net.

The relationship of trust to risk articulated through the work of Das and Teng (2004) appears to connect the nature of consumer trust to the stakeholder literature on consumer assessment of company trustworthiness (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011). Goodwill trust relating to relational risk appears to support the consumer's evaluation of trustworthiness on the integrity dimension, while competence trust relating to performance risk appears to support the evaluation of trustworthiness on the technical competence dimension (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2011).

The four conditions of trust outlined in section 2.3, namely an act between two parties, favourable outcome for trustor, vulnerability, and risk, are all central to the understanding of consumer trust. These conditions are represented in the Mayer et al. (1995) definition of trust, making it an appropriate definition to use for this research. Additionally, the typologies discussed, while different in their configuration, nevertheless all relate to the core principles of consumer trust, namely the evaluation of the cognitive, affective and behavioural elements of trust to assess company competence, integrity and value-congruence.

In order for consumers to trust a company they first need to assess the trustworthiness of the company. The next section discusses the influence of corporate reputation on consumer assessment of trustworthiness. As discussed above, a company's reputation is one of the important sources of knowledge in the formation of consumer trust. This is particularly relevant to this research as reported experiences and reported corporate behaviour shared on online social networks could have significant influence on consumer assessment of corporate trustworthiness and thus on consumer trust. Research has shown that trustworthiness is a key mediator between the dimensions that are antecedent to trust for consumers and the formation of cognitive or affective trust (Sekhon et al., 2014). Therefore, a discussion of the corporate reputation factors on which consumers assess corporate trustworthiness is important to this research.

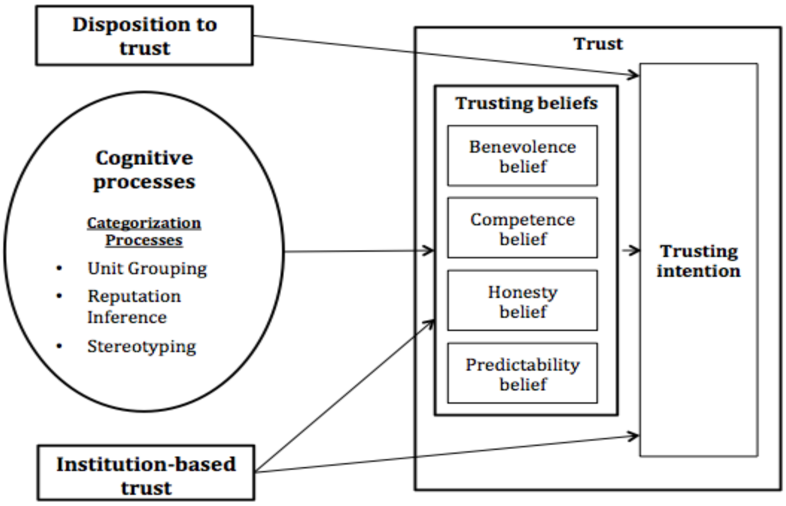
2.6 Corporate Reputation Factors Important to Consumer Trust

Consumers assess corporate trustworthiness primarily through direct experience of products and services and through reputation derived from reported experiences (Helm, 2007; Puncheva-Michelotti & Michelotti, 2010; Xingyuan, Li, & Wei, 2010). Reputation acts as a point of entry into the trusting process for consumer-stakeholders as well as other stakeholders (McKnight et al., 1998; Puncheva, 2008). A company's reputation also impacts consumer loyalty and product decision-making, (e.g. Argenti, 2014; Helm, 2007; Helm & Tolsdorf, 2013; Shamma & Hassan, 2009; Sichtmann, 2007) and determines consumer advocacy (Petrokaite & Stravinskiene, 2013). Therefore, it is important for this research to understand the role of corporate reputation in consumer trust and how consumers assess corporate reputation. This section considers in more detail how such trust develops and how the social net might have influence over the process.

McKnight, Cumming and Chervaney (1998) looked at the question of what antecedent factors, in the initial stage of the formation of trust, governed the development of trusting beliefs. Building on the ABI framework of Mayer et al. (1995), they identified three groups of antecedent influences in the formation of trusting beliefs, a Disposition to Trust, Cognitive Processes, and Institution-based Trust (McKnight et al., 1998). The Cognitive Processes group consists of three categorization processes. These are Unit Grouping (which they define as placing others in the same category as oneself and therefore relates to value congruence), Reputation Inference (which they define as forming beliefs based on second hand information) and Stereotyping (which they define as forming beliefs based on the reputation inference of the group in which the potential trustee is placed). Their work has been proven empirically in both organizational and e-commerce contexts (McKnight & Chervaney, 2006).

Figure 2.6 below offers a simplified version of McKnight et al.'s (1998) model with an expanded section on the cognitive processes in order to detail the sub-elements included in their discussion of the model that are relevant to this research. In this model, the Benevolence Beliefs relate to Mayer et al.'s (1995) Benevolence dimension, the Competence Beliefs relate to Mayer et al.'s Ability dimension, and the Honesty Beliefs relate to Mayer et al.'s Integrity dimension. McKnight et al. (1998) also include Predictability Belief as a fourth in the list of Trusting Beliefs, which Mayer et al. (1995) explicitly reject in their discussion, but implicitly allude to in their definition with the use of the word 'expectation' (p.712).

6 Figure 2.6: McKnight et al.'s 1998 Model of Initial Formation Trust (p.476, figure 2) simplified and adapted to show cognitive processes relevant to this research



A company's reputation in general is a composite of all stakeholder opinions (Argenti, 2014; Helm, 2007). However, for the consumer-stakeholder, corporate reputation and thus their trust of a company and intent to purchase is shown to be strongly related to their own experience with the company and its products and services, or the reports of others about their experiences (Hajli et al., 2014; Sichtmann, 2007; Xingyuan et al., 2010). The corporate reputation literature has identified the corporate reputation factors important to consumers as quality and value of products and services, credibility of advertising claims, customer orientation, and commitment to the environment and to the workplace for employees (Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). These are discussed further in chapter 3.

Customers have been found to have considerable impact on the views of other consumers concerning corporate reputation (B. Choi & Lee, 2017; Matook, Brown, & Rolf, 2015). Not all customer relationships have the same information at their disposal by which to make an assessment. Three sub-relationships of consumer-stakeholders have been identified in the research, those in a personalized customer relationship, those in a depersonalized customer relationship and those who are potential customers but are at present not in a direct relationship (Sichtmann, 2007). This distinction is important because the differences in their relationship mean that they have different ways of assessing the trustworthiness of a company (Shamma & Hassan, 2009; Sichtmann, 2007).

Consumers in a personalized customer relationship, have a direct relationship with the company or a representative of the company (Sichtmann, 2007). This means that interpersonal dynamics of trust formation may apply. An interpersonal relationship of trust with a sales representative, for example, can project onto trust of the company through the assessment of integrity and technical competence represented by the behaviour of the sales representative (Kroeger, 2012). Alternatively, an interpersonal relationship of trust with a company owner can result in a positive assessment of trustworthiness through perceptions of integrity and competence, as well as through perceptions of value congruence, especially when strengthened by cultural ties (Altinay, Saunders, & Wang, 2014). Thus, interpersonal relationships for those in a personalized customer relationship can be strong influencers on consumer trust of a company. Moreover, these individual relationships with members of the company provide a basis for forming an assessment of trustworthiness that is "stronger, quicker and more confident" (Palmatier et al., 2006, p.141) than when consumers are assessing the company as a group entity. Since those in such a direct relationship with the company are existing customers, they already have experience with the brand, the company and its products or services, which has been found to be the dominant source of information on corporate reputation for existing customers (Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). This group is less central to the research aim of this research study, since their source of information for assessment of trustworthiness is direct and personal, and therefore, I contend, less susceptible to statements affecting corporate reputation that come to them through the social net.

A depersonalized customer relationship, on the other hand, appears more likely to offer more opportunity for the opinions of others on the social net potentially to influence trust through corporate reputation. A customer in a depersonalized relationship is likely to be customer of a company who mass markets their products (Sichtmann, 2007), and so this type of relationship is, I submit, characterized more by corporate communications that are uni-directional and impersonal, such as advertising. This type of customer is generally not interacting personally with individuals in the company, and so must therefore form an assessment of corporate reputation on other dimensions. Their primary source of information for assessment of trustworthiness is experience with the products and services the company offers, since they are likewise existing customers (Shamma & Hassan, 2009; Sichtmann, 2007). However, they also obtain information from other sources such as reports in the traditional media and word-of-mouth (Shamma & Hassan, 2009; Xingyuan et al., 2010).

Lastly, there is the group of people who are potential customers. This group is important because they represent future growth potential. Potential customers are not yet in a consumer-stakeholder relationship with a company, and so their assessment of the company's trustworthiness must depend on the company's reputation. This reputation is likely to be formed in part through word-of-mouth reports from others who are in a consumer-stakeholder relationship with that company and in part through traditional media (Shamma & Hassan, 2009; Sichtmann, 2007; Xingyuan et al., 2010). More generalized assessments of trustworthiness based on reports of such criteria as consideration for the environment, treatment of employees, and social responsibility towards the community are also likely to have an impact (Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). This group could be the most susceptible to influence from reports on the social net. Table 2.1 below summarizes the differences between these three groups in terms of the type of relationship they have to the company, the dominant basis for assessment of trustworthiness, the source of information for the assessment and the resulting likely level of susceptibility to outside influence.

1 Table 2.1: Customer Relationship Summary

	Personalized customers	Depersonalized customers	Potential Customers
Type of relationship	• Manifest-Direct • Individual to individual representative of company	• Manifest-Indirect • Individual to impersonal corporate entity	• Latent • Not yet in relationship but not opposed
Dominant basis for assessment of trustworthy-ness	• Personal relationship with company representative • Experience of products and services	• Experience of products and services • Reputation	• Reputation • Stereotypes

Source of information for making assessment	• Company representative • Experience of products and services • Company's customer orientation	• Experience of products and services • Company's customer orientation • Traditional media • Word-of-mouth	• Traditional media • Word-of-mouth
Likely level of susceptibility to outside influence	• Low	• Medium	• High

As discussed above, consumers in depersonalized or potential relationships obtain the information to make these assessments through the traditional media, and word-of-mouth or the opinion of others (Botsman, 2018; Chari, Christodoulides, Presi, Wenhold, & Casaletto, 2016; Shamma & Hassan, 2009; Xingyuan et al., 2010). Thus, with the rise of social media and the social net as major factors in communication, there is opportunity for users of such platforms to influence the trusting opinions of other consumers by sharing their experiences, opinions, biases or grudges with each other across the networks (Botsman, 2018; Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, & Malinen, 2015). There is empirical evidence that opinions of other consumers do impact loyalty and trust, both positively (e.g. Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007) and negatively (e.g. Schultz & Block, 2012). Furthermore, engagement with the brand in online social networks has been shown to help build trust and maintain loyalty (Zheng, Cheung, Lee, & Liang, 2015) and strong trust of a brand or company can protect against the effects of single-instance negative experiences (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007). In contrast, other research has found that a pre-existing positive reputation may not shield a company from erosion to customer loyalty due to negative reports of a corporate crisis as much as previously thought, since expectations for that company are higher (Helm & Tolsdorf, 2013). Thus, it is important to understand how the mechanisms of social networks could be influencing the assessment of company trustworthiness, thereby potentially impacting consumer trust of companies both positively and negatively (see discussion in Chapter 3 for how this relates to the specific research question for this research).

2.7 Relevant literature regarding online trust

This research aims to explore the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies, and as such it draws on both the online trust literature and the social media marketing literature. The threads of the literature on online trust and social media marketing that are relevant to this research are discussed in detail in Chapter 3 during the development of the context for Research Question 2. Online trust is a large and growing area of research. Even just within the part of the literature that has to do with consumer behaviour there is now a substantial body of work. However, a large portion of this literature is not directly relevant to the focus of this research study. The brief discussion that follows covers only a broad view of the landscape in order to situate the relevant threads within the broader context of the research field, and to establish boundary conditions on what literature is not within the scope of this research.

Much of the online trust literature is in the context of the role of trust and its impact on purchase intent in the transactional exchange of e-commerce (e.g. Grabner-Kräuter & Kaluscha, 2003; McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Some threads investigate the distinction between trust of vendor, trust of system and trust of third party certification (e.g. McCole et al., 2010; McKnight et al., 2002), and have found, for example, that trust in the company and trust in the institution of the web are antecedent factors that significantly influence a consumer's intent to take advice, share information or purchase from a company online (McKnight et al., 2002). Other research threads look into other trust factors that impact purchase intent such as privacy and security concerns (e.g. McCole et al., 2010), website design and engagement tools (e.g. Ahn et al., 2007; Weisberg et al., 2011), and the impact of trust cues communicated through websites (e.g. Bauman, 2014; Weisberg et al., 2011) and how this impact might vary by culture (e.g. Bauman, 2014; Gefen & Heart, 2006). Recent related research into information-rich websites found that viewers' confidence in themselves was more statistically significant and had a stronger correlation to purchase than either trust in the site itself or trust in other reviewers who had left reviews on the site (Duffy, 2017).

Similarly, much of the online literature regarding consumers and companies has a strong focus on the role of social networks in reaching target consumers and persuading them to make purchases online (Stephen, 2016). A large segment of this literature is devoted to social media marketing, which, for example, has contributed to our understanding of how marketers can stimulate posts and 'likes' on social media (e.g. de Vries et al., 2012), or how different elements of the marketing mix influence online viral propagation (e.g. Feng & Papatla, 2011). There is considerable attention paid in the research literature to the value and use of company pages on channels such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to build brand loyalty and brand equity (e.g. Schultz & Block, 2012; Zheng, Cheung, Lee, & Liang, 2015). Research has compared social media channels to discover how brand-related user-generated content differs between them (e.g. Phua, Jin, & Kim, 2017; Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012), which has revealed that Twitter is high in brand centrality, Facebook high in opinion vs. fact, and YouTube high in promotional self-presentation (Smith et al., 2012). Recently the study of social commerce has emerged as an area of strong interest (e.g. Hajli, 2015; Hajli, Sims, Zadeh, & Richard, 2017; Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011). The study of trust and influences in virtual communities, including brand communities, has also received considerable attention (e.g. B. Kim & Han, 2009; Y. A. Kim & Ahmad, 2013).

This study is concerned with online trust, online social networks and consumer behaviour only as they relate to the influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumers trust of companies. There is little in the literature with regard to how the specific mechanisms of the social net, namely the ability to share, tag, 'like', link and comment on information, function in influencing consumer trust of companies, especially from the receiver's perspective. However, some aspects of the threads mentioned above are relevant and have been pulled into the discussion in Chapter 3. These include social commerce, trust in online communities, the influences of online viral propagation, as well as trust of online sources. Additionally, some of the online marketing literature is helpful in understanding how the mechanisms of the social net are used. These threads are all discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

2.8 Summary and Proposed Contribution of this Research

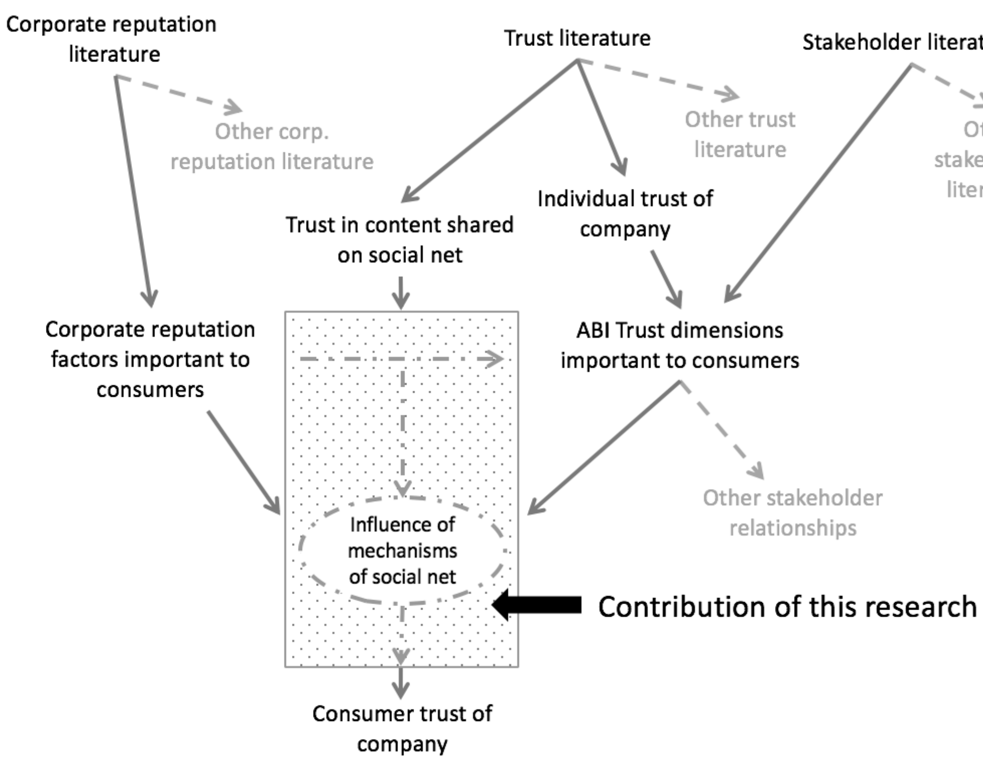
In summary, there is a substantial body of work on trust that looks at what it is, what it does, how it is formed, and in this body of work are many different descriptions of the dimensions of trust along with many definitions of trust. The overall aim of this research is to explore the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies. To achieve this, the research looks at trust between individuals and companies formed in a socialized context on the social net, using the definition of Mayer et al. (1995) and their Integrated Model of Organizational Trust based on the Ability, Benevolence and Integrity dimensions as a foundation. In the stakeholder specific literature, as discussed above, the trust dimensions based on this model that are most important to the consumer-stakeholder relationship are integrity and ability (technical competence), along with value-congruence (identification) (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007). Consumers assess the trustworthiness of companies on these dimensions on the basis of experience and reports about products and services, credibility in advertising, customer orientation and commitment to the environment and employees (Helm, 2005, 2007; Puncheva-Michelotti & Michelotti, 2010). Word-of-mouth has been shown to shape corporate reputation on these criteria (Shamma & Hassan, 2009; Sichtmann, 2007; Xingyuan et al., 2010). Thus, it is one of the sources of influence on the formation or destruction of consumer trust.

With the advent of the social net, the reach and frequency of word-of-mouth communication has been amplified exponentially (Botha & Reyneke, 2013; Luarn, Yang, & Chiu, 2014), creating the potential for significant impact on consumer trust of companies owing to individuals sharing links, posting, commenting etc. on matters important to consumers. Yet little research has been done to integrate the corporate reputation literature with the stakeholder trust literature on consumer trust and to understand how the mechanisms of the social net that are being used to communicate information on corporate reputation might be influencing the formation or destruction of consumer trust from the receiver's perspective. Hence the aim of this research:

> **To explore the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies.**

The next chapter establishes two research questions that relate to this research aim and which, when answered, provide the contribution of this research. The first research question seeks to investigate an empirical connection between the corporate reputation factors that impact consumer trust and the dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness. This is an important step in understanding the influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust since much of the content on the social net that might have influence on consumer trust likely relates to the corporate reputation factors important to consumers.   The second research questions then seeks to contribute to the understanding of how the mechanisms of the social net used to report on and share corporate reputation content might influence the assessment of company trustworthiness from the receiver's perspective.   Figure 2.7 below offers a visual representation of the contribution of this research to the trust literature.

7 Figure 2.7: Diagram showing contribution of this research to the trust literature



CHAPTER 3: CONSUMER TRUST OF COMPANIES AND THE INFLUENCE OF FACEBOOK MECHANISMS THEORETICAL MODEL AND RESEARCH FOCUS

3.1 Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st century, accelerated by the rise of mobile technologies, the Internet has become an interactive space in which consumers of content become generators of content and where open sharing of ideas, comments and perspectives between consumers is the norm (Hsueh et al., 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). In addition to creating and uploading content themselves, users share links to content created by other users, companies or news agencies. Such content can be shared directly between friends through comments or posts, sometimes being tagged to call it to a specific person's attention (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). Indeed Facebook is now a major platform for dissemination of news through news feeds and through links shared by Facebook users with each other (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). Content can also be shared more broadly simply by posting a link on one's own timeline or by clicking icons that propagate it from the original source. More recently, hashtags have come into use to punctuate a sentiment or aggregate content around a person, topic or event (Zappavigna, 2015).

This study examines from the consumer's point of view how the mechanisms of the social net, specifically Facebook, are interacting with the influence of tie strength and of critical mass (viral response) in driving awareness and sense-making of shared content that affects consumer trust. The study looks at mechanisms such as tagging, liking, posting links or comments, and trending to understand how consumers are influenced by these mechanisms and how they use them in establishing their level of trust or distrust in a company.

In the previous chapter, it was established from the trust and stakeholder literature that the trust dimensions of the ABI model (Mayer et al., 1995) that matter to the consumer-stakeholder of a company are Ability in the form of Technical Competence (TC) and Integrity (I) both of which relate directly to the ABI model, and, in addition, the Value Congruence or Identification (VC) the consumer feels with the company (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007, 2011). Furthermore, reputation is an antecedent to trust (McKnight & Chervaney, 2006; McKnight et al., 1998). Separately, research into corporate reputation established that the reputation factors with high importance to consumers, and which can therefore impact consumer trust, are Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV), Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC), Customer Orientation (CO) and Commitment to the Environment and Employees (EE) (Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). The first three (QV, AC and CO) are directly related to the experience of becoming a consumer, with the environment and employees being more general concerns. The corporate reputation literature has argued that companies can use the trust dimensions important to stakeholders to build a reputation worthy of trust (Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014) thus allowing stakeholders a way to assess the company's trustworthiness (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2016). In the case of the consumer, the trust act is then manifested as the purchase of goods or services from that company.

These points provide the context for this research, which examines the role that Facebook mechanisms play in helping consumers become aware of content relating to the corporate reputation factors listed above and assess it relative to the decision to trust. This research also looks at how different conditions of tie strength and critical mass may impact which mechanisms are in play, how and why they are being used, and how all of these factors inhibit or facilitate the assessment of trustworthiness and thus the decision to trust the company by purchasing its goods and services.

This chapter continues with an overview of the literature context for social network communications and their impact on consumer trust to which this research relates (see section 3.2). Two specific research questions (RQs) are developed. These address the connection between corporate reputation and consumer trust (RQ1, section 3.3), and the influence of Facebook mechanisms on awareness sense-making, including the effect of tie strength and critical mass (RQ2, section 3.4). The chapter concludes with a model showing how these two research questions are integrated.

3.2 Social Networks and Consumer Trust: An Overview of the Context for this Research

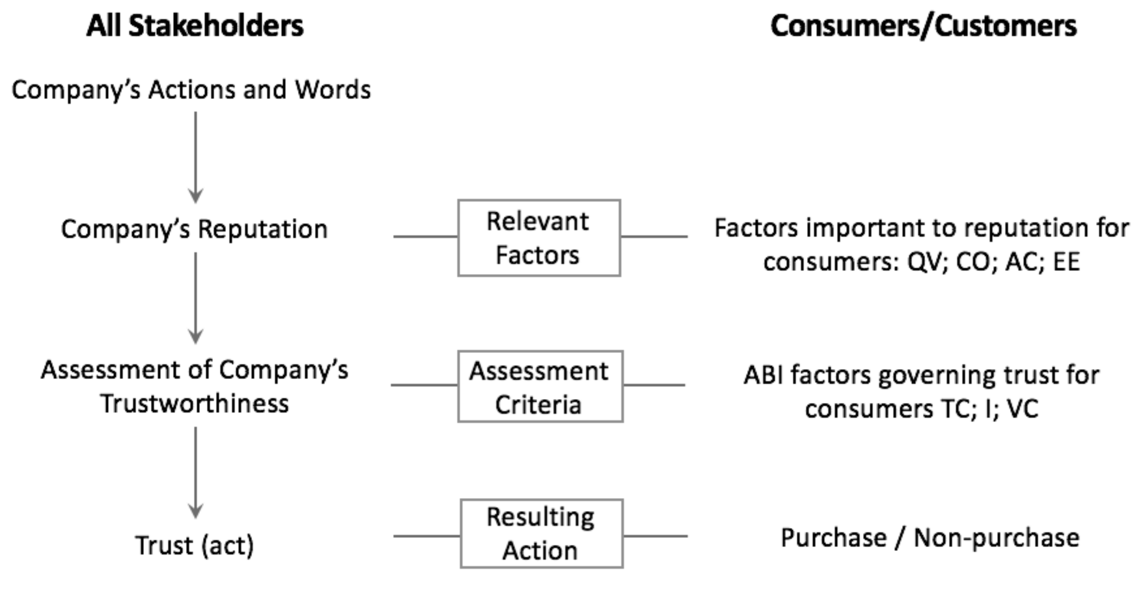
The influence of user-generated content shared across social networks on public trust of companies has been found to be playing an increasing role in shaping public opinion across business, politics, sports and entertainment (Zamani, Giaglis, & Kasimati, 2015). It is thought to be playing a growing role in shaping consumer trust in ways that are increasingly difficult for companies to predict and control (Botsman, 2018; Zamani et al., 2015). Consumers actively take into consideration the opinion and recommendations of others in their online social networks when assessing a company's trustworthiness with regard to making a purchase (Bronner & de Hoog, 2010; B. Choi & Lee, 2017; Hajli, 2014a). Moreover, the information they find or receive has been shown to influence consumer trust and loyalty both positively (Matook et al., 2015) and negatively (Schultz & Block, 2012). This influence is not just confined to recommendations and product information. There is also evidence that consumers are increasingly taking ethical (including employment and environmental) considerations into account when making purchase decisions, and both a company's ethical reputation (Leonidou, Kvasova, Leonidou, & Chari, 2013; Singh, Iglesias, & Batista-Foguet, 2012) and their transparency in ethical matters (J. Kang & Hustvedt, 2014) also drives trust and loyalty among consumers.

The growth of the Internet and subsequently social net platforms such as Facebook has allowed people to communicate this information without any real consideration for geographic location, and instantaneously with a large number of people, often in real time (Bright, Kleiser, & Grau, 2015; Wei, Seedorf, Lowry, Thum, & Schulze, 2017). The social net differs from more traditional media channels in particular because it allows people to engage actively in sharing content through links and posts and appending comments and 'likes' to express opinions on what is shared (Lee & Chun, 2016). The sharing brings consumers into contact with this content either because friends in their network have shared it, or because it has gone viral and is trending. In addition to individual users, companies and news organizations also propagate content through social networks, and consumers are exposed to those messages voluntarily or involuntarily. Two thirds of Americans now say they get some portion of their news through social media, according to a recent Pew Research Center report (2017b), and this is no longer true of just the younger generations. Fifty-five percent of Americans over the age of 50 are now reporting getting news through social media, similar to their younger contemporaries, Gen Y at 47% and Gen X at 42%

(Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). This sharing of news and information across the social net can drive awareness of matters relating to corporate reputation which have the potential to affect consumer trust. In some cases, this sharing could provide information that the consumer has not heard elsewhere, since users of online social networks, especially the younger generations, get news through the social net (Mitchel et al., 2017), and often click on links to news stories through social network platforms (Mitchel, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). However, there is little research on how, when and why the mechanisms of the social net might be influencing consumers on the receiving end of such communications to engage with messages thus shared.

Reputation has long been considered as an antecedent to trust (McKnight & Chervaney, 2006; McKnight et al., 1998). More recently, corporate reputation, specifically, has been argued to be an antecedent to stakeholder trust, including that of consumers (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2016; Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014). If a company demonstrates that it is ethical, responsible, and transparently consistent (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014) between what it says and what it does, it can build a positive reputation that engenders a favourable assessment of trustworthiness amongst its stakeholders (Argenti, 2014; Edelman, 2019; Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2016; Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014). Conversely, inconsistency that (occasionally) reveals unethical or irresponsible behaviour, or inconsistency between what a company says and what it does can damage or destroy a positive reputation and affect stakeholder trust negatively (Argenti, 2014; Leonidou et al., 2013; Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014). The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer (2018, p. 10) found that 63% of people surveyed agreed with the statement "A good reputation may get me to try a product—but unless I come to trust the company behind the product I will soon stop buying it, regardless of its reputation" . Thus, a company's words and actions along dimensions important to consumers can demonstrate to them that the company is worthy of their trust. The company thus develops a reputation for being trustworthy (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2015; Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014). Consumers are consequently able to assess the degree to which a company has that reputation on the factors or dimensions most important to them, and decide to trust or not to trust the company with their patronage (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2016). There is, therefore, a linkage from company words and actions, to corporate reputation, to assessment of trustworthiness, to trust (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2016; Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014). Figure 3.1 below represents the sequence diagrammatically.

8 Figure 3.1: Diagram of connection between company reputation and trust



In making these decisions, consumers are using online sources including the social net to gather the opinion of others on companies and their products or services (B. Choi & Lee, 2017; Liang et al., 2011). Yet there is starting to be some evidence that this is becoming less effective because consumers are aware that such reviews can be manipulated by companies (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013). Thus, marketing content put out by companies on the social net can be seen as less credible than content from other users (Balaji, Khong, & Chong, 2016; B. Choi & Lee, 2017). When social network friends, such as those on Facebook, report experiences, research has shown that they can play a significant role in the consumer decision-making process, from awareness of reputation to assessment of trustworthiness to decision to trust by making a purchase (Hornik, Shaanan Satchi, Cesareo, & Pastore, 2015; Matook et al., 2015; K. Z. K. Zhang, Zhao, Cheung, & Lee, 2014). Thus the ability to share user-generated content through the social net and to comment on content, means that the potential influences on opinion about companies and their products and services are now caused as much by other friend connections the consumer has on the social net as by the companies themselves (Hajli et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2011).

Some of these friend connections are online and/or offline friends with whom the consumer has linked up through online social networks such as Facebook. This creates an additional assessment method for the consumer because they have knowledge of that friend, their values, biases and prior experiences, from the history of interaction between them either online or offline (Dou, Walden, Lee, & Lee, 2012; Matook et al., 2015). The knowledge and level of interaction with that friend (tie strength) influence both the willingness to read the content shared (awareness) (Chiu et al., 2014; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008) and the interpretation and assessment of the content shared (sense-making) (Matook et al., 2015; Pan & Chiou, 2011). Similarly, when large numbers of people share opinion or spread content virally reaching a critical mass of engagement in a 'viral cascade', this too influences awareness (Watts & Dodds, 2007) and sense-making (Heverin & Zach, 2012). Recent research into interaction on company fan pages on Facebook has identified three elements of connection that influence consumer behaviour, the number of sources, the tie strength and the importance of the source (Perez-Vega, Waite, & O'Gorman, 2016).

The focus of this enquiry is to build on this literature to contribute to the knowledge in two ways. The first is to explore the connection between the corporate reputation factors important to consumers, (QV, AC, CO, EE) and the trust dimensions derived from Mayer et al.'s (1995) ABI model, (technical competence, integrity and value congruence). With a better understanding of the nature of this connection, the research then examines how Facebook mechanisms are influencing consumer trust when communications concerning the corporate reputation factors are propagated on Facebook. This is examined through an enquiry into the role that the mechanisms play in facilitating or inhibiting consumer awareness and sense-making and thus the assessment of company trustworthiness.

3.3 The Link Between Corporate Reputation and Trust for Consumers (RQ1)

The first of the research questions for this research investigates the existence of an empirical link between the corporate reputation literature and the stakeholder trust literature. This section outlines the argument that there is such a link and that the corporate reputation factors are what consumers assess, with the trust dimensions being how consumers assess them. Figure 3.2 at the end of this section summarizes the connections.

The corporate reputation factors important to consumers are Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV), Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC), Customer Orientation (CO) and Commitment to the Environment and Employees (EE) (Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). Of these, research shows that the experience of the Quality and Value of Products and Services offers the primary interpretive lens for consumers (Helm, 2007), this being true for both current customers and non-customers (Shamma & Hassan, 2009). This primary corporate reputation factor is a combination of two criteria that scored high in Helm's research for consumers, 'quality of products' and 'value for money of products' (p.246). The latter scored the highest of all the criteria in the research, higher than quality alone. This result is possibly because value is a concept that encompasses the relationship of price to quality and therefore addresses both cost and quality in one concept.

In considering which of the ABI (Mayer et al., 1995) trust dimensions consumers might use to assess trustworthiness on this Quality and Value of Products and Services reputation factor, Technical Competence (TC) appears to be the trust dimension most closely aligned. In their research on stakeholder trust, Pirson and Malhotra (2011) define Technical Competence as "the organization's ability to deliver high quality products and services" (p.1092). Therefore, a company's ability to make or deliver consistently good, quality products or services at a reasonable price is likely to be assessed on the dimension of Technical Competence, and a favourable assessment of the company's trustworthiness on this dimension could result in a favourable influence on consumer trust. This connection is represented by the arrow QV-TC in the figure 3.2. In addition to Technical Competence, the 'value' element of the QV factor might also relate to the dimension of Integrity. Pirson and Mahotra (2011) define Integrity as "an organization's general tendency (or propensity) to act fairly and ethically" (p.1092). So, for example, if a company were to price its products and services too high relative to the quality, consumers might consider that the company was not acting 'fairly and ethically' in charging the consumer more than something was worth, given the quality. Conversely, a company that tended to price its products 'fairly and ethically' relative to quality might be assessed as having Integrity (I), and a favourable assessment of the company's trustworthiness on this dimension could result in a favourable influence on consumer trust. This connection is represented by the arrow QV-I in figure 3.2.

Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC) was the reputation factor that scored the next highest for consumers in Helm's (2007) research. Research into the relationship between consumers and companies has identified that a breach of the consumer's expectations based on branding and advertising claims can reduce or even destroy the consumer's trust (Hannah et al., 2016). Thus, if a company continuously makes claims of performance to which their products and services don't measure up, or other claims or offers which they don't honour in the way they are portrayed, consumers are likely to consider this unfair and/or unethical. Such a company might, therefore, be assessed by consumers as lacking Integrity, and an unfavourable assessment of the company's trustworthiness on this dimension could result in an unfavourable influence on consumer trust. This connection is represented by the arrow AC-I in figure 3.2.

How companies handle complaints concerning quality and value of product and services and credibility of advertising claims would be likely to influence a company's reputation for Customer Orientation (CO), which therefore, not surprisingly, also emerged in Helm's (2007) research as one of the corporate reputation factors important to consumers, and again it is important for both current customers and non-customers (Shamma & Hassan, 2009). A company which guarantees its products and services and upholds what it claims in its advertising and promotional materials could be considered by consumers as acting fairly and ethically. In such a case, consumers could be assessing the Customer Orientation reputation factor on the basis of the Integrity trust dimension, and a favourable assessment of the company's trustworthiness on this dimension could result in a favourable influence on consumer trust. This connection is represented by the arrow CO-I in figure 3.2.

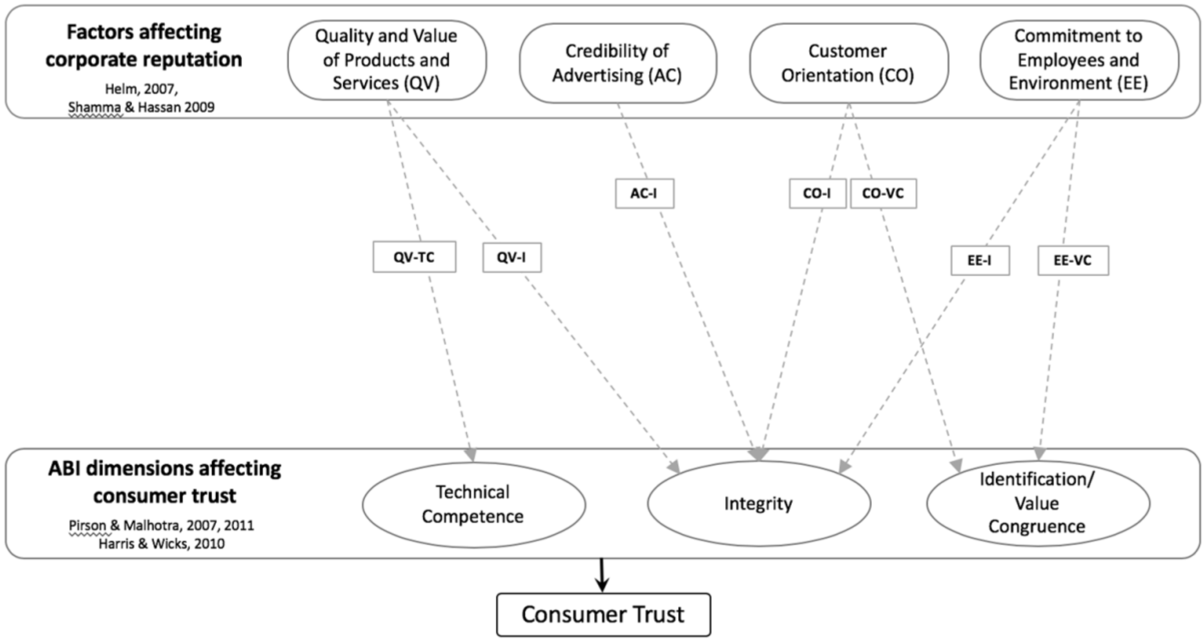
A company which develops good and responsive customer relationships might be one that fosters strong brand identification and brand loyalty among its customers. In discussing this trust dimension, Pirson and Malhotra (2011) find that identification is important to consumers, "based on the fact that one's social identity may include an association with the organization, its behaviors, and its espoused values" (p.1093) including "perceptions of value congruence" (p.1093). Consumers may assess a company which engages its customers directly and is responsive, and indeed proactive, in the relationship as having values congruent to their own, and they may form a stronger bond with that company for that reason. Thus, in this instance, the consumer could be assessing the company's trustworthiness regarding customer orientation on the basis of the value congruence trust dimension and a favourable assessment of the company's trustworthiness on this dimension could result in a favourable influence on consumer trust. This connection is represented by the arrow CO-VC in figure 3.2.

Finally, there is the reputation factor that concerns the Commitment to the Environment and Employees. In Helm's (2007) research treatment of the environment emerged as an important reputation factor for consumers in both the qualitative portion and the quantitative portion of the research. In contrast, commitment to employees only emerged in the qualitative portion of the study but did not appear to be an important factor for this stakeholder group in the quantitative portion. However, it has emerged as important to consumers in other quantitative research studies which looked at reputation factors by stakeholder group (e.g. Puncheva-Michelotti & Michelotti, 2010; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). It would seem to make sense that the company's practices on these criteria would be very likely to be considered by consumers on the basis of whether they are fair and ethical. Consumers making assessments on this basis would likely be interpreting this EE reputation factor through the Integrity trust dimension and a favourable assessment of the company's trustworthiness on this dimension could result in a favourable influence on consumer trust. This connection is represented by the arrow EE-I in figure 3.2.

It is not clear from the literature how widely consumers' opinions may range on these matters, but extremes of behaviour notwithstanding, there could be wide range of opinions ranging from what is acceptable, to what is permissible but bad practice, to what is considered simply wrong or even injurious. Where any given person's judgement falls on that continuum may be governed by their personal values in the matter. Thus, consumers would likely be using Value Congruence as a trust assessment dimension in assessing where a company also falls on this continuum relative to their values. If the company was deemed by the consumer to be performing better than their standard, this could result in a favourable influence on consumer trust. Conversely, if the company was deemed to be performing unsatisfactorily, then the impact to consumer trust is likely to be unfavourable. This connection is represented by the arrow EE-VC in figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2 below is a visual representation that summarizes the potential connections discussed above between the corporate reputation factors important to consumers and the trust dimensions on which consumers assess corporate trustworthiness.

9 Figure 3.2: Theoretical connection between corporate reputation factors important to consumers and trust dimensions by which consumers assess trustworthiness



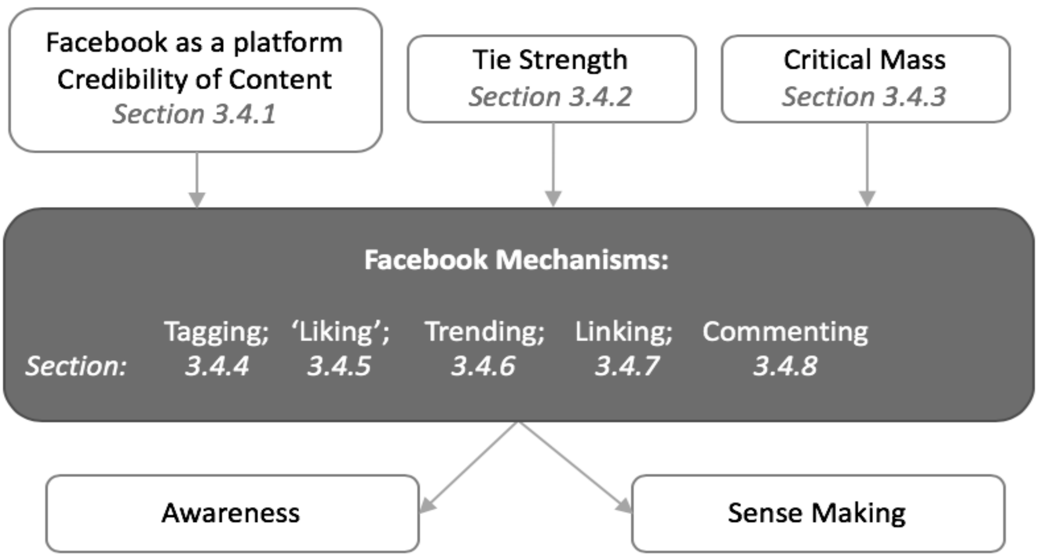
This discussion on the theoretical relationship between the corporate reputation factors important to consumers and the trust dimensions by which consumers assess company trustworthiness leads to the first research question.

<u>RQ1</u>: How do consumers articulate the concept of consumer trust and does their perception of what consumer trust means provide an empirical link between the reputation factors important to consumers and the trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness?

3.4 The Influence of Facebook Mechanisms on Consumer Trust (RQ2)

This section develops the arguments that establish the basis for the model for Research Question 2. This research question looks at Facebook as the largest social network (see discussion in Chapter 4.3). The associated model has several elements that are discussed in the sections below. First there is a discussion of Facebook as a platform for dissemination of news and information that could drive awareness of issues affecting consumer trust, and along with this the question of credibility of content found on Facebook which could affect sense-making (section 3.4.1). Next there is a discussion of the potential influence of tie strength (section 3.4.2). Since Facebook is a social network, the friend connection may influence both awareness and sense-making. This is followed in section 3.4.3 by a discussion of the effect of a critical mass of engagement. The ability of social networks to spread information virally means that the level of engagement might reach a critical mass such that the engagement itself drives awareness or sense-making. The five sections that follow this discussion, (sections 3.4.4 to 3.4.8) look at the potential influence on awareness and sense-making of each of the main Facebook mechanisms which may add influence to shared content, namely tagging, 'liking', trending, linking and commenting, figure 3.3 below provides a visual orientation to the discussion that follows.

10 Figure 3.3: Diagram of Discussion for RQ2



3.4.1 Facebook as a Platform and the Issue of Credibility

This research is focused on the effect of Facebook and Facebook mechanisms on content concerning the corporate reputation factors that is shared by Facebook friends with each other or is trending on Facebook. In particular, the research investigates how Facebook mechanisms help consumers become aware of, and make sense of, this content, and how that might ultimately affect their trust of the company as consumers. Many consumers, particularly Gen Y, appear to be finding a broader range of news items and of opinion on online social networks and so are increasingly turning to these channels over more traditional news media sources (Flintham et al., 2018; Mitchel et al., 2017). Research has shown that consumers increasingly prefer socially filtered news (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015) and that links posted by friends on Facebook connect people to news items that are outside their normal consumption patterns (Masip, Suau-Martínez, & Ruiz-Caballero, 2018).

Among social network platforms, Facebook is still the largest with a significantly higher user base than most other platforms: 68% of Americans use Facebook, only You Tube is higher at 73%, with no other social media platform higher than 35% (Gramlich, 2018). There are some reported gender differences in usage, with 74% of women and only 62% of men saying they use Facebook (Gramlich, 2018). Generationally, while Boomer (born 1946 to 1964) use has increased significantly in the past few years, Gen Y (born after 1980) are still the heaviest users at 81%, almost double the Boomer penetration, with Gen X (born 1965 to 1980) in second place (Gramlich, 2018). Fifty one percent of Facebook users in the U.S. say they are on Facebook several times a day and three quarters are on the platform daily (Gramlich, 2018). Forty-five percent of adults in the U.S. are now getting news on Facebook (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017) and 53% of those who get news in this way follow up on it by finding out more or taking action (Mitchel et al., 2017). In addition to keeping up with friends, Facebook users can follow companies to get communications from them directly, they can get information both from news organizations and from content shared by friends and family, and they can see what topics are trending, i.e. receiving the most interest (Mitchel et al., 2016).

Many companies have a Facebook presence to disseminate news and promotional offers, with which they actively encourage consumers to engage (Chow & Shi, 2015; de Vries, Peluso, Romani, Leeflang, & Marcati, 2017; Men & Tsai, 2015; Park & Youn-Kyung, 2014). Moreover, news organizations now have a much bigger presence online on such platforms as Facebook and are also actively encouraging reader engagement (Glynn, Huge, & Hoffman, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2018). Thus, as recent evidence suggests, consumers on Facebook may well be finding information from multiple types of sources all within the social network (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Masip et al., 2018; Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). Such, news items and information presented on Facebook are presented in small soundbites and consumed in a browsing fashion, which might encourage snap judgements on insufficient information and a lack of rigour in assessing validity of the content (Flintham et al., 2018).

The issue of content validity has lately become a widespread issue (Flintham et al., 2018; J. Shin, Jian, Driscoll, & Bar, 2018). The quality of information on social net platforms such as Facebook varies widely, ranging from information that is credible and well-supported, to misinformation or highly biased opinions, to deliberately misleading and even false or abusive content (Flintham et al., 2018; Graf, Erba, & Harn, 2017; J. Shin et al., 2018). Telling the true from the false is not always easy (Graf et al., 2017; Moturu & Liu, 2011). Content can be uploaded by anyone with an interest, an agenda, or a grudge, with few if any filters, and little regulation and oversight of content (Graf et al., 2017; Moturu & Liu, 2011). 'Fake news', which is content that has been developed deliberately to misrepresent the facts in favour of a certain point of view (J. Shin et al., 2018), has become a significant issue, with 64% of Americans saying it is sowing confusion and 23% saying they have passed on 'fake news' stories knowingly or unknowingly (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016). While these statistics were mostly collected regarding political news, the propagation of 'fake news' also extends to news about companies and the generation by companies of 'fake' reviews and recommendations, although recent research has shown that the latter can backfire (Wessel, Thies, & Benlian, 2016). If these 'fake' reviews or other 'fake news' gets posted by friends on Facebook it could influence opinions of consumers in their network, and once formed, those opinions might be difficult to change even when the 'truth' is later conveyed to them (De keersmaecker & Roets, 2017). Indeed, once the 'fake news' has been propagated, it has been shown that efforts to correct the record are inconsequential for the most part (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018), thus 'fake news' passed from friend to friend on Facebook could have a very real if distorted impact on consumer trust. There is therefore the need to explore how users of Facebook perceive the issue of credibility of content passed between Facebook friends.

Given many online news consumers are getting their news through Facebook, including through content shared by friends, the decision of their friends what constitutes content worth sharing could introduce a bias into the opinions of consumers in the network (Bakshy et al., 2015). User sharing/reposting activity on social networks such as Facebook has been found to provide a gatekeeper function by increasing or decreasing the visibility of content (Singer, 2014). This gatekeeper role of the Facebook friend could be influencing consumer assessment of trustworthiness of a company and the decision to trust through purchase. This influence could be a simple matter of awareness by bringing to the attention of Facebook consumers the reports of company products, services and practices that those consumers otherwise might not see, while at the same time shielding them from information that might influence them in a different direction. In addition, or alternatively, the gatekeeper effect could extend to sense-making. Commenting on the news and information shared by friends is thought to be an important part of online social network interaction (Glynn et al., 2012; Winter, Brückner, & Krämer, 2015), so, the opinions Facebook friends hold about the content that they share along with the link to the original source of the information could influence the sense-making of other consumers in the network as they form their opinion of the company's trustworthiness and make the decision to trust or not to trust that company through purchase of its goods or services.

In decisions about what to share, the sender's own stakeholder relationship as a customer, or as an avowed non-customer, may increase the influence. It has been found that people tend to share information more readily when they have an emotional connection to it or find it more relevant (Botha & Reyneke, 2013; Chakrabarti & Berthon, 2012). Therefore, people may be more likely to share information when they have strong feelings about a company, for example if they are loyal, satisfied customers, or alternatively they have had a negative experience with the company. Research into social commerce shows that the opinions of others in online social networks significantly influences consumer trust of companies (Hajli et al., 2014), and consumers actively seek out this information, and exchange opinions and purchase influence in real time when shopping online (Hajli, 2014b; Hajli et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2017). Thus, when the sender acts to filter and pass on information that is of particular relevance to him/herself in relationship to a company, those in his/her network in that same relationship (or contemplating being in that same relationship) could have a heightened awareness of the posts and find that the content resonates with them and thus be more influenced by it. Conversely, the sender's decisions about relevance could filter out news that might present a more balanced influence on consumer trust. Over time, this could create a pattern of partial or one-sided information that consistently influences consumer trust, either positively or negatively. There is therefore a need to explore the effect of relevance and the perceived experience of the source on awareness of issues affecting consumer trust.

When any content is posted to or shared through Facebook, it is left to the receivers of the information to make sense of what they see (Y. A. Kim & Ahmad, 2013; Moturu & Liu, 2011). Sense-making has been interpreted in several ways in the literature. Maclean, Harvey, & Chia (2012) consider it a way of developing understanding or making meaning divided into three stages, namely locating, meaning-making and becoming. Colville, Brown, & Pye (2012) say it is a balance of thought and action, where thought lessens ambiguity by expanding comprehension through complex understanding of what is going on, while action lessens equivocality by simplifying comprehension through the practice of shaping what is going on. Heverin and Zach (2012), referencing Dervin (1983), argue sense-making is a way to overcome knowledge gaps or cognitive deficiencies both in everyday circumstances and in extraordinary ones In other words, it is more heavily weighted towards information seeking. Weick, who has studied sense-making in an organizational context, does not consider that sense-making is knowledge acquisition for evaluation, but rather an ongoing process of developing mental images that explain human behaviour (Weick, 2012). He considers it an iterative process of action and interpretation that helps to situate an individual relative to a topic or to other people (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Cunliffe & Coupland (2012) agree that sense-making is an interpretive process that helps individuals to judge their experiences and identity relative to others. For the purposes of this research, sense-making is seen as a dynamic and interpretive activity more in keeping with the definitions of Weick et al. (2005) and Cunliffe & Coupland (2012) as described above. This is an appropriate lens since Facebook is a social construction of online relationships and interactions and therefore a participant's ability to arrive at an understanding of an issue or topic relative to others in their network through active engagement is a salient need.

Research has identified certain indicators that consumers of content on social media sites such as Facebook can use to access and interpret what they read. These include, familiarity with the post creator and the strength of the tie (Osatuyi, 2013), the preponderance or critical mass of opinion (Watts & Dodds, 2007) including the metrics of engagement such as number of likes and shares (Chung, 2017; Sundar, Oeldorf-Hirsch, & Xu, 2008), the use of links or embedded content (Osatuyi, 2013) including source cues (H. Kang, Bae, Zhang, & Sundar, 2011), and the topic itself (Liu, Tang, Han, & Yang, 2012; Osatuyi, 2013). There is therefore the need to explore how consumers on Facebook are processing these engagement cues, including the role of the main Facebook mechanisms, tags, 'likes', trends, links and comments, and how these might therefore have a role in influencing their trust of companies.

3.4.2 Tie Strength

Tie strength (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) is known to be one of the factors in the influence of online word-of-mouth communications, and research has shown that a strong tie can drive awareness and more active sharing of information (Chiu et al., 2014; Chu & Kim, 2011; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Strong ties are those with whom a person has frequent contact and a level of personal identification and intimacy, characterized by mutual confiding and an alignment of opinion (Granovetter, 1973). The role of tie strength in influencing consumer trust may relate to several factors, for example, knowledge and trust of the friend (Matook et al., 2015), history of interaction (Matook et al., 2015), similar attitudes and shared interests (Cheng, Fu, & de Vreede, 2017), social obligation to the relationship (Ha, Han, Lee, & Kim, 2017), as well as other factors such as interest in the topic or their own prior experience, as discussed below.

Since Facebook is primarily a tool to connect with friends who are known to each other or have a connection offline, the receiver of communications on Facebook usually knows the sender personally (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Luarn et al., 2014). Indeed, almost half of all social network users, including those on Facebook, are said to be connected to all of their closest friends through their online social networks (Burke & Kraut, 2014). This point of connection is thought to be one of the factors that differentiates how Facebook influences opinion as opposed to how anonymous content found through search or through other sites or other media channels might influence opinion (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Luarn et al., 2014; Masip et al., 2018). While other mainstream media channels provide ways to disseminate information (e.g. TV, radio, print media) and allow for consumer responses (e.g. Letters to the Editor, call-in Talk Radio), these communications are not normally between people known to each other. Industry research highlights a growing preference for peers as a source of news and information, primarily because of the more rapidly declining trust in business and established media institutions (Edelman, 2018; Ipsos MORI, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018). Communications through Facebook that come from friends or peers may have more credibility and influence precisely because of the social connection (Matook et al., 2015; Mitchel et al., 2017). By 2017 peers as recommenders had risen in estimation to the point where they were considered to be as credible as experts and academics in the field (Edelman, 2017).

In such a climate, the influence of the interaction between friends on Facebook has been shown to be a significant factor in influencing consumer trust and purchase behaviour (Wang et al., 2012). Not only is the connection a factor, but the strength of the connection (tie strength) can be important to the influence on trust (Blazevic et al., 2013). Strong ties are closer friends and this closeness has been shown to be a key influence on trust in recommendations coming from that friend and also intent to act on that friend's recommendation (Matook et al., 2015). Recommendations made by strong ties are likely to be more trusted and more likely to be read and acted upon than recommendations from weaker ties (Bialik & Matsa, 2017).

The frequent exchanges of information between strong ties provide a shared history of interaction which can contribute to the Facebook user's trust assessment. Strong ties have been shown to share information frequently and less guardedly, and they discuss present experiences (Balaji et al., 2016). As a result, the rich history of interaction would also be likely to provide information on the friend's recent purchases, the companies they favour, and their general orientation as a consumer. Good results from a friend's prior recommendations have been shown to influence trust in the recommendations of that friend positively going forward (Y. A. Kim & Ahmad, 2013; Matook et al., 2015). Thus, if a strong tie posted an endorsement of a product or a company, the person reading that could have a way to assess the information quality of the post from what they know of the friend and could use their knowledge of their friend's past recommendations and the history of communication between them as a lens through which to make sense of the post. This would most likely influence their consideration of the trustworthiness of that company and subsequently impact the decision to trust it with their patronage.

The knowledge of the friend and the history of the interaction are also likely to contribute to an understanding of the friend's expertise in a certain industry or product category or topic. Source expertise can be an important consideration and indeed research has found that it can override tie strength (Sweeney et al 2008). If a friend, weak or strong tie, on Facebook is known by the consumer to have a certain expertise, or if that friend consistently posts content that seems relevant and informed to the consumer, this may have influence on the consumer's trust (Y. A. Kim & Ahmad, 2013). The perceived (or actual) expertise on the part of their Facebook friend may provide a consumer with a short-cut to sense-making whereby the they accept what their Facebook friend posts (Liu et al., 2012). Other research has shown that it also depends on the product category that is the subject of the post. For example, strong ties have been found to be more credible than weak ties with experience goods (goods whose quality and performance can be evaluated after purchase) than for credence goods (goods where even after purchase it is hard to assess the quality and performance) (Pan & Chiou, 2011).

Chapter 2 discussed how customers in a personalized or depersonalized relationship with a company take into account their own experiences with that company when making assessments of trustworthiness, while those not yet in a relationship but thinking of being so (potential customers) rely much more on reputational factors (Shamma & Hassan, 2009). It has been shown that reported experiences, especially by strong ties, are used to assess trustworthiness in the absence of direct experience (Currall & Epstein, 2003; Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007). Therefore, in a case where a consumer does not yet have direct experience with a company, the opinions that they read in a Facebook post from a friend who does may have more weight in shifting their trust of that company. In contrast, in cases where the consumer has had prior experience it is not clear how consumers weigh the opinions of others against their own experiences. Alternatively, if consumers consider that they themselves have greater expertise, or if they have concerns about the motivations of the friend who is recommending a product in a post (e.g. because they are being financially compensated), they might simply dismiss the communication altogether (Blazevic et al., 2013).

Most Facebook users have relatively few strong ties amongst their Facebook friends, and a large number of weak ties (Blazevic et al., 2013). However, a strong tie may not always be necessary for influence to occur. Perceived affinity on values and consumption preferences may be sufficient, since research shows that perceptual affinity can moderate the importance of the sender's posts in the receiver's eyes, and influences both interest in the post (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008) and adoption of the information in making a purchase decision (Blazevic et al., 2013; Davis & Agrawal, 2018). When consumers are looking for information on products and services, they have been found to prefer to communicate with people who share their preferences, even if that means a weak tie, taking perceived similarity into account when assessing recommendations from friends (Cheng et al., 2017). A recent study reveals that value-driven identification and consumption-driven identification are both likely to be significant predictors of information adoption (Davis & Agrawal, 2018). Personal identification and alignment of opinion are thought to create a gravitational pull because, according to social judgement theory, people tend to reject opinions that disagree with their point of view and adopt those that agree (Lee &

Chun, 2016). Thus, where shared preferences exist between ties, whether strong or weak, communications from that friend could be very influential in shaping or reinforcing the consumer's trust of a company.

Recommendations and information sharing on online social networks such as Facebook can have impact on purchase decisions in part because of the influence of conformity with peers (Wang et al., 2012). People who tend to see themselves as part of a group (their 'in-group'), often conform to the norms of behaviour and opinion of the groups with which they identify (Hsueh et al., 2015). Those who share strong ties have been found to behave as members of an in-group often displaying shared preferences and shared common norms, with significant overlap of knowledge and opinions (Abrantes, Seabra, Lages, & Jayawardhena, 2013). Research shows that consumers expect the recommendations they get from other like-minded people in their in-group will be better quality than recommendations from out-group members (S. Y. Shin, Van Der Heide, Beyea, Dai, & Prchal, 2017). Yet, in-group members apparently don't often verify what is posted by other in-group members (Hsueh et al., 2015), and therefore this could potentially perpetuate perceptions about companies or products or brands that are not accurate just as much as it could develop and reinforce accurate impressions. Conversely, other research has shown that while identification with a peer group can reinforce product involvement, the need for individuality moderates this effect (Wang et al., 2012) and therefore the in-group opinions may be less influential than might be supposed.

The social context of a Facebook exchange may also affect how consumers are disseminating information and making sense of opinions on Facebook. Research has shown that people more readily pass on or post positive information to strong ties, and hold back on posting negative information, in part, it is thought, because they feel vulnerable to the judgement of others and want to avoid the social risk associated with transmitting negative information (Balaji et al., 2016; R. A. King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014). Indeed it has been found that people were more willing to share negative information electronically across weak ties, or put another way with out-group members, as the risk to personal reputation and status is lower (Carr, Vitak, & McLaughlin, 2013; Harvey, Stewart, & Ewing, 2011). If consumers are unwilling to challenge information from their close ties, this could impede sense-making activity, resulting in a bias of opinion that is perpetually reinforced, or at a minimum unchallenged, within the friend group.

While there is research that has shown the effect of tie strength on trust of source and thus trust of content and adoption of opinion, as just discussed, little research has explored how the receiver of a post on Facebook might be using tie strength intentionally in sense-making and how tie strength might affect the use and interpretation of Facebook mechanisms in sense-making. This research seeks to shed more light on how the exchanges that flow between strong ties may be contributing to a base of understanding that allows for a quick assessment of a post from a strong tie, and/or may be contributing to perpetuating a biased influence on consumer trust. There is therefore a need to explore how social factors such as social identity and tie strength may influence awareness and the sense-making process overall, and how the mechanisms of the social net such as the ability to tag, comment, share links and indicate approval through 'likes', might contribute to the influence of tie strength on consumer trust.

3.4.3 Critical Mass

Critical mass has been found to be a concept important to the spread and adoption of opinion on the social net in general, and thus also on Facebook (East, Uncles, Romaniuk, & Lomax, 2017; Sweeney et al., 2008; Watts & Dodds, 2007). Critical mass is said to be achieved when the viral cascade of propagation persuades a sufficient number of others to a point of view such that the preponderance of opinion becomes a persuasive factor in itself (Watts & Dodds, 2007). The speed with which this point is reached is affected by the posts of a few opinion leaders influencing large numbers of others because of the dense network they have (Y. S. Kim & Tran, 2013). However, it can equally be achieved (and is thought to be perhaps more frequently achieved) through many modestly influential people spreading word to many other modestly influential people (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011; Watts & Dodds, 2007). Influences that cascade opinion have been shown to be dynamic and can come from any direction and through multiple steps of pass-along (Hornik et al., 2015; Watts & Dodds, 2007). In this context, it is possible that critical mass is acting as a trust cue that reduces the complexity of the large amount of content found on Facebook for the receiver and allows a quick assessment of the communications, just as the critical mass of opinion in ratings and reviews are thought to do on e-commerce sites (Hsiao, Lin, Xiang-Ying, Hsi-Peng, & Yu, 2010).

Since the viral spread of opinion can be propagated in any direction from the many to the many (Watts & Dodds, 2007), the perception of critical mass could simply be driven by the number of times the message reaches the consumer through different members of his/her network. Frequency and recentness have been shown to be important attributes of viral propagation (Kocas & Akkan, 2016). Moreover, research has shown that it may only take a small group of people all commenting in a like fashion on a post to give the impression that this topic has reached a critical mass of engagement and 'everyone' is talking about it (Lee & Chun, 2016). Alternatively, it is possible that the consumer's perception of critical mass is driven more by metrics such as the number of 'likes' and 'shares' something receives, and that consumers pay attention to this as a metric of the preponderance of opinion (Ding, Cheng, Duan, & Jin, 2017). The metrics of 'likes' and 'shares' are thought to be commonly used on Facebook as a bandwagon heuristic, i.e. a mental shortcut that allows a quick assessment of the value of the content and signals that the message is influential (J. W. Kim, 2018). Furthermore, if the post contained a link, others in the social network could add to the pool of information by sharing other links or commenting, or more recently by using hashtags, to aggregate content around a brand or issue (Martín, Lavesson, & Doroud, 2016). This research seeks to understand how these cues of aggregation are influencing consumers to engage with or interpret the content and why.

Whether quantity is as persuasive as quality in influencing the receiver's trust of a company is less clear, and it is possible that the answer varies depending on which friend the communication is coming from and which reputational factor is the subject of the post. For example, it is likely that the influence of quantity is stronger for information on the Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV) dimension, since 78% of consumers say they trust and look for multiple recommendation of others online when going to make a purchase (Y. S. Kim & Tran, 2013). With more complex topics, such as the Commitment to the Environment and Employees (EE), it may be that links to an 'authority' site, such as the Financial Times or the BBC, results in greater influence, since credibility has been shown to increase when there is deeper, better quality information and further links for more information (Chiu et al., 2014).

How the critical mass of opinion might influence consumers might also have to do with tone or civility. Recent research that looked at the influence of civil versus uncivil tone in non-political posts and comments found that civility increases trust of information and of the person posting, where incivility was distasteful and off-putting, and erected barriers to further sense-making (Graf et al., 2017). Therefore, the overall tone of the posts on a topic may influence opinion, or in the case of very uncivil discourse, might cause consumers to dismiss the posts without even reading them enough to become fully aware of the issue.

The communication of emotion in posts could influence both awareness and sense-making. Researchers have argued that exchange on the social net may be governed by the principles of gift exchange theory and that emotions are the currency of that exchange (Chakrabarti & Berthon, 2012). Emotional tone is a central feature of social media marketing, and tapping into consumer emotion can be key to successful viral marketing (Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & van Wijk, 2007). When the language or visuals of the narrative are vivid and evocative and arouse empathy, the content tends to be subject to better recall and tends to influence cognitive judgements more (Mazzarol, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2007). If there is no emotional connection, even if the linked content is deemed relevant, it is unlikely to be passed along; the emotional connection appears to be the arbitrating factor (Botha and Reyneke, 2013). Emotion, both in valence and intensity, can also be a factor in sense-making (Heverin & Zach, 2012). Yet it is not well understood how the receiver reacts to emotion in posts, either from friends (where the tie strength may well moderate the influence) or in trending communications where there is perhaps a critical mass of intensity behind one particular emotion. There is therefore a need to explore how Facebook users on the receiving end of such posts interpret emotion in posts and how it affects their engagement with and interpretation of the content.

Similarly, the positive versus negative valence of the amassed comments might have influence. Online word of mouth communications are often very polarized (Mazzarol et al., 2007), and the negative comments appear to be more influential than the positive ones, requiring fewer of them to influence consumers (Gavilan, Avello, & Martinez-Navarro, 2018; Lee & Chun, 2016). Moreover, negative content is propagated to more people, over a longer period of time, and is more assimilated by those who read it than positive content (Hornik et al., 2015). In really egregious cases, protest sites can arise where all the negative comments and complaints against the company are accumulated creating a critical mass of negative opinion (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). The aggregation of opinion in this way, whether positive or negative but especially if negative, could reach a critical mass that influences consumer trust (Gavilan et al., 2018; Watts & Dodds, 2007).

In summary, with regard to the influence of critical mass, this research seeks to explore how consumers interpret the cues of mass engagement, such as the number times they see posts on the same topic, or the number of 'likes' or 'shares', or whether something is trending on Facebook. It also looks at how consumers interpret quantity versus quality and how emotion and civility, along with negative/positive valence might influence either awareness or sense-making and consequently potentially have influence on consumer trust.

Consumers need ways to sort through all of the content on Facebook to decide what to read or view. They also need ways to assess credibility and to determine whether they will adopt the information or point of view posted on the social net by a friend in their network. In addition to looking at the influence of both tie strength and critical mass in this process, this research focuses on the tactical influence of the mechanisms themselves. There is therefore a need to consider the research evidence for how consumers interpret the use of the tagging, 'liking', trending, linking and commenting mechanisms by other consumers in their network and how these mechanisms contribute to their assessment of company trustworthiness and thus ultimately on consumer trust. The basis for research into these Facebook mechanisms is discussed next in sections 3.4.4 to 3.4.8.

3.4.4 Tagging Mechanism

Tagging a friend in a person's network alerts them that their name has been associated with a certain post or picture that is relevant to them, and also allows the other friends in their network to see that they have been tagged (Ha et al., 2017). Since a tag specifically emphasizes the relevance of the content to the person tagged, the influence of a post with a tag may be greater than the influence of a post without a tag. For example, a friend might tag someone on something to do with a company or its products and services if the friend knew that person were a customer or thinking of becoming a customer of that company. Or, if someone found something they were considering purchasing and wanted their friend's opinion on it they might take a picture and tag that friend, since consumers actively seek out the opinion of friends in real time when they are shopping (Hajli et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2017). Even if a person were otherwise disinclined to stop and read a post or follow a link shared by a friend, if the friend tagged them that might alter the outcome, since in general, people who have been tagged will look at the content to see what they were tagged on (Ha et al., 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). Thus, tagging raises the likelihood that the tagged person will become aware of the post or of the content of a shared link, and this could influence consumer trust.

The purpose of the tag is to call attention to the post, but the tagging mechanism is dynamic in that a person who has been tagged on something can comment in reply or 'like' the tag, or forward the tagged content on to someone else (Ha et al., 2017). Ha et al. (2017) found that 78% of users tagged in their study responded, with over half of those commenting in reply and almost all the others just clicking the 'like' button. However, only very few shared a post they were tagged in. Tags have also been used to encourage engagement and invite comment on a topic of conversation (Ha et al., 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). When tags are used this way, the influence could extend beyond driving awareness to encouraging sense-making activities indirectly through the comment mechanism.

However, tags and tagging seem to be viewed with mixed emotions; many people do not like being tagged, particularly females and the younger generations, because of privacy and image management concerns and even un-tag themselves when they are tagged on content they consider inappropriate or embarrassing (Birnholtz, Burke, & Steele, 2017; Wisniewski, Xu, Lipford, & Bello-Ogunu, 2015). This disaffection with the use of the mechanism may engender a negative reaction that taints the consumer's engagement with, or opinion of, the content. Alternatively, how a person reacts to a tag may depend on how active they are on Facebook overall, including using tags, as well as who the tag is coming from. Research has shown that the more experienced people are with using a platform, the more they use and accept use of the mechanisms, and that with experience comes a comfort level with discussing or sharing negative content that might affect their image (Balaji et al., 2016). Therefore, the reaction to tags is likely to be somewhat dependent on the extent to which Facebook users see themselves as active content creators versus browsers, and the familiarity they have with using the tagging mechanism themselves.

There is therefore a need to explore how tags are perceived when they call attention to matters that might affect consumer trust, and what kind of influence that might have on the consumer's trust of the company. There is also a need to explore whether consumers take into account who the person is who is tagging them and what difference that might make, if any.

3.4.5 'Liking' Mechanism

When someone posts original content or shares a link on Facebook, their friends can indicate their reaction to the post quickly by clicking the 'like' button. This mechanism allows their friends to vote their approval of content shared via a link or posted directly to a Facebook status with one click, and by so doing, their 'likes' become visible to others in the network, signalling approval or acceptance (J. W. Kim, 2018). When other people in the friend network go on Facebook and see the same post, they can see the number of 'likes' it has received and can also see who in their friend network has liked it (Wessel et al., 2016). 'Likes,' can communicate that this content is good, and/or interesting or worth sharing, and it can increase the likelihood that others will read/view the content and even take action on it including 'liking' it themselves (Ding et al., 2017; Wessel et al., 2016). Furthermore, Facebook has an algorithm that alerts users to content that others in their friend network have 'liked' and tells them exactly which of their friends have 'liked' it, thus calling to the user's attention content they might otherwise not come across.   Thus, 'likes' could be an important awareness mechanism for content that could affect consumer trust.

The sheer number of 'likes' can be a factor in itself, as research has shown that consumers are increasingly using heuristics such as 'likes' to sort through the enormous amount of content online and decide what to look at (J. W. Kim, 2018). However, the social connection of knowing who within someone's network has 'liked' content could be just as important, as it may amplify the effect of a 'like'.   Social Impact Theory states that behaviours are influenced, not just by the number of sources who agree, but also the by the closeness of the sources (the immediacy) and the importance of the sources (the strength) (Ding et al., 2017). Therefore, if there were a close tie between the consumer and their friend who 'liked' the content, and/or if the friend had strong credibility with the consumer on this topic, then social impact theory would suggest that this could influence the consumer's trust and behaviour.

Research has shown that 'likes' are valuable to companies because they can influence consumer opinion and also consumer behaviour (Ding et al., 2017; Mochon, Johnson, Schwartz, & Ariely, 2017). 'Likes' have been shown to have an effect on what users think of the content and their actions in response (Mochon et al., 2017), including considering products to be of higher quality, when they have higher numbers of 'likes' (J. W. Kim, 2018). The 'bandwagon-effect' (i.e. the effect that causes people to follow the crowd) when consumers see a number of others 'liking' a product, or giving it high 'star' ratings, has been shown to significantly increase perceptions of quality, value, credibility, and purchase intent (Sundar et al., 2008). Thus, the 'like' mechanism appears to have potential to influence sense-making and consumer trust when it comes to evaluation of products and services.

In contrast, other research into the effect of ‘likes’ on content of news articles has shown that ‘likes’ have little to no effect on evaluation, persuasion or perception (Winter et al., 2015). This may be in part because ‘likes’ may be taken as a positive endorsement, which research showed was less influential than negative disapproval (Winter et al., 2015), and may be in part because ‘likes’ don’t provide any further information on which to judge the assessment (Wessel et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2015). Thus, if Facebook friends are ‘liking’ an article that discusses a company’s practices or actions regarding one of the reputation factors that influence consumer trust, it may be that other friends in their network are not as influenced by the ‘likes’ as the bandwagon-effect discussed above might suggest. There is therefore a need to explore how ‘likes’ are interpreted by consumers and their influence on consumer trust.

3.4.6 Trending Mechanism

In the highly socially connected online world where significant amounts of opinion and information are available, information that is trending has been shown to have a strong influence on consumer trust (Sundar et al., 2008; Watts & Dodds, 2007), especially in high stakes purchase decisions (Sweeney et al., 2008). Trending items are topics, words or phrases, or items that are being searched, discussed, and/or purchased online at a high rate and in a short and recent timeframe, such that they rise to the top of the lists of hot topics or hot products (Kocas & Akkan, 2016). On news sites, the designation ‘most read story’, used to feature trending news, calls popular items to the attention of visitors to the site and research has shown that consumers read and engage more with content that has been flagged in this way, including adding comments themselves appended to the article (Yang, 2016).

In an effort to meet the growing demand for trending news in short soundbites, in June 2014, Facebook introduced a Trending News section which listed the headlines of news stories that were most being viewed or read in a separate section on a user's homepage (Facebook Product News, 2014). Prior to that date such hot topics of news would appear in a user's feed but in this location they were buried in with a lot of other content. The Trending News mechanism was introduced to compete better with Twitter and was managed by a combination of automation and a team of employees who curated the content that the automated algorithm surfaced (Osofsky, 2016). In 2016, Facebook came under pressure for curating the Trending News with a political bias and in favour of their company sponsors, and made the decision to cease the human curation of the news and simply allow the automated algorithm to surface news stories (Thielman, 2016). However, this proved to be highly unsatisfactory for Facebook and its users, even after several product redevelopments (Solon, 2016). Therefore, in June of 2018 Facebook announced that it was withdrawing this feature altogether and instead was introducing three new features, *Breaking News Label* which allows news organisations to flag their posts on a Facebook user's feed, *Today In …* which connects users to local news stories, and a *News Video* section in Facebook Watch where users can view live coverage of events (Hardiman, 2018). The research for this study was conducted during the period that Facebook had an active Trending News section, and therefore Trending News is one of the mechanisms that this research considers. While this specific mechanism no longer exists as of this writing, nevertheless the discussion continues to be relevant, as other (substitute) mechanisms have been introduced, and influence from socially curated topics that a large number of others are watching, reading or talking about will likely continue to be a factor in influencing consumer opinion.

Facebook displayed headlines of trending items from news sites on their platform, usually showing topic, title and some metric of engagement, with the opportunity to click and read more (Duguay, 2018). Items that are called out to consumers in this way provide signals to consumers of popularity and can drive interest in finding out more about them because 'everyone' is talking about them (Kocas & Akkan, 2016; Yang, 2016). Items that are featured as trending not only expose consumers to information, but also accelerate the speed at which they can skim through to keep abreast of topics in the news (Flintham et al., 2018). Trending lists also bring information to the attention of consumers that they might not see elsewhere; a study of Trending Topics on Twitter across several countries found that between 40% and 46% of Trending Topics on Twitter were matters that were only reported on Twitter and not in the mass media (Carrascosa, Cuevas, Gonzalez, Azcorra, & Garcia, 2015). Therefore, trending items on social networks can play an important role in driving awareness and conveying information beyond traditional online and offline news media channels, and this could influence consumer trust if the trending item were to do with one of the reputation factors on which consumers assess company trustworthiness.

A growing body of research reveals that the social media metrics that drive and reflect trending interest, such as 'likes', shares, recommendations of news stories, etc., are affecting how consumers engage, process and perceive both the news itself and the comments appended to the news item (e.g. Chung, 2017; Duguay, 2018; Sundar et al., 2008; Yang, 2016; Ziegele, Weber, Quiring, & Breiner, 2018). Moreover, these trending metrics have been shown to influence consumer trust through purchase intent (Kocas & Akkan, 2016; Sundar et al., 2008), and to influence consumer perceptions of corporate reputation (Ravaja et al., 2015). Although a consumer's own experience in their interactions with a company or brand may usually be given greater consideration, content that is trending among friends in their network can influence the consumer's perceptions of company reputation through the emotional connection evoked by the discussion (Ravaja et al., 2015). Thus, when content relevant to assessment of company trustworthiness goes viral or trends and shows up on Facebook's feed, the perceived preponderance of opinion could affect the consumer's trust of a company.

Several other factors may mediate the level of awareness and influence on consumer trust driven by the trending mechanism on Facebook. One of these is the topic itself. If a consumer is not interested in a topic, they will likely not bother to read it or engage with it (Flintham et al., 2018). Research has shown that personal relevance of the topic is also a factor; where there is high personal relevance, there is strong potential for influence, but even in cases where there is low personal relevance, consumers will be more influenced if engagement metrics indicate a high level of interest from others (Chung, 2017). In addition to the content, the negative or positive valence of the trending item may mediate the influence. Research has found that certain factors render some stories more liable to be picked up and reported than others, notably controversy and damage inflicted on a society or individuals, and these topics may also invite more engagement (Ziegele et al., 2018). Therefore, items that affect corporate reputation negatively, and thereby potentially lessen consumer trust, may more often trend on Facebook compared to more positive or benign reports. In contrast, other research has shown that positive rather than negative comments have more influence on consumer perceptions of corporate reputation (Ravaja et al., 2015). There is therefore a need to explore how factors such as these might mediate the influence of the trending mechanism.

It is possible that the influence of the trending mechanism and metrics of engagement vary with the reputation factor. The Facebook trending mechanism may be most important with those reputation factors directly related to the purchase and usage experience. This is suggested by consumer trust in e-commerce (Hsiao et al., 2010), consumer acceptance and widespread use of ratings and reviews (Sundar et al., 2008), as well as the interest in trending lists of best sellers that companies and e-commerce sites publish (Kocas & Akkan, 2016). Quality and Value of Products and Services, (QV) Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC) and Customer Orientation (CO) would seem to be the reputation factors most likely to fall into this category. Moreover, the trending mechanism may be playing an important role just by bringing these cases to the attention of consumers in the first place, as these topics are perhaps less likely to be a news item on the mainstream media unless there is a major event or reason to report on them (Carrascosa et al., 2015). Therefore, the trending mechanism of Facebook may provide a 'stumble upon' access (Baresch, Knight, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011) that drives awareness.

When content goes viral on the social net, comments that are appended to the content can sometimes number in the hundreds. However, it is not clear whether the presence of a long comment stream invites readership or discourages it, especially given that the discussion in the case of viral content is likely to be contributed by people unknown to the reader. A large number of comments may have the advantage of offering the reader some sense of the preponderance or critical mass of opinion thus helping with sense-making (Heverin & Zach, 2012; Sundar et al., 2008; Watts & Dodds, 2007), but when comments start to number in the hundreds, it raises the question as to whether consumers actually make the effort and time to read through them. Moreover, as a comment stream lengthens, it may become subject to the patterns of change that affect rumour diffusion, namely 'levelling' where the message gets shorter and parts get dropped out, 'sharpening' where some message elements rise to prominence at the expense of other elements so the emphasis changes, and 'assimilation' where the message gets distorted and modified by information not originally included (Hornik et al., 2015). Therefore, it is possible that the influence on consumer trust of a long comment stream appended to content trending on Facebook might vary depending on whether the consumer had time or inclination to read it, and the stage of development the comment stream might have reached when the consumer accessed it.

There is therefore a need to explore trending as a mechanism for driving awareness on matters influencing consumer trust, and to look at the importance of the topic itself with regard to the influence of the trending mechanism and critical mass of engagement on consumer trust. There is also a need to explore how, when and why consumers read/view trending items and the comments attached to the stories, and how they take information found there into account, as compared with information that comes directly from a friend in their network.

3.4.7 Linking Mechanisms

Trending items usually have links to other content on which users can click for more information (Duguay, 2018). Additionally, the sharing of links is one of the main activities that users on Facebook and other social media sites engage in (K. Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011). Baresch et al. (2011, p.5) have identified a shift from what they call the "ink economy" to the "link economy", as consumers move more online for news consumption and browse links shared by their friends, or links that they find in trending news items, in order to stay informed. This, they say, creates a kind of news and information treasure hunt, where members graze, forage and happen upon items serendipitously by following links (Baresch et al., 2011), sometimes through multiple levels of connection (H. Kang et al., 2011).

Research has shown that the use of links tends to increase the credibility of news (Borah, 2014). Indeed, research shows that linking to content or embedding content are tools used by those who post on social networks and social media in general to signal information quality (Osatuyi, 2013). Facebook users use links often with almost half (49%) sharing information through the use of links, many of which (21%) are to news articles (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015); and heavier users of Facebook appear to share links more often (K. Baek et al., 2011; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). Eighty percent of online news consumers often or sometimes click on links in news items they read (Mitchel et al., 2016), of which links to products (shared more by women than men) has been found to be the third most frequent category after general interest and news (Baresch et al., 2011). Linked sources cover a wide range from links to YouTube videos, to online sites of traditional news media, as well as to product sites and blogs, among others (Baresch et al., 2011). Not only can these links serve to provide context and information, they are a shortcut that permits speedy engagement with the topic (Holton, Baek, Coddington, & Yaschur, 2014) thereby increasing likelihood of engagement. This could be important to the influence on consumer trust since the links through which a consumer encounters a company's website or products significantly influences their judgement of that company (Stewart & Malaga, 2009). Moreover, linked content can also provide the frame which defines the boundaries of the discussion, boundaries that can be dynamic as others aggregate related content through further links, or the use of other mechanisms such as comments or hashtags (Christensen, 2016). Clicking on such links could provide access to a broad range of information on topics that could include content on the corporate reputation factors important to consumers. In these instances, the framing, the context, the depth and credibility of the information could all have influence on consumer trust.

In assessing reliability of linked content, it has been shown that people consider both the reliability of the proximate source, that is the person posting the link to Facebook, and also the reliability of the distal or anterior source, that is the original site or author of the linked content (H. Kang et al., 2011; Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012). The influence of source credibility has been shown to be stronger when processing information quickly and heuristically, as happens on the social net, rather than thoughtfully and critically, as might be the case when reading an article (Dou et al., 2012). Moreover, research shows that if someone has a history of positive experiences with trusting information from a source, they are generally more likely to believe information from that source in the future (Y. A. Kim & Ahmad, 2013; Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012). However, they need to have confidence that the source (either anterior or proximate) not only has the will or motivation to provide honest and objective information, but also has the ability to provide true and accurate information (Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012). Therefore, when a consumer sees someone who is a strong tie posting a link on Facebook they may well be inclined to trust the credibility of the linked content, since recommendations from strong ties are trusted (Balaji et al., 2016; Matook et al., 2015) and credibility of the proximate source has been positively linked to credibility of the news content itself (Dou et al., 2012; H. Kang et al., 2011). Furthermore, a Facebook user's in-group of close ties are likely to share information which validates common knowledge and common attitudes, increasing likelihood of information adoption from shared links within the in-group (Abrantes et al., 2013).

The influence of the anterior source is not as clearly defined, in part because it seems that there is an interdependence between the proximate and anterior sources in the consumer's mind. There are many reasons people share links on Facebook, including information sharing, convenience, entertainment, passing the time, interpersonal utility, control, promoting work, and incentives or compensation (Blazevic et al., 2013; Holton et al., 2014). So, the receiver's perception of the sender's motivation to share could colour the receiver's interpretation of the credibility of the anterior source and the news itself (Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012). Research has shown that credibility of the proximate source can influence credibility of the anterior source; when credibility of the proximate source is high, then a credible anterior source can influence news credibility and information adoption; yet, when credibility of the proximate source is average or low, the news credibility was perceived as low whether anterior source was perceived as credible or not (H. Kang et al., 2011). Trust of the content has also been associated with the number of times links to the content or to related content are shared; high numbers of shares increased the perception that the content was influential on others, and therefore also increased influence on self (J. W. Kim, 2018). These results imply the anterior source may not matter very much since several other factors are in play, some of which may override consideration of the anterior source.

In contrast, people look to see who or what the anterior source is and actively internalize that information such that they can recall (at least half the time) what the name of the anterior source was for the article that was linked (Mitchel et al., 2017). If that source is a news organization, they consider it more reliable than information they find on social media in general (Mitchel et al., 2016). Furthermore, the receiver's past experience with the anterior source may mean that they are already disposed to trust or not to trust information from that source, which would influence their likelihood of clicking on the link in the first place (Lucassen & Schraagen, 2012). The framing of the news by the anterior source may also affect credibility. Research reveals that links tend to increase news credibility but only when depicted as a values issue (value framing), not when depicted as a competitive issue (strategy framing) (Borah, 2014). Consequently, the framing that the anterior source uses to discuss the topic may influence the receiver's assessment of the source's credibility. Therefore, it is unclear how the anterior source may be influencing consumer assessment of company trustworthiness and thus consumer trust.

The form of the linked content that is being widely propagated may also have significant bearing on whether it is likely to influence consumer trust. Links can lead to content in text form, to pictures or to videos, with text being the most common links; men tend to post more links to video, women to photos, and those over age 35 tend to post more links to articles than the younger cohorts (Baresch et al., 2011). Yet, how important the form is to the influence on consumer trust, and how this might vary with age or gender, has not been thoroughly researched. It is not well understood whether the link mechanism as a tool to propagate information virally has a different function regarding influence on consumer trust when linking to video vs. when linking to articles, and if so, how the consumer receiving the communication views the difference with regard to impacting their trust of companies as a consumer.

A deeper understanding is therefore needed regarding how consumers on the receiving end of links interpret them and engage with them, and how this might affect their trust of companies. There is also a need to understand influence the proximate and anterior sources have on that assessment. This research therefore seeks to explore the influence of links and the importance of the source.

3.4.8 Commenting Mechanism

When links are shared through Facebook, users often post a comment with the link that provides their point of view (Chun & Lee, 2017), and this can give the reader additional information or perspective on which to assess the credibility and interpretation of the linked content (Chun & Lee, 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). At the same time it could also increase the opportunity for influence (Osatuyi, 2013), especially as posts have been found to have more influence when they have a comment appended (Hsueh et al., 2015). Sharing comments with posted links is not uncommon; it is thought that a third of all internet users have shared comments on links to news that they post (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). When comments are appended to linked content in this way, this moves the linked content from being a static, secondary source of information to being a primary, dynamic source of information where the discussion can inform the sense-making of the linked content (Chun & Lee, 2017; Osatuyi, 2013).

Comments can be very influential, from simple comments that consumers leave as reviews which directly influence purchase intent (Hajli et al., 2017; R. A. King et al., 2014; K. Z. K. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016), to dynamic conversations that exchange information and perspective (Hong & Cameron, 2018), providing new frames for the topic of the linked content which may alter consumer perspective (Borah, 2014; Ravaja et al., 2015). Comments about companies' products and services may provide information supporting decision-making, especially in the information gathering, evaluation and selection stages of decision-making (Sadovykh, Sundaram, & Piramuthu, 2015). Researchers argue the purchase funnel is now becoming a continuous loop of assessment and adjustment based on consumer feedback through posts, comments and reviews on online social networks (N. King, 2004), enhanced and made more impactful by the social amplification that occurs there (East et al., 2017).

When there is a story about a company in the news that gets passed around virally, the company may not only get impacted by the story itself, but may also get impacted by the amplification contributed by all the comments appended to the story (Hsueh et al., 2015; Lee & Chun, 2016). Such comments can also have the opposite effect; a recent study has found that comments that contradict a post or linked content can alter consumer perception about that company in contradiction to the original story (Hong & Cameron, 2018). Even for companies that have a bad corporate reputation with consumers, positive comments can improve reputation scores and increase purchase intent (Ravaja et al., 2015). This interpretive power that comments have is thought to come about because comments can set the context, the frame, for the linked story and thus can bias the reader's response (Hsueh et al., 2015), and also because comments are socially curated by the number of likes or supporting comments they receive (Hong & Cameron, 2018). Thus, research has established that comments can have influence on consumer trust of companies.

In contrast, research has also indicated consumer resistance to influence from comments, especially if the comments have an uncivil tone (Chen & Ng, 2017). Research into comments and Social Judgement Theory found that people use their own prior opinions as a benchmark by which to judge new opinions and tend to reject those comments that disagree with their own, especially when they hold negative opinions about the company (Lee & Chun, 2016; Sung & Lee, 2015). Thus, there are some contradictory findings on the nature and context of the influence of comments.

The comment mechanism offers participants the opportunity for dynamic sense-making (active discussion) with their Facebook friends for clarification, interpretation, persuasion or refutation, and thus comments could enhance understanding and evaluation of the importance of an issue or topic regarding a company and how trustworthy they perceive it to be. In a related context, simply re-posting news on Facebook makes little difference to the level of involvement, but if the news that is posted invites dialogue, then involvement significantly increases (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). Similarly, research in the activist literature has shown that online discussion around a topic is positively correlated to civic and political engagement, while news consumption on the social net without discussion was not found to have a positive correlation (Valenzuela, 2013). This indicates that the discussion function of the comment mechanism can support sense-making through the dynamic and interpretive activity of comments, and influence can occur between parties involved in these discussions (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Valenzuela, 2013; Weick et al., 2005). However, the use of the comment mechanism on the social net for dynamic sense-making between friends for decision-making regarding trust of companies has not been extensively researched.

Within the social circles of Facebook, the context of the personal social connection could come into play to bias information in one direction or the other. Research has shown that people are more willing to add comments online that are in agreement with the majority of comments in a comment stream, and less willing to add their comments if they disagree with the preponderant viewpoint, following the theory of the Spiral of Silence (Woong Yun & Park, 2011). This states that people assess the climate of opinion before adding their voice and are only willing to state opinions openly that agree with the majority opinions for fear of isolation (Woong Yun & Park, 2011). Consequently, if comments are only added to the majority opinion side of the debate, this will exacerbate the sense that that position is the widely held view amongst a person's circle of friends on Facebook creating an echo-chamber and perpetuating a one-sided spiral of opinion (Flintham et al., 2018; Sundar et al., 2008; Woong Yun & Park, 2011). When this occurs within a group of friends on Facebook it could bias consumer trust by exposing the consumer to only one side of an argument on an issue that affects consumer trust.

Whether or not a consumer might choose to engage in active discussion on Facebook through the comment mechanism for the purposes of sense-making might also depend on the strength of the tie between the person and their friends engaged in the dialogue. If the Facebook friend were a strong tie, a consumer might feel comfortable engaging in online discussion using the comment mechanism, since a strong tie is one with whom they have frequent exchanges and long term reciprocity (Balaji et al., 2016; Granovetter, 1973). In particular, and somewhat in contradiction to the influence of the Spiral of Silence, those who use the comment mechanism and post frequently are more willing to post controversial, negative or contrary opinions on social networks, especially between strong ties, where less frequent users tended to reassess their own position rather than post a contrary one (Balaji et al., 2016). Therefore, an active and engaged Facebook user may feel quite at ease adding a comment to the post of a strong tie to invite discussion, even if they disagreed with the friend's position.

Yet this conversation may be less likely to happen online between strong ties. A recent survey found that taking the conversation offline and texting or speaking with someone was much the most common action after seeing news online (Mitchel et al., 2017). Moreover, engagement with comments on social networks has been found to be driven by a motivation simply to connect with others, not by a motivation to inform or obtain feedback from others (Wu & Atkin, 2017). Therefore, whether people would use comments on Facebook for this purpose is unclear. Moreover, if a Facebook user chooses instead to take the conversation offline, while the discussion between the friends could influence their trust of a company, the opportunity to influence others who might 'listen in' to the discussion by reading the comment stream is forfeit.

Finally, the overheated environment of Facebook and other social networks during the recent US political campaign in 2016 has increased the level of incivility in comments in general and experts fear this trend is likely to continue (Rainie, Anderson, & Albright, 2017). There is evidence that this is now spilling over into incivility in comments on non-political and even non-controversial news stories (Graf et al., 2017). If a consumer sees a lot of incivility in comments in their circle of Facebook friends, they may develop a more hostile orientation overall and specifically with regard to the company that is the subject of the posts and comments (Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016). Moreover, incivility may have profound impact on the use of the commenting mechanism going forward as exposure to uncivil comments may deter engagement. In their recent study, Graf et al. (2017) found that, while civility increased both trust of the information and of the person commenting, uncivil comments shut down sense-making activity and eroded the expectation that using the comment mechanism for sense-making was even worthwhile.

There is therefore a need to explore how consumers use the comment mechanism on Facebook, both passively as a reader of comments and actively as one who engages the dialogue on matters affecting consumer trust. This research investigates how Facebook users feel about the usefulness of comments in this context and whether that might be changing, as well as how their use of comments might change under different conditions of tie strength or with different topics of discussion. Thus, the research seeks to uncover how comments from friends on Facebook might contribute to influence on consumer trust of companies.

3.4.9 Summary and Research Question 2

This discussion has established the academic foundation for examining the mechanisms of Facebook regarding their potential influence on consumer trust. The discussion has focused on how the influence of the mechanisms may be occurring through awareness and through sense-making. Prior to discussing each of the mechanisms in turn, it was important to discuss the context in which they operate. Thus, the discussion began in section 3.4.1 with consideration of Facebook as a platform and issues of credibility. Facebook as a platform may mediate the influence of the mechanisms both through the effect of the social curation of news and information on awareness (Bakshy et al., 2011; Singer, 2014), and through the effect of consumer perception of credibility of online content found on Facebook (Flintham et al., 2018; J. Shin et al., 2018; Wessel et al., 2016).

In addition to considerations of Facebook as a platform, the influence of the Facebook mechanisms on consumer trust could be moderated by considerations of tie strength (section 3.4.2) and a critical mass of engagement (section 3.4.3), both defining elements of online social networks. An increased likelihood of engagement due to personal connection (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) as well as the opportunity for gatekeeper bias (Masip et al., 2018) both point to the potential influence of tie strength on awareness. The influence of tie strength on sense-making is possible due to knowledge of the friend along with the history of interaction (Balaji et al., 2016; Matook et al., 2015), as well as the influence of perceptual affinity and in-group/out-group dynamics (Cheng et al., 2017; Ha et al., 2017). Similarly, the likely effect on awareness of a critical mass of engagement appears to be from frequency of exposure and the need to make oneself aware of what others are discussing online (Lee & Chun, 2016; Watts & Dodds, 2007). The subsequent perception that a number of others hold a given opinion may create a bandwagon effect thus supporting the possible impact of critical mass on sense-making (J. W. Kim, 2018; Sundar et al., 2008).

This discussion established the context in which Facebook's 'tagging, 'liking', trending, linking and commenting mechanisms have the potential to influence consumer trust of companies through awareness and sense-making. The discussion of the tagging (section 3.4.4) established a likely influence on awareness, since when Facebook users are tagged they almost always look to see what they were tagged on (Ha et al., 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). The influence from 'liking' (section 3.4.5) appears likely to be mostly on awareness due to both the number of 'likes' (J. W. Kim, 2018), and the particular friend whose 'like' communicates endorsement (Ding et al., 2017; Wessel et al., 2016), but both of these attributes might also influence sense-making to a lesser degree. The trending mechanism on Facebook is changing, but the influence of topics that are trending on Facebook (section 3.4.6) could bring matters to the attention of consumers they might not find elsewhere thus affecting awareness (Flintham et al., 2018). Trending can also affect sense-making given the accelerated speed and broad scope, as well as social curation that occurs with viral propagation on online social networks (Go, Jung, & Wu, 2014; Sundar et al., 2008; Yang, 2016). Although the sharing of links (section 3.4.7) could impact awareness, links appear to be important in particular to sense-making because they provide quick access to deeper information (Holton et al., 2014) and their inclusion in a post increases consumer perception of credibility by providing transparency on the source of the information (Borah, 2014; H. Kang et al., 2011). The commenting mechanism (section 3.4.8) provides opportunity for sense-making by increasing influence of the original post (Hsueh et al., 2015) and offering the opportunity for dynamic conversations that can influence perspective and opinion (Hong & Cameron, 2018).

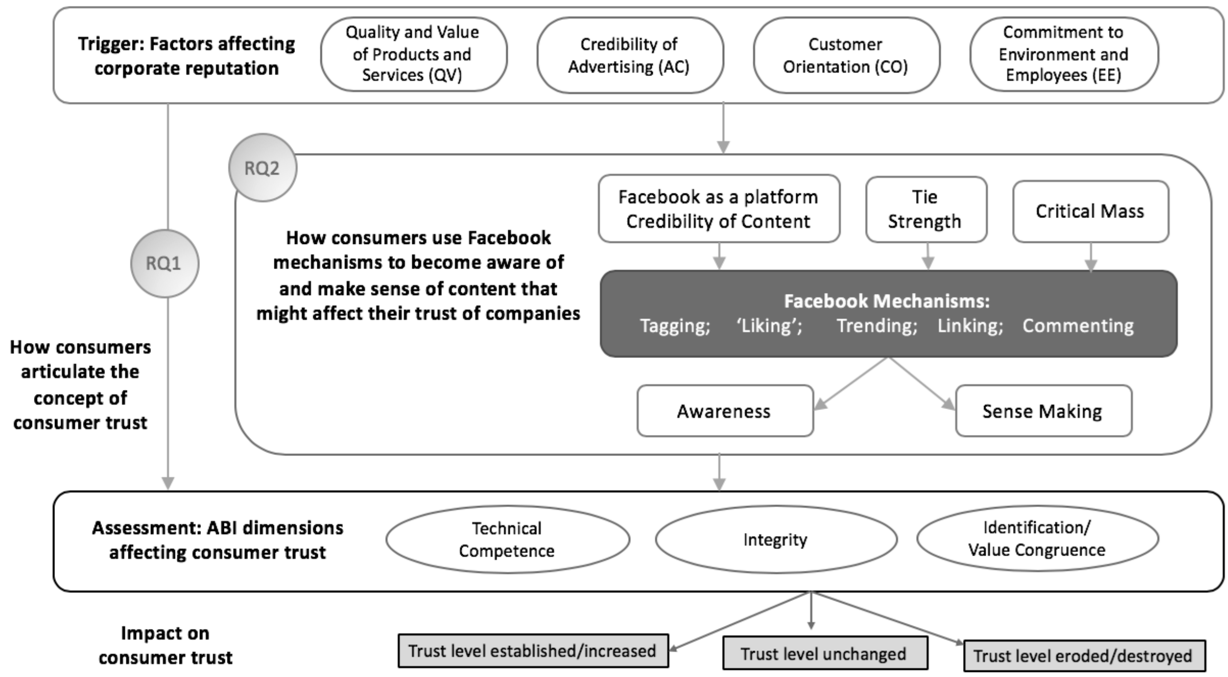
When matters concerning the corporate reputation factors important to consumer trust are reported on Facebook, they have potential to influence consumer trust. As discussed, the context of Facebook communications and the mechanisms themselves may be playing a role in this influence. However, how consumers are using Facebook mechanisms to become aware of or make sense of such matters and how this is impacting their trust of companies has not been fully researched. The need to understand this more fully establishes the second research question:

> **<u>RQ2</u>: How do consumers use the main Facebook mechanisms to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their trust of companies, and how might their use of these mechanisms be affected by different conditions of tie strength and critical mass?**

3.4.10 Research Model

This research seeks to establish a connection between the corporate reputation factors to which consumers are sensitive (Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009) and the ABI trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2008, 2011). This is articulated in RQ1, making a contribution by empirically connecting the corporate reputation literature and the stakeholder trust literature regarding consumer trust. In RQ2, this research contributes to the consumer trust literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of how Facebook mechanisms may be influencing consumer trust through the sharing and discussion of content relating to the corporate reputation factors important to consumers. This discussion provides the foundation for the research model shown in figure 3.4 below, now expanded from figure 3.2 to include RQ2 and showing how the two questions relate.

11 Figure 3.4: Research model



The next chapter, Chapter 4, addresses the methodology and research methods used to gather data to answer the two research questions. This is followed by the findings for RQ1 in Chapter 5 and for RQ2 in Chapter 6, and the discussion of the findings in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

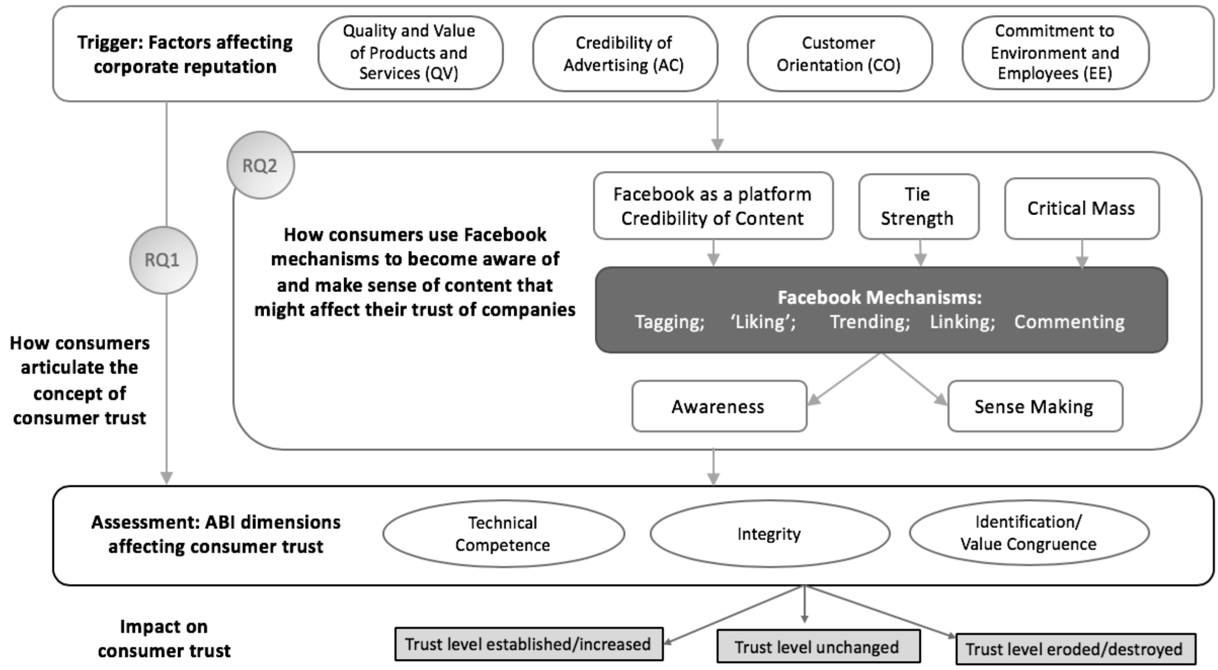
This chapter discusses the methodology and methods used in this research. It begins with an overview of my approach (section 4.1). Methodological choice is discussed in section 4.2. The research objective called for a qualitative study. Before undertaking the main study, I conducted a pilot study. This pilot study and the resulting adjustments to the method for the main study are discussed in section 4.3. Section 4.4 covers the target population and sample selection for the main study. This is followed by a discussion of the method used for data collection (section 4.5) and the analysis of the data (section 4.6).

This research was undertaken with a view to understanding how the mechanisms of the social net may influence consumer trust of companies. This entailed exploring how consumers perceive such communications and what influences might be brought to bear on their perceptions from the friend connection and from the mechanisms of propagation. The knowledge thus acquired was necessarily context-specific in its derivation, but the underlying principles governing the influences were analysed to reveal patterns of behaviour that could be understood independently of the original social context from which they derived (Fleetwood, 2014; J. Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010). While it was necessary to accept the situational and human factors as relevant and important to understanding these influences, it was also necessary to look behind what was occurring in any given actual circumstance to determine the causal tendencies of these influences and how they might work in other actual circumstances (Fletcher, 2017; Reed, 2005; Ryan, Tähtinen, Vanharanta, & Mainela, 2012). The emphasis for this research was therefore on inductively revealing and understanding the influences both of the mechanisms themselves and the social construction of the context in which they are used in a blended explanation of the potential influence on consumer trust of companies. At the same time, the research sought to explain abductively those aspects that transcend the empirical specifics of a particular situation, focussing on the explanation of connections rather than seeking simply to report thick descriptions of events or perspectives (Fletcher, 2017). This approach applied to this research allowed for a richer, deeper explanation of how the mechanisms of the social net might be influencing consumer trust, one which could encompass the multiple possible combinations of different situational factors, while at the same time abductively identifying those elements that operate at a more universal and transferable level (Fletcher, 2017; Reed, 2001, 2005; Ryan et al., 2012).

4.2 Methodological choice

To reiterate, the overall aim of this research is to explore the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies. Facebook was chosen as the focus of this research, since it is still the most widely used social network platform by a considerable margin (A. Smith & Anderson, 2018). As established in chapters 2 and 3, there is a solid grounding in the literature for the possibility of such influence. From that, a theoretical model was developed to explain how this is taking place (Chapter 3, figure 3.4). For clarity, this model is reproduced below in figure 4.1.

12 Figure 4.1: Research model (reproduced from Chapter 3, figure 3.4)



Three methodological choices were considered and evaluated for exploring this model, qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method research. Qualitative methods (mono or multiple) offer a process-oriented, exploratory paradigm of research where events and interactions are observed and interpreted to address the research question (Fielding, 2012; J. A. Maxwell, 2010). Quantitative methods (again, mono or multiple) are essentially a variance-oriented, explanatory paradigm of research where the strength of variables and correlations are measured and these address the research question (Fielding, 2012; J. A. Maxwell, 2010). Mixed methods research (MMR) combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods in the same study, integrating the analysis and results of each (Denzin, 2012; Saunders et al., 2016; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). MMR has been growing in popularity in recent years, and has become recognized as a tradition in itself alongside, and independent of, mono-method or multi-method research (Bryman, 2006; Denzin, 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010).

As can be seen in figure 4.1, in its theoretical form, the model only summarized potential connections at a general level since the specifics of the connections had not yet been researched. There was a need for deeper understanding and insight in order to understand specific causal connections and refine the model to a deeper level of granularity. Prior to conducting this research, it was not clear exactly what influences would dictate the shape of the model. The flow of influence and the connections were not yet well understood, and so the model could not yet be sufficiently well refined to form hypotheses that could be quantitatively tested. Using a quantitative design would have been essentially a hit-or-miss exercise and therefore this was discarded as an appropriate approach.

A QUAL-quan mixed method research design was also considered, since one of the appropriate contexts for using MMR is that of a researcher bringing together two or more relatively mature strands in the literature to focus on a research question as yet relatively unexplored (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007). This was the case for this research. However, this method necessitates sufficient support in the literature to move beyond the purely exploratory stage (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010) which was not the case here. Therefore, this was also discarded as the method of choice.

While developing the specifics of the research design, it became clear that a deep exploration of attitudes and usage was needed. Therefore, the research method selected for the model refinement was a multi-method qualitative study. A multi-method study is any study that employs two or more methods of data collection and analysis, either concurrently or sequentially, to address one or more research questions in the same study (Brinkmann, 2013; Saunders et al., 2016). The research questions for this study were related but required different data collection methods. The first question required a very open-ended, unstructured approach to interviewing in order to discover whether and how participants would articulate the connection between the reputation factors and the trust assessment dimensions. The second question required a semi-structured approach using vignettes in order to explore the potential influence of Facebook mechanisms on consumer trust of companies. Therefore, a multi-method qualitative study was the design of choice.

Institutional Review Board ethics approval to conduct this research with the target population and research design outlined in the following segments, including the pilot, was sought and obtained from Wake Forest University, an AACSB accredited R1 research university in America where I am on the faculty. This included pre-approval of all documents and communications intended for use in the research, such as the interview guide and vignettes, the Informed Consent, and the solicitation of interest. The oversight by Wake Forest University and the approval notice to proceed with the research was submitted to, and accepted by, the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee (appendix A-1).

4.3 Pilot Study

The research design called for a pilot study to be conducted first in order to gain input to the main study design, and to test and refine the structure of the interviews to improve credibility (Saunders et al., 2016). In this discussion, credibility is used as the qualitative research equivalent to internal validity for quantitative research, dependability as the equivalent of reliability and transferability as the equivalent of external validity (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saunders et al., 2016). In addition to strengthening the discussion guide and the questions themselves, this pre-testing enabled a more accurate estimate of length of time needed to complete the interview and identified any potential lack of understanding on the part of the researcher that needed to be addressed about how Facebook is used as a social network before embarking upon the main study for this research. A review of the data that emerged in response to the research questions enabled an assessment of whether the interview structure and discussion guide, along with how I conducted the interview, would result in useful, credible and dependable data when the main study was undertaken using this research design (Saunders et al., 2016). Furthermore, the pilot study also enabled an assessment of the appropriateness of the planned target population.

The original plan for the main study called for it to be conducted with a sample of heavy users of online social networks from among the Gen Y generational cohort in the U.S. Generation Y, variously referred to as Gen Y, Millennials, the Net Generation, or Echo-Boomers, are the generational cohort, defined at the time of the data collection as born after 1980 (Nielsen, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015). Gen Y are a diverse, optimistic, self-expressive group who are strongly influenced by the opinions of family and friends and who care about how companies act (Colucci & Cho, 2014; Leask, Fyall, & Barron, 2014; Nielsen, 2014; Taylor & Keeter, 2010). Gen Y are known as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001a) this demographic frequently exchanges opinions and peer recommendations on brands, products and consumption behaviours, often in real time through the social net (Colucci & Cho, 2014; Jansen, Sobel, & Cook, 2011) and are quite dependent on their online peer networks for opinion and decision-making on these matters (Bolton et al., 2013; Hajli, 2014b; K. Z. K. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). This dependence on the social net in general for peer-to-peer communications, news, discussion and input into opinions about companies, particularly as consumers, made this generational cohort a good target population with which to begin the process of understanding the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies.

Since the main study was planned to be conducted with Gen Y, the pilot study likewise used a Gen Y sample of students. I intended to source participants for the main study from the university populations in the area around the university where I worked, as well as my own university. This undergraduate population in the south-eastern United States is a population well versed in the topic of the research question, representing a typical rather than extreme case (Collins, 2010). The sample for the pilot study was a sample of convenience, sourced from a group of prior students of mine who were in the intended target population for the main study. This form of sampling was used since the main purpose of the pilot was to test the interview structure and discussion guide, to practice and sharpen my interviewing techniques, and to consider whether limiting the target population to Gen Y was appropriate. In addition, it allowed me to ascertain the time needed to cover all the interview points in the discussion guide. The focus was, therefore, on the method rather than on content, although it also allowed me to make sure that I was not missing anything obvious that would limit the usefulness of the data. Ten interviews were conducted for the pilot, six were female, four were male, all were between the ages of 19 and 22 and all were Caucasian Americans of well-educated, upper level socio-economic families. The interviews were conducted individually and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes each. Informed consent (appendix A-2) was obtained from all participants.

The discussion guide (appendix A-3) was based on my original thinking regarding the topic under research, which was that the interview would be structured around the three defining elements of communications on the social net, namely the ability to share content, to aggregate content and to comment on content. I developed a detailed discussion guide to ensure rigour in the interviews and enhance consistency of data analysis and interpretation (Brinkmann, 2013). However, through the pilot, I discovered that this did not fit how the participants thought about the topic and how they therefore wanted to talk about the topic. My interview guide was too detailed and too restrictive. I needed to have a more open approach in order to make sure to uncover unexpected answers that might yield important points of information. Therefore, for the main study, although I developed a full discussion guide (appendix A-8) to make sure I included all the points I wanted to cover, I conducted the interview with a more open approach to how and when the points came into the conversation.

This relates to the other important finding regarding the discussion itself, and one that had significant influence on the main study method, which was that participants needed material in the form of examples or situations in order to discuss fully how they used these sharing, aggregating and commenting mechanisms themselves, and how they reacted to the use of the mechanisms by others. They found it hard to discuss their attitudes and usage in the abstract, yet they could not always come up with good examples themselves that were relevant to the matter of consumer trust of companies and the reputation factors that were the focus of the enquiry. Therefore, the design of the main study was adapted to include the use of vignettes (see section 4.5). These were developed using material from the pilot interviews to ensure relevance to both the participants and the topic.

In the pilot study I tried to look across social networks at Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. I found that the participants used these networks differently and for different types of communication. I also realized that each of these was a study unto itself, and that to try to cover all three in the same interview and do justice to each would make the interview two to three hours long, which was unmanageable. Participants got tired after just one hour, with diminishing returns on the quality of information after that length of time. Therefore, as a result of the pilot, I decided to narrow the focus to the main social network, Facebook, and save the study of the other networks to future research. Facebook was selected because it is the most widely used social network platform with 68% of adults in the U.S. on Facebook, with Instagram at 35% and Twitter at 24%. (A. Smith & Anderson, 2018). Even though the pilot participants explained that many of the younger Gen Y cohort are now moving to Instagram, they said they use Instagram to post photos and project their desired social image online, not to get news or information or have discussions. Facebook and Twitter are still their channels of choice for the latter. Of these two, Facebook has a much deeper penetration of the population than Twitter (A. Smith & Anderson, 2018), and as pilot participants said, also has a broader range of topics and information than Twitter, which they indicated is very political. Therefore, Facebook was chosen as the network for the main study.

Important findings also emerged from the pilot regarding the target population. Participant discussion indicated that different generations use Facebook and Facebook mechanisms in different ways. The reported differences in attitude and usage observed by these Gen Y participants amongst their Facebook friends pointed to the need to include Boomers and Gen X as well as Gen Y in the main study to see if this might reveal different influences on consumer trust.

In addition to generation, results of the pilot study indicated that a wider socio-economic range would likely yield richer insights. The students from this university are somewhat homogenous and come from upper socio-economic backgrounds. Their answers and the discussion in the pilot study indicated less dependence on Facebook for news and information and a more sophisticated level of critical reasoning regarding content found there than reports from The Pew Research Center indicated were the case for the population at large (Pew Research Center, 2010; Taylor et al., 2014). This indicated the need to include participants from both an upper socio-economic and a lower socio-economic level for a fuller understanding of how Facebook mechanisms may be influencing consumer trust.

4.4 Target Population and Sample for the Main Study

Data collected for the main study were cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. A longitudinal study could have been informative, since the life experience of the information consumer and advances in technology may alter how the mechanisms work, but at this stage a cross-sectional approach was called for to get the initial exploration accomplished that could help refine the model. There was a clear focus for selecting the sample for the main study, namely to reveal the key themes concerning potential influence of Facebook mechanisms on consumer trust of companies and to understand the differences in reactions across specific demographic dimensions. Therefore, a purposive approach to sample selection was appropriate to make sure a range of perspectives were represented (Bryman, 2012; Gentles & Vilches, 2017;

Saunders et al., 2016). A non-probability sample was used as no statistical inferences were required from this sample and thus it was not necessary that the sample proportionately represent the population (Bryman, 2012; Saunders et al., 2016).

Purposive sampling is any intentionally managed sampling where the initial parameters and sample sizes are established a priori, called the initial sample, and then recruitment occurs ongoing throughout the data collection until saturation is reached according to the stopping criteria established a priori for data saturation (Francis et al., 2010; Gentles & Vilches, 2017). A recent review of qualitative research found the number of interviews used in qualitative research varied widely (where it is reported), and suggested that the actual number is less important than the ability to demonstrate that depth and breadth have both been addressed in the sample in order to achieve sufficient insight into the research question (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). Indeed, given the explorative nature of qualitative research, the notion of data saturation has been challenged as a false premise that is inappropriate, and the argument advanced that it does not render the findings of a qualitative study invalid if the horizon for exploration of a phenomenon is never reached (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Eight to ten interviews are recommended for a purposive homogenous sample, with data saturation generally reached at no more than twelve (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Saunders et al., 2016). While overall the total sample was not homogenous, there were specific criteria for homogenous sub-segments on which I wished to achieve saturation, namely gender, generation and socio-economic level.

The gender criterion was used because there is some indication in the literature that males and females may react to information on the social net differently, and may choose to share different things (Baresch et al., 2011; Chai, Das, & Rao, 2011; Y. Zhang, Feick, & Mittal, 2014). Moreover, there were some participants in the pilot who indicated that amongst their friends, men and women sometimes reacted differently to information posted by others, men more argumentatively, women more supportively. Thus, sample selection on this criterion could be expected to yield different insights.

The generation criterion for the main study was expanded to include the Gen X and Boomer generational cohorts in addition to Gen Y, for reasons discussed above in section 4.3. The birth years for the generational cohorts were selected following the definitions established by Pew Research Center at the time of the data collection (Pew Research Center, 2015). A three-year gap was allowed between each generational cohort for which no data were collected. This was done in order to improve credibility and dependability by reducing noise in the data that might have arisen from including participants born in the cusp years between generations. Gen Y's are profiled above (section 4.3). Short profiles of Gen X and Boomers are included here as background on some of the key defining features of the generations.

Gen X are a smaller generation in numbers than the other two, spanning only 16 years between 1965 and 1980 (Pew Research Center, 2015). Demographically, as well as in most of their political and social attitudes, they are fall between the two larger generational cohorts on either side of them on most dimensions (Taylor & Gao, 2014). More pessimistic and indifferent than the other two generations, they are described by Pew Research Center as savvy, sceptical and self-reliant (Taylor & Gao, 2014). This was the first generation to grow up with the Internet, though not with the social net, although two thirds now use social networks (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016).

Boomers are still the largest generational cohort, born in the post-WWII baby boom years between 1946 and 1964 (Pew Research Center, 2015), though due to the aging of the cohort, they are about to be overtaken by Gen Y as the largest living generation (Fry, 2018). Boomers are described as self-centred, individualistic and materialistic, with 80% online, and two thirds now using the Internet to make product purchases (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016). Boomers did not grow up with online technology as Gen X and Gen Y did, and while they have since adapted to it, their online and mobile technology orientation tends to be more based on productivity and convenience than on connectedness, the latter being more how the younger generations use mobile technology (Cohn & Taylor, 2010).

The third of the selection criteria, socio-economic level, was also highlighted in the literature and supported by indications from the pilot study as likely to be an important variable. Research into politics and activism has shown that education and socio-economic class impacts how consumer trust/distrust is manifested (Y. M. Baek, 2010). Higher education correlates with increased engagement in political and activist organizations, and those who are more affluent and educated tend to engage in boycotting (punishing) practices to express dissention with companies they distrust. Conversely, lesser-educated and lower income populations tend to use buycotting (rewarding) practices as a purchasing motivation for companies they trust and approve (Baek, 2010). Thus, a difference in education and income may impact how the mechanisms of the social net might have influence on consumers of different socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, to get some variety of insight along this dimension, participants were selected for the sample from both upper and lower socio-economic levels. This was determined through survey questions on education and occupation level adapted from the Hollingshead Index of Social Position (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016) (see appendix A-4).

Recruitment was undertaken using a research agency who selected participants on a volunteer basis that met the research criteria. This was done in the south-eastern U.S. city where the research was taking place. Additionally, some of the participants were recruited through a solicitation of interest conducted among current students and staff at a south-eastern US private university in the same city. To avoid ethical conflict of interest, students enrolled at the time in any of my classes were excluded from participation. Those who expressed interest in participating were asked to complete a screening questionnaire (appendix A-5) to ensure they qualified for the research and were willing to be contacted for it, and also to identify the demographic profile of the study volunteer in order to complete the required selection criteria for sample sizes per gender, per generation and per socio economic level. Qualification included familiarity with Facebook and at least some level of weekly usage.

Participants who were selected were administered a more detailed questionnaire (for questions see appendix A-6) to assess intensity and presence following the method of Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe (2007) along with some further questions on activity. Intensity relates to the amount of time and engagement a person has with social networks, and presence relates to the number of friends they have and whether they tend to originate content or simply respond to or pass on content (Glynn et al., 2012). Empirical research shows there is some correlation between intensity and presence and the way users of social networks (particularly Facebook) interact with and influence each other on the social net (Glynn et al., 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). For this research on Facebook, the questions from Ellison et al. (2007) were pre-tested with colleagues and with students in the pilot study for comprehension and relevance. In some cases, the wording of the questions was found to be out of date or incompatible with current usage of Facebook. For example, one question used to gauge intensity asked for agreement with the statement "I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook" (Ellison et al. 2007 p. 1150). Those with whom the questions were pre-tested considered this question to be absurd, as absurd as asking if you are proud to own a car or have a mobile phone. They explained that it is not considered a matter for pride, but simply a way of life. Based on input such as this from the pre-testing, the list of questions was amended, and some additional questions were added to help assess the level of engagement. The table in appendix A-7 shows the questions used by Ellison et al. (2007) and how they were amended, along with the questions that were added.

Following the method of Francis et al. (2010) for a theory-based interview study, an initial sample size of 10 per demographic dimension was decided, with the stopping criterion for the saturation point of three consecutive interviews with no new information. As discussed in Francis et al. (2010), 'saturation' and 'new information' are terms that are often ill-defined, which inhibits assessment of dependability and transferability. In order to address this for the current research, 'new information' was determined to be information that altered the coding structure significantly enough to affect the development and shape of the model that was emerging. When no new information was found for three consecutive interviews, saturation was deemed to have been achieved for that demographic dimension. In addition, in order to ensure breadth within the sample to improve both the transferability and the dependability (Saunders & Townsend, 2016), the research design called for ensuring representation (though not necessarily saturation) at all the micro-level intersections of these dimensions. Therefore, it was established a priori, following the method of Francis et al. (2010), that a minimum of three interviews would be conducted for each of the micro-level intersections of the main macro-level dimensions. This requirement necessitated more actively identifying participants with specific demographic profiles that were still needed to achieve the desired distribution and saturation requirements as the recruitment was drawing to a close.

There were 276 volunteer participants who completed the screening questionnaire. The participants were chosen in order of response on a first available basis according to the selection criteria, until all the research recruitment requirements had been fulfilled. A minimum sample of 36 participants was needed to fulfil the initial sampling criteria established a priori for the research design (as discussed above). As the interview process progressed, further recruiting was necessary on specific demographic attributes to achieve saturation on the three targeted demographic dimensions, gender, generation, and socio-economic level. Saturation was considered to have been achieved when participant discussion did not materially change the coding structure for three consecutive interviews. In all, forty-four participants were needed to fulfil the design requirements and reach saturation, the breakdown of which is shown in Table 4.2 below.

2 Table 4.1: Composition of the Research Sample by Targeted Dimension

	Boomer 1946-1961	**Gen X 1965-1980**	**Gen Y 1984-1999**	**Total of Targeted Dimension**
Upper Socio-Economic Level	3 Females 4 Males	4 Females 3 Males	6 Females 3 Males	**23 Upper Socio-Economic Level**
Lower Socio-Economic Level	3 Females 4 Males	3 Females 4 Males	3 Females 4 Males	**21 Lower Socio-Economic Level**
Total of Targeted Dimension	**14 Boomers**	**14 Gen X**	**16 Gen Y**	**22 Females 22 Males**

4.5 Research Design for Data Collection

Data collection took place over the course of approximately five months in the first half of 2017 using in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted individually, the research being fully discussed with each of the volunteer participants, along with privacy issues and use of material for publication. Their voluntary participation was re-affirmed and all questions addressed before the forms were offered for assent and signing. An Informed Consent document (appendix A-2) was reviewed with each participant and each participant signed a copy indicating consent to be interviewed under the conditions specified. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. Anonymity was preserved in both the transcription and the reporting by eliminating the use of participant's names and using coded pseudonyms instead (University Ethics Committee, 2013). The anonymized data were kept on a password protected personal computer and used in the analysis. There were no participants who chose not to participate or withdrew from the interview, therefore all data from the interviews were used in the analysis. Responses to the screening questionnaire were destroyed for non-participants.

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews, a well-established method of enquiry in trust research (Lyon, Mollering, & Saunders, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015). Semi-structured interviews ensured coverage of all the points of enquiry as well as some level of consistency in discussion between the interviews. However, the interviews were exploratory, and so narrative explanation and discussion of participant-generated examples was encouraged, and the flexibility to follow the participant's lead maintained (Brinkmann, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Saunders et al., 2016). This approach not only obtained information on the potential connections already identified in the model, but also afforded the opportunity to uncover different connections or influences in order to build the model more accurately (Fletcher, 2017). The discussion guide used for the interviews, which was pretested for scope, use of language, comprehension and relevance, is included in appendix A-8. The structure of the interviews involved both general open-ended questions and also specific detailed discussion on the mechanisms and the reputation factors afforded by participant recollection of examples and the use of vignettes.

RQ1 was addressed first, beginning with an open-ended question regarding what consumer trust meant to the participant. Early in the research interview participants were asked what consumer trust meant to them. Asking a broad open-ended definitional question at the beginning of the interview on the nature of consumer trust allowed the participants to articulate what were top-of-mind factors that governed their trust of companies (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). This allowed me to listen for information that would articulate the linkage between the corporate reputation factors and the ABI trust dimensions important to consumers established in the literature. It was important that this question came before the vignettes were introduced in order not to bias the participants' responses. The discussion that followed from this question allowed the research to surface all the connections between the reputation factors and the ABI trust dimensions. It also allowed directional indication of which connections were likely to be the most important, though statistical confirmation of impact to trust was not within the scope of the research method.

During the interviews, participants were asked to recall specific and clear incidents. These examples were used to probe for the underlying data to answer the research question. This improved credibility because these incidents that were captured and discussed were real and memorable (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The discussion that ensued was viewed as likely to be an accurate account of the informant's experience as seen from their point of view, thus potentially offering more powerful insights into the participant's interpretive framework than if they had not been discussing actual incidents (Mazzarol et al., 2007; Saunders et al., 2016).

Next, discussion moved on to address RQ2. This part of the interview was semi-structured using vignettes. Vignettes increase dependability of the research by providing context and consistency, which are important to accurate interpretation of the data (Finch, 1987; Jackson, Harrison, Swinburn, & Lawrence, 2015). The use of vignettes is a well-established as a tool for in-depth interviews in the social sciences and marketing research (Benedetti, Jackson, & Luo, 2018; Jackson et al., 2015) as well as in trust research (Lyon et al., 2012). Vignettes are called for when there is a need to stimulate discussion and elicit reactions to explore topics conceptually and maintain consistency in the context for the discussion between interviews (Benedetti et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2015). Moreover, using vignettes in semi-structured interviews provides a basic level of standardization across interviews to allow comparative analysis between sub-groups in the research (Benedetti et al., 2018). When used in this way, the vignettes are not intended to be predictive of actual behaviour had the participant been confronted with the situation in real life, but rather are used to understand how the participant thinks about the topic and their interpretive framework (Finch, 1987; Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010). Thus the participants are not constrained by the limitations of their own experiences, but are able to consider, in a personally unthreatening context, the norms and beliefs they have regarding the topic under investigation (Finch, 1987).

The vignette technique is particularly useful in research into social behaviours where there is a need to keep participant response focused on specific elements even when admission of personal behaviour regarding those elements may be difficult or embarrassing. This is because the use of vignettes creates a veneer of distance between the situation and the participant which allows more open discussion of the participant's interpretive framework without limitation of personal experience (Finch, 1987). Therefore, to yield the best results, the vignettes not only need to involve the concepts and behaviours that are under study, but they need to be highly plausible as reflective of what might be encountered in real life and pretested for plausibility (Benedetti et al., 2018; Finch, 1987; Jackson et al., 2015).

The four vignettes designed for the main study specifically reflected the use of different Facebook mechanisms in the context of each of the four corporate reputation factors important to consumer trusts:

> **<u>Scenario 1</u>** You see a close friend has posted link about a technology company's newest product, which you have not yet heard about. This company is a company you trust, and you know that many others fully trust this company. But the friend's comments with the shared link are not favourable, slamming this company as being over-priced and a company that chronically launches products with underdeveloped technology, needing lots of updates to address issues.
>
> **<u>Scenario 2</u>** You see that company that sells beer has a commercial that is trending on Facebook with generally favourable posts. One of your friends has tagged you on it because you like that brand of beer. The commercial shows a puppy waiting for his family member to come home, but the family member doesn't because he was killed in a drunk-driving accident on the way home after drinking with friends. The commercial urges responsible drinking, while at the same time promoting the consumption of beer.
>
> **<u>Scenario 3</u>** You have an ambivalent feeling towards a fast food chain we will call Swift Burgers and are not sure whether you really trust them or not. A friend of a friend (not someone you know) posts a picture of their food with the comment "Man, I love Swift Burgers!" which you see on your friend's wall. A comment stream unfolds between several friends as follows:
>
> > "Yeah. I love it when I get my Swift Burgers fifteen minutes after I order it – NOT!"
> >
> > "I finally got mine once it was cold – and they refused to re-do it."

“Are you kidding me? This is the best service in town. What are you even talking about?”

“Really, Swift Burgers? They got my order all wrong in the drive through. Had to pull over and wait while they fixed it. So much for ‘swift’!”

“I guess if you were special like me, you’d actually get your food on time.”

“You should never support this company. Last time I went there they charged me wrong and refused to fix it.”

“Never like that for me. Best fast food around.”

“Totally! Nothing like Swift Burgers when you need something fast and good. Hits the spot!”

Scenario 4 A Facebook friend of yours who worked for a canned tuna company recently posted about getting laid off from her job. In her post she claims she was treated unfairly because she blew the whistle on what she considered were bad environmental practices at the company’s tuna canning plant. The practices had passed EPA inspection but as a result of the negative press, sales went down, and several people lost their jobs along with her. She calls for a boycott against the company and the call has received thousands of shares and significant support on the social networks.

The vignettes were developed following the method of Jackson et al. (2015), which calls for the researchers to familiarize themselves with practical, real-life scenarios, and then develop and pre-test scenarios for the vignettes that are reflective of real-life, yet also purposefully incorporate theoretical concepts and the elements or phenomena under study. Following this method, material for the development of the vignettes was derived from a composition of participant responses in the pilot study. Thus, they were based on real reported scenarios, although they were manipulated to provide context for examination of specific mechanisms. The vignettes were pre-tested for plausibility with students and faculty colleagues representing all three generational cohorts, and were deemed very typical and likely to elicit good insights. This was also re-confirmed by the discussion of the participants in the main study, many of whom expressed how realistic the scenarios were in the course of the interviews.

The scenarios described in the vignettes were written to enable focus on different the aspects of RQ2 that were being researched, as established from the literature (Chapter 3). The following table summarises how the vignettes were designed to achieve this objective.

3 Table 4.2: Alignment of Vignettes with RQ2

	Vignette 1: Quality and Value of Products and Services	**Vignette 2:** Advertising Credibility	**Vignette 3:** Customer Orientation	**Vignette 4:** Commitment to Environment and Employees
Awareness	Allows me to explore how things come to their attention because in vignette participant is unaware of the new product.	Allows me to explore how and how trending affects awareness because in vignette advert is described as trending.	Allows me to explore whether controversies and/or comment streams increase awareness because in vignette there is a comment stream that discusses the issue.	Allows me to explore participant engagement cues because in vignette there is a high volume of shares which can be an engagement cue.
Sense-Making	Allows me to explore how participant would make sense of the contradiction between their own opinion and the friend's opinion because in vignette the posted opinion is contrary to participant's opinion.	Allows me to explore how participant would make sense of the dichotomy in the advert because the vignette sets up a contradiction in what the company does vs. what it says, which the participant needs to evaluate.	Allows me to explore how participants sort out their own opinion when presented with both pros and cons because the comment stream included in the vignette has a balanced number of views on each side of the debate.	Allows me to explore what sense-making activities participant might engage in to figure out their own opinion since in vignette there is implied potential justification for both parties to the dispute.
Credibility	Allows me to explore how participants evaluate credibility and how their own experience measures up against opinions of a strong tie because in vignette participant's experience is opposite to the friend's opinion.	Allows me to explore credibility in cases where might have duplicitous messaging, and how OSN mechanisms impact evaluation of that, because in vignette there is a dichotomy in alcohol company promoting drinking while also stressing negative results from drinking.	Allows me to explore how participant's own experience factors in vs. what other weaker ties are saying because in vignette the comments are about something everyone will have experienced at some point.	Allows me to explore how participants know what to believe and the trust cues they use, because in vignette there is implied potential justification for both parties to the dispute.
Tie Strength	Allows me to explore influence of strong tie in changing assessment of trustworthiness because in vignette the close friend expresses the opposite point of view from the participant.	Allows me to explore influence of tagging because in vignette the friend tags the participant on the advert	Allows me to explore influence of weak ties because in vignette some of those involved in the discussion are not direct friends.	Allows me to explore effect of tie strength on support for a friend's position because in vignette person posting and calling for a boycott is a friend.

Critical Mass	Allows me to explore influence of critical mass of opinion vs. personal experience because in vignette it says that many others trust this company.	Allows me to explore how critical mass of opinion influences participant because in vignette the advert is trending with favourable posts in support of the advert.	Allows me to explore influence of having several comments/people voicing opinion, because vignette includes 8 comments. More than 3 to 5 is considered by participants to be a critical mass.	Allows me to explore role of critical mass in awareness and influence because in vignette it says there are high number of shares of original post and support for boycott.
Specific Mechanisms	Links Posts & Comments	Tags Trending	Comment stream	Likes Shares

This semi-structured design of the interview improved both credibility and dependability. Credibility was improved through discussion of actual examples recalled by participants and narrative of personal experiences during the more unstructured parts of the interview. Credibility was also supported by the participant's favourable assessment of the plausibility and realism of the vignettes. Dependability was improved through the consistency of focus and resulting comparability of data brought about through the use of the vignettes.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data collected from the interviews were coded and analysed using NVivo. First, all transcripts were read straight through for review and general overall comprehension of the interview data. During this reading the transcriptions were cleaned regarding formatting and spelling mistakes in order to facilitate uploading, coding and analysis. Additionally, the interviews were labelled with coded designations to preserve anonymity. The labelling code designated a number for each participant, followed by three letters. The first letter designates the socio-economic status with U for upper and L for lower. The second letter designates the generation with B for

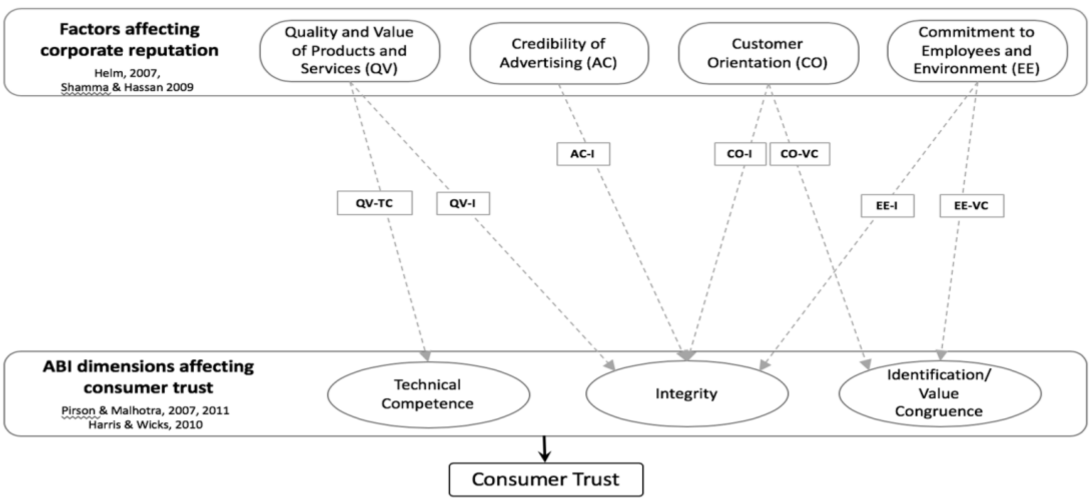
Boomer, X for Gen X and Y for Gen Y. The third letter designates the gender with M for male and F for female. The data were then uploaded to N-Vivo for coding.

To improve credibility and ensure interpretive consistency, a faculty colleague also coded the data from three interviews using the final node structure that emerged. The few discrepancies between the two were discussed and resolved between the two coders. Where necessary, the original transcripts were reviewed for context as well as content, in order to resolve the discrepancies. No discrepancies were left unresolved.

4.6.1 Research Question 1

For the analysis regarding RQ1, participants' responses were coded to the reputation factors and sub-coded to show the links to the ABI dimensions. This followed the structure of the model for RQ1, reproduced here from figure 3.2. However, in order to improve dependability, the coding was not limited to the connections identified in this figure. All possible connections between the reputation factors and trust dimensions were coded.

13 Figure 4.2: Theoretical connection between corporate reputation factors important to consumers and trust dimensions by which consumers assess trustworthiness (reproduced from figure 3.2)



The following explanations of the classification for the four reputation factors, adapted from Helm's (2007) definitions, makes explicit how these were interpreted during the coding, in the interests of enhancing transferability.

- Quality and value of products and services (QV) was used for any mentions of quality, reliability, durability, price, value, efficiency or effectiveness of performance, and mentions of purchasing brands to ensure quality and performance.
- Credibility of advertising claims (AC) was used for any mentions of advertising, public relations, promotional offers, delivering on their claims of performance, and honest representation of the product or service.
- Customer orientation (CO) was used for any mentions of addressing customer complaints, engaging with customers directly or on social media, standing behind the products they sell, response times, and transparent and honest purchase transaction procedures.
- Commitment to the environment and employees (EE) was used for any mentions of environmental issues with products or with company practices, any mentions of labour practices.

Similarly, the following explanations of the classification for the three trust dimensions, adapted from Pirson and Malhotra (2011), makes explicit how these were interpreted.

- Technical competence (TC), defined by Pirson and Malhotra (2011) as "the organization's ability to deliver high quality products and services" (p.1092), was used for any mentions of ability and competence in delivering on customer expectations of products or services, including mentions of performance and function, timeliness, efficiency, and responsiveness.

- Integrity (I), defined by Pirson and Mahotra (2011) as "an organization's general tendency (or propensity) to act fairly and ethically" (p.1092), was used for any mentions of products and services being accurately represented, delivering on perceived promise of performance or contractual obligation, willingness to resolve issues, indifference, overcharging, false advertising, transaction security, and treatment of employees.
- Value Congruence (VC). Pirson and Malhotra (2011) describe identification and value congruence as, "based on the fact that one's social identity may include an association with the organization, its behaviours, and its espoused values" (p.1093). This coding was used for any mentions of listening, paying attention, caring, how customer expect to be treated relative to their own values, community involvement, support of charitable causes, environmental concerns, brand loyalty, and brand identification.

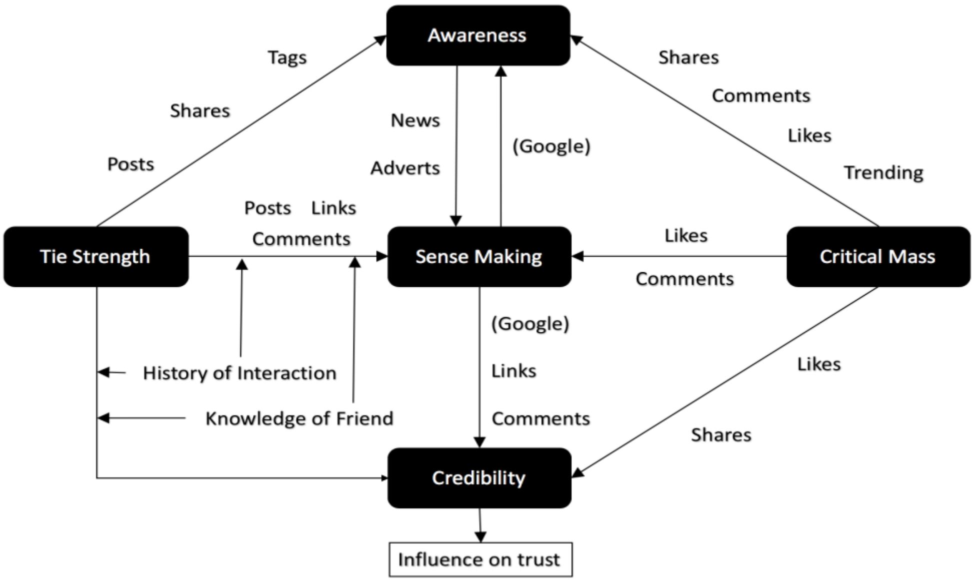
Data for RQ1 were coded initially on the basis of the opening discussion only (i.e. before introducing the vignettes). The first round of coding captured mentions of the reputation factors and mentions of the trust dimensions independently of one another. These two sets of data were then recoded to capture the cross-connections between the reputation factors and the trust dimensions. The resulting node structure can be seen in appendix A-9. This node structure informed the main part of the analysis in Chapter 5. Following the coding of the first part of the interviews, the remainder of each interview was coded the same way to add in any other mentions that connected the reputation factors with the trust dimensions in the ensuing discussion of the vignettes. This second level of coding did not change the main findings regarding the connections between the reputation factors and the trust assessment dimensions, although it did increase the credibility of the findings by adding more data points, and in some cases altered the degree of differentiation between gender, generation or socio-economic group. The findings are reported in full in Chapter 5.

4.6.2 Research Question 2

The data were analysed on different levels, often conducted recursively, seeking to find the likely themes that support logical explanation of what the data are saying (Fleetwood, 2014; Fletcher, 2017). The objective of this recursive process of analysis is not to develop a predictive model, but rather to develop a robust explanatory model (Fleetwood, 2014) that can shed light, in this case, on how Facebook mechanisms might tend to influence consumer trust.

The pilot had indicated that a model based on the three defining functions of online social network communications that I had originally thought would frame the analysis, namely sharing content, aggregating content and commenting on content, would be unlikely to fit the data. Therefore, I went back to the literature and the results of the pilot research and developed a new model that I thought would explain how Facebook mechanisms were an influence on consumer trust. This model, which I refer to here as the diamond model, is reproduced in figure 4.3 below.

14 Figure 4.3: Original diamond model developed from literature and participant discussion in pilot and used for initial coding of main study data.



The first round of coding was done deductively using this model. The result was very convoluted with data coded to multiple places with some of the data left unexplained by this model. The 'story' of the data did not come together, and it was complicated to explain with no flow to the process of influence. An example of the coding diagrams that emerged from this structure can be seen in appendix A-10. Coding the data to this diamond model resulted in a finding that this model did not at all explain what was going on, even though it was developed from the literature with input from the pilot. It was very clear that this preconceived structure for the analysis was hindering the identification of what the true causalities were and how the mechanisms were really being used. Therefore, there was a need to start again with no model and code purely inductively using in-vivo coding to understand how consumers used and interpreted the Facebook mechanisms when assessing content regarding the trustworthiness of companies.

The first level of this more inductive approach used in-vivo coding, following the method used by Corley and Gioia (Corley & Gioia, 2004a) to explore and organize data. This method used in-vivo coding to look for first order concepts or nodes. These were concepts that emerged from the participant discussion as themes in the data. The coded data were interrogated using text search queries, matrix coding queries and the NVivo data exploration tools. This process was an iterative, recursive process that took multiple passes through the data to complete. Themes that emerged were continuously compared and assessed for whether the difference in language was truly denoting a difference in concept, or whether comments could be grouped under one concept. Figure 4.4 shows an example of this initial round of coding to show the approach.

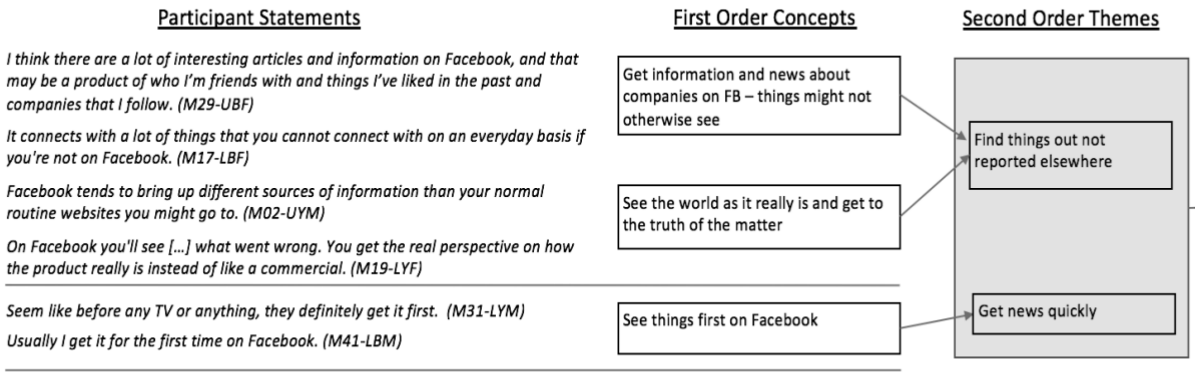
15 Figure 4.4: Example of first step in the analysis (following method of Corley and Gioia, 2004).

Participant Statements	First Order Concepts
I think there are a lot of interesting articles and information on Facebook, and that may be a product of who I'm friends with and things I've liked in the past and companies that I follow. (M29-UBF) *It connects with a lot of things that you cannot connect with on an everyday basis if you're not on Facebook. (M17-LBF)*	Get information and news about companies on FB – things might not otherwise see
Facebook tends to bring up different sources of information than your normal routine websites you might go to. (M02-UYM) *On Facebook you'll see [...] what went wrong. You get the real perspective on how the product really is instead of like a commercial. (M19-LYF)*	See the world as it really is and get to the truth of the matter
Seem like before any TV or anything, they definitely get it first. (M31-LYM) *Usually I get it for the first time on Facebook. (M41-LBM)*	See things first on Facebook

Once all interviews had been coded to this level, the first order nodes were then grouped into second order themes using axial coding to identify relationships between the first order nodes across interviews. These broader second order themes categorized the data at a higher level to help identify the major connections and influences around attitude and usage of Facebook mechanisms, and the influence of content reported on Facebook through these mechanisms on consumer trust. Figure

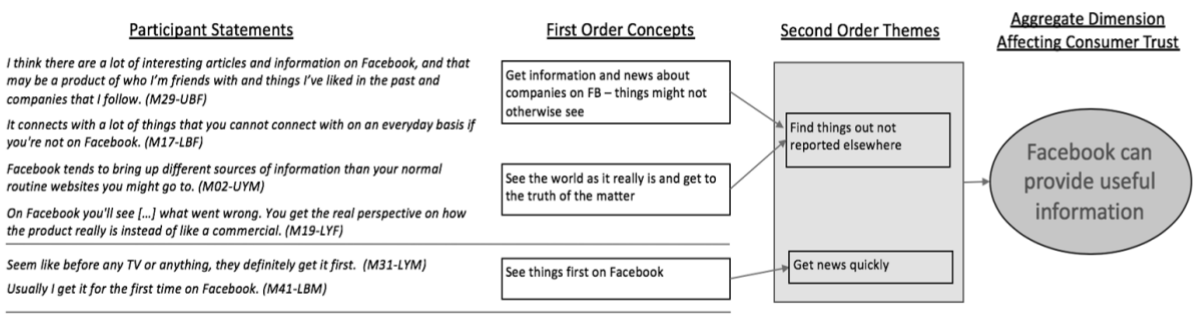
4.5 shows an example of this round of axial coding showing how the first order concepts roll up to second order themes.

16 Figure 4.5: Example of second step in the analysis (following method of Corley and Gioia, 2004).



Finally, these second order themes were aggregated to the dimension affecting consumer trust. This method has been used successfully in other qualitative trust research (e.g. Altinay, Saunders, & Wang, 2014; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Isaeva, Bachmann, Bristow, & Saunders, 2015). Figure 4.6 shows an example of this third round of coding showing how the second order themes roll up to an aggregate dimension potentially affecting consumer trust.

17 Figure 4.6: Example of third step in the analysis (following method of Corley and Gioia, 2004).



This procedure was followed for each of the dimensions identified from the literature discussed in Chapter3 section 4. The diagrams summarizing the coding can be found in Appendix A-11. The findings themselves are discussed in Chapter 6.

This coding exercise resulted in a schematic that accounted for the main themes emerging from the data, but which still did not describe the consumer's mental processes in determining company trustworthiness. This coding schematic was then connected to the concepts of awareness and sense-making. During this phase of the analysis, not only were the data and the schema from the inductive analysis examined using the tools provided by NVivo, but extensive mapping and diagramming were also conducted using a white board, in order to develop a model that explained the data and the causal relationships. This combination of traditional and computer assisted methods have been found to be more effective than using computer modelling alone (Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings, & de Eyto, 2018). From this emerged the explanatory model discussed at the end of Chapter 6 that is the main contribution of this research. This new model revealed a two-stage triage process the consumer seemed to be doing, first at the awareness stage and then at the sense-making stage. Within this process there appeared to be filters which depended on certain mechanisms for input, and which governed the consumer's decision-making on engagement, credibility and ultimately assessment of trustworthiness of the company. The full discussion of this Consumer Trust Triage Model is explained in Chapter 6 section 4.

4.7 Summary

This research method and research design are well suited to an enquiry into the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies seeking not only to explain what influence may be happening, but also at the same time to identify the causal relationships that create the tendency for this influence to occur in the socially constructed online context.

This research approach used a qualitative methodology. The specific methods involved qualitative research using semi-structured interviews with vignettes following the method of Jenkins et al. (2010). The study participants were a voluntary sample of Facebook users drawn from three generational cohorts, two socio-economic levels and both genders in the southeast United States. The data were analysed deductively to answer RQ1 on the link between the reputation factors and the trust dimensions for assessing trustworthiness, the findings from which are reported in Chapter 5. For RQ2 it was necessary to analyse the data inductively following the method of Corley and Gioia (2004). From this analysis emerged a new understanding of how the mechanisms of the social net might be impacting consumer trust of companies through the development of the Consumer Trust Triage Model, explained in detail in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 5: THE LINK BETWEEN COMPANY REPUTATION FACTORS AND TRUST DIMENSIONS (RQ1)

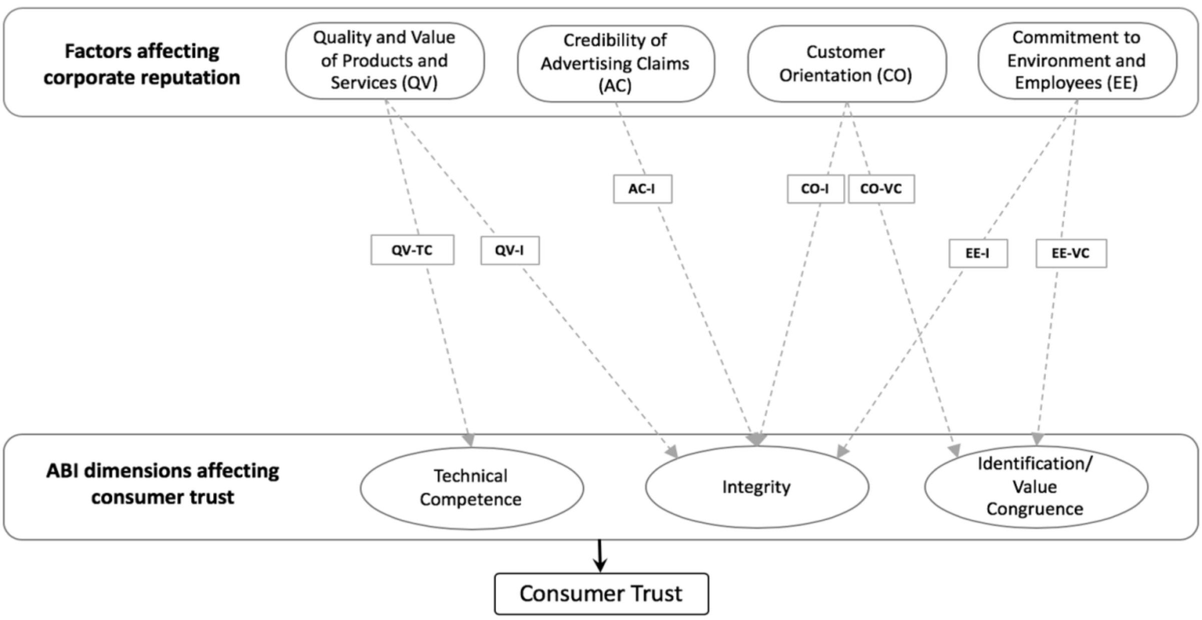
5.1 Introduction

The first research question was to explore empirically the theoretical connection between the reputation factors important to consumers and the ABI dimensions which govern trust for consumers. It was as follows:

RQ1: How do consumers articulate the concept of consumer trust and does their perception of what consumer trust means provide an empirical link between the reputation factors important to consumers and the trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness?

From the discussion in Chapter 3, a proposed set of connections was identified and summarized in figure 3.2, reproduced here as figure 5.1 for sake of convenience and clarity.

Figure 5.1: Theoretical connection between corporate reputation factors important to consumers and trust dimensions by which consumers assess trustworthiness (reproduced from Fig. 3.2)



5.2 Participant Articulation of Concept of Consumer Trust

Participants were asked early in the interview to express what 'consumer trust' meant to them. During this part of the interview, participants' top-of-mind answers indicated specific linkages between the corporate reputation factors and the ABI trust dimensions (Mayer et al., 1995) important to consumers established in the literature. As the interview progressed and the vignettes were being discussed, the language participants used and the examples they gave often reinforced their initial answers. This section begins with a summary of the findings, giving an overall view of how the answers shaped the connections. A more detailed analysis of these findings with specific to each reputation factor can be found in the sub-sections below.

Participants views on the nature of consumer trust were varied. Approximately half of the participants gave initial responses that had to do with Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV). About one third of the participants gave responses that indicated Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC) or Customer Orientation (CO) were important to consumer trust for them. The least mentioned of the four reputation factors was Commitment to the Environment and Employees (EE) with only a fifth mentioning this up front during this part of the interview. However, by the end of the interview, the conversations generated by the vignettes increased the sensitivity to these reputation factors such that almost three quarters had mentioned Quality and Value of Products and Services as important to trust, both Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC) and Customer Orientation (CO) were mentioned by half the participants with CO issues having more overall mentions than AC issues, and almost a quarter of the participants said Commitment to the Environment and Employees issues impacted their trust of companies. Some participants gave answers that were straightforward and focused on one factor, while others gave more complex answers where more than one reputation factor was mentioned in the same answer, sometimes with linkages between the reputation factors themselves as well as between the reputation factors and the trust dimensions.

While approximately three quarters of participants immediately gave answers which connected the reputation factors to the consumer trust dimensions, others really struggled with answering this question and some avoided it by digressing and moving off topic. Answers ranged from the specific (as discussed below) to vaguely-defined concepts, such as their relationship with the brand:

> *I guess the consumer trust [is] the ability to make the consumer feel like they have a personal relationship with the brand. (M15-UYF)*

… or brand loyalty:

> *For me it means brands and brand loyalty (M07-UBF)*

…or simply that the brand was well-known:

> *They have an established brand. I mean, Apple is a good example of a brand that everybody knows and is really well-known. I think that they probably have established that trust with their consumers. (M09-UXF)*

The company or brand being well established appeared to be a trust cue, providing a kind of vote of confidence because the history of doing business over a long period indicated that others trusted this company and therefore the company must have performed in a trustworthy manner. This was particularly mentioned by Boomers, about a third of whom mentioned longevity as a trust cue:

> *Well, basically, if a company has been around for a long time, then that helps me sort of feel like they've established some kind of trust with people because if they were really a shady company, then they probably wouldn't be around that long*

because of the outcry of the people, the bad results and stuff that they have. (M36-LBM)

Two Boomers also mentioned endorsements from third party organizations as being important to their trust of a company:

Another would be like Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval or a high ranking with Consumer Reports or some notable board of some kind that would say that it ranks in their 'good' categories. (M34-LBF)

However, other participants looking for endorsements, especially Gen Y, mentioned reviews from other consumers as their preferred form of endorsement. The generational differences here are not surprising, and likely reflect the fact that the Internet is a relatively recent technology. Boomers were likely accustomed to other forms of endorsement prior to the advent of the Internet, where the 'digital native' (Prensky, 2001b) Gen Y are likely more accustomed to turning to the Internet to seek out peer reviews.

5.2.1 Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV)

The data from this research confirmed the corporate reputation literature that Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV) was the factor of most important for consumers. This factor was referenced more than any other, and answers on this factor were often immediate, straightforward and direct. Quality and performance surfaced as the main criteria that participants were looking for:

The quality of the product. The longevity of it. (M10-UXF)

Does it work. And, is it effective? (M13-UYF)

Answers such as these appear to support a connection to the Technical Competence assessment dimension. The implication of the way these statements were phrased and delivered in an unequivocal and direct tone expressed in short declarative phrases was that, at a minimum, a company should produce products that work and don't break down, an issue of technical competence. The QV link to the Technical Competence dimension appeared to be strong, particularly for women. Women outnumbered men 3 to 1 in articulating the QV-TC link at the beginning of the interview, though that gap narrowed to 2 to 1 when the full content of the interviews was taken into account.

In addition to durability and performance, value for money was directly expressed by seven participants as being important, thus addressing the 'value' side of the QV factor. The need for the product to fulfil expectations regarding being worth what the participant paid for it relates the QV answer to Integrity:

> *I guess the cost versus the quality, kind of thing. So, if it is a reasonable cost for the quality of the item that I purchase, goes into, at least in my mind, a trust factor. I don't want to be overcharged for a lesser quality item. (M10-UXF).*

In this quote, *"I don't want to be overcharged for a lesser quality item"* indicates the importance of Integrity with the use of the word 'overcharged', the judgement expressed by the participant being not about the overall cost nor about the overall quality, but about the lack of integrity in charging a price too high relative to the quality of the item. Similarly, the expectation of performance and use of the words like *'supposed to do'* in this next quote indicate an assumed obligation which could be breached through technical incompetence and could also be breached through lack of integrity:

> *If I'm going to put the money into that brand name, then I expect for it to do what it's supposed to do. That is where my consumer trust comes in. (M17-LBF)*

Thus, the data from this research indicate that the QV reputation factor appears to be the uppermost reputation factor to consumers, as more participants gave this answer than any other when asked about consumer trust. Emphasis appeared to be more on quality than on value, but value was also indicated. The discussion, both at the beginning of the interview and throughout the interview, supported the proposed connection in figure 5.2 of the Quality and Value of Products and Services reputation factor to both the Technical Competence trust dimension (line QV-TC) and the Integrity trust dimension (line QV-I), though the connection to Technical Competence appeared to be stronger.

5.2.2 Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC)

For Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC) the findings indicate that the most common dimension used in assessing trustworthiness is Integrity. A quarter of the participants connected AC to Integrity. The criteria on this ranged from (mis)representation of specific information in promotional materials:

> *Consumer trust would say to me [...] is it of good quality or does it just look good in the picture? So, is it represented as what it is by the company? (M29-UBF)*

… to a need for honesty and transparency in all communications:

> *That I trust their brand, and that if they put something out there on social media, TV, whatever medium it is, that I would trust that they are giving me the correct truthful facts. (M09-UXF)*

Most often the phrasing participants used was to do with delivering on what the company promised:

> *I guess it would just mean whether or not you can trust a company to actually do what they say they're going to do. (M20-LXF)*

Phrases such as *'represented as what it is'* and '*do what they say they're going to do*' clearly express an assessment of trustworthiness based on the company's integrity in delivering on its advertising claims, and there was definitely a sense of a contractual obligation in this regard, epitomized by this quote:

> *"I guess what trust is to me, it's if I send them my $50, are they going to send me the product that they said they're going to send me?" (M26-UYM)*

The phrasing of the participants' comments suggested that they were thinking not so much of whether the company was capable of delivering on their promises, which would relate more to Technical Competence, but rather whether they had the will to do so, indicating a link to Integrity. Thus, the data collected in this research appeared primarily to support the link between Credibility of Advertising Claims and Integrity.

There was one other connection that was not typical. One Gen Y participant made a direct connection between advertising and value congruence, saying that if a company gets involved in social issues to support the community and they promote their involvement in their advertising, this also builds trust:

> *"If they have any kind of political community involvement, maybe if a company has displayed maybe some type of service project they were just involved in, whether that's feeding the homeless over Thanksgiving or just doing something within the community. When they advertise that […], I think that also helps build the trust. More consumers might want to support a company like that knowing that the proceeds might go to a non-profit or something of that nature." (M05-UYF)*

This was the only participant who mentioned the advertising of charitable or socially responsible activities as relating to consumer trust in this part of the interview, though others did express similar support for companies that supported social causes at other parts of the interview, especially during the discussion of the AC vignette. This could point to the possible existence of a connection between Credibility of Advertising Claims and Value Congruence.

These data on Credibility of Advertising Claims support the proposed connection in figure 5.2 between AC and Integrity (line AC-I). However, a new connection emerged that was not proposed but seems to be suggested by the data. This is the connection between AC and Value Congruence (line AC-VC in figure 5.3), though this may not be a very strong connection.

5.2.3 Customer Orientation (CO)

The connection between Customer Orientation (CO) and the consumer trust dimensions was articulated by half of the participants in this research study, both when discussing consumer trust in general at the beginning of the interviews, and also later during the discussions of the vignettes. The proposed connection of CO to Integrity (line CO-I in figure 5.2) was most often expressed as a company being willing to make things right when product failures occurred, or services did not meet expectations, whether reactively:

> *If there is a problem, how responsive will that person, company, entity be to the request of those who are relying upon the product to have the situation remedied. (M11-UXM)*

… or proactively:

> *Like when you see recalls or all the stuff with Toyota and all the airbags and all those things. Just taking care of things when they find they have a fault in a situation." (M20-LXF)*

Participants expressing this felt strongly that companies should take responsibility and be honest and open with their customers. They wanted transparency:

> *If something about the product goes wrong, that they will tell you that there was a recall, or somebody got injured, or died, or it doesn't do what it said it was going to do. (M08-UXF)*

…and admission of fault:

> *I want them to at least recognize the fact that it was at some point a fault of theirs. Or a fault of the brand, or what have you, and that they're going to do something to make it right. (M10-UXF)*

Most of the engagement on this came from Gen X, as can be seen in all four quotes above. These participants expressed a level of frustration both verbally and through body language when talking about companies that did not have a good customer orientation. Gen Y participants tended to exhibit a more pragmatic approach; if they had a bad experience with customer service, they simply went elsewhere. While bad customer service was also a point of frustration for Boomers, there seemed to be somewhat more recognition by Boomers than by the other two generational cohorts that products or services do sometimes fall short of expectations or simply malfunction. In these situations, Boomers seemed to have greater tolerance of failure as long as the company was supportive of the customer when that happened, as typified in this quote below:

> *Companies are going to make mistakes. Just their willingness to fix their mistake that makes the most to me. (M36-LBM)*

The need for the company to admit fault, to be transparent about the issue and take steps to redress the situation in order meet their contractual obligations to the consumer links this CO factor to the Integrity trust dimension, supporting the proposed link indicated by line CO-I in figure 5.2. This was the sentiment most often expressed.

In contrast, several of the same participants who complained of bad customer service, also offered positive mentions that praised companies that had a good customer orientation, some saying it increased their trust or it was simply good business. Most of these mentions came from Boomers and Gen Y. This account of the effect of good customer service by a Gen Y participant explicitly addresses the positive impact on trust from a good experience:

> *For example, the first time I used Amazon which was a while ago, they were kind of up and coming and I feel like everyone walked in with a little sense of hesitation of the first time you're buying this thing from Amazon. It's like, "I don't really know. I hope it gets here." I had to call customer service and walked away with a really positive experience from customer service. I was like, "Wow, that was impressively good." [...] I walked away saying, "I trust them," because of that one experience. (M02-UYM)*

As with the quote above, when participants talked about customer orientation in terms of good business, a subtle change in their words and tone appeared to indicate a shift in their thinking from being dominantly an assessment on Integrity to being more of an assessment on Technical Competence (line CO-TC in figure 5.3 below). The following quotes illustrate the difference in tone and language. In this first quote the language is more resentful indicating the participant seemed to be assessing the situation on Integrity:

> *I had bought something and I tried to take it back and they wouldn't accept it. It was a particular item that cost a lot of money, but they were like because it was the type of product that I got they don't accept it back. I mean, it's in the same packaging. I just couldn't use it. [I felt] angry. [...] Even if you didn't give me the money, you could have gave me a credit toward something else. Here I'm stuck with something I can't even use. So, it makes me feel kind of bad. (M23-LBF)*

In this second quote, the language is more matter-of-fact, seeming to suggest the participant is assessing the situation more on Technical Competence:

> *I have to say I trust Wal-Mart on that, because if you get anything from Wal-Mart, anything's wrong and it don't fit whatever it is, take it back no problem, they'll take it right back and make it right. [...] And prompt. Whether you go there for something, and they don't have it in stock, and they say, "It'll be here Tuesday," you go back Tuesday, it's there. (M32-LBM)*

In comparing how participants articulated the connections between CO and Integrity and between CO and Technical Competence, it appears that consumers see this as a matter either of will or of ability. Thus, the company's customer orientation and willingness to deliver great customer service and make amends when things went wrong appeared to impact consumer trust by affecting perceptions of Integrity, whereas the company's ability to do so appeared to impact trust by affecting perceptions of Technical Competence. Of these two connections, the negative examples that participants gave that connected CO to Integrity were delivered with intensity of emotion, even hostility and anger, whereas the connection to Technical Competence was expressed in more matter-of-fact language and with less emotion. The tone and body language, when coupled with the descriptions, suggested that companies that *would not* address an issue risked engendering active distrust, where companies that *could not* address an issue engendered simply a lack of trust.

The discussion in Chapter 3 articulated the case for a potential connection between CO and Value Congruence (figure 5.2, line CO-VC). This was developed from a discussion of companies embracing relationship-building activities with customers and thus encouraging the consumers to identify with the company. This discussion posited a perceived value congruence between how consumers expect to be treated by others and how the company was treating them. However, this did not emerge very strongly in the data. Only one participant mentioned relationship marketing:

> *"Last night I just had a real burning desire to have [...] fried pickle chips, and I discovered that Sheetz has fried pickle chips on their restaurant's menu. I said, "Well, let me try the fried pickle chips," because once I found out it existed it was like I've got to have it. I just want to find out what it's like. And they were great. I got some last night on my way home and they were fantastic, so I tweeted @Sheetz, "Thank you for satisfying my craving for fried pickle chips," and then this morning they had liked the tweet. [...] It makes me feel as though they care and they are really responsive to the feedback that they're getting, whether it's good or not. It seems like someone's listening. There is someone who really cares about what's being said." (M11-UXM)*

This participant's account gave some indication of the existence of a connection between Customer Orientation and Value Congruence on the basis of consumer relationship building, including engendering positive feelings towards the company when they responded to his grateful tweet. He indicated that it made him *'feel as though they care'* and that *'someone's listening'*. This sense of caring and listening seemed to be at the heart of the participant's reactions in general. When this participant got a response from the company that showed they both listened and cared, it really made a favourable impression on him.

However, immediately following this account he proceeded to give me two examples of when things had not gone well in his interactions with companies. Thus, in this participant interview, as in others, negative experiences apparently more readily came to mind for participants than the positive ones. One explanation for this might be that negative experiences make more of an impression than positive ones, as reflected in the finding that negative reviews are more powerful than positive ones (Gavilan et al., 2018; Reichheld, 2003). Thus, participants in this study could easily come up with examples that they indicated eroded their trust, but there were fewer references to positive customer orientation experiences that enhanced their trust.

Customer Orientation issues were mentioned by both genders, and both genders indicated a connection to Integrity and to Technical Competence. With regard to differences in socio-economic levels, slightly more of the lower socio-economic participants than the upper socio-economic participants mentioned Customer Orientation issues as a factor in their trust of companies. This may simply be a question of financial stability; a lower socio-economic customer might have less capacity to absorb the cost of spending money on something that didn't work for them, but no direct evidence for this emerged from the data.

In summary, the data from this research on Customer Orientation support the proposed link that shows that consumers assess the CO reputation factor through the Integrity trust dimension (line CO-I in figure 5.2). The responses of the participants show that they consider it fair and ethical that the company should take responsibility for making sure the customer's experience of the company's products and services is satisfactory to the customer, and should take steps to address any deficiency. In addition, a new connection emerged that was not proposed. This is the link that shows that consumers also assess the CO reputation factor through the Technical Competence trust dimension (line CO-TC in figure 5.3). This emerged as a consideration of whether the company appeared competent in effectively and efficiently handling grievances, returns, exchanges, etc., and whether good customer service was normal business practice for the company. The proposed link to the Value Congruence trust dimension (line CO-VC in figure 5.2) did not emerge in situations describing a negative experience, but there appeared to be some indication of a possible link with regard to positive experiences.

5.2.4 Commitment to the Environment and Employees (EE)

Environmental concerns and workplace concerns were the least frequently mentioned of the reputation factors in this research. Only about a fifth of the participants mentioned EE issues initially, less than half the number of participants who mentioned Quality and Value of Products and Services issues, and even taking into account the discussion of the EE vignette, only about a third of the participants said these types of concerns would really affect their trust, and then possibly not to the extent of changing their purchase behaviour. Nevertheless, there were several participants for whom this was a concern. Those who mentioned it up front were Gen X and Gen Y participants; Boomers did not mention this factor at all when initially asked about what consumer trust meant to them. Moreover, the data indicate a greater concern for EE issues amongst women and upper socio-economic participants. Expressions of concern ranged from general statements, only vaguely defined, to specific examples, both of environmental issues:

> *I mean Volkswagen is another good example, they did some things kind of wrong and that doesn't mean that every car that is sold by Volkswagen is going to have an emissions problem […] but they did some things wrong, so I probably wouldn't buy a Volkswagen. (M14-UXF)*

… and of employee working conditions:

> *Papa John's. When that hit the news that they didn't want to give their employees healthcare, it really made me not want to buy Papa John's pizza anymore because I just felt terrible. (M20-LXF)*

Amongst those who expressed concern regarding the EE reputation factor, most of the participants used language that indicated an assessment more heavily weighted on the Integrity dimension, but somewhat also on the Value Congruence dimension. These two trust dimensions appeared to be closely interrelated on questions of company performance regarding Commitment to the Environment and Employees issues. For example, the same participant who spoke of Papa John's above initially gave a more general statement on what consumer trust meant to her. This statement seemed to include not only a connection to Integrity, but also a connection to the Value Congruence dimension, with words like *"doing the right thing"*, which imply value judgements:

It would be whether or not they're doing the right thing as far as maybe the environment, or whether they're taking care of their employees. (M20-LXF)

The participant who was most concerned about EE issues and corporate social responsibility in general was a different Gen X female, also one of those participants who mentioned EE issues when asked what consumer trust meant to her at the beginning of the interview. She claimed to shop according to her principles in that regard. When she mentioned environmental issues, phrases such as *"putting it back on the consumer"* or *"raise the rates for having to clean up something they did wrong"* in this next quote suggest an assessment on the integrity dimension with the implication being that the company should be taking responsibility for their own actions at their own expense:

I do get discouraged when I see how they get rid of their chemical waste. I'm into that. If they destroy things and don't immediately clean it up or they just write it off or just put it back on the consumer I don't trust them anymore. Especially if they raise the rates for having to clean up something they did wrong. (M35-LXF)

In contrast, this same participant in the same part of the interview, articulated an inherent conflict between her assessment of how employees were being treating (badly) and the desire to support a company who was doing good in the community in alignment with her own personal values. Here, Value Congruence appeared to be a stronger consideration than Integrity:

I do shop Goodwill a lot and I want to be able to help people go to school and get these classes and get these things done. But at the same time the CEOs are just draining these people that actually work there. That is the problem to me, but I have to look over that and think of the positive for the people that are gaining, helping people read, helping people get to school. Especially like special people. They do a lot for them in communities. I like Salvation Army. I like Outreach Ministry. These are places that actually are giving back. I like to shop those kind of places. (M35-LXF)

Companies taking positive actions, especially in support of social causes or the local community was not frequently mentioned but when it was, it appeared to be assessed on Value Congruence and this seemed to have a positive influence on consumer assessment of the company's trustworthiness. This example provided by an otherwise generally cynical Gen X male participant showed enough approval of the reported activity in support of the community to soften his cynical stance:

> *That gives more credibility to the company for sure. [...] I like seeing companies do things in the community, like [...] "Today we're doing free cholesterol screenings at the Foot Locker store," (M39-UXM)*

The Commitment to the Environment and Employees reputation factor seemed to affect Gen X the most when it came to the trust act of making a purchase on the basis of their assessment on this reputation factor. They had the most to say and the most passion on this subject. Gen Y, the other generational cohort most engaged with this factor, were more conflicted. On one hand their socialization and their values indicated to them that they should consider EE issues when making purchases and should consider the company's integrity on this basis. On the other hand, often more practical considerations of price, value, convenience, product preference, etc. influenced them to disregard EE concerns when it came to actually making a purchase. In this example, a Gen Y participant, towards the end of the interview after discussing all the vignettes, indicates Customer Orientation issues are more important to her than Commitment to the Environment and Employees issues:

> *The treatment of employees would be really important, but [...] sometimes the treatment of you the customer might outweigh how they treat their employees. If you have to go somewhere like Walmart. They don't treat their employees very well so in general, I'm less likely to go there. But I don't know, it sounds mean, but ... You might be more interested in how they treat their customers than their employees. (M21-UYF)*

Similarly, another Gen Y explained, during the discussion of the EE vignette, that she would not stop buying the product of her choice because of an EE issue that she had heard about, even if it happened to her friend, although she clearly thought that maybe she should consider doing so:

> *If it's the tuna that I normally buy, and this had happened to her, and all of this... like people losing their jobs or everything, I would probably still buy the tuna just behind her back. (laughter) Just push it back to the corner of the cabinet. [...] If the product is really good but they are just terrible to work for, terrible in general, I would be hesitant to buy the product. But not hesitant enough to not buy it. (M19-LYF)*

It is perhaps interesting to note that, during the discussion of the EE vignette, there were a couple of participants who pointed out that they see content about workplace conditions on Facebook a lot. Neither of these people mentioned EE issues as matter of consumer trust initially, yet at the end of the interview, when asked which of the four vignette scenarios would have the most effect on their trust, they both claimed that the EE vignette was the most influential in terms of their customer trust. This disconnect in the data points to the possible influence of socialization in the responses concerning this reputation factor; they may have thought that was the 'correct' answer according to social norms. Therefore, with this reputation factor issue in particular, a more accurate indicator of importance may be the low level of inclusion of EE concerns in the initial reaction to the opening question. A more honest insight as to what is truly going on might be the response given by M21-UYF above regarding shopping at WalMart, indicating a lower importance for EE concerns than other concerns.

Overall, the data from this research show that the Commitment to the Environment and Employees reputation factor was perhaps less top-of-mind with participants than other factors when it came to assessing trust. However, those for whom it truly appeared to matter said it did affect their trust and thus purchase intent. The primary trust dimensions on which they assessed this were Integrity (line EE-I in figure 5.2) and Value Congruence (line EE-VC in figure 5.2).

5.3 Summary

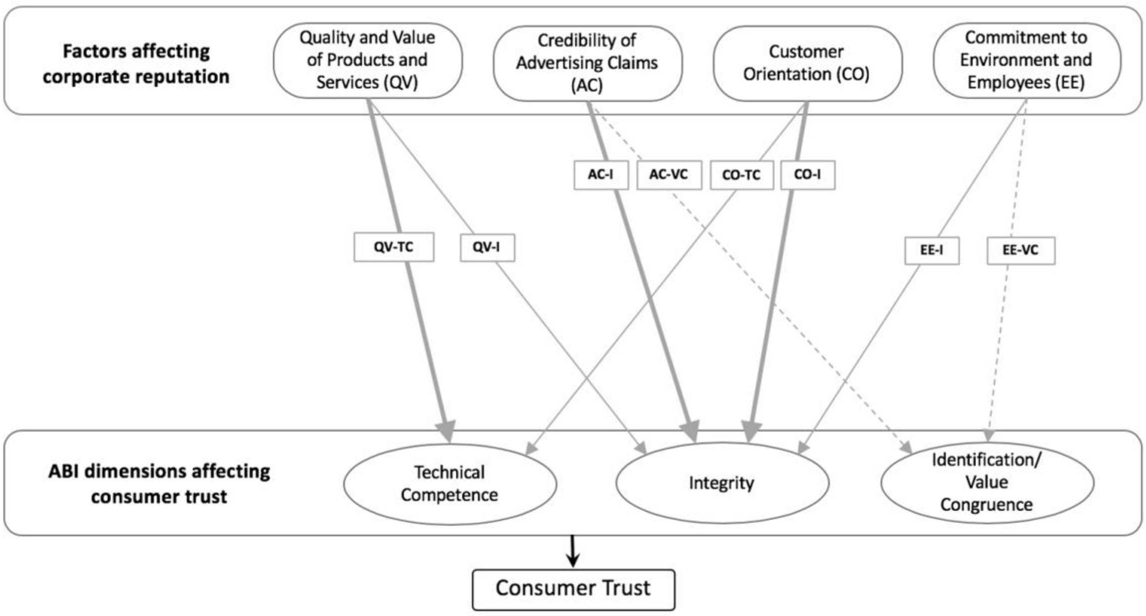
In summary, in answer to RQ1, the participants' responses in this research provide empirical evidence for the existence of connections between the reputation factors which affect consumer trust and the trust dimensions by which they assess trustworthiness. Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV) and Customer Orientation (CO) appeared to be the most influential reputation factors, with Commitment to the Environment and Employees being the reputation factor that was least likely to be taken into account. The QV reputation factor was the most often mentioned and was connected in this study most strongly to Technical Competence. In contrast, Customer Orientation was more strongly connected by participants to the Integrity trust dimension. This appeared to be because participants more often described CO issues in terms of will or policy (integrity) rather than of ability (technical competence), and thus the link to Integrity emerged more strongly. In this study Gen X displayed the most intensity of emotion about this, with Boomers being more forgiving of things not being right (a matter of TC) as long as there was the will to make amends (a matter of Integrity). Quality and Value of Products and Services emerged as the most important reputation factor for female participants with almost all the women mentioning QV issues, where only half the men did. More men in this study mentioned the CO factor than any other factor. Credibility of Advertising Claims emerged as strongly linked to Integrity with an indication of a possible link to Value Congruence when the company's advertising showed it was supportive of social causes. Commitment to the Environment and Employees did not emerge as a widely considered factor, but for those who cared about these issues there was evidence that it could influence consumer trust. This factor appeared to matter more to Gen X and Gen Y than it did to Boomers, and appeared to be assessed mainly through the Integrity dimension, although a connection to Value Congruence was also suggested.

The Integrity trust dimension emerged as the most important overall. These data showed that all four reputation factors were connected to Integrity and Integrity concerns were mentioned by over four fifths of the participants. Technical Competence emerged as the second most important of the trust dimensions with mentions by two thirds of the participants. Both Quality and Value of Products and Services and Customer Orientation appeared to have relatively strong links to Technical Competence. Value Congruence appeared to be used much less often as a dimension on which to assess company trustworthiness, with just over a quarter of the participants mentioning issues of Value Congruence. Two reputation factors connected to Value Congruence, namely Credibility of Advertising Claims and Commitment to the Environment and Employees. However, the data were not strong for these connections.

The data revealed that while both genders offered responses that indicated the importance of the Integrity trust dimension, women appeared to be more sensitive than men to matters of Technical Competence (twice as many women mentioned this as men) and Value Congruence (three times as many women mentioned this as men). Members of the upper socio-economic level appeared to be more sensitive to matters of Integrity than the lower socio-economic level (half again as many upper as lower mentioning this) and they slightly more often mentioned Value Congruence. Both levels showed sensitivity to Technical Competence. Across all three age cohorts, Integrity was the trust dimension that was highlighted by the greatest number of participants. Technical Competence was second, with indications that Gen X and Gen Y were more inclined to allow this dimension to affect their trust of companies than Boomers were.

Figure 5.3 below visually represents the connections identified by the data from this research, with the bold lines being those connections that were most strongly indicated, and the dotted line being a link that is only weakly indicated in the data.

19 Figure 5.2: Diagram of findings showing connections articulated by study participants between corporate reputation factors and trust dimensions important to consumers



The next chapter addresses RQ2 by examining how consumers use the mechanisms of Facebook to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their trust of companies, and how their use of these mechanisms might be affected by different conditions of tie strength and critical mass.

CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH FINDINGS ON THE INFLUENCE OF FACEBOOK MECHANISMS ON CONSUMER TRUST (RQ2)

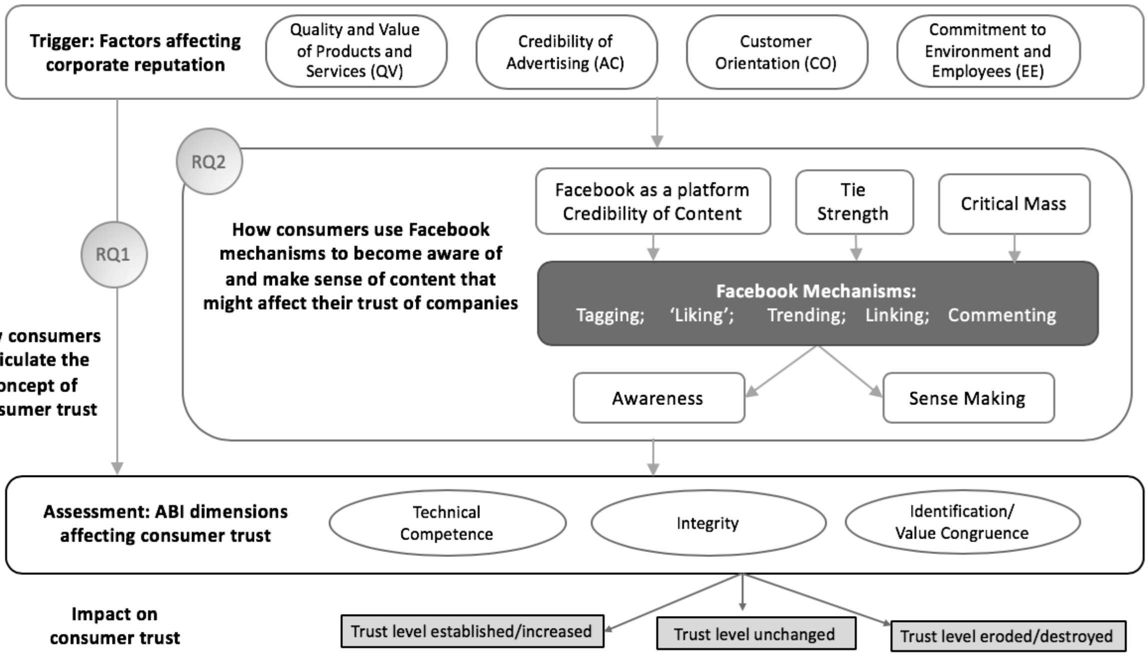
6.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the findings from this research study on Research Question 2 (RQ2) exploring at the influence of Facebook mechanisms on communications that affect consumer trust. This chapter builds on the connection established in Chapter 5 between the reputation factors and the trust assessment dimensions important to consumers by looking at how Facebook mechanisms are influencing that, specifically:

> **How do consumers use the main Facebook mechanisms to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their trust of companies, and how might their use of these mechanisms be affected by different conditions of tie strength and critical mass?**

Chapter 3 established the basis in the literature for this research question, culminating in the research model itself, which is reproduced here in figure 6.1 for convenience and clarity.

20 Figure 6.1: Research model reproduced from figure 3.4 showing how the research questions relate



This chapter reports on the influence of Facebook mechanisms in the context of the connection between the reputation factors that influence consumer trust and the assessment of company trustworthiness on the ABI dimensions, as depicted in figure 6.1. Four vignettes were designed around these reputation factors as part of the semi-structured interview and each included a focus on one or more of the Facebook mechanisms under study (see table 4.2 in Chapter 4).

The chapter is divided into three parts. Section 6.2 discusses three general findings which relate to the research question. The first of these is the role of Facebook as a platform (section 6.2.1). The findings suggest that Facebook as a platform is a potential factor in the influence of consumer trust due to the nature of the way the platform delivers content to its users and due to the social context in which the use of the platform is embedded. The second is the issue of credibility of content on Facebook (section 6.2.2). Credibility was identified by participants as being a major issue with content found on the social net. The third is the role of tie strength in awareness and in sense-making (section 6.2.3). The findings suggest that tie strength is integral to the way consumers access and process information found on Facebook that might influence their trust of companies. The influence of critical mass is discussed in the sections on the mechanisms themselves since this refers to the critical mass of engagement and opinion expressed through the mechanisms.

The chapter continues with a discussion of the findings around the individual mechanisms. This section is divided into five sub-sections covering the interpretation and response of participants to different mechanisms. The findings suggest that tags, (section 6.3.1), 'likes' (section 6.3.2), and trending (section 6.3.3), influence awareness but have a lesser role in sense-making. However, links (section 6.3.4) and comments (section 6.3.5) appear to influence both awareness and sense-making.

The chapter concludes in section 6.4 with a summary regarding the key points from the findings that reveal the triage process a consumer goes through to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their assessment of company trustworthiness. This triage process appears to be influenced by the Facebook mechanisms. The discussion ends with a revised version of the model, called the Consumer Trust Triage Model for Facebook Communications.

6.2 Overall findings regarding Facebook, Credibility and Tie Strength

6.2.1 Facebook as a platform for information

In 2018, 93% of adults in the U.S. got at least some of their news through social networks, up from 67% in 2017 (Mitchel et al., 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018). This was mostly happening through Facebook, in part because Facebook had a much larger penetration of the U.S. population than other social networks (Mitchel et al., 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018), and in part because Facebook as a platform had direct feeds from news sources. It is therefore important to situate this discussion within the context of Facebook as a communication platform.

Given Facebook is primarily an online social network of personal friends, it was not surprising that participants, both younger and older, reported that they mainly engaged with content shared by friends on Facebook in a social frame of mind. A third of the participants said they did not see much news or information on Facebook about company products, services and practices. One Boomer participant succinctly captured the slightly contemptuous sentiment expressed by most other participants in her generation regarding Facebook as a source of news and information:

> *I don't expect Facebook to be my Bible of world affairs and consumer products. (M34-LBF)*

While Boomers and Gen X said they occasionally did see news or information (terms they used interchangeably) about companies on Facebook, they were more likely to hear about such things outside of Facebook either from online news channels, or from more news-oriented social sites such as Twitter or blogs, or from traditional offline media:

> *I get my information from other sources either blogs […] or news feeds, things like that. […] Facebook to me is strictly just a social thing. […] I don't hardly get any news from Facebook. (M42-UBM)*

Gen Y participants were more reliant on newsfeeds that came into Facebook or other online social networks and less likely to consume news through broadcast and print media than participants from the two older generations. These findings are consistent with other national surveys (Mitchel et al., 2016; Shearer & Gottfried, 2017).

Reasons Gen Y gave for preferring Facebook to other sources ranged from Facebook getting news more quickly than other channels:

> *Facebook to me, pretty much they gonna get it first, really. Seem like before any TV or anything, they definitely get it first. (M31-LYM)*

… to Facebook providing a more unfiltered account:

> *On Facebook you kinda get to see how the world really is. […] You get the real perspective on how the product really is instead of like a commercial. (M19-LYF)*

… and access to news they don't find elsewhere:

> *Facebook tends to bring up different sources of information than your normal routine websites you might go to. (M02-UYM)*

This greater confidence in peer to peer communications among Gen Y points to a possible opportunity for greater influence on consumer trust amongst this generation from communications coming across Facebook. However, not all Gen Y felt Facebook was a place to go to for information on consumer products:

> *Social media wouldn't be a place I would go for anything pertaining to products, or something I would use. (M18-LYF)*

Participants in general said that the two types of posts they were most likely to see from their Facebook friends regarding companies were either reports about a new or existing product or service (QV), or customer service issues (CO). They said they occasionally might hear about environmental practices or malpractices, or even more rarely about treatment of employees. More commonly, one participant explained, these EE issues would tend to be reported on the mainstream news channels (broadcast or online) and they would more likely hear about them or see them there first. With regard to advertising claims (AC), participants said advertisements were rarely shared between their friends on Facebook unless as a follow-up and directly relevant to something they had just been talking about, or because they were humorous or particularly well (or badly) done.

Just over half of the participants considered information that came from friends or companies on Facebook as helpful, because most often these were items related to things they were interested in and sometimes they were items they did not see elsewhere:

> *I think there are a lot of interesting articles and information on Facebook, and that may be a product of who I'm friends with and things I've 'liked' in the past and companies that I follow. (M29-UBF)*

> *It connects with a lot of things that you cannot connect with on an everyday basis if you're not on Facebook (M17-LBF)*

In contrast, about half of all the participants considered Facebook problematic as a source of information and said they did not use Facebook to search for information or get answers to questions. The environment was too cluttered with irrelevant information, which made it time-consuming to sort through:

> *So much I just don't engage in. I just let it pass on purpose, because otherwise [...] it would tie up too much time. (M30-UBM)*

Additionally, there was a sense that Facebook was restricting them from seeing the most recent range of posts and opinions, while serving up outdated content they had already seen on Facebook and/or flooding them with sponsored material:

> *Facebook is so full of sponsored stuff. [...] It got to be just overwhelming, so much stuff you never could see anything you actually wanted to see. (M20-LXF)*

A fifth of all participants mentioned explicitly that Facebook controlled what they saw and who they saw posts from. This seemed in part to stem from a belief that, as a platform, Facebook manipulated content through algorithms, a belief held by participants from all three generations. Thus, Facebook was thought to control what they saw:

> *Even if you go back the next day, sometimes you'll see the same stuff again. I think that's probably their algorithm trying to show you things that they expect you to want to like and want to see and bring you back. (M02-UYM)*

…and who they saw it from:

> *I guess there are algorithms that give you the same friends over and over. On Facebook I'm seeing the same people over and over. (M06-UBF)*

This sense that Facebook was controlling and manipulating the flow of information, such that the users of Facebook were not getting open access to all their friends and everything their friends had to say, points to the perception by participants of a gatekeeper role that Facebook as a platform may be playing by curating the news and posts from friends. This was cited by some participants as being one of the reasons for their disengagement with Facebook, consequently limiting Facebook's role in driving awareness of matters that may affect consumer trust as users migrate to other platforms or other sources of information.

In summary, it is clear from these data that news and information about company products, services or practices are found on Facebook and thus Facebook does provide a platform for the communication of content relevant to consumer trust, but that this is neither the only nor the primary way most participants in this study found out about such information. Many other sources outside Facebook, both online and offline, also provided information thereby somewhat diluting the role of Facebook as a primary driver of awareness on such topics.

The findings also indicate that Facebook as a communication platform was perceived by participants to be acting as an inhibitor of information flow due to the action of the algorithms controlling the flow and nature of information, which in turn limited participant willingness to depend on Facebook as a source of information. Participants considered Facebook may be performing a gatekeeper function that is potentially impacting awareness both by providing a portal for access to information on companies, products and services that consumers might otherwise not see, while at the same time controlling and curating the flow of information from friends and sponsors. In this way, Facebook as a social media platform appears potentially to be impacting consumer trust by influencing consumer awareness of matters concerning the reputation factors that affect consumer trust.

6.2.2 Issue of credibility

There was a widespread level of scepticism about the reliability of information found on the Internet in general and the social net in particular amongst participants in this study, as summed up in this quote by one Gen Y participant when asked about credibility of content on the social net:

> *"That is the number one issue with the Internet is the lack of credibility."* (M01-LYM)

This is consistent with the Pew Research survey (2016) which showed that only 4% of adults on the Internet consider information on social media sites to be trustworthy. The discussion on this showed that participants appeared to be concerned about both content and source. They indicated there were so many rumours, some verging on outright lies, and so many people with different moods and motives, that they often just did not know what or whom to trust.

There's so much false news on there now. I'm not sure what to believe and what not to believe. (M41-LBM)

Many dismissed what they found on Facebook as likely to be false or ‘fake news’, a popular and well-worn phrase in current usage at the time of the data collection:

I definitely don't get [news] from social media, because so many people post fake news, and then they form their own opinions around it. So, it's not reliable. (M18-LYF)

‘Fake news’ was a term used by just under half the participants (a quarter of the Boomers, half of Gen X and Gen Y) and the word ‘fake’ came up with three quarters of the participants, including references to fake reviews and fake likes in addition to fake news. One Gen X participant, who maintained a generally sceptical attitude throughout the interview, captured part of the issue when he mentioned the problem of anonymity:

Anybody can be anybody and they can say anything. Doesn't make it true, you know. (M25-LXM)

Upper socio-economic level participants mentioned the problem of anonymity more than lower level participants. Four of these participants, all upper level, said that the electronic medium emboldened people to say things that they might not otherwise say and that might not be true. Thus, some level of triage was called for to sort true from fake. One way participants might have done this would have been by looking only at posts from friends. However, even where the friend was known to the participant, there was still apparently a lack of confidence in the credibility of the content posted. Six participants held the view that people express unfounded opinions just to follow the crowd. A boomer participant said this made her more wary about what she saw from her friends and raised the need for greater critical assessment of her friends’ posts:

It's not just being pulled this way or that by friends, however much you might trust them. It's, “Wow my friends were influenced by fake news or fake posts or fake likes. I need to be a bit more careful that I don't get pulled in that way. (M07-UBF)

In keeping with this line of concern, one Gen X participant explained why he felt information on Facebook was really problematic. He referenced the issue of rumour diffusion:

> *That's just like, say, you tell me something and […] I tell somebody. By the time it reaches 10th or 12th person online, it's going to be totally different than what it was originally. (M37-LXM)*

He said people shared content indiscriminately without checking to see if it was true and that meant that falsehoods and rumours spread easily, creating a snowball effect which could do real harm even when the intent was not malicious:

> *There's been a lot of my friends that has actually, just because it might sound nice, or whatever, had shared stuff on Facebook […] and come to find out it's all fake or just made up or something to have a good laugh at. […] Like, for instance, okay, last week a friend of mine had shared, and I'd seen several people share, that all Taco Bells were closing by 2018. I researched it for myself. It's not true. It's fake. But if enough people would start sharing that, you're going to have the whole United States or the whole world believing that, hey, Taco Bell's going under, Taco Bell's going bankrupt. (M37-LXM)*

When information went viral this exacerbated the effect. In this case, participants said the result was usually either a polarized argument, as described by this Gen Y when discussing comments:

> *They're very opinionated. You're never really going to get like a kind of half-way, in between, seeing it from both sides and choosing kind of a thing. (M12-UYF)*

Or, it was a landslide of opinion in favour of one side with no opposing point of view, because people were hesitant to go against the majority sentiment, as expressed by a different Gen Y when talking about the trending mechanism:

> *When things go viral and everyone's posting this one point of view, a lot of people are sometimes afraid to share the opposite end of the spectrum. (M04-UYF)*

One participant indicated he was particularly sceptical if he was seeing the information for the first time on Facebook and had not seen it reported elsewhere. That indicated to him a likelihood that it was not true, because if it were really a big story, then some more legitimate news site such as one of the established news media channels would have picked it up and reported on it. He used this as a trust cue:

> *It's the things that you see for the first time on Facebook that I'm honestly a little sceptical about because I find that it's usually a more extreme position, it's never like you found out something minor for the first time on Facebook. It's some person making a huge claim about a company they found on some seedy news site that may or may not be true." (M02-UYM)*

In addition to doubting the content that they found on Facebook, participants across all groups also expressed misgivings about the motivations of the people posting. They were not sure that the people themselves were credible and said sometimes it was hard to tell, especially with those they did not know well who were in their extended network. For example, four of the participants, three of whom were Gen X, referenced trolls, people who post things that are not true or that they know little about often using an alternative persona, just to stir up trouble or be in the conversation. Other participants had concerns that people spread misleading information deliberately and maliciously, especially if they had had a bad experience and were in a mood to retaliate against the company. This was a concern expressed by lower socio-economic Boomers in particular, and most often surfaced in the EE discussion of the vignette about the whistle-blowing employee of a tuna company who lost her job:

> *There's a lot of bashing companies, too, that some people do to try to take the company down because they can't take them down any other way. (M36-LBM)*

Although two thirds of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they follow organizations and companies they like on Facebook, a third considered content propagated by companies themselves on Facebook suspect. Opinions on this ranged from believing such content was simply self-serving to considering company-generated content to be deliberately manipulative and deceptive. Lower socio-economic participants were slightly more likely to express mistrust in advertisements and company communications than the upper socio-economic participants. It was not clear from the data why this was so.

Participants perceived company communications as self-serving when, for example, they offered rewards for recommendations through promotions or paid Facebook to promote them. While there was an implied acceptance that this was legitimate, it did not make such content necessarily credible; it being considered a meaningless endorsement:

> *If it's Facebook recommended, I have a tendency to just totally ignore that. Because I know good and well that company's paying Facebook. […] There's absolutely no meaning. (M32-LBM)*

A fifth of the participants spoke of deliberate manipulation of reviews and endorsements by companies and considered this illegitimate. The reaction was generally one of resentment at being manipulated and a reduced inclination to trust the company by making a purchase as a result, the exception to this being when they had followed the company in order to get promotional offers and notifications on new products. This resentment at the manipulation is captured here by a Gen Y participant, who overall believed in the power of the social net to expose manipulative behaviour and get to the truth, but who trusted very little that came from companies:

> *It's very easy to catch the idea that there is a company actively trying to manipulate you. […] A lot of times, they'll create entire fake news accounts and report on their own product extremely favourably. (M01-LYM)*

Overall, although opinions expressed by friends (or companies) on Facebook helped participants become aware of matters that might affect their trust of companies, they did not have confidence that this content would be credible, and thus in general they were not willing to trust it by taking action on it without looking into it further. As this same Gen Y male put it expressively:

> *There is nobody I just sheep behind. (M01-LYM)*

A Boomer participant, who praised company efforts to connect with consumers online, but who was wary of fake news and unfounded opinion from friends, had a somewhat philosophical conclusion:

> *We're going into social media 3.0, where there has to be a different level of engagement linked to verification. (M07-UBF)*

Thus, when participants became aware of content that could affect their trust of companies, they appeared to engage in a sense-making triage to sort content into three categories, content that was dismissed, content that was accepted and believed, and content that required verification. Participant discussion indicated that the latter was likely the largest of the categories. Three approaches to verification were discussed by participants, online research, personal experience and requesting more information from the person posting.

Almost all the participants said they do research online; this was the most common reaction when coming across doubtful information on Facebook. Participants said they did this by Googling it, reading reviews, looking for news articles, or in some cases going to the company's website. Especially in cases where the topic of the post was more serious (such as the AC vignette about the beer company advertisement against driving drunk or the EE vignette about environmental concerns at the tuna company), participants expressed a need to research outside Facebook by Googling the issue to look for reports in the mainstream media in order to make a more informed trust assessment. This comment by a Boomer male echoed what almost all participants said:

> *I'd go to a third party. I'd do my homework. I'd Google the company. I'd find out about the company. (M40-LBM)*

However, many said that they only undertook this kind of research if they cared about the topic and/or had the time. Therefore, situational factors appeared to moderate the likelihood of following up in this way and seemed to form part of the triage.

Two fifths of the participants (three quarters of whom were male) felt that any time the information was either controversial or likely to be exaggerated, they wanted some kind of proof, or to see the facts behind the claims.

> *The post in and of itself isn't going to have a big influence. It's going to be whatever the supporting data behind the post. (M26-UYM)*

This appeared to offer one reason why links emerged as a very important mechanism (as discussed below in sub-section 6.3.4), because links provided a short-cut which could make the process of verification quicker.

An alternative assessment method that participants discussed was simply to compare what was being said to their own experience. Two thirds of the participants said that their own experience was more important than the opinion in posts. These participants identified two ways in which their personal experience was brought to bear. One way was to verify the friend's experience by trying it out for themselves:

> *I would probably still be inclined to maybe have my own personal experience or think, say like, "I have to go check this out for myself," (M16-UXF)*

This was mentioned most frequently when direct personal experience was a viable method of assessment and when the financial exposure was not great, such as with the QV vignette regarding the quality of the electronic device, or the CO vignette regarding service at the burger restaurant. However, this method also required time and sufficient interest. A more immediate way participants described was to apply personal experience to the evaluation by comparing what the friend said to their own similar experiences from the past:

> *I mean, I'd be like, "Oh, yeah well, yeah, I can see that the burger was cold, yeah," because that has happened to me before. (M24-LYM)*

Past experience was deemed relevant because it provided a point of relatability. Relatability appeared either to cause them to dismiss the post if they could not relate to it, or it made the post much more persuasive due to the immediate credibility provided by the alignment. This could extend further than just the direct experience with that particular product or service. One participant explained in the context of the QV vignette, that experience with a category in general could also provide context for assessing the credibility of a post:

> *If somebody has posted a negative comment on my Facebook feed that these two aspects [pricing and under-developed technology] were definitely influencing their negative comments, I would seriously consider not purchasing. Those are two things that based on my personal experience I know to be generally true. (M07-UBF)*

Thus, the participant's own experience, past or future, appears to play a major role in the assessment of credibility and trustworthiness of the company. This dependence on personal experience (the 'self') to assess credibility of content found on Facebook emerged as likely to be an important part of the triage process at the sense-making stage, as discussed in section 6.4 below.

Of the three ways of verifying information, the least often pursued by participants was to respond to the person posting openly online. Only a quarter of the participants said they would do this. About half the participants said they would engage in some kind of follow up on something a friend posted if they were in the market for the same product or just wanted to know more about what was going on, but they would only do this through private channels or in person, and only if that person were a Facebook friend with whom they had a close enough tie to feel comfortable doing that:

> *If I know the person very well, like this scenario suggests, I'll ask them what happened, and why. (M08-UXF)*

This awareness of the public exposure inhibited verification and sense-making through direct open interaction on Facebook and meant participants, particularly upper socio-economic participants, preferred to verify content through other means. However, all the participants said it mattered who the friend was who had made the post because how well they knew that person factored into their assessment of the content of the post and their willingness to follow up with that person directly (as discussed further in the next section).

In summary, with regard to credibility of content found on Facebook participants had little confidence that what they found there about companies and their products, services or practices, would be accurate. They considered 'fake news' and misinformation posted by other Facebook users to be a real problem. Moreover, it was hard to get a balance of opinion. Communications directly from companies on Facebook were generally discounted as self-serving. Therefore, some level of triage was needed to sort out what to look at and what to believe. In addition to the influence of tie strength and critical mass of engagement, the topic of the content and the participant's personal experience, the 'self', both emerged as potentially important in the triage process. If participants really wanted to find out about something they saw on Facebook, they said they would verify the information by researching it or by experiencing it for themselves through purchase. If the product or company were one in which they were interested, they might reach out to the friend who made the post to get further details or clarification, but this was usually not done on Facebook. However, all the participants said it mattered who the friend was who had made the post because how well they knew that person needed to be factored into their triage activity regarding what to view and what believe, as discussed in the next section.

6.2.3 Tie strength: a triage tool

The data reveal that tie strength was used by participants as a triage tool that influenced the awareness and sense-making of content regarding the four reputation factors. This process could potentially impact consumer trust by helping consumers sort out what to view/read and facilitating interpretation. The findings show that strong ties in general encourage awareness and help with sense-making, but weak ties are seen as irrelevant.

The existence of the offline relationship was cited by most participants a main reason for engaging with content posted by friends online. Almost all the participants mentioned at some point in the interview that knowing the friend in person made a difference to their level of engagement. For the two older generations, this seemed to be because they were closer and more current friends, as reflected here in a comment made by a Gen X female in the context of the QV vignette discussion:

> *I may be more apt to click on it if it's someone that I'm closer to, than someone that I might have just connected with on Facebook because we went to high school together or something." (M09-UXF)*

However, for Gen Y, the 'digital natives' generation who live their social lives as much online as offline (Prensky, 2001a), there seemed to be more than that. Three Gen Y specifically mentioned the social obligation to the offline relationship as a reason for engaging. This Gen Y male spoke at length about this and referenced it more than once in the interview:

> *The outside social cues make you want to interact on Facebook [...] It brings a personal nature back to it. It's like if someone was sitting there and you were sitting in someone's room and they said, "Hey watch this video with me." You would probably do it. [...] It draws you in more and it makes you feel socially pressured to watch it. (M02-UYM)*

Besides the interest or obligation imparted by the offline relationship, how well the consumer knew the friend emerged as triage tool with which they sorted through what to read/view and how to assess the content, thus potentially influencing consumer trust. All the participants talked about this as a factor, as captured here:

> *People that you really truly know, you know their habits, and trust them because you have that more personal interaction maybe one-on-one." (M07-UBF)*

...and conversely:

> *If it's one of the people I didn't know as well, I would give it less credence. (M42-UBM)*

About half the participants reported that knowing the friend meant they knew whether this was someone they could count on to post useful and reliable information regarding a product category.   It seemed the history of communications between them could make a difference in this assessment, as indicated here by this Gen X female:

> *They've never steered you wrong in the past about something. Those are the kind of people that you can go with." (M08-UXF)*

In addition, participants appeared to take into account what they knew of the friend's expertise or experience, as this Boomer male explained during the discussion of the QV vignette on the technology product as to why he would look at some posts like that and not others:

It's a knowledge base kind of thing. So, is this something they could know about in a way that I wouldn't? As opposed to, they're just blowing smoke? (M43-UBM)

This participant went on to explain that the triage could vary with the topic of the post, since one could have different degrees of confidence in the opinions of one's friend depending on the topic:

You know how to read what they're saying. You're reading it through what your opinion of them is. […] So, some friends I trust their political opinions, but I wouldn't trust their restaurant opinions. (M43-UBM)

Since this consideration of expertise emerged mainly during the discussion of the QV and EE vignettes, it seems possible that the topics of the vignettes might have driven some of this response. Knowledge of technology seemed to be viewed as a specific kind of knowledge that not everyone had. Several participants mentioned this. Participants who offered alternative examples mentioned other specialized categories, such as cars. In the case of the EE vignette people mentioned specialized knowledge of environmental and health standards or even just insider access to information, as referenced here by this Gen Y male:

The fact that this person worked for the company gives her a sense of credibility that I wouldn't normally get. That to me makes me already more intrigued because that's a perspective that I don't have. (M01-LYM)

Knowing the friend in person reassured them that they had legitimacy and were not someone from the company manipulating the reviews, as captured in this quote from a Gen X male towards the end of the interview when he was discussing the value of reviews from close personal friends on the social net, as opposed weaker friends or people he didn't know on an e-commerce site:

Personal has greater weight. Because I know that they've owned a similar product and can base their opinion on their experience that they've had with the product. Versus somebody that I don't know that could be a person that works for the company, just making reviews on the product. (M39-UXM)

In contrast, a fifth of the participants mentioned that they have friends they know well, with whom they are in regular contact and who post on Facebook frequently, yet if they saw a post from one of those friends, they were inclined to skip over the post because they felt they already knew what it might be likely to say. This Boomer statement during the discussion of the QV vignette was typical of this alternative point of view:

> *I know them, so I know what I'm going to get. [...] I don't really have to look at those to know what they're going to say. (M30-UBM)*

In addition to being able to assess the value of the post by what they knew of the friend's expertise or authority, the personal affinity and the interpersonal trust between the friends emerged as a factor in the triage. Trust of the friend appeared to transfer to trust of the information, building on findings by Matook et al. (2015). For half the participants the fact that they knew the person could be enough in itself, simply because they already trusted them as a friend, as stated with conviction by this Boomer female:

> *If she's my friend, I'm going to believe her. I can think of four or five who I would just be like, "Yeah, I mean she tells me that, it's the truth." (M06-UBF)*

The natural affinity and value congruence that exists between stronger ties may explain why participants appeared to trust their friends more and were willing to use this as a triage tool, particularly in the case of quality and value of products and services. This Gen Y participant said in a Quality and Value of Products and Services context that opinions of close friends mattered more than other opinions, giving the following reason which is based on personal affinity:

> *I think because the people you spend your time with, you're going to be interested in the same sorts of shows, maybe the same kind of food, wear the same type of clothes. So, if they didn't like something there's a greater chance that you're not going to like it also. (M21-UYF)*

Half a dozen other participants, mostly Gen Y, made very similar observations. However, one participant framed it from the reverse perspective. She remarked that a product or service recommendation that came from a strong tie would influence her more because that friend knew her well and would therefore be likely to make recommendations she would like:

> *If I did have a good friend who said, "You should really go eat at this place," I probably would trust and put a lot of weight in that, because it's probably someone who's [thinking], "I know the type of food that you like. You're going to like this place, I've been there." (M16-UXF)*

Five participants (two Boomers and three Gen Y) pointed out a different way that personal affinity became important, especially to the awareness aspect of triage. They said they knew their closer friends well enough to recognize when a post was out of character. Thus, when that friend posted something unusual for them, the opinion stood out, and they would give such a post greater consideration. This quote from one of the Gen Y participants during the EE vignette discussion illustrates this reaction:

> *If it was coming from my vegan California friend who posts stuff like this all the time, I'd probably be like that's just Jennifer being Jennifer, but if it was someone who normally wasn't engaged with something like this, I would be a little more likely to tune in. (M15-UYF)*

Thus, it appears from the findings that a strong tie provided a basis for conducting the triage at both the awareness and sense-making stages. However, the social context of Facebook also appeared to inhibit the potential impact of the tie. Participants were very much aware of the social context and felt the need to protect their offline relationships. Over half of the participants referenced taking care to follow social protocols online and said they were careful to avoid public challenges to their friends or getting involved in any kind of controversy for fear of causing offense. This arose particularly in connection with using the comment mechanism, as represented here by a Gen X female:

> *I personally do not engage in commentary that can invoke difficult feelings between friends. (M10-UXF)*

One Gen Y participant made a revealing comment in this regard by saying that she might challenge a post if her participation were just one of the crowd, but she would avoid a direct challenge to her friends:

> *Like between my friends not this argumentative. If it were a public post and everyone was commenting on it, then maybe, but not with my friends. (M21-UYF)*

Thus, when a post or comment was made across a tie that mattered to the participant, this appeared to discourage sense-making activities openly online. Instead the preference was to find information in other ways. Almost all participants said that they would do their own online research to get further information. About three quarters of them said if they wanted to challenge the opinion, they would take the conversation directly to the friend through private channels, as expressed here:

> *I would probably ask "Why did you have this particular take on this when every other review that I've been reading seems to give it good marks?" but I don't think I would ask that in a public, like on a person's wall, in public. I would ask them in a private message. (M11-UXM)*

The consciousness of the social connectedness and its effect inhibiting open dialogue on Facebook was expressed equally by both males and females, and equally across generations though sometimes for different reasons. Boomers and Gen X participants tended to express wanting to keep their opinions to themselves so as not to risk stirring up any contention between themselves and their friends. In contrast, Gen Y more often expressed the concern about exposure in terms of being reluctant to add posts or comments if doing so might put themselves in an embarrassing light:

Very little like, "How does that work?" Often, not, because people have a fear of not knowing something. [...] They don't want to appear stupid on the Internet. [...] People don't want to be embarrassed. (M01-LYM)

The fear of embarrassment appeared to hinder the use of Facebook as a medium for sense-making with the Gen Y participants in particular, who tended to have many more friends whom they knew less well in their network than the other two generational cohorts. Indeed, when Gen Y participants needed clarification or more information, their first preference was to Google it rather than to ask the friend at all, in order to avoid potential social sanction.

With weaker ties where exchanges were less frequent or longer ago, a third of the participants said they might not read the post, thus affecting awareness. Near the beginning of the interview when discussing Facebook as a platform, one Gen Y indicated how he performed a triage on posts using tie strength:

Facebook has created such a wide net of people you have some minor level of interaction with, that you have this huge social net where theoretically you might be getting input from somebody you don't really have any connection to anymore. [...] You kind of just move on. It doesn't really reach you in the same way that your best friend [does]. (M02-UYM)

Moreover, about a fifth of the participants, all male but one, said with weak ties the absence of a relationship or sufficient knowledge of the friend's perspective meant they would be less inclined to trust the opinion without researching it for themselves, as in this quote from a Boomer when discussing the QV vignette:

If it was somebody I didn't really know that well, and I really couldn't tell where they were coming from, I'd like to check it out myself. (M41-LBM)

This triage activity, which appeared to favour content from friends who had more recent and more frequent communications and disfavour posts from weak ties, has the potential to limit impact on consumer trust. Granovetter (Granovetter, 1973,

1983) made the point that it is weak ties that expand a person's thinking and horizons more than strong ties, since strong ties tend to have more alignment in their points of view. So, if consumers are skipping over content coming from weak ties and only accessing comment from stronger more recent ties, this could be introducing a confirmation bias in consumer opinion resulting from this triage, thus potentially limiting impact on consumer trust to confirmation of existing opinions.

In summary, the data in this research appear to show that tie strength was important to the triage that the participants performed on the content they saw on Facebook at both the awareness and the sense-making levels. At the awareness level, the social context of the strong tie seemed to obligate, or at a minimum stimulate, participants to read/view the content. Knowledge of the friend's expertise and authority provided additional information which allowed the participant to perform a triage on the flood of posts and determine what to look at and what to ignore, thus influencing awareness. It seemed to encourage awareness and enhance sense-making by providing participants with context for assessing whether the post would be legitimate, well informed, accurate, and relevant. Knowing their friend well also could encourage awareness by stimulating engagement when the post seemed out character. Having accessed the post, knowledge of the friend's experience, values and perspective, and the personal affinity that was within the relationship, then also allowed the participant to perform a second level triage regarding what they would be inclined to believe, what to dismiss or discount, and what to look into further, thus influencing sense-making. Thus, the knowledge the participant had about the friend appeared to be an integral part of the triage process.

Important to the sense-making process appeared to be the fact that the close tie not only provided context in which to assess their friend's post, but also gave participants permission to follow up for further detail if they felt they needed it. However, due to the fear of potential embarrassment and fear of damage to the curated self-image online, follow-up was more often taken offline than conducted online. Additionally, some participants said that the close personal affinity and trust they had with stronger ties meant they were more inclined to accept the opinions of those friends without need for follow up. When asked about weak ties, participants indicated that they had no way to assess these posts because they knew the person less well, and therefore they tended to discount, dismiss or skip over those. This emphasizes the importance of the real-friend relationship regarding the potential influence on consumer trust of content found on Facebook.

The general findings discussed in this section on Facebook as a platform, the issue of credibility and the influence of tie strength, set the context for the discussion that follows on Facebook mechanisms. The next section addresses the findings regarding the tagging, 'liking', trending, linking and commenting mechanisms and how consumers use these to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their trust of companies.

6.3 Findings regarding role of specific mechanisms

6.3.1 Tagging

Tagging emerged as the mechanism most reliable in triggering viewership or readership among participants in this study, whether it came from a strong tie or a weak tie. This was true across genders, age cohorts and socio-economic levels. Many of the participants said they viewed tagging as a direct call to view the content because a friend considered it important that they should see whatever it was that was tagged. The following quote is typical of views expressed by participants on tagging:

> *If somebody tags me on something that tells me that one particular person, whoever has tagged me, thinks that I would be interested in that for whatever various reasons. (M29-UBF).*

Since tagging was viewed as a direct call to view the content, over three quarters of the participants said if they were tagged on something, they would look at it, regardless of who tagged them. For them, it was a question of wanting to know what the content was and why it had been earmarked as being of interest to them:

> *If I'm tagged in something, I'll definitely pay more attention to it because I want to see why. (M23-LYM)*

However, tags got mixed reactions from participants. When a tag was for a recommendation on a product or service, it could be welcome, especially if the tag came from a friend who knew them well and would know what kind of products or services they would enjoy. This comment from a Gen X participant reflects this attitude:

> *To me tagging says this will interest you directly and I think you should check it out. Like you know if somebody puts something wrestling themed on my Facebook page and they tag me in it they know it's for me because they know I love wrestling. (M25-LXM)*

However, tags were not always well received. About a third of the participants, predominantly in the upper socio-economic group, said that being tagged on things was a source of annoyance. Most of these participants said they would un-tag themselves and some, like this Gen Y female, said they used their privacy settings to prevent tagged content from showing up on their timeline without their approval in case they were tagged on something that could be deemed inappropriate or that would adversely affect their personal reputation online:

I've set my Facebook up with privacy where no one can post to my timeline unless I approve it. […] I don't want people posting inappropriate content or that I deem inappropriate. (M04-UYF)

While other research has revealed similar findings, especially with regard to younger females (Birnholtz et al., 2017) this type of reaction and response may have been driven in part by the context of the discussion which was the AC vignette about the beer company advertisement against drunk driving, in which a friend supposedly tagged another friend on the advertisement. Several participants reacted negatively to being tagged on content like that, because it had to do with alcohol. They appeared to be less sensitive to being tagged when the content concerned a less controversial product.

Participants who expressed annoyance at being tagged nevertheless said they looked to see what they were tagged on, although most of them did not usually approve the tags and often did not respond at all. They were careful to curate what showed up on their feed and wanted to keep it to subjects they wanted to have there, not what others wanted to communicate to them. This Gen Y male had taken this to the extreme:

I just kind of prefer to keep my feed my feed. Right? So right now I have, I think last time I checked, I have 81 tags. I will not approve, I won't put them on my wall. (M25-LXM)

These findings suggest the potential for tags at least to influence the consumer trust of the person tagged through awareness. However, again, the curation of content, in this case tagged content, was potentially limiting the impact of Facebook communications on consumer trust more broadly by restricting awareness in that person's network of that content. The tagging mechanism appeared to be effective in driving awareness with the person tagged, but it was apparently less effective in expanding the awareness beyond that point through viral propagation.

Participants did not attribute meaning to the tag beyond just that their friend wanted them to see that item they were sharing, so tags did not seem to have much bearing on sense-making with participants in this study. A sixth of the participants directly stated, as here, that tags did not influence their opinions:

> *When I get tagged in something, it's usually something we have in common, me and a friend. It wouldn't really change the way I viewed it. (M18-LYF)*

Thus, the data show that tagging can be effective in driving awareness with the person tagged but could only influence others in the network when the content was deemed appropriate by the receiver. In general tagging was viewed more favourably when it came from strong ties because the content was deemed more likely to be relevant. Nevertheless, participants' responses indicated that tagging could also be effective in driving awareness when coming from weak ties, simply because of the call to view. Thus, the strong call to action meant that tagging could provide a fast-track to awareness effectively bi-passing the awareness triage decision. However, the desire to screen the content for personal reputation purposes appeared to limit the effectiveness of tagging as a mechanism for driving awareness more broadly than one to one. Lastly, participants only considered tagging to be a tool to bring something to someone's attention and in general indicated that it did not really affect their interpretation of the content shared, thus this mechanism did not emerge as a factor in the sense-making triage.

6.3.2 Likes

It might seem logical that if a consumer saw that friends in their network, especially those that were strong ties, were indicating their approval of content through use of the 'like' mechanism, the consumer's awareness of that content might increase, and their perception be biased in favour of the point of view it expressed. However, 'likes' did not emerge as a reliable driver of opinion or sense-making.

'Likes' were deemed generally to be the least important of the Facebook mechanisms. They were considered a mild form of interaction, described as '*a passing nod'* (M25-LXM) and a *'lesser'* (M03-UYM) way to engage. When asked to rank order the mechanisms, participants often ranked 'likes' lowest on the list in importance and influence, as did this Gen Y male:

> *I think that if I were to categorize these in the amount that the consumer is interacting with the brand, I'd say that 'liking' is on the bottom. Because once again it's very convenient. You click it. You 'like' it but it doesn't mean a lot to me when I see my friends do that. (M03-UYM)*

When asked what 'liking' meant, just over half of the participants said 'liking' was just an acknowledgement that the person had seen it and generally agreed with it, or at least supported their friend in that opinion. At best it meant an agreement with the post and/or mild endorsement of the product. In contrast, for about a quarter of the participants 'likes' just meant acknowledgment of the post, but not necessarily adoption of the opinion. Thus, likes appeared to have little to no influence on consumer trust. This Boomer male captured the sentiment of several others when he said:

> *'Liking' is usually more a thank you or an acknowledgement of the source. 'Liking' sometimes is an endorsement of the message but, for me most of the time, it's an acknowledgment of the person who posted the message. It's sort of like say, "I got it. Thanks." (M43-UBM)*

Prior research has shown that 'likes' are not very influential in part because they don't provide much information (Winter, Brückner, & Krämer, 2015). These data from the present study build on that finding to provide deeper insight into why 'likes' appear to have so little influence. Gen Y participants, who were more cynical about the use of ‘likes’ than older generations, said ‘likes’ were meaningless because people on Facebook (and on other platforms) ‘like’ things without much thought, or for reasons that have nothing to do with the content, such as ‘liking’ something because they were entertained by the discussion, or they liked the look of the photo that’s attached, or even just because they are in that mood. The following is an example of how Gen Y participants described this off-handed use of the ‘like’ mechanism:

> *To me, ‘liking’ something has become so overrated. […] Everybody just ‘likes’ everything so you really don't get a full opinion or a full view on what people really think. […] If the lighting is nice, they'll ‘like’ it. If the colour of the beer bottle is nice, they'll ‘like’ it. Or the tuna can, they'll ‘like’ it. (M19-LYF)*

As a result of this wide range of reasons for ‘liking’ a post, ranging from endorsement of the content, to supporting the person, to appreciation of one small element of a photo, the person seeing the ‘like’ might not be able to tell why the person ‘liked’ it, and so that made a ‘like’ less helpful for sense-making purposes. One Gen Y participant, in an extreme example, said she sometimes clicked ‘like’ for no reason at all:

> *That's probably the least influential because it's so easy to ‘like’ something. I will just ‘like’ something scrolling through even if I don't actually like it, sometimes. (M21-UYF)*

Facebook has an algorithm that notifies users when their friends have ‘liked’ something and it tells them who and how many have ‘liked’ it. The notification will say “So-and-so and x number of your friends have ‘liked’ this”. Though participants in this research claimed that ‘likes’ were relatively meaningless, nevertheless, the data suggest that this Facebook algorithm can amplify the influence of ‘likes’ and cause people to read or view and even endorse content they might otherwise not see. When asked about this mechanism, some participants were dismissive of it, but, in keeping with Social Impact Theory (Ding et al., 2017) a third said it did make them want to know what their friends had ‘liked’. Boomers tended to say they would look to see who was posting first before looking at the content and would only be inclined to view or read the content if the name of a close tie or someone who's opinion they valued were on the list. This is another an example of using tie strength, here combined with 'likes', to perform an initial triage on whether to engage:

> *First, I go and hit the five, and see who the five friends were. […] Just to see who they are and see what I think of their opinions. […] Then I'll go back and look at it, and read it, and see if I like it, too. (M41-LBM)*

Conversely, Gen Y were more inclined to assume it was of interest since their friends shared common interests with them and they were more likely to look to see what the content was first before looking to see who had 'liked' it:

> *We share common interests. […] If 10 of my other friends have liked this, chances are it's something that I would be interested in as well, or at least would interested in checking out. Even if it's not something that I'm like really into, I might be interested in seeing it and seeing what they have to say. (M26-UYM)*

In considering this generational difference in the data, it is worth noting that only two of the Boomer sample in this study had more than 800 total friends on Facebook, with half having 200 or less, whereas half of the Gen Y sample had between 400 and 1000 total friends on Facebook, with three having more than 1000. This possibly suggests an explanation that it appeared to matter more to Boomers than to Gen Y to know who the friends were first before bothering to look at the content, because their Facebook friends were a tighter and better-known group of people.

This engagement in response to the Facebook prompt on 'likes' could go beyond just looking to see what it was. 'Likes' from friends could encourage the readers to 'like' it also or repost it, thus spreading awareness of the content to their friend network. A Gen Y participant indicated that, since friends shared common interests, a 'like' from a friend might also trigger a 'like' from him if it was a brand he also used and liked, more as an endorsement of the brand that as a way to share information with his friends:

> *When it pops up and says, "So and so liked this company." I'm like "I use this every day. I don't know why I didn't 'like' them. So why don't I just 'like' them now and endorse them." (M03-UYM)*

In this way the awareness of the content could spread virally, propelled by Facebook's algorithm that announces to users when a friend in their network has 'liked' a post or a product, etc. However, it appeared the influence on sense-making was only mild. In general, throughout the interviews when discussing the 'like' mechanism, participants indicated that, just because their friend group 'liked' something on Facebook, it did not mean they would necessarily agree or convert to the same opinion. Thus, in-group influence on consumer opinion did not appear to be strong through the 'like' mechanism.

Lastly, a third of the participants, more frequently Gen X and Gen Y than Boomers, also brought up the point that companies run promotions and campaigns specifically to trigger the 'like' mechanism, so they did not attach great importance to the 'likes' that surfaced this way. They approached the notification with some level of scepticism and a degree of discernment, as evidenced for example, in this statement by a Gen X participant:

> *You see companies that you know you have to like their page to enter contests or whatever. If 24 of my friends 'liked' Proctor & Gamble, I'm like yeah okay, maybe they did it to get coupons too. (M20-LXF)*

To summarize, whilst the results of this study found that the 'like' mechanism can influence consumer trust through awareness and can encourage a viral propagation of further 'likes', the influence of the 'like' mechanism on sense-making, even from strong ties, did not really emerge. 'Likes' appeared to have some influence at the awareness triage stage, but little to no influence at the sense-making triage stage. This seemed to be so in part because of the casual way Facebook users treated 'likes' making it hard for the person on the receiving end of this communication to tell why their Facebook friend had 'liked' the post. The reason could have had nothing to do with the opinion expressed in the post, and therefore the influence of 'likes' in adding persuasiveness to the content of the post was seen as limited. From the participant responses, it was clear that the Facebook algorithm that highlighted what content was liked by their friends, did serve to call matters to a consumer's attention that might affect their trust of a company or brand, but the data here do not support an indication that the apparent mass of opinion suggested by this mechanism had much effect on consumer opinion or consumer trust.

6.3.3 Trending

Trending items are closely related to 'likes' as an indicator of popular interest and possible influence. Trending means that critical mass of engagement and interest has occurred. Items were perceived by participants as trending on Facebook either when Facebook listed the item in the Trending News section, or when someone shared something that had a large number of views or shares recorded, or when many of the participant's Facebook friends shared or talked about something. In the latter case, it may only have been trending within that group of friends not in the population as a whole, but nevertheless this was still perceived as trending by participants. Since the Trending News feature of Facebook no longer exists, as discussed in Chapter 3, this analysis of the findings on trending will discuss the influence of trending in general as a mechanism. Where comments made by participants regarding the Trending News feature are relevant to the more general discussion, they will be included to provide deeper insight, but the focus will not be on this feature.

The data suggest that the trending mechanism on Facebook could be influencing consumer trust, primarily through awareness, but also through sense-making. According to study participants, trending did bring matters to their attention and thereby could directly impact consumer trust through awareness. Some participants actively monitored trending items in order to discuss them with their friends, thus potentially leading to further sense-making indirectly. Additionally, the metrics of mass engagement appeared to contribute to sense-making through the signals they conveyed regarding importance.

Study participants were divided on the value of looking at things that were trending on Facebook, with three fifths saying they often looked at what was trending and two fifths saying they had no interest in that. Attitudes varied, ranging on a wide spectrum from:

> *I look at that, that's probably one of the biggest things that I'm consistently looking at on Facebook. The trending stories. (M22-UXM)*

…to the other end of the spectrum:

> *It's so viral that I assume it's not worth my time. (M43-UBM)*

Two thirds of the female participants said they followed trending stories, and the same was true of the upper socio-economic participants. The men and the lower socio-economic participants were more evenly balanced between those who said they did and those who said they did not. Of the three generational cohorts, Gen Y were the ones who were most inclined to follow trending stories. However, participants did not appear to be dependent to any great degree on what was trending on Facebook for news and information. Only seven participants in the study agreed or strongly agreed that they got most of their news from Facebook (four of which were Gen Y and all but two of which were lower socio-economic participants). All the rest appeared to have other sources that they preferred for news. Nevertheless, when asked if they found out about what was in the news by what friends were talking about on Facebook, half of both Gen X and Gen Y said they agreed or strongly agreed with that, though only a third of Boomers did.

One of the main reasons participants gave as to why they looked at what was trending was to be sure to stay current on breaking news so as not to fall behind on topical issues:

> *I guess I would feel like I was glad I saw it because if somebody's talking about it, I would feel like I was at least keeping up with stuff. [...] You're afraid you're going to miss out. (M06-UBF)*

This reason for engaging with trending items on Facebook could be important to the influence of the trending mechanism not only on awareness but also indirectly on sense-making, because participants noted that the purpose of engaging with such content is to be able to discuss the matter with friends. Gen Y participants agreed but seemed to put stronger emphasis on wanting to avoid being at a deficit socially in conversations with friends. One Gen Y participant, who seemed to be very conscious of what others, particularly his friends, might think of him, described the triage process that he would go through in his head when he saw something trending:

> *Okay, wow. A lot of people are talking about this. This is a current topic. It's a trend. [...] Maybe I should watch it, so I can talk about it at lunch tomorrow. (M03-UYM)*

Not surprisingly, if the trend was within a participant's circle of friends that appeared to amplify the importance of finding out about it. This next quote from a Gen

Y participant shows that she attributed more significance and felt a greater imperative to engage when she saw people in her network posting about an issue, especially when she was seeing posts on the topic from several different people who were maybe not directly connected with each other:

> *I think if it's a lot of different people across my friend spectrum that are sharing it and raising awareness of something, [...] I'm like, "Oh, then this is probably something culturally that I should be aware of and engage with." (M04-UYF)*

In addition, participants discussed items that were trending within their friend group in a way that indicated that this additional degree of social connection made the trending item seem more relevant, especially if it was about a product or service they and their friends used:

> *If I enjoyed the beer and I see that many people have shared this commercial, especially those that I'm close with, then I will take a deeper look into it. (M05-UYF)*

Thus, when posts were trending in a participant's in-group, this was an important consideration in the triage, thereby linking the trending mechanism to the awareness triage process.

Participants who looked at what was trending on Facebook in general outside their immediate friend group did not appear to go deeply into the topic, with several of them saying that they would not do more than read the first few lines. Nevertheless, news items that were trending on Facebook in general did appear to have potential to influence consumer trust. One Gen Y female explained specifically that she found out about a significant Customer Orientation (CO) issue in this way that had a major impact on her trust as a consumer:

> *I frequently find interesting things. That's honestly how I first found out about the United scandal is because it was on the Trending News stories. (M15-UYF)*

Reference here to the United Airlines scandal, where a passenger was forcibly dragged from a plane before take-off in April of 2017, is an example of a CO issue which trended on the social net and caused significant problems for United, including calls for boycotts (Domonoske, 2017; Victor & Stevens, 2017). This example illustrates how trending items can influence consumer trust by bringing corporate reputation issues to the attention of Facebook users. When asked about how this story affected her trust of the company, this participant confirmed the influence on her trust manifested through her purchase behaviour as a consumer, and even offered a second example:

> *I think it does very much influence. There are companies that I've stopped going to because of certain scandals or something I found out about. How they raised their chicken - I won't eat Tyson's chicken. I think that has a big influence for me. (M15-UYF)*

Both of these examples have an emotional component to them which may have enhanced their impact (Ravaja et al., 2015). They also both have elements of controversy and individual or societal harm and therefore may have invited more engagement (Ziegele et al., 2018). They both serve, however, to illustrate that the trending mechanism, whether trending amongst a person's in-group, or on Facebook at large, can bring content relating to the reputation factors to the attention of consumers, that does appear to affect their trust as a consumer.

In addition to the importance of keeping up with what friends may be talking about, the metrics of engagement themselves were also important to the consumer trust triage. The metrics showing a critical mass of engagement was used by almost half those in this study who engaged with trending items as a triage filter to make a quick assessment of importance. To these participants, if something had received a large number of views or shares, it seemed necessarily important to know about it. For the two older generations, their interest seemed to stem primarily from the fact that so many friends were bringing it up which increased their curiosity to see what this was about. In contrast, Gen Y participants attributed more significance to the actual number of 'likes', 'shares' or 'views' an item was receiving:

> *If something gains that level of popularity, there is a weight to it, automatically. It just can't be ignored. […] It does not mean I automatically side with the people that are the masses, but it will catch my attention much, much more. (M01-LYM)*

Half of the Gen Y participants in this study mentioned the amount of engagement as being a cue that this was something they should know about, a considerably higher percentage of the group than either Boomers (a fifth) or Gen X (very few). For Gen Y this was more than mere curiosity about what others were discussing. The sheer volume of engagement that caused something to trend appeared to attribute an importance to the content itself and to drive an imperative to become aware of the issue in a much stronger way than it did for Boomers and Gen X. The difference in attitude was reflected in the much more powerful and compelling language used by Gen Y versus the language used by the older age cohorts in discussing their motivations. This can be seen by comparing the language in these two quotes, the first one from a Gen Y participant that has an urgency to it, and second one from a Boomer that is much calmer language:

> *If it goes viral, then you know it's something super important, something that's very knowledgeable (sic) that everyone needs to know what's going on or what the issue may be. (M05-UYF)*

> *You want to know what people talk about. That's human nature, to just know what people are doing, what they're talking about. (M06-UBF)*

Additionally, for some Gen Y participants (notably lower socio-economic ones), unlike for Boomer or Gen X participants, the metrics were used as an indicator not just of importance but of credibility. This Gen Y participant said that she specifically looked at the number of views a video had received and that this metric could impact her assessment of the content of the video:

> *Anytime I look at a video I look at how many views it's had. […] Like if I watch a video that had three million, it would enhance that feeling that the video gave me versus having something that was viewed a hundred times. (M19-LYF)*

Similarly, this Gen Y male said if a post had a lot of engagement, then that would give it more credibility in the triage of what to believe than one that did not have as much:

> *If two people posted the same post with a similar thing and one had more engagement than the other one, somebody's going to take the post with the more engagement. They'd believe it more over the one with the no engagement on it. (M24-LYM)*

These data reveal that these participants, particularly Gen Y, were not only actively making themselves aware of topics that were trending but were also using the metrics of engagement in triage at the sense-making stage. The critical mass of engagement was apparently acting as a trust cue, increasing the importance and credibility of the content itself. Thus, for those consumers who do pay attention to what is trending on Facebook, the data from this research indicate that this trending mechanism can influence both awareness and sense-making, and through that can influence their trust of companies. If consumers are then discussing what they found trending on Facebook with friends offline, then Facebook's trending mechanism could also be indirectly influencing sense-making on matters relating to consumer trust.

Of the two fifths of the participants who expressed little to no interest in what was trending on Facebook, most offered no real explanation beyond that they just didn't care to look at that. About a quarter of them, mostly men, expressed a concern that companies made deliberate efforts to make good reviews trend or go viral, thus distorting the perception of public opinion. Consequently, they considered the mechanism less reliably indicative of what was genuinely trending socially and therefore discounted it. This Boomer male expressed this sentiment in a more extreme way than most:

> *I know that companies have […] farms of people that do nothing but sit at computers and 'like' things and comment, so I know all this stuff is skewed. (M30-UBM)*

Three others noted that there was a point at which something went so viral that it was likely to be something frivolous and not worth their time. For these participants, the potential for influence on consumer trust appeared to be moderated by an attitude which discounted the validity of trending content, causing such content to be screened out in the awareness triage process.

In summary, while a good portion of the participants dismissed the trending items, the contributions from those participants who did engaged with trending content indicated that the trending mechanism could influence consumer trust across all sub-groups of participants both through awareness and through sense-making. The awareness was driven by a sense of critical mass and the consequent need to become informed. This occurred both by friends sharing a topic within their personal friend network and by items that were trending on Facebook in general. Sense-making occurred through the persuasive influence of a critical mass of opinion and also indirectly through the social context of discussion with friends. If the topic of the trending items had to do with the reputation factors important to consumers, as for example in the case of United Airlines (a CO issue), or Tyson's Chicken (a QV issue), or a beer advertisement (an AC issue) quoted above, the data suggest that this mechanism can influence consumer trust.

The reasons for reading or viewing content that was trending were different for Gen Y participants than for the older cohorts with Gen Y having a heavier emphasis on social benefit. Moreover, because a critical mass of engagement signalled to Gen Y participants an importance of the issue itself, participants from this generational cohort tended to express greater need to engage and to make themselves aware of what was trending than their older counterparts, and a greater disposition to accept the content as important when assessing credibility. These data would suggest that the opportunity for a higher degree of influence of the trending mechanism on consumer trust exists with this Gen Y group.

6.3.4 Links

Links emerged as the mechanism considered to provide the most accurate and trustworthy information and they were therefore seen by participants as the most valuable of the mechanisms they discussed in this study. Shared links could promote awareness of matters affecting consumer trust but in particular, links helped with sense-making on such matters. In addition to providing further information through the linked content, the presence of the links and the sources to which the links connected also provided trust cues for sense-making. Links appeared to be a factor at both the awareness triage stage and at the sense-making triage stage.

Participants confirmed that their Facebook friends frequently shared links to content they found elsewhere. All of them said they often saw posts with linked content, and many said that sharing links was one of the main activities and reasons to be on Facebook. There was general recognition that links were useful to get further information on the topic of the post. This point was most often raised in connection with products or services in which participants said they were interested, but it also came up in connection with the other factors relevant to consumer trust. This quote that came up in the QV vignette discussion is a typical comment when discussing the use of links:

> *If there were a link, I would click on it and look at it, if it were something, a product or a service that I was interested in. (M42-UBM)*

Most participants clicked on links regularly. Over half the participants in this study said they click on links at least daily if not multiple times a day. A third said they click on links weekly or multiple times a week. Those who said they clicked on links multiple times a day or daily were more likely to say that what they saw on Facebook caused them to change their opinion about a company than those who clicked on links less frequently. These data suggest a likely relationship between the propensity to click on links and the influence of Facebook posts on consumer trust of companies.

There were slight differences in demographics amongst those who clicked on shared links multiple times a day. Almost half of the men in the study said they clicked on links on Facebook multiple times a day, compared to only one third of the women saying the same. Also, about half the lower socio-economic participants were amongst this group compared to only a quarter of the upper socio-economic participants. Boomers and Gen Y were more highly represented in this group than Gen X.

Half of the male participants (three times as many men as women) said that a post with a link backing it up would make a lot of difference to them, and they would attribute more value to such a post, as in this example from a Boomer male:

> *If he has the link in there, he feels strongly about it. Went to the trouble of doing that and make it easier to check it out for myself. So, yeah, I'd give it more value. (M41-LBM)*

Links appeared to authenticate the post. A fifth of the participants thought that the presence of the link was important in itself. Half of the Gen Y participants, three times as many as either Boomers or Gen X, said links - even the mere presence of links whether they clicked on the link or not - made a difference in credibility, as can be seen in this definitive reaction from a Gen Y:

> *Oh yeah, it automatically would make it more valid, in my mind. And if it's something that I cared about [...], I would definitely click on that link. (M26-MYM)*

The reason given for the credibility and influence attributed to links was that if links were attached, the friend posting the link was demonstrating transparency (thus, integrity) by showing where (s)he got the information:

> *It shows that they are open. [...] "Here's where I drew my opinion from. You can look at that and you can see what I'm saying or see for yourself." (M39-UXM)*

Transparency apparently acted as a credibility cue, thus adding persuasive influence by providing the option for access to the full content. It communicated that the friend was being genuine in the communication and was not 'spinning' the information. In contrast, five participants mentioned that they felt that linked sites were often biased or had an agenda, and so they might be inclined to discount or even discredit the link, as reflected here from this Gen Y when discussing how he evaluated the source:

> *I'm not even worried about my top-tier as far as you are my favourite websites to get information from. It's much more a pass or fail. Do you pass my regards of being somebody who is reporting without agenda? (M01-LYM)*

Participants felt it was important to identify the anterior (linked) source. If they regarded the source as credible and trustworthy, such as a major news media channel, participants indicated this would increase the likelihood of accessing and paying attention to the linked content. In this way, the link increased the potential influence of the post on the participant's trust of the company because it provided further information for sense-making that the participant considered credible:

> *It can make a difference, especially if it's going to a place […] that has solid reviews and commentary and if they know what they're talking about. Then I'll take that into a much higher consideration. (M11-UXM)*

That source could be a trusted news channel, or trusted third party site, or even the company site itself, depending on the topic of the post, though there was general consensus that not all sources were regarded as having equal influence. When the topic was straightforward and/or not of great consequence, participants were content with further information from a subject matter expert blog or other consumers or the company's website. For example, when this participant was discussing sense-making in the context of the Quality and Value of Products and Services vignette, he considered links to reviews and information from the company appropriate:

> *If it's coming directly from the company, I would have to say yes, probably trust it more, especially if it's a reputable company, been around for a long period of time. Then, yes, most definitely. (M37-LXM)*

A link to such a source in QV posts, therefore, improved the likelihood of influence on consumer trust. In contrast, when it came to sense-making around more complex issues, issues that might have greater societal consequences or were more controversial as in the Commitment to the Environment and Employees vignette, participants felt they needed deeper information from well-established, independently credible sources. This builds on Borah (2014) who found that links in news articles increased credibility when the issue in the article was one of values, such as was the case with EE vignette. The following quote from a Boomer female, who frequently emphasized the importance of verification, is typical of this point of view expressed during the EE discussion:

> *I would want to see a mix of government sites but also ... partly because this involves the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], I would also want to see evaluations that scientists might have done. (M07-UBF)*

The difference in the discussion of links in the QV versus EE vignettes indicates that expectation on level of the information and credibility of the source might vary with the topic of the post. Participants indicated that they would generally only click on links if they had interest in the topic. This supports the emergence of 'Topic' as a filter in the awareness triage and the association of links with this filter.

With regard to the format of content linked and whether video or articles were more likely to be accessed and consumed, participants were evenly divided as to which drove readership/viewership more, with about a fifth of the research sample saying it would depend on the topic or not make any difference. In this study men tended to click on links to videos more and women on links to articles more; Gen Y tended to gravitate more towards videos while Boomers tended to gravitate more towards articles. The dominant reasons given for preferring articles were that it gave the reader more depth and balance of information, and they could be skimmed quickly and read in places and at times where it would be inappropriate or difficult to play a video. The dominant reasons given for preferring videos were that they were quicker and easier to access (often they auto-played right in the participant's feed on Facebook) and that they were more powerful and for some more real because, as those participants said, they could see what was going on. Thus, no strong patterns emerged on preference for video or articles. Both appeared to be held to be valuable by those who accessed them and seemed to have about the same level of influence for the person who preferred that medium. In the end this seemed to be mostly governed by personal preference, time and convenience.

In contrast to those who frequently clicked on links, a third of the participants expressed hesitance to click on links. Men expressed more suspicion of links than women, as did the lower socio-economic participants more so than the upper socio-economic participants. Viruses and cookies were the concerns expressed most often with links. One might have expected that Boomers, the generation of the three that had come last to the social net and were the least at home with links might be the generation most likely to have these concerns. Interestingly, however, most of the emotion and energy around this came from the Gen X generational cohort, as in this quote:

> *I don't know where that's taking me or what kind of cookie that's leaving about me. [...] I don't click on them. I'm sure there's some data collection going on, that's what a lot of that really is. (M14-UXF)*

Gen X participants were also the most doubtful about the value of links. Of the six participants who said links did not necessarily make a post more credible, three were Gen X. Again, it came back to the issue of the credibility of content on the Internet in general, as expressed by this Gen X participant who was one of the six, and the same person who was concerned about the impact of false information circulating on the social net hurting companies:

> *I mean, a link is just a link but everything that's out here that has links isn't factual, isn't true, never even took place. (M37-LXM)*

About half the participants, including some who clicked regularly on links, mentioned time as a factor in whether they clicked on links to read further information, though the ways they expressed the time factor were subtly different between generations. Boomer participants tended to give reasons regarding not wanting to waste their time and having better things to do with their time. Gen X participants generally agreed, but they also expressed that they would follow links to view or read content more than they currently did if it weren't for their busy lives and the limitations of having time at any given moment to do it, as did Gen Y:

> *Rarely. Rarely, just because I don't have a ton of time. […] I'll maybe read whatever the caption is or what the video's about, but not actually watch the video. (M04-UYF)*

Lack of time as a reason not to engage seemed to be independent of the corporate reputation factor that might be the topic of the post, since it came up as a reason that participants might not engage with posted content during the discussion of all four vignettes. These data suggest that time is probably a moderating factor in the ability of links to influence consumer trust. This is in keeping with recent research that reveals that social media fatigue is setting in and lack of time is one of the reasons this fatigue is emerging (Bright, Kleiser, & Grau, 2015).

In summary, participants in this study considered links to be the most important of the Facebook mechanisms for providing information that could impact their trust of companies. The Gen X cohort tended to be wary of links, but most participants were accepting of links that came from people they knew as friends. Indeed, they thought posts on Facebook from friends that contained links were of a more serious nature than posts that did not contain links, since there was external information to support the discussion. For some, the mere presence of links provided a transparency that increased credibility of the post, in particular for the men and the Gen Y participants in this study. Identifying the anterior source, and the perceived credibility of that source appeared to be an important contributor to the level of influence, but this could vary by topic of the post. Additionally, those who tended to click on links daily or multiple times a day also claimed that information they found on Facebook influenced their opinions of companies more strongly that those who clicked on links less often. It did not seem to matter a great deal whether the link was in video or article form, though participants generally expressed a preference for one or the other. One factor that did appear to govern the effectiveness of links in potentially influencing consumer trust across all cohorts was time. Participants often expressed that they had limited time for Facebook activities, even among heavy users of Facebook, and thus lack of time emerged as a possible moderating factor in the effect of links on consumer trust.

In terms of the triage activity, links appeared to be a factor in both the awareness and the sense-making stages of triage. If a post contained links, it was more likely to be read and the links accessed, affecting the awareness triage. In addition, the presence of links affected the sense-making triage by increasing credibility and providing quick access to more information.

6.3.5 Comments

The Customer Orientation vignette about Swift Burgers, which had a light-hearted comment stream, formed the context for much of the discussion on comments. Participants almost universally said they saw similar things on Facebook relatively frequently, whether they engaged or not. Initial reactions to the Swift Burgers comments stream ranged from interest and a willingness to be open to the communication:

> *I definitely check into it, especially if it's somewhere I like to eat. [...] It might change my opinion about going there now. (M31-LYM)*

…To total dismissal of the value of the conversation:

> *My reaction is typical rants. This is your typical Facebook argument. [...] Not even worth my time. Why would I look. (M03-UYM)*

Participants all said they read comments but the decision to engage appeared to be very context specific, depending on what the topic was, or if they had the time, or whether it was entertaining, or relevant. Half said they made comments on posts themselves at least daily if not multiple times a day, with another third saying they commented weekly or several times a week. Yet they did not consider the Facebook comments mechanism was useful for serious dialogue:

> *Facebook has become more about entertainment than it is about a real dialogue. I don't see Facebook as being its own platform for dialogue where there's real serious conversations. [...] Most of what I see is a lot of fluff. (M40-LBM)*

Regarding companies and their products and services, the reaction to comments was mixed. Half of the participants said they would read comments on Facebook to find out about products and services, and a quarter of the participants said they would sometimes comment to ask for further information, especially if they were interested in potentially purchasing that product or service. Yet, half of the participants said it was not good information, just a lot of opinions, and two thirds said their own experience would outweigh anything they read in the comments. Nevertheless, in general participants did seem to find review-comments helpful, whether on Facebook or elsewhere, though comment streams of the type depicted in the CO vignette were considered less useful.

In spite of the variance on the value of comments, participant discussion revealed that the Facebook comment mechanism could be having an influence on consumer trust in three ways. First, participants said they read comments if they saw a lot of comments attached to a post, if only out of curiosity or for entertainment. This could drive awareness and may influence sense-making through the critical mass of opinion. Second, they read and even solicited comments to get specific information for a purchase decision, which appeared to drive sense-making. The third reason is closely related but discussed separately by participants, namely to avoid bad experiences. A deeper explanation of the findings on each of these follows.

Between a quarter and a third of the participants indicated that amusement or entertainment was a strong reason for them to engage with comments on Facebook. Participants said they found light-hearted comments, such as was represented in the CO vignette on Swift Burgers, '*really amusing'* (M07-UBF) and they might read such a comment stream because it was *'hilarious,'* (M35-LXF) especially if the comment stream was composed of quick comments back and forth (lengthy comments discouraged readership):

> *I think that I found that some of the funniest stuff I've seen on Facebook is in the comments […] so I probably would read through some of the comments. (M26-UYM)*

Similarly, a quarter of the participants said they would read comments out of curiosity. This Gen X female here illustrates how she might react if she saw something trending with lots of comments:

> *"Man, there's a conversation thread with 30 different people. What are these people possibly talking about that has to do with this?" You just want to pull it up and see that, but not from any kind of deep interest in what they're talking about. (M16-UXF)*

As these quotes illustrate, comments accessed in this frame of mind did not seem to promote deep engagement, but nevertheless could impact consumer trust by making consumers aware of an issue or a good experience that friends had had with a company. A third of the participants said even when reading comments on Facebook just for amusement or curiosity, those comments could influence their opinions and might impact their behaviour at point of purchase next time they were in the market for that type of product or service, as expressed here in the context of the CO vignette about Swift Burgers:

> *The next time I go through the drive through or go visit that establishment it [...] I might remember some of these comments and wonder if maybe I can get a Whopper instead. (M09-UXF)*

The sheer number of comments, while a signal that something was a hot topic of discussion, could nevertheless be overwhelming to read through, so participants said they would usually only skim them or read the first few to get the gist. The exception to this was if they knew the people commenting or they were friends of friends, then the influence of tie strength increased engagement thus driving a deeper level of awareness and possibly sense-making, as expressed by this Gen Y, who tended to engage when his friends were engaged:

> *I'm much more interested in, if my friend posts something and there's 30 comments, and they're all people I know or a friend of a friend. Those are the ones where I will actually spend time and sit and read the comments, and comment back and forth. (M26-UYM)*

Even if the friends were not close friends, a high level of social network reaction and discussion could impact trust and purchase intent. A Boomer female offered the following example concerning Quality and Value of Products and Services in which she said that the high level of comments on Facebook concerning a product directly affected her assessment of the company's trustworthiness, resulting in a decision not to trust the company by making a purchase.

> *The new iPhone, which is a very typical scenario. When people started making negative comments about the earphones that they came out with, I thought, "Well I'm not rushing to do that." [...] There were quite a few negative comments about that and yeah, I haven't bothered to update my phone. (M07-UBF)*

Beyond curiosity or entertainment, the main reason participants gave for engaging with comments seemed to be to gain information for a specific purchase decision, thus using them for sense-making. Those who were already in a standing relationship as a customer of a company, said the comments of others would have little influence on them. Two thirds of all participants said that their own experience was more important in deciding their trust of a company than what other people were saying on Facebook. However, those thinking of becoming a customer said they would often read relevant comments to get information on that company or product/service. In describing this, one Gen Y said comments are helpful get greater insight into the user experience beyond the one person's original post:

> *I go through the comments to see what is the real issue, because the comments give you a better explanation regarding certain posts. (M05-UYF)*

A quarter of the participants said they would comment back on a Facebook post, if they were actively considering purchasing and wanted more information about a product or service someone had posted or commented on: This Gen X female specifically called out the difference in the nature of the online response when in this frame of mind from when just in a more social frame of mind:

> *Like not because I'm going to be that interested and be like, "Oh, how was your experience with this," but more about, "Oh, I'm thinking about actually spending money on this, so tell me what that was like." (M16-UXF)*

Similarly, half the participants said they would add their comments on their own experience, in contradiction or in support, to provide further information to future purchase decisions.

When asked if they took the initiative on seeking product information by putting up a Facebook post asking for comments or recommendations on products and services, a third of Boomers and two thirds of Gen X said they do or have done that, especially upper socio-economic females. Gen Y participants were more reluctant to do this, primarily because of the fear of embarrassment, as discussed earlier. Many of the participants, including almost all the Gen Y, said if they wanted to get recommendations, they would reach out individually and privately to people in their network whose advice they trusted on the topic, rather than post openly on Facebook. One reason given by a quarter of participants was a fear that posting openly could open themselves up to too many potentially uninformed or unfounded opinions, which they felt they had no way to evaluate:

> *I had one friend asking about air conditioning units. I don't think I ever would go on social media and ask questions like that. There are 5,000 people that could comment on there. It's like, too many opinions. I feel like you can't get solid facts from everybody's opinion. (M18-LYF)*

A third of participants said that the opinions expressed in comments were irrelevant on the grounds that everyone is entitled to their own opinion; they seemed just to shrug them off. This was a point of view that tended to be expressed by more Gen X participants than other generations, and by more lower than upper socio-economic participants, as in this case in the context of the QV vignette discussion:

> *If that's my friend and they're posting something [...], that is their opinion and they are entitled to that. It won't affect how I view the company at all. (M25-LXM)*

Somewhat in contradiction to this position, over half of those who expressed this attitude (all lower socio-economic participants including the participant quoted above) also said they would comment back on Facebook to challenge or refute the opinion if it did not align with their experience! This indicates that the stated position of indifference is perhaps somewhat a position of resistance to the influence of comments not a position of indifference to them. As with those who say that comments are a waste of time and not for real dialogue, this indicates that information in comments is not always seen as worth taking seriously.

Participants who were thinking of becoming a customer of a company, and sometimes those who were already a customer, said they were primarily concerned with the negative comments, because one of the main reasons to read comments about companies and products was to help avoid bad experiences. Three times as many participants said negative comments were of more importance to them than positive ones and they were more likely to remember them. Negative comments seemed to stand out more and have more impact, particularly for Gen Y and for upper socio-economic participants. This was demonstrated in the interviews themselves by the fact that many of the participants said there were more negative comments than positive ones in the Swift Burgers vignette, when in fact there were the same number of each. Participants said that negative comments would cause them to think twice about purchasing a product or service and could directly affect trust of a company. When asked why negative comments seem to have more influence, participants gave various answers that underscored that negative comments appeared to be just more memorable and more influential, as for example this one from a Gen X female:

> *I think negative comments are always more influential. They just tend to have stronger power. I probably am not going to remember someone who said, "This is the best service in town." […] If people have like, "I had this really negative interaction," you just tend to remember those. They just have more influence. (M16-UXF)*

One participant suggested a reason for this may be because consumers are more receptive to them, even looking for them, in order to avoid bad experiences:

> *As a consumer, I feel like you're always on guard to steer away from bad experiences. […] I think you kind of look for that stuff and look out for it, because you don't want to have those bad experiences. (M02-UYM)*

Another participant quantified that by saying it was not worth risking being a part of even a 10% chance that they would have a bad experience also, when there were other options available:

> *If there's [...] a thousand reviews and they'll probably be like 10% negative. [...] I don't want to take that chance. I don't wanna be part of that 10% that had that negative [experience]. (M19-LYF)*

A different perspective was shared by a participant when discussing review-comments in particular. She said she felt people are more honest and more forthcoming when they have negative things to say and people give more specifics in negative comments where positive comments are often just a quick endorsement:

> *Normally people are more honest whenever they get a bad product, versus a positive review. Normal positive reviews is, "Great product." That's it. But then where you put the negative, it's like a big long story. [...] You kinda get into the story, you kinda see how the person is, and kinda convince yourself, "that product may just not be for me." (M19-LYF)*

Thus, negative comments were considered by participants to have more influence on their trust as consumers, and it appears that they were also more inclined to read negative comments to avoid the downside of misplaced trust.

Participant discussion during the interview overall indicated that the comment mechanism can have influence on consumer trust through awareness and sense-making, but most likely only in the context of practical application regarding customer experience. Where the heart of the issue was not to do with purchasing a product or service, but rather to do with personal values, political, ethical or otherwise, the comment mechanism was not considered likely to be a suitable sense-making tool. A quarter of the participants made observations that showed they agreed with this.

This is supported by a comparison of the discussions around the Customer Orientation and Commitment to the Environment and Employees vignettes. In both cases the post was described as trending on social networks with many comments; both cases had a he-said / she-said component, and in both cases the purchase decision was for a common consumable that did not cost much money (a burger in the CO vignette, a tin of tuna fish in the EE vignette). However, the importance and seriousness of the topic was very different. Whilst participants indicated that the high level of engagement, as reflected in the number of comments, would have triggered awareness, perhaps surprisingly, the influence on trust appeared to be weaker in the more serious EE case. This is because in the less serious scenario participants appeared to be willing either to respond back online to ask more about it, or more often to accept comments as sufficient input to a decision to trust or not trust since the decision was a simple one and the issue a relatively inconsequential one (service at a burger restaurant). Conversely, when the issue was complex, had broader consequences and required deeper understanding, the comments (and even the original post by the employee) seemed inadequate for most participants. They wanted more evidence and more information from reliable sources before making up their minds on trusting the company or, in this case, joining the boycott the comments were calling for. In this case, most said they would not respond back online to ask for more information, but instead would turn to other sources and do their own research.

To summarize the discussion on the comment mechanism, the data from this research suggest that comment streams are a factor at both the awareness and sense-making stages of triage. They appear to bring discussions about companies and their products, services and practices to the attention of other consumers on the Facebook, and that this can and does influence consumer trust. The findings suggest that consumers will read content in comment streams if the topic or company or product is relevant to them or of particular interest to them, or if there is a considerable volume of engagement in a short period of time that signals importance of finding out what the commotion is about. The data also suggest that there is resistance to influence from comments on Facebook, which participants described as occurring when they already had a customer relationship or prior experience with a company and thus already had formed an opinion of that company. This could serve to shield the consumer from information which might challenge those opinions and offer an alternative view, thus potentially introducing a confirmation bias relative to their trust of a company.

Avoiding bad experiences appeared to be a strong motivator for reading comments about companies, products or services. In part perhaps for this reason, negative experiences made a stronger impression than positive experiences and seemed to influence consumer trust more strongly. In these instances, most participants said they would read comments posted by other users, and some would also actively interrogate their network or respond to a user's comment to ask for more detail. Notwithstanding the fact that most said Facebook was not a primary destination for this kind of information, about a third of participants said they had solicited recommendations on Facebook from their friend network, and almost all said they had read comments regarding products or services they were interested in purchasing. Thus, the findings from this research suggest that consumers would be open to influence from what was being discussed in comments and comment streams prior to making a decision to trust a company with their patronage.

Finally, the influence of comment streams on driving awareness of the reputation factors is somewhat dependent on the topic of the posts. With Quality and Value of Products and Services or Customer Orientation issues where the experience of others could translate to their own experience, participants expressed greater interest in reading the comments. With issues like Commitment to the Environment and Employees issues where the impact to themselves was less direct and the topic more complex and more sensitive, participants expressed a need for additional information and did not consider the information or discussion as presented in Facebook comments to be a sufficient basis on which to make a decision regarding their trust of the company.

6.4 Consumer Trust Triage Model for Facebook Communications

In this final section for this chapter, the key findings are summarized and pulled together to reveal the model that emerged from the data. Abductive reasoning was used to arrive at the most likely explanation that fit the data. This abductive approach led to the development of a model which explains what the data revealed in answer to the research question **How do consumers use the main Facebook mechanisms to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their trust of companies, and how might their use of these mechanisms be affected by different conditions of tie strength and critical mass?**

The discussion of the findings in the chapter thus far reflected the inductive approach used in the analysis and followed the order used in Chapter 3 when establishing the basis for the research question in the literature. The findings in this summary section are organized and discussed somewhat differently in order to explain most clearly the model that has emerged abductively from the data. The model, a diagram of which is included at the end of this section and which is called the Consumer Trust Triage Model for Facebook Communications. This model attempts to represent visually how the complex web of influences happens through Facebook, and how that shapes the connection between the reputation factors that are important to consumers and the ABI dimensions (Mayer et al., 1995) on which consumers assess company trustworthiness, and thus how the Facebook mechanisms potentially impact consumer trust.

The process starts with a trigger (number 1 in figure 6.2). Some form of content is posted to Facebook that has to do with one of the reputation factors important to consumers, namely the Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV), the Credibility of the Advertising Claims (AC), the Customer Orientation (CO) or the Commitment to the Environment and Employees (EE). This research has revealed that a triage process ensues relating to awareness and sense-making, in which the mechanisms of Facebook, interact with tie strength, the topic, the 'self' and a critical mass of engagement to help the consumer sort through the flood of content on Facebook and determine what should be read and how to assess it. Content that is accepted as a result of this triage process is then used to assess company trustworthiness on the ABI dimensions important to consumers and thus potentially impacts consumer trust. This research informs how the triage process in the middle section of the model works.

It appears that the first sorting is actually not done by the users themselves, but is done by Facebook's algorithms, which participants believed controlled to some extent what they saw (number 2 in figure 6.2). While Facebook may be intending to serve up the most relevant content, nevertheless this perceived constriction meant that possibly some information that might impact consumer trust was not being seen by the users at all. Yet participants felt that information that did get through from their Facebook friends was often more valuable to them and offered a more genuine and transparent perspective on the topic under discussion.

All the participants said there was more content on Facebook than they had time to look at, and some of it was not of interest or relevance. They all described scrolling through content and using various cues to sort out what to read or view and what to skip over in a triage-like process. This was essentially an awareness triage that was taking place (number 3 in figure 6.2). Three triage filters emerged from the data at the awareness stage, tie strength, the topic, and a critical mass of engagement. All the mechanisms studied in this research provided input to this awareness triage process, variously associated with these three filters. However, there was one mechanism that appeared to bypass these three filters and almost always resulted in the content being read or viewed and that was tagging. If a friend had tagged them, participants all said they would look to see what it was that they had been tagged on. Thus, the tagging mechanism always drove awareness of content and in this way had potential to influence consumer trust through awareness.

The awareness triage filter that emerged from the data as most central to Facebook communications was tie strength (3a in figure 6.2). 'Likes', links or comments shared or posted by friends all appeared to be triaged on the basis of tie strength. This is because the strength of the tie provided rich context for determining whether the content would be worth looking at. Their knowledge of the friend provided information on expertise and experience that allowed the participant to assess likely credibility,

credibility being a significant issue with content found on the Internet and Facebook, according to participants. The history of the posts provided a cognitive basis for trust by supplying information on the bias or perspective of the friend, the likely tone, relevance and interest of the post, and also influenced perceptions of credibility. The personal affinity between close ties perhaps engaged a more affective basis for trust by conveying to participants that the information was likely to be more aligned with their views and feelings on the topic, and therefore more relevant to their world view and more worthwhile to look at. For these reasons, when a participant saw that their friends had 'liked' something, or had shared a link to an article or video, or had commented on a post, the data suggest that the participant was relying to some degree on the level of interpersonal trust, whether knowledge-based, relational, or identification-based (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998), that existed between the friends (see discussion in the next chapter). The broader the knowledge of the friend, the deeper the history of relevant and interesting posts and the stronger the personal affinity, the greater the likelihood that the participant would read or view the content.

In addition to tie strength, the topic of the post emerged as a triage filter at the awareness stage (3b in figure 6.2). 'Likes' did not appear to be so important here, but both shared links and comments were triaged on the basis of the topic. Level of interest and/or relevance to the participant were the main elements of this topic filter. If the topic was one of interest to the participant, for example information about cars for the car enthusiast, the participant would likely read/view the content just out of interest. If the participant were a customer or thinking of becoming a customer of the company in question, they would be likely to read or view the content in order to gain deeper insight before making a purchase. In this instance the content was highly relevant in that moment because of the impending customer relationship. Not surprisingly, therefore, Quality and Value of Products and Services, Credibility of Advertising Claims and Customer Orientation topics were most likely to be accessed when participants were in this mode. Commitment to Environment and Employees topics were apparently not so often accessed. Sometimes participants considered that posts on EE topics were more likely to be complaints or advocacy than information, so unless there was a link to an article or video which provided deeper information, these were more likely to be skipped over.

Finally, a critical mass of engagement emerged as an awareness triage filter (3c in figure 6.2). This filter had two main components, the perception of importance of the issue (driven by high metrics of engagement) and curiosity as to what could be driving so much interest. With this filter, the mechanisms that were most important were 'likes', trends and comments. Items that received a high level of engagement through significant numbers of 'likes', shares or comments, could 'go viral' or trend on Facebook. Several participants said they monitored trending stories in order to keep up with current topics of discussion. Similarly, items that received a significant number of 'likes', shares or comments just within the circle of friends that a participant had on Facebook was also regarded as trending within that group. In either case, participants said that the high level of engagement, especially if in a short period of time, would likely peak their curiosity as to what this was about, and they would click on the item to read or view the content. Additionally, for the younger generations, particularly Gen Y, the high metrics of engagement signalled that this item was important, something everyone should know about, and therefore they would access the content to make themselves aware of the issue or the news.

Through this process of triage on awareness, content on Facebook was either skipped over or read/viewed. If it was skipped over, it had no influence and the process terminated. If it was read or viewed, then it seemed from the data in this research that a second level of triage on sense-making followed (number 4 in figure 6.2). At this level of triage not all mechanisms were important. Tags and 'likes' really did not seem to have influence, but links, trends and comments were all important. The triage filters that emerged in the data for sense-making were tie strength, the self, and a critical mass of engagement. Thus, tie strength and critical mass were important to both awareness and sense-making, but the elements appeared to be somewhat different.

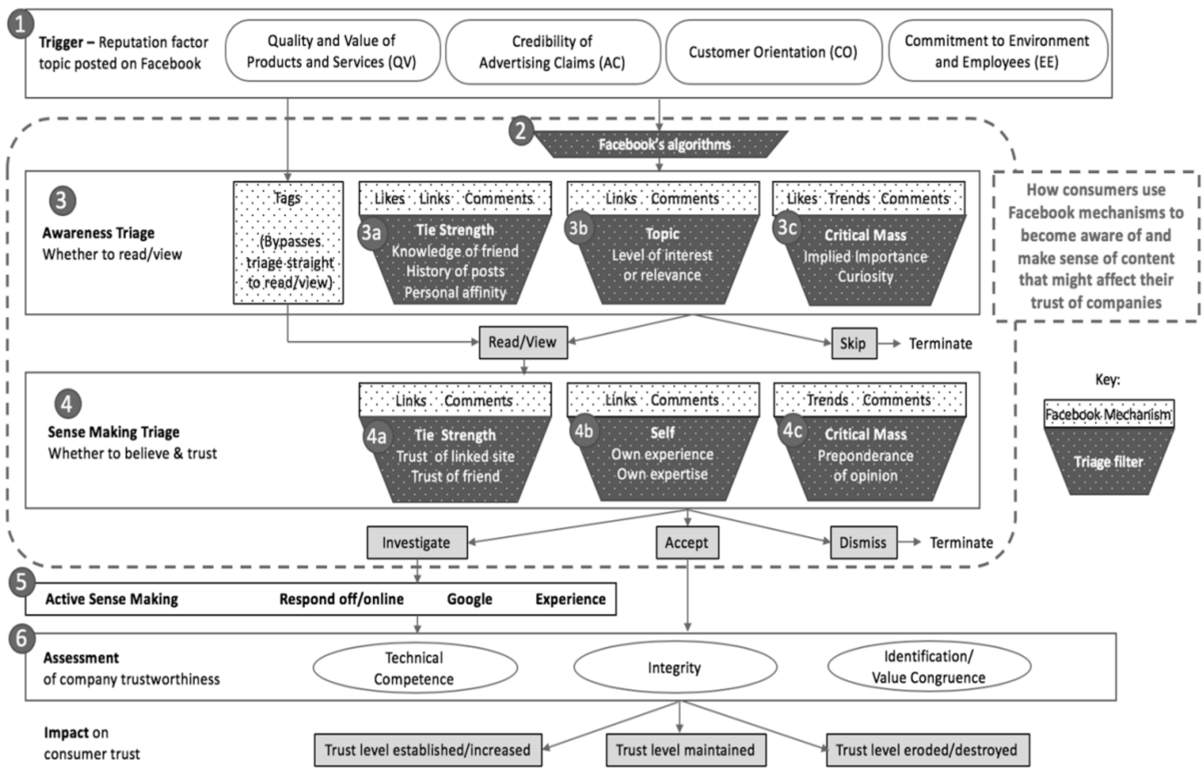
Tie strength emerged as a very important triage filter in the sense-making stage (4a in figure 6.2). Links and comments were the mechanisms most relevant to this filter. The tie strength filter at the sense-making stage had two main components, trust of the friend who posted the communication (proximate source) and trust of the linked site (anterior source) if any. Trust of the friend, the proximate source, encompassed knowledge of the friend, history of posts and personal affinity. If the participant felt that their friend had proven in the past to be credible and their posts relevant this made a big difference, even to the extent of accepting whatever the friend said as the truth with no further need to research it. Thus, trust of the friend transferred to trust of the content also (Matook et al., 2015). Trust of the linked site, the anterior source, encompassed the general reputation of the site, as well as the participant's own trust of that site as a source for news and information. If the linked site's reputation was well-established, was respected and trusted by the participant, especially if it was a site the participant frequently turned to for news and information, then the linked content was also deemed more trustworthy. This was true for some participants even to the extent of the mere presence of a link to a trusted site adding credibility without need for the participant to click on the link. Overall, in the sense-making triage, links emerged as the most important mechanism and tie strength as the most important filter.

Links and comments were also important mechanisms for the 'self' triage filter (4b in figure 6.2). The 'self' triage filter relates to the participant's own experience with a given company, product or service category, or their expertise on the issue or topic, or their confidence in their ability to research and assess their friend's post. When the participant felt they knew as much or more about the topic or company, either because they were a customer already or because they had gained expertise in other ways, they assessed the linked content or comments with a more discerning and critical eye. Participants indicated their own direct experience often took precedence over the opinions of others and when they had direct experience of their own, their trust of a company would be hard to change, unless the linked content or reported experience was very compelling. Similarly, where the friend was reporting first-hand experience of something the participant had not experienced, the participant reported being more inclined to trust the information because they felt it was 'real', it was a truer view of what happened or what the user experience was like. If the friend's post provided insufficient information or was something they felt they could not assess with their current level of knowledge, many said they would research the topic for themselves by searching through Google. Thus, the participant's own experience, knowledge of the topic, or search activities appeared to have significant influence on sense-making.

Finally, critical mass also emerged as a triage filter for the sense-making stage (4c in figure 6.2). Here, trends and comments seemed to be the most important mechanisms, because the main way this filter appeared to influence sense-making was through the preponderance of opinion (Watts & Dodds, 2007). Participants said that when items of interest trended or there were a lot of comments about a product, service or company, they would skim through to see where the preponderance of opinion lay. However, negative comments carried greater weight with them than positive ones, such that only a few negative comments appeared to be able to influence opinion in the direction of not trusting the company for fear of incurring the negative consequences.

As a result of the sense-making triage, participants took one of three actions. Either they dismissed the content and moved on to other things, in which case the process terminated. Or they accepted the content and assessed the company's trustworthiness on the basis of the ABI dimensions important to consumers, namely technical competence, integrity and identification/value congruence (number 6 in the diagram). This then should result in trust being established or increased, trust being maintained, or trust being eroded or destroyed. Thirdly, they might decide that they did not yet have enough information to make an evaluation of trustworthiness and they might decide to investigate further (number 5 in figure 6.2). This occurred most often by using Google to undertake further research or by a decision to experience it for themselves. Occasionally, but less often, the participants said they might respond offline or online through private channels to find out more from the friend who had made the post. When the topic of the post was a Quality and Value of Products and Services, Credibility of Advertising Claims or Customer Orientation issue and the financial hurdle not high, participants seemed more inclined simply to experience it for themselves, or in some instances they might post a comment back openly asking for some further details. When the financial hurdle was high or the commitment great, or particularly with more complex issues such as Commitment to the Environment and Employees, the response was more usually to research further by Googling or perhaps following up with the friend privately. Thus, the topic made a difference to the nature of further investigation. Subsequently, the process moved on to assessment of trustworthiness (number 6 in figure 6.2) and impact to trust. Figure 6.2 below represents this process visually in the Consumer Trust Triage Model for Facebook Communications.

21 Figure 6.2: Consumer Trust Triage Model for Facebook Communications



The process discussed above and illustrated in figure 6.2, describes a somewhat linear and methodical progression through the triage stages. In reality, the consumer's experience of this process is more iterative and concurrent, and less deliberate and sequential than this linear explanation of the model would imply.

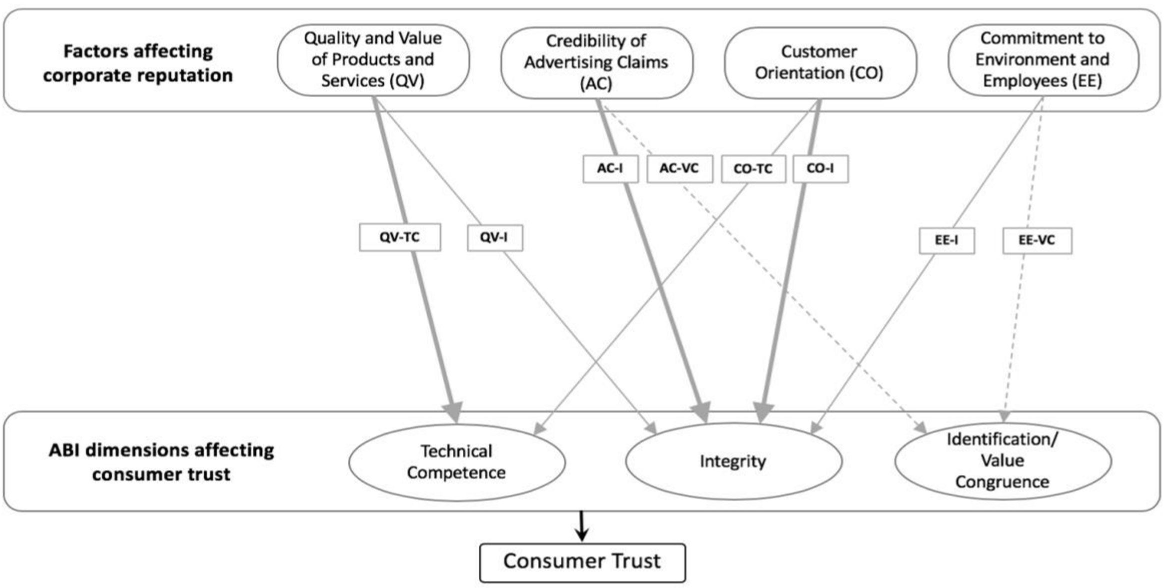
CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study set out (a) to explore the existence and nature of a possible empirical connection between the corporate reputation literature and the stakeholder trust literature regarding how consumers assess company trustworthiness (focus of RQ1), and (b) to provide a deeper understanding as to how friend-to-friend communications on Facebook and the Facebook mechanisms for propagation of content might influence this assessment process and thus impact consumer trust (focus of RQ2). Chapter 2 reviewed the relevant trust and corporate reputation literature, followed in Chapter 3 by the discussion that established the basis in the literature for the specific research questions. The results and analysis of the interviews conducted for this research were reported in Chapters 5 (RQ1) and 6 (RQ2). From this analysis the two major contributions of this research emerged namely the existence of an empirical link between the reputation factors important to consumers and the ABI trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness, and the emergence of the Consumer Trust Triage model for Facebook communications. This chapter discusses these two contributions in sections 7.1 and 7.2 and how they contribute to the literature a better understanding of the influences of the social net on consumer trust of companies. The chapter then continues with the conclusion and implications for theory and practice in section 7.3, and finally closes with limitations and directions for future research in section 7.4.

7.1 The Connection between Corporate Reputation and Trustworthiness

The corporate reputation factors important to consumers has been established in the corporate reputation literature (e.g. Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). The influence of these reputation factors on consumer trust has been theoretically argued (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2016; Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014) but the reputation factors have not been empirically connected to the stakeholder trust literature, which identifies the ABI (Mayer et al., 1995) trust dimensions on which consumers assess corporate trustworthiness (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007, 2011). The first of the contributions that this research makes is to demonstrate empirically that this connection exists, and to explain how the two are connected in the consumer's mind. This connection provides the bridge between knowledge and action, the knowledge being the information on the reputation factors and the action being the consumer trust made evident through purchase. For convenience and ease of understanding, figure 7.1 below reproduces figure 5.2 that visually represents the findings on research question 1 discussed in chapter 5.

22 Figure 7.1: Diagram of findings showing connections between corporate reputation factors and trust dimensions important to consumers (reproduced from figure 5.2)



The data from this research indicate that the main consideration for consumers in regard their trust of a company concerns the implied contract to deliver quality and value in products and services (line QV-TC in figure 7.1 above) in accordance with the expectations set by the company's advertising claims (line AC-I). Closely interconnected with this is the company's willingness (line CO-I) and ability (line CO-TC) to address consumer concerns in the event of a perceived breach of this implied contract. Thus, Quality and Value of Products and Services (QV), Credibility of Advertising Claims (AC) and Customer Orientation (CO) emerged as the three reputation factors that are likely to be most important to consumers, and Integrity and Technical Competence (Mayer et al.'s 1995 Ability dimension) as the two most important ABI dimensions.

Secondarily, some consumers appear to be more sensitive than others to the company's Commitment to the Environment and Employees (EE). For these consumers, their assessment of the company's level of commitment on this factor is likely to be a matter of Integrity, but the assessment of performance appears to be closely connected to their personal values and therefore connects the EE factor to the Value Congruence (VC) dimension identified by Pirson and Malhotra (2011).

The two strongest influences on trust to emerge from these data were the connection between Quality and Value of Products and Services and Technical Competence (line QV-TC), i.e. the ability to deliver good products and services, and the connection between Customer Orientation and Integrity (line CO-I), i.e. the willingness to put things right in the event of a failure to satisfy. Brand loyal consumers seem to be more willing than other consumers to accommodate the occasional failure on the QV-TC connection, as is supported by the literature (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007), but a new level of understanding has emerged here as to the importance of the CO-I connection. The CO-I connection emerged strongly in the data, with lack of integrity in addressing post-purchase issues being a strongly expressed barrier to trust. Even brand loyal consumers appear from this data to be less forgiving of a failure of integrity in a company's customer orientation (a CO-I breach) than of a failure of ability to produce and deliver quality and value in their products and services (a QV-TC breach). This relates to Das and Teng's (2004) concepts of subjective trust and perceived risk. Consumers appear to be more willing to accept performance risk and reduced competence trust than they are to accept relational risk and a low level of goodwill trust. Therefore, the CO-I connection appears to be potentially more influential with regard to consumer trust than the QV-TC connection.

The link between Customer Orientation and Value Congruence that was also anticipated from the literature (CO-VC in figure 5.1), did not emerge. This may be because that connection was not truly distinguishable in the consumer's mind from the link to Integrity, Integrity emerging as the main connection.

However, a new connection emerged. Consumers articulated a difference in a failure to demonstrate good Customer Orientation due to perceived indifference which emerged as an Integrity issue (CO-I) from a failure to demonstrate good Customer Orientation due to perceived incompetence which emerged as an Ability issue (CO-TC), contributing a deeper understanding as to how consumers assess trustworthiness regarding the Customer Orientation reputation factor. Whereas the Customer Orientation connection to Integrity (CO-I) seems to reflect whether the consumer thinks the company has the will to offer great customer service, this new connection appears to reflect whether the consumer thinks the company has the ability or competence to offer great customer service, thus connecting Customer Orientation with Technical Competence (CO-TC). Again, a breach of the connection to integrity appears to be less easily forgiven and to have a more negative impact to consumer trust than a breach of the connection to competence. Whilst the connection to integrity appeared to be the stronger connection of the two, the Customer Orientation to Integrity connection and the Customer Orientation to Technical Competence connection emerged from this data as complementary to some degree. Both appear to be required for a truly positive assessment of trustworthiness on the CO reputation factor, each being somewhat irrelevant without the other.

Credibility of Advertising Claims, as a separately articulated consideration, usually emerged in the data after mentions of QV or CO issues. This factor emerged with less distinction and somewhat less clarity. This suggests that for consumers Credibility of Advertising Claims may not be uppermost in their minds as an issue separable from Quality and Value of Products of and Services and Customer Orientation. Nevertheless, the connection between Credibility of Advertising Claims and Integrity (AC-I) was the third of the three strongest connections that emerged. The AC-I connection appears to be integral to the connection between Quality and Value of Products and Services and Technical Competence (QV-TC), because, as study participants expressed, the consumer's QV-TC expectations are to some extent driven by the advertising claims. It is clear from the study data that consumers can and do consider it a matter of integrity that the company deliver on what it claims it can. That it emerged as a matter of integrity rather than a matter of technical competence appeared to be because the ability to deliver is somewhat taken for granted given the claims, especially in the absence of prior experience with that company or with that product or service that would indicate otherwise. Therefore, when a company fails to deliver on their claims, it appears to be seen as more of a failure of integrity than a failure of competence, the underlying sentiment being that if the company does not have the capability to deliver, then it should not be making a claim that it can.

However, Credibility of Advertising Claims encompasses more than just claims about products and services or customer orientation, according to consumers. The data show that competitive claims, claims concerning promotional offers, or claims regarding social responsibility are also evaluated in assessing company trustworthiness. In an Internet-connected world, it is relatively easy to find out about the company's performance on such claims. Consumers do so by reading customer reviews, or researching the company online, or posting to Facebook or another social network for information (see results of RQ2 discussed in Chapter 6 and below in section 7.2.) Therefore, consumers can and do factor such claims into the assessment of trustworthiness. Again, this was most often articulated as a matter of integrity. However, a less frequently mentioned but consequential connection emerged providing a new link between Credibility of Advertising Claims and Value Congruence (line AC-VC), in particular regarding social responsibility. For those consumers for whom social responsibility is a strong personal value, a company's reported performance in that respect can impact trust considerably, to the extent that these consumers appear willing not only to change their own purchase behaviour, but also to encourage others to do so to on the basis of their assessment. This indicates that, whilst the importance of the AC-VC connection may not be widespread, where the value congruence is deemed important, it can have a deep effect.

These three reputation factors, Quality and Value of Products and Services, Credibility of Advertising Claims and Customer Orientation and the two dimensions of

Mayer et al.'s (1995) ABI model to which they primarily connect, Technical Competence (ability) and Integrity, appeared to form an interconnected set of criteria which framed the consumer's assessment of the company's trustworthiness. From the study participant responses, and the examples they gave to illustrate their points, a consumer's interrelated pattern of thought in assessing company trustworthiness on these factors follows the logic of the experience of becoming and remaining a customer, as follows:

> The company claims that this solution will fit my needs (AC). Do I think they have the technical competence (TC) to produce quality products or services (QV) that deliver on that promise, and are they charging a fair (I) price for what they can deliver (QV)? Also, if I need further help before or after the purchase (CO), or if the product or service fails me (TC), can I get assistance (CO) efficiently and effectively (TC), or will they give me the run-around and leave me stranded (I)?

The last of the four reputation factors identified as important to consumers and investigated in this research is the company's Commitment to the Environment and Employees (EE). This EE factor did not emerge from the data as strongly as the other three reputation factors with regard to the influence on consumer trust, thus the EE factor does not appear to be uppermost on the minds of most consumers. Few study participants mentioned this unprompted when asked about consumer trust at the beginning of the interview, although during the discussion of the vignette on this subject, more comments regarding how they assessed this reputation factor did emerge. This may be because this EE factor is not a factor that is integrally connected to the process of becoming and remaining a customer in the same way that the other three are, except in so far as there are those who make this a criterion for earning and keeping their patronage.

Since this factor is not directly related to the process of becoming a customer, most consumers appear to be somewhat inattentive to the EE factor, and EE issues do not appear to be a part of the assessment of a company's trustworthiness for these consumers. For these less concerned consumers, the impact on trust does not tend to be significant enough for them to change purchase behaviour. The exceptions are cases of really egregious behaviour, such as was the case of the Nike child labour sweat shops or the BP Deep Horizons oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, or when the company's behaviour impacts them directly, as for example in the case of contaminated food or treatment of airline passengers, all of which were brought up by participants in the study as examples.

In contrast, those consumers who have strong principles or values regarding how companies treat their employees and the environment tend to take into account the company's performance on this Commitment to the Environment and Employees factor. Thus, for these consumers it seems that EE issues do become a part of their assessment of trustworthiness and their purchase decision. The study findings confirmed the two connections developed in Chapter 3, namely the lines connecting EE to Integrity (EE-I) and to Value Congruence (EE-VC). However, the data suggest a closer interdependence between these two than was previously identified in the literature. Study participants who expressed strong personal values on EE matters, and who were guided to some degree in their purchase decisions by these values, were not easily able to separate value congruence from integrity. This appeared to be somewhat of a false distinction to them. When the participants became aware of behaviour on the part of a company that raised or lowered their estimation of the company's performance against their own EE values, the alignment or misalignment seemed to alter their perception of the company's integrity. A likely explanation of this suggested by the participant discussion is that consumers appear to use their values as the measure of whether a company has integrity on EE issues, in the absence of experiential evidence. Thus, for these consumers integrity and value congruence on EE issues appear to be interconnected, and they seem to view it as a matter of integrity that the company meet their standards. If a company fails to meet these standards, they are unlikely to align themselves with that company or trust it by making a purchase. Instead, they will likely look for alternatives. However, as Commitment to the Environment and Employees matters are removed from the essential journey of becoming a customer, they tend to be less at the forefront of the decision-making process. Therefore, unless a consumer holds strong views, or has reason to believe that there may be doubt about the company's performance on EE matters, the impact to consumer trust does not appear to be great.

The present research builds on the corporate reputation and stakeholder trust literature to show that when Facebook friends share reports of company behaviour, or products and services, or when they report on their own experiences as consumers, they are providing the knowledge and/or behavioural evidence on the reputation factors important to consumers that form the basis for the consumer's trust. Other consumers reading this then appear to perform a rational evaluation of this cognitive or evidentiary information and assess how trustworthy they consider the company is. The nature of the consumer trust thus formed therefore starts from a calculus base (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995) in which the consumer assesses the economic cost-benefit of making a purchase from that company based on corporate communications (advertising, website, etc). It appears then to evolve quickly into a knowledge base (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995) as the consumer accesses information from friends on the social net who are already customers, or from direct experience of purchasing the product or service themselves. Consistent with the logic of Lewicki & Bunker's (1995) model, the trust that consumers have of most companies is likely to remain knowledge-based. For a few companies, those with whom the consumer has strong value congruence, or those whose brands are image brands that align well with the consumer's desired or actual self-concept, the basis of trust may evolve towards a uni-directional form of identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). Whether this progression happens and how quickly it happens appears to be influenced by the nature of the trust between the friends on Facebook. Strong ties, that is friends with whom the consumer's trust is identification-based, appear to have greater influence on this progression than weaker ties where the relationship may depend only on knowledge-based trust. This intersectionality revealed through this research contributes to the understanding of how the nature of trust between friends on Facebook is influencing the nature of consumer trust of companies.

Integrity emerged as the strongest of the ABI trust dimensions on which consumers assess trustworthiness, connected to all four of the reputation factors examined in this research. A breach by the company of the consumer's trust on any of the four reputation factors is likely to be assessed by consumers through the lens of Integrity. Technical Competence emerged as the second most important trust dimension on which consumers assess company trustworthiness, having a strong connection with the assessment of performance on Quality and Value of Products and Services. Value Congruence appears to be the least frequently applied of the three dimensions in assessing company trustworthiness, but for those consumers to whom this matters, this dimension can have a significant influence on trust, both positively and negatively.

A lack of Integrity tends to be seen by consumers as more damaging to their trust than a lack of Technical Competence or a lack of Value Congruence. This is because Integrity appears to be viewed more as a matter of will or intent than the other two trust dimensions and therefore a lack of Integrity tends to be perceived as a more intentional harm, thus causing more damage to the relationship between company and customer, and apparently having greater negative impact on trust. Conversely, strong Integrity in Credibility of Advertising Claims or Customer Orientation matters appears to be able to help build trust, and for those to whom it matters, the Commitment to the Environment and Employees factor also does. On the Quality and Value of Products and Services factor, lack of Integrity appears to diminish trust but beyond a minimum acceptable level, Integrity did not appear to be as important to building trust as the Technical Competence dimension.

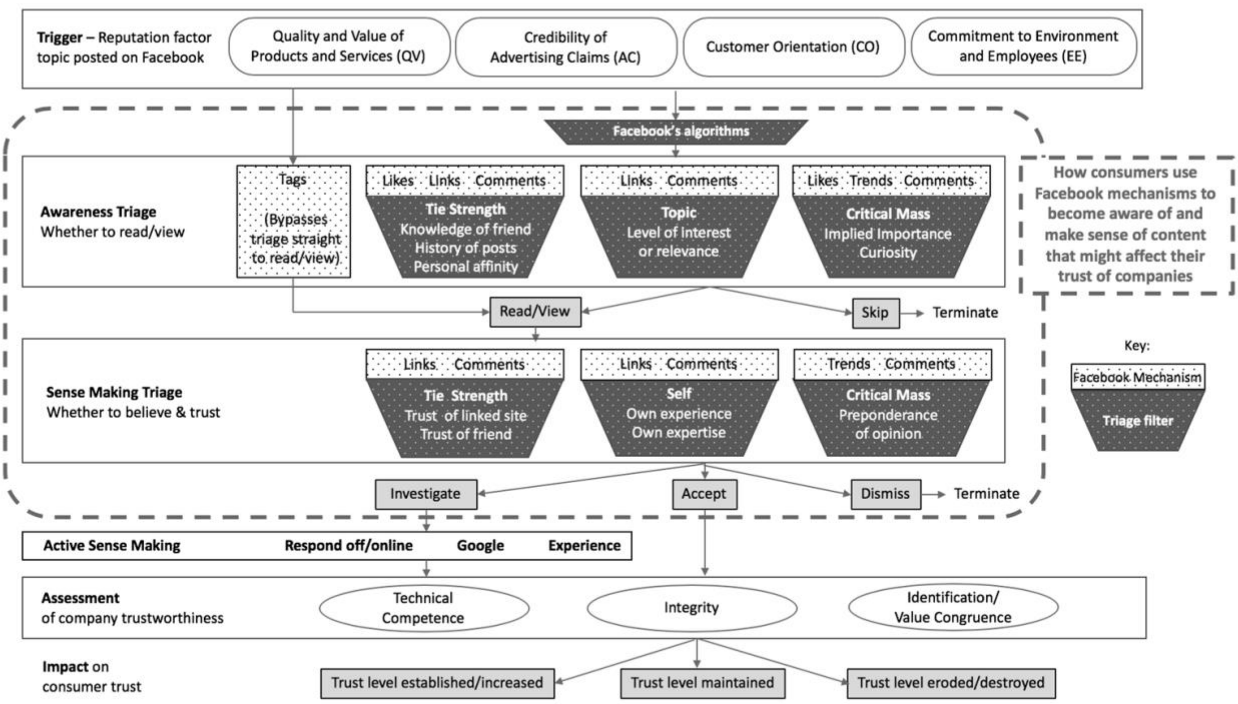
The corporate reputation literature has argued that the company's performance on corporate reputation factors is important to consumers. The stakeholder trust literature has shown that consumers assess the trustworthiness of a company on the basis of technical competence, ability and value congruence (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007, 2011). The findings from this research contribute empirical evidence that the bridges between these two research threads, to show that a company's reported performance on these reputation factors (the knowledge) is taken by consumers as input to their assessment of trustworthiness (the assessment), and thus can influence consumer trust (manifested in the purchase). Thus this research supplies a critical link in the understanding of consumer trust, and a deeper insight into how the reputation factors and ABI trust dimensions (Mayer et al., 1995) operate in this context.

7.2 The Influence of Facebook Mechanisms on Consumer Trust

The influence on consumer behaviour of peer to peer communications through online social networks and social media is well documented (e.g. Chu & Kim, 2011; Chung, 2017; Hajli, 2014; Liu, Tang, Han, & Yang, 2012; Luarn, Yang, & Chiu, 2014; Matook, Brown, & Rolf, 2015; Watts & Dodds, 2007). However, Facebook users are overwhelmed with the amount of content (Bright et al., 2015) and have concerns about credibility and privacy (Bright et al., 2015; Flintham et al., 2018; Rainie et al., 2017). This research study also found that Facebook users are overwhelmed by the amount of sponsored content and content from friends that appears in their Facebook feed that they find it tedious and sometimes difficult to sort through all the content to find the content that really interests them or that they have not yet seen. It revealed that users therefore undertake a triage process to find and engage with relevant content. The exploration of this triage process and an understanding of how this operates and therefore its potential impact to consumer trust is the second major contribution of this research.

This triage appears to be a two-stage process to filter, engage with, and assess content found on Facebook. It is applied to content from friends as well as sponsored content. The first stage of triage relates to awareness, the second stage to sense-making. The relationship with the friend, the level of engagement, and the Facebook mechanisms of propagation all play an integral role in this triage process. The elements of the triage process and the resulting model were explained in more detail in Chapter 6.4, but the diagram of this Consumer Trust Triage Model is reproduced below.

23 Figure 7.2: Consumer Trust Triage Model for Facebook Communications (reproduced from figure 6.2)



7.2.1 Awareness stage of triage

Consumers perform an initial triage to decide what to read or view and what to skip over. This triage stage affects awareness and could impact consumer trust simply by a consumer deciding to look at or to skip over information concerning company performance on the reputation factors important to that trust. Data from this research indicate three triage filters that consumers use to sort through content at the awareness stage. These are tie strength: who the post is from, topic: what it is about, and critical mass of engagement: how much interest others are showing in it. These filters appear to be widely used by consumers, irrespective of gender, age, or socio-economic level. In some cases, the filters provide auxiliary knowledge and indicators, which inform the triage decision. At this awareness stage of triage, consumers appear to use tie strength to filter content by applying knowledge of their friend, past experience of the history of posts from this person, and an understanding of the level of personal affinity that exists between them. Similarly, consumers seem to use the topic filter to gauge their likely level of interest or the relevance to themselves from the titles or first words of the post. Finally, they incorporate the critical mass filter as an indicator of importance or curiosity. The different mechanisms of Facebook that propagate and call attention to information essentially help to funnel the content on Facebook through one or more of these triage filters. Thus, this research reveals an interrelationship between the triage filters, often used in combination, and between the filters and the Facebook mechanisms of propagation. The triage process, therefore, tends to occur in an interrelated fashion as follows:

> Consumers, seeing that something has a large number of 'likes' and 'shares' and is clearly trending, might look at it out of curiosity or because the metrics of engagement for the trending mechanism signal importance or urgency to finding out about it (Critical Mass). Yet, even if the metrics are high, if it is a topic of no interest, consumers might be inclined to filter it out and skip over it to view something else more relevant to themselves (Topic). Alternatively, even if the topic was of low interest or relevance, if the post came from a close friend, consumers might read it just because it comes from a close friend (Tie Strength). Moreover, if a number of their friends, especially close ties, are among those 'liking' or sharing the content, or if the post has a comment stream attached in which one or more of their closer friends are participating, then that could

influence consumers to read the post and the comments to keep up with what ‘everyone’ is talking about (Tie Strength and Critical Mass).

This illustration of the process shows how the sequence of the triage unfolds, and advances the understanding of how communications on Facebook and the Facebook mechanisms tend to be used by consumers to sort content and decided what to look at.

Of these three triage filters in the awareness stage, tie strength emerged as the most widely used. It has been well established in prior research that a strong tie is one of the factors that drive word-of-mouth communications online (e.g. King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Matook et al., 2015). The knowledge and trust of the friend and the history of their interaction (e.g. Matook et al., 2015), the personal affinity through shared attitudes and interests (e.g. Cheng et al., 2017; Davis & Agrawal, 2018; Sweeney et al., 2008), even the social obligation to the relationship (e.g. Ha et al., 2017) are all aspects that have been shown to influence awareness and adoption of information shared by friends on Facebook about companies and their products, services, and practices. The present research builds on this foundation to reveal how the influence of tie strength on awareness is an integral part of a more complex triage process that also includes, at the awareness stage, consideration of the topic and the critical mass of engagement. The mechanisms most at work with this filter appear to be links, ‘likes’ and comments.

The findings that emerged from this research provide a new level of understanding of how the nature of the trust between strong and weak ties on Facebook influences the triage process. The incentive to engage with content under these two different conditions of tie strength appears to be governed by different types of interpersonal trust between the friends, thus the strength of the tie appears to mediate which type of trust the consumer is depending upon in making the decision to view or read the content posted by their friend. Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie (2006) have made the case that identification-based trust is primary in the few strong tie relationships and knowledge-based trust is primary in the many weaker tie relationships. Identification-based trust is described as a complete understanding between the two parties of each other's desires and intentions, where knowledge-based trust is the predictability of outcome based on knowledge of the trustee (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006). Dietz and den Hartog (2006) argue that Rousseau et al.'s (1998) relational trust, which has elements of both, sits between these two as a stronger form of knowledge-based trust or weaker form of identification-based trust. Each successive basis for trust, knowledge, relational and identification, builds on the one before and retains the prior basis while adding further elements resulting in a deeper form of trust (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006). The current research builds on this to show how this applies in the context of Facebook communications as follows.

The data from this research reveal that when deciding to read and engage with content posted by a strong tie, consumers appear to rely more on criteria internal to the relationship, whereas with weak ties they tend to rely more on criteria external to the relationship. Strong ties increase the likelihood that consumers will engage with content since they might read the post for the sake of the relationship alone or because of what they know about the friend or how well the friend knows them. When the tie has as a foundation in a strong personal alignment and affinity, the influence of the tie in driving awareness of matters potentially affecting consumer trust seems to derive from the strong deep relationship of Lewicki & Bunker's (1995) identification-based trust, which has as a basis mutual identification and value-congruence. When the tie is strong but the friends are not necessarily very aligned on views and tastes, the influence of the strong tie in driving awareness of these matters appears to derive more from relational trust (Rousseau et al., 1998) between the friends, which has a basis in the interpersonal connection and understanding of the individual, but is not as robust as the identification-based trust.

In contrast, with weak ties the data reveal that consumers may only read the post if the topic of the post were of particular relevance or interest to them, or if the participant felt the Facebook friend had some level of expertise or direct experience that gave them authority to speak on the subject, as a subject expert, a customer or an employee. These are criteria that are not to do with the relationship between participant and friend, but rather they are impersonal criteria or knowledge external to the relationship. Thus, the influence of a weak tie on awareness of matters potentially affecting consumer trust appears to be based more on Lewicki & Bunker's (1995) knowledge-based trust, which has as its basis predictability based on prior interactions and a knowledge of the friend.

The critical mass filter, also part of the awareness stage of triage, operates as a tool to identify news or information that is being propagated widely and rapidly, and the 'like', trending and comment mechanisms are the ones most closely associated with this triage filter. While most consumers appear to use this filter as a tool to identify current content, younger consumers are more inclined to consider this filter a way to identify important content. Younger consumers tend to view the metrics of engagement, such as the number of 'likes', 'shares' or 'views' or comments, as a way to sort through their Facebook feed, and decide what is having impact and is therefore important for them to look at or to read.

While the critical mass of engagement can attribute importance to finding out about certain topics, the topic itself, independent of the engagement metrics, can also influence the consumer's triage at the awareness stage. This is the third of the three triage filters at the awareness stage of triage. If the topic of the post is about a company or brand the consumer follows, or one the consumer is potentially interested in because they are considering a purchase, or because of something they heard, read or saw elsewhere, when they see the post on that topic the consumer will tend to engage with the post to find out more. Thus, the topic filter appears to be used by consumers to sort out items of interest or relevance simply due to the subject matter, independent of whether the post comes from a friend (tie strength) or is trending (critical mass). The mechanisms most commonly employed with this filter are comments or posts and particularly those with links. Posts with links tend to be valued above posts without links because they provide transparency and depth of information on the topic.

The findings from this research show that within this triage process the influence of the filters interact with each other based on the nature of the trust between the friends, apparently accelerating or simplifying the triage at the awareness stage. Thus, for example the findings indicate that, where there is identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995) between Facebook friends, and such a friend indicates that (s)he 'likes' certain content, identification-based trust encourages engagement, because the consumer considers that they will also like such content, since there is strong value congruence and personal affinity between them.

Likewise, where the level of trust between the Facebook friends only extends to relational trust and not full identification-based trust, this may be in part because the views of the consumer and their friend are less well aligned. In this case, the consumer may trust their friend regarding some topics but not others. Where the topic of the post is one on which the consumer does not respect that particular friend's opinion and their views are not aligned, even if the topic is of interest to the consumer, (s)he may scroll past that friend's post about it without reading it or engaging with it. However, if a number of Facebook friends are sharing and reposting content on that topic, then the consumer may be more likely to make themselves aware of the content of the post because it is trending within their circle of friends. Thus, in this case, critical mass may moderate the influence of the interpersonal trust between the friends on the awareness triage process and thus potentially influence consumer trust.

Similarly, the findings show that when the topic of the post concerns a company or brand the consumer follows or is about something they are thinking of purchasing, if the consumer knows that this friend is a customer and has direct experience to share, they may decide to engage and make themselves aware of what that friend has to say, even if the friend is only a weaker tie (the influence of knowledge-based trust). Thus, whilst the Consumer Trust Triage Model diagram indicates separate filters and associated mechanisms, the triage process is not linear or segregated into separate judgements, but rather an interrelated process that often involves more than one filter and depends on more than one mechanism at the same time and is subject to the influence of different types of trust depending on who is communicating the information.

*7.*2.2 Sense-making *stage of triage*

Having decided which content to consider at the awareness stage of triage, consumers then perform a second stage of triage that is directed at sense-making regarding what to believe and trust. The current research showed that Facebook is not viewed by most consumers as a destination for news and information on company products, services, or practices. Indeed, only 5% of Americans have a lot of trust in what they find on social media including Facebook (Gramlich, 2018). Nevertheless, content relating to the reputation factors important to consumers is found on Facebook, and so consumers are faced with the need to make sense of this content, sorting it according to what they will accept, what they will dismiss and what they will investigate further.

At the sense-making stage of triage, as at the awareness stage of triage, this research identified three filters through which consumers performed the triage. Tie strength and critical mass of engagement again appear to be utilized as filters (although applied differently as discussed below). Topic did not appear to be as important at this stage as it was during the triage at the awareness stage. However, this time the consumer's own experience and expertise, the 'self', emerged as a filter and a relatively strong one. Again, as with the triage at the awareness stage, these filters are widely used by consumers, irrespective of gender, age, or socio-economic level. The Facebook mechanisms that emerged as the most important to the sense-making stage of the triage process are the ability to share links and to comment.

The emergence of self as a filter is directly related by consumers to the issue of credibility of content. Although consumers see credibility of content as an issue on the social net, they appear to have confidence in their own ability to assess the credibility of information reported or shared through links and comments by Facebook friends. In the context of information-rich websites, consumer confidence in themselves has been shown to be more statistically significant and have a stronger correlation to purchase than trust in the reviews of others, in particular because consumers had confidence in their ability to assess and verify information from others through their own knowledge of the topic and through online search, which was strongly correlated with trust in self (Duffy, 2017). The present study builds on this research revealing that on the social net, the self is very important to sense-making and the development of consumer trust, and in a similar way appears to be as important or sometimes more important than the viewers' trust in their friends or in the critical mass of opinion. The 'self' filter brings to bear the consumer's own expertise and experience to the sense-making stage of triage.

The findings from this study indicate that consumers appear to apply the 'self' in two ways, either by relating past experience to the present context, or by deciding to experience the product or service or research the topic for themselves. When assessing a post relative to their own past experience, the findings from this research indicate that consumers are not easily shifted from the opinions they already hold on the basis of their own experience. Two situational factors, however, can make a difference.

The first is when either a close friend with whom they have a personal affinity (identification-based trust), or a weaker friend but one who they know to have superior knowledge about the topic (knowledge-based trust), reports an experience quite different from their own. When either of these conditions are present, the findings show that consumers may well come to doubt their prior judgement and question whether the experience they had was in fact a-typical. In these situations, the mechanisms that their friend used to propagate the information make a difference to their likely reaction. When the friend includes links or hard data to support their position, the research shows that consumers might well be persuaded to change their point of view without further personal experience or engagement with the company or product, in part because the friend is providing the data to verify and assess the information. When the friend only comments or just posts an essentially unsupported opinion, the research shows that consumers are not so easily persuaded, but their trust of their friend means that they will approach their next experience with a more open mind and reassess their point of view. If the comment is product or service related, this reassessment would occur through repurchase. If the comment is related to company policies or practices, this reassessment might occur through further independent research, most likely conducted through online search.

The second situational factor is when the consumer has no prior experience, but there is also no real consensus of opinion in the review-comments posted. In this instance consumers may decide to try it for themselves to see what they think if the financial or social risk is not great. Or, again, they may research it further online or ask other friends before deciding to trust. When this happens, it is apparently not unusual to see them go back online and add their opinion for the benefit of others in their network. Thus, consumers rely for sense-making on their own ability to assess the content of the posts, judge whether their experience and reaction would likely be similar to their friend's report, and conduct further research and analysis as needed.

Critical mass is also an important filter during the triage at the sense-making stage, as with the triage at the awareness stage, but consumers appear to apply it differently. Prior research has established the persuasive effect of a critical mass of opinion, identifying the 'bandwagon' effect that critical mass can have on opinion adoption (e.g. Sundar et al., 2008; Watts & Dodds, 2007), purchase intent (e.g. Gavilan, Avello, & Martinez-Navarro, 2018; Hsiao, Lin, Xiang-Ying, Hsi-Peng, & Yu, 2010; Sundar et al., 2008) and corporate reputation (e.g. Ravaja et al., 2015). The present research builds on these studies to provide a deeper understanding of how the influence of critical mass is operating in the context of social networks to shape consumer trust through the two-stage triage process. The findings from this research reveal that at the awareness stage of triage, critical mass is operating through metrics of engagement in helping consumers identify what content is worthy of their time and attention. In contrast, at the sense-making stage of triage, critical mass is operating through the preponderance of opinion in helping to shape consumer trust through the 'wisdom of crowds' (Surowiecki, 2004). This affects sense-making by taking into consideration the preponderance of opinion, thus potentially impacting consumer trust through the bandwagon effect. The adoption of opinion in this case provides the basis for the formation of calculus-based trust (Rousseau et al., 1998) based on the reported experiences of many others.

In addition to self and critical mass, tie strength again emerged as an important filter in the sense-making stage of the triage process. Participant discussion indicated that the strength of the tie between Facebook friends provided a context in which consumers assess content posted by their friends, influencing sense-making in terms of interpretation of content and adoption of opinion. In this sense-making stage, as in the awareness stage, the basis for trust and strength of the tie appear to moderate the triage process. Participants discussion indicated that where identification-based trust was present, this this provided an easy lens for sense-making. The closer personal affinity and shared preferences of strong ties increased the likelihood that their response would be the same as their friend's, and therefore provided a triage method to make sense of the content. Thus, where identification-based trust existed between friends, this appeared to contribute to the consumer's assessment of the trustworthiness of the company on that reputation factor, apparently without the need for the consumer to spend as much time on research and validation.

Recent research into online review platforms found that the effect of personal affinity and shared preferences is moderated by how important the topic is to the consumer, with the consumer's personal involvement with the topic increasing the likelihood of information adoption in cases of value-driven identification, but decreasing the likelihood in cases of consumption-driven identification (Davis & Agrawal, 2018). However, the data from the present study indicates that this finding may not be as applicable on social networks such as Facebook, where strong ties exist, and identification-based trust appears to be a more important factor and, uniquely, a factor that seems to operate in both directions. Specifically, this study found that consumption-driven recommendations (e.g. for products, restaurants, etc.) coming directly from strong ties tend to be accepted by consumers not just because of what they might know the friend's values and perspectives and the close personal affinity, but also because of what the friend knows of them. This is a condition of sense-making not possible on online review platforms where reviews are posted for general public consumption and not for a network of personal friends. Thus, identification-based trust between close friends appears to have potential both to increase and to decrease likelihood of opinion adoption in the sense-making stage of triage on corporate reputation information by apparently providing the assurance of the relevance and validity of the information to the receiver-consumer.

However, consumers do not necessarily adopt the opinions that strong ties communicate on Facebook blindly. Whilst, research has shown that people tend to conform their opinion to those of their in-group and adopt similar purchase patterns and values, especially if the ties are strong (e.g. Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, & Malinen, 2015; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012; Williams, 2001), participants in this study indicated this was not automatically so. The data show that it is possible on social networks to have strong ties with whom one is aligned on some things but perhaps not on most others, that is, a strong tie based more on relational trust (Rousseau et al., 1998) than on full identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). The findings indicated that when relational trust is present, the topic of the post appears to have influence on whether the consumer trusts the content of friend's post, accepting opinions on topics where there is greater alignment and rejecting opinions on which there is less alignment. Similarly, the tone and sentiment of the post appears to influence engagement, with participants indicating that they would be less inclined to take into consideration content which was negative or angry in tone or which expressed a sentiment in contradiction to their own feelings.

With weaker ties where trust may only be knowledge-based, consumers may use their knowledge of the friend's expertise or basis for authority on the topic to assess the content posted and determine the influence they would permit the post to have on their own opinions. Thus, when consumers are engaging in triage of content on Facebook at the sense-making stage using the tie strength filter, the nature of the trust in action depends not only on the strength of the tie, but also to some degree on the topic and sentiment of the post.

Conversely, just as the social connection can facilitate the sense-making stage of triage, it also appears to act as an inhibitor to sense-making by creating a barrier to active engagement in dialogue through Facebook to clarify, refute, discuss and actively make sense of posts. Prior research has found social exposure on Facebook and other social networks to be an inhibitor to open challenge or serious debate, causing consumers to withhold negative reactions or disagreements to avoid social sanction (e.g. Balaji, Khong, & Chong, 2016; King et al., 2014; Oeldorf-Hirsch, Birnholtz, &

Hancock, 2017; Woong Yun & Park, 2011). Data from this study confirm that consumers may be reluctant to engage in open debate through the comment mechanism with their friends on Facebook due to the social risk of causing either offense or embarrassment and add to this understanding by revealing that tie strength can help mitigate that by facilitating private sense-making activity. The findings show that if consumers have a need for further clarification or they disagree with the post, they are likely to take the conversation offline or to a more private channel, such as messaging or emailing, or conduct their own research. Thus, a strong tie makes it easier to follow-up with their friend in person or through private channels to find out more or to discuss an opposing point of view.

The Facebook mechanisms most used during the sense-making stage of triage were links and review-comments, these having the potential to provide the most information on the corporate reputation factors important to consumers. Of all the mechanisms, links emerged as the most important Facebook mechanism during sense-making stage of triage. The present study clearly supports prior research by confirming that consumers are very aware of the potential for information distortion, whether through deliberate spin, i.e. fake news (Flintham et al., 2018) or through the effects of rumour diffusion during pass-along (Hornik et al., 2015; J. Shin et al., 2018). Therefore, consumers tend to value links because links help address the issue of credibility and information quality by providing a way for consumers to get back to the original source and judge for themselves (Borah, 2014; Osatuyi, 2013). So much is this so that even the mere presence of links adds to the credibility by providing reassurance of transparency (Osatuyi, 2013). This study confirms this prior research and contributes further to this understanding of the transparency links provide by showing that when consumers recognized the anterior source through the URL, their own trust of that source acts as a filtering mechanism in the sense-making stage of the triage process, without necessarily having to follow the link.

When asked to rank order the Facebook mechanisms in terms of importance in assessing their level of trust of a company, participants ranked links most often at the top. Thus links emerged as very important in this study, not only by providing further information for both awareness and sense-making, but also by acting as a credibility cue in a context where only 5% of Americans have a lot of trust in what they see in the way of news and information (Gramlich, 2018).

In addition to links, review-comments were important as another mechanism that provided information at the sense-making stage of triage. Participants in the study made a clear distinction between the value of general comments or comment streams and the value of review-comments to them as consumers. General comments or comment steams do not appear to be useful to consumers as they can be seen as too frivolous, or too argumentative and negative, or simply redundant with everyone agreeing with everyone else and not adding anything worthwhile to the discussion. In contrast, consumers do seem to find review-comments very helpful, especially review-comments on a product or service that they are thinking of purchasing, and they often seek these out. Even a comment stream can be deemed useful if those commenting are responding to each other and offering their experiences concerning a product or service.

The findings from this research indicate that a consumer's preference for links or comments depends on whether they are in information-gathering mode or decision-making mode. When consumers are finding out about an issue or something that has come to their attention, they want breadth of information from many sources, whereas when they are thinking of making a purchase they want depth of information or preponderance of opinion (R. A. King et al., 2014). The current research contributes to this understanding further by linking the mechanisms to these two behaviours. The findings here suggest that consumers consider links more useful when they are gathering information about a topic or an issue. When they are in this mode, they are looking for a broader understanding with exposure to different viewpoints on the topic, and links to different sources will give them a greater amount of information and a greater variety of opinions. Conversely, when consumers are considering making a purchase, they are looking for convergence of opinion and review-comments will help provide closure on a decision by indicating where the consensus of opinion lies amongst current customers with regard to the experience of the product or service under consideration.

In summary, during the sense-making stage of triage more than one triage filter and more than one mechanism may be in play at the same time. At this stage, consumers first take into consideration who is posting the content (tie strength). If they have a close personal affinity with that person (identification-based trust) or have reason to know that that person is in a position to have good information (knowledge-based trust), they will take the opinion into serious consideration, or simply accept the opinion. If there is a link, they look at the source of the link in the URL to determine if it is one of their trusted sites or at any rate a reputable site in their opinion. If deemed so, they will often follow the link for further information, but again, they may just see that the friend's opinion comes from content on a reputable site and accept the opinion without following the link. In cases where they have experience themselves with this product or company, their own experience (self) might overrule what their friend says, but a strong tie (tie strength) could cause them to change opinion or at minimum re-evaluate, especially in cases where there is also an indication of preponderance of opinion (critical mass). In situations where the consumer is in information-gathering mode, links shared by friends appear to be helpful in accessing different points of view and further information. However, in situations where the consumer is in decision-making mode, the critical mass of opinion expressed through review-comments appears to be more helpful.

As a result of the sense-making stage of triage, participants took one of three actions. Either they dismissed the content and moved on to other things, in which case the process terminated. Alternatively, they accepted the content and assessed the company's trustworthiness on the basis of the ABI dimensions (Mayer et al., 1995) important to consumers, namely technical competence, integrity and value congruence. This then results in trust being established or increased, trust remaining unchanged, or trust being eroded or destroyed. Thirdly, they might decide that they did not yet have enough information to make an evaluation of trustworthiness and they might decide to investigate further. This occurred most often by doing further online research or by a decision to experience it for themselves.

This discussion has situated the major findings of this research study in the context of the literature that established the foundation for this enquiry. The next section concludes this research with a summary of the major contributions and the relevance for theory and practice, followed by identification of the limitations of this study and some suggested areas for further research.

7.3 Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, this has been a reasonably comprehensive qualitative study of 44 interviews with participants across three generations, two socio-economic levels and both genders of the influence of Facebook on consumer trust. This study was undertaken with a view to answering two research questions, the first concerning the link between corporate reputation and the assessment of trustworthiness, and the second concerning how the mechanisms of communications on Facebook might be influencing that assessment and consequently potentially impacting consumer trust.

This study investigated the possible existence of an empirical link between two bodies of literature that both concerned consumer trust, the corporate reputation literature which addressed content, and the stakeholder trust literature which addressed assessment. The existence of this connection had been argued theoretically in the corporate reputation literature (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2016; Van Der Merwe & Puth, 2014), but the connection had not been proven empirically. This is the first major contribution of this research.

The reputation factors important to consumers identified through the corporate reputation literature are Quality and Value of Products and Services, Credibility of Advertising Claims, Customer Orientation, and the company's Commitment to the Environment and Employees (Helm, 2007; Shamma & Hassan, 2009). The ABI (Mayer et al., 1995) dimensions on which consumers assess trustworthiness as a pre-requisite to trust identified through the stakeholder trust literature are Technical Competence and Integrity , with Value Congruence also indicated (Harris & Wicks, 2010; Pirson & Malhotra, 2007, 2011). Research question 1 sought to relate the reputation factors to the assessment dimensions:

<u>RQ1:</u> How do consumers articulate the concept of consumer trust and does their perception of what consumer trust means reveal the empirical link between the reputation factors important to consumers and the trust dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness?

Participants articulated several links between the reputation factors important to consumer trust and the ABI dimensions on which they assess company trustworthiness. Specifically, the data from the participant discussion suggest that consumers assess Quality and Value of Products and Services on the Technical Competence and Integrity dimensions. These two connections appeared to have the most impact on consumer trust, but they were integrally bound up in the pattern of thought participants articulated regarding how they formed their assessment of trust. This pattern also included Credibility of Advertising Claims, assessed on Integrity and apparently to a lesser extent on Value Congruence, and Customer Orientation, assessed on Technical Competence and on Integrity. Commitment to Environment and the Employees was not a primary consideration for most participants, though it was a lesser consideration, and as such it was assessed on Integrity and on Value Congruence. The nature of the trust thus formed is a calculus-based trust (Rousseau et al., 1998) wherein consumers are more willing to accept performance risk a consequent reduction in competence trust, than they are to accept relational risk with the consequent reduction in goodwill trust (Das & Teng, 2004).

Given the existence of this connection, the research then addressed how communications concerning the reputation factors that were reported through Facebook might influence consumer trust in research question 2:

<u>RQ2:</u> How do consumers use the main Facebook mechanisms to become aware of and make sense of content that might affect their trust of companies, and how might their use of these mechanisms be affected by different conditions of tie strength and critical mass?

While much research has been undertaken on the propagation of content on Facebook for marketing purposes (e.g. Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2017; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Stephen, 2016) and the effect peer-to-peer communication has on purchase intent (e.g. Hajli, 2014; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016), little has been done from the receiver's perspective on how the consumer thought process worked regarding engaging with and interpreting the information found on Facebook. Nor have the mechanisms of propagation been thoroughly studied in terms of how they might be influencing perceptions of company trustworthiness and thus consumer trust. This is the second major contribution of this research.

The key contribution is the emergence of the Consumer Trust Triage Model, described in detail in Chapter 6 and discussed further above, which explains the process consumers go through to sort content found on Facebook and assess its relevance and impact on their decision to trust the company to which the content refers. This model has two stages of triage, a triage at the awareness stage and a triage at the sense-making stage. Tie strength emerged as the filter most important to both, with critical mass also relevant to both. The topic of the post emerged as a filter important to the awareness stage of triage, but less so to sense-making, and conversely a consumer's own knowledge and experience, or the self, emerged as a filter important to sense-making but less so to awareness. The mechanisms were integrally connected to these filters, with links and review-comments emerging as important to both stages of triage, and ‘likes’ and trending mainly emerging as important to the awareness stage of triage. Tagging was not a widely used mechanism compared to the other mechanism in the study, but when was used it nearly always drove awareness, essentially bypassing the triage decision, since it was a direct call to a specific individual to read or view the content.

Credibility of the content found on Facebook appeared to be a significant barrier to adoption. Therefore, participants adopted a cognitive approach to assessment, which included doing further research of their own, evaluating the post in light of their own experience, and following up with the friend for further information. This cognitive approach appeared to have its basis in calculus-based trust (Rousseau et al., 1998), and appeared to be a purposeful and rational activity to determine the credibility of the content. their assessment of what it communicated about the company’s trustworthiness, and their determination of the impact on their trust of the company. In addition, tie strength was also used to assess credibility by participants. With weak ties this depended on knowledge-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). However, with strong ties where the personal affinity was closer, identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995) was also used. Thus, trust of content and trust of friend both impacted the overall assessment of company trustworthiness and therefore had potential impact on consumer trust.

In summary, the research aim of this study was to understand the potential influence of the mechanisms of the social net on consumer trust of companies. This was achieved in two ways. Firstly, the empirical link between corporate reputation content reported on the social net and the dimensions on which consumers assess trustworthiness was established. Secondly, a deeper understanding of how social net communications, in this case on Facebook, impact consumer trust was articulated through the emergence of the Consumer Trust Triage Model. This model illuminates two stages of triage around awareness and sense-making and shows how the mechanisms of the social net are integrated into these two stages. In addition, the findings showed how both knowledge-based trust and identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995) are an integral part of how the Consumer Trust Triage Model works given the social context of the communication. Both of these are original contributions to the literature that provide important insight and connections in the understanding of consumer trust.

7.3.1 Implications for theory

The findings on RQ1 have clear implications for theory. By connecting the stakeholder trust literature and the corporate reputation literature, the research reveals how information regarding the corporate reputation factors found on the social net is impacting consumer trust through assessment of company trustworthiness. It provides the empirical link that enables each to give context and meaning to the other by linking content (reports on reputation factors) with assessment (trust dimensions important to consumers). Moreover, the data from the participant discussion illuminate the thought process consumers engage in when assessing the content on the trust dimensions important to them, and how the pattern of thought is interconnected on the reputation factors and the assessment dimensions. This enriches the understanding of how consumer trust is impacted by communications on the corporate reputation factors important to consumers and provides a strong foundation for future research.

Findings in relation to RQ2 have deepened the understanding of how communications across the social net, in this case on Facebook, can impact consumer trust. The Consumer Trust Triage Model that emerged is a significant contribution for those researchers seeking to understand how consumers engage with and interpret online word-of-mouth and peer-to-peer communications on the social net, and how this influences consumer trust. It also helps to explain what tools consumers use to sort through the content and determine what to read/view and how to assess the validity and importance of what they see. On a more granular level, the details of the findings also give some insight on how influence and activity might vary by generational cohort, upper and lower socio-economic levels, and gender. Finally, the discussion helped shed further light on the nature of the consumer trust developed as a result of social net communications, as well as how the nature of the trust between the friends on the social net influences judgement and assessment of content

This research also contributes to the debate in the literature on whether trust is a disposition, a decision or an act. The findings from this research indicate that consumers tend to consider trust of a company in terms of a trust act and not just a disposition or a decision. All the discussion on Quality and Value of Products and Services and much of the discussion on Customer Orientation and Credibility of Advertising Claims was expressed in terms of the experience of being a customer. Thus, the decision to trust had been made and that decision was consummated through the trust act of making a purchase. Indeed, the ability to experience the company's performance for themselves by making a purchase emerged from the data as an important factor in building consumer trust. Post purchase, consumers then assess the companies' trustworthiness primarily on the basis of the companies' Technical Competence and Integrity in fulfilling the trust the consumer had placed in them by purchasing their goods and services. This assessment of the company's performance and the performance of their products and services was evaluated relative to whether to trust the company again by making further purchases. Several participants discussed the history of their interactions with the company over time as being influential to their future trust of the company. This history clearly related to past purchases from that company, and indeed would have limited meaning or relevance if trust were defined only as a disposition or decision to trust. Without the experience of making the trust act there would not be any historical experiential evidence to evaluate.

If the consumer has not yet purchased from a given company and is assessing whether to trust (that is, make a purchase) for the first time, the consumer appears to rely on the company's reputation as reported by other consumers who have had experience with trusting that company, or as reported in the media. These reports appear from the data in this study not only to be influencing their disposition to trust and informing their decision to trust, but they are also important to making the act of trust through purchase.

Regarding issues of corporate social responsibility publicized either through advertising claims of socially responsible activity or reported corporate acts and policy relating to the Treatment of the Environment or Employees reputation factor, the discussion moved more towards the ABI dimensions of Integrity and Value Congruence. Here the disposition to trust emerged more strongly as a stage in the development of the consumer's trust. The findings from this study suggest that, in this context, the trust act of making a purchase is not as integral to the assessment of trustworthiness. Consumers appear to assess the trustworthiness based on the reports alone and consider how that measures up against their values. This evaluation appears to form their disposition to trust, but consumers still appear to consider the full measure of trust to be the act of trust. This appears to be because this act of trust becomes the way in which they can endorsed the company's behaviour through their financial support in purchasing the company's products and services, or conversely, censure the behaviour by withholding their purchase.

Thus, the findings from this study contribute to the debate in the literature on the question of trust as an act versus trust as a disposition or decision, by revealing that, in the case of consumer trust, the only meaningful definition of trust is the trust act. The disposition and decision are important stages to this, but when consumers speak of their trust of a company, they are generally referring to the act of purchasing of goods and services from that company, based on their past experiences of doing so or on the reported experiences of others who have done so. If this is so for consumer trust, it may also extend to all situations of trust where there is trust by an individual of an impersonal organization or entity.

7.3.2 Implications for practice

The findings from this research also have implications for the practice of stakeholder management and consumer relationship marketing. While the corporate reputation literature established the reputation factors important to consumers and consumer trust, without a deeper understanding of how this connects to the dimensions on which consumers assess company trustworthiness, a prerequisite to consumer trust, companies do not have a full picture of how and why their actions and statements are impacting consumer trust. These data shed more light on how the consumer calculus on trust is taking place. In particular, since these data show that all the reputation factors are assessed by consumers on the basis of the Integrity dimension, it is of particular importance for management to maintain integrity and transparency in their dealings with their customers on each of the reputation factors.

The research also helps to explain how the mechanisms of the social net are being used by consumers as tools, not only to propagate information, but also to engage with and interpret information. This has implications for social media marketing as well and brand community development in online social networks. This research provides input on how the mechanisms of the social net used to propagate information can influence assessment of trustworthiness in consumers receiving such information, and thus increases the understanding of how social net communications build consumer trust. Companies wishing to engage in social media marketing on online social networks now have a clearer understanding of how the process works through platforms such as Facebook, as they make efforts to engage and persuade consumers to trust the company.

In addition to contributions to general management practice, some specifics emerged from the data which provide input to good and bad practices regarding company communications on Facebook. One of the main points to emerge has to do with clutter. Consumers are overwhelmed by all the content on Facebook, and the research showed that when companies push out too much information, this just exacerbated the problem, causing some consumers to get annoyed with the company and to un-follow them and/or reduce time spent on Facebook. Therefore, companies should avoid over-communicating and flooding the timeline of Facebook users. Relevance of the content to the consumer was highlighted by participants as very important, so, selective and relevant content is the key to successful communication on

Facebook. Additionally, getting people to follow the company on Facebook appeared to be worthwhile since participants indicated that when they followed a company, they were more receptive to content the company published and found it more relevant. Moreover, in this cluttered environment, consumers appear to be much more likely to read company communications if they are genuinely interesting and not manipulative or self-serving. The exception to this is in the case of promotions when consumers are willing to engage in order to get a chance to win whatever was offered. Finally, with the current sensitivity to 'fake news' amongst the general public, the findings from this research re-emphasized the need for transparency and integrity in company communications.

There were also instructive findings that emerged with regard to the mechanisms themselves. While 'likes' were found to be relatively meaningless for sense-making, they were found to drive awareness, so campaigns designed to drive 'likes', especially of favourable news or new products, could be worthwhile. Links emerged as the most important mechanism as they added both interest and credibility, thus driving both awareness and sense-making. Consumers appear to give more credibility to posts that have links, because links provide opportunity for verification and deeper understanding of the issue, and, indeed, even the mere presence of links appear to make the post more credible. These findings suggest that, particularly with regard to crisis management or negative publicity, links to reputable third-party content, such as governmental reports or scientific reports or even reports from well-established news organizations could be important. With regard to comments, consumers do appear to be sensitive to whether they consider companies to be 'listening', and this they assess by how responsive the company is to comments they post on the company's Facebook page or on Twitter. A responsive company is deemed to have a strong customer orientation, which is one of the most important reputation factors for consumer trust. The data from this research indicate that high integrity, in particular with regard to customer orientation, can go a long way to building and maintaining consumer trust and loyalty.

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

While this research has provided valuable insights significant to both the academic literature and corporate practice, there are some limitations. The research was conducted only in the south-eastern U.S., and at a time when the U.S. had just come through a very vituperate election cycle which may have heightened sensitivity to 'fake news' and increased disaffection with Facebook communications. However, these extreme circumstances resulted in greater insight as participants were more forthcoming about how they triage information, having just been through a cycle where they felt the need to do that more than usual.

This research focused on Facebook as the platform for communications. A recent article makes the case that Facebook has been over-researched by academics since it is the largest social network (Stoycheff, Liu, Wibowo, & Nanni, 2017). Yet, Facebook is still the largest social network by a large margin, with 68% of adults in America using Facebook, and the next closest social network platform only at 35% (A. Smith & Anderson, 2018). Therefore, Facebook is arguably still an important network to focus on and one that will most likely offer the greatest insights into the attitudes and usage of a broad population.

This research was investigating self-reported behaviour and self-examined attitudes and usage. Research has shown that it is difficult for people to remember accurately how they reacted or what they did even as little as two hours prior (Mitchel et al., 2017). Therefore, in order to help overcome this, vignettes were used to provide material for the discussion and help focus the conversation. These vignettes proved invaluable in drawing out the information both on the reputation factors and on the mechanisms. While these vignettes were hypothetical cases, they were based on a composite of real situations and information that arose from the pilot study. As a result, participants felt they were very realistic, and indeed the realism of the vignettes then reminded participants of similar instances they had encountered, which they then went on to discuss. Therefore, these vignettes served a two-fold purpose of increasing the focus on the topic and stimulating participants to remember specific examples they had experienced.

Finally, the Consumer Trust Triage Model that emerged from the data is based on qualitative data only. This was an important first step in order to establish the shape of the model and the process consumers go through to become aware of and assess communications on Facebook that impact their trust of companies. Starting with a qualitative study enabled deeper insights and an abductive analysis that allowed the model to emerge from the patterns in the data. This now needs to be tested in a quantitative study.

7.4.1 Future research

The Consumer Trust Triage Model in figure 6.2 resulting from this research offers several avenues for future research. These include proving the connections and flow sequence in a quantitative study, possibly through experimental design. Further work should also be done to test the strength of moderating and mediating factors, such as the influence of Facebook algorithms and situational factors, as well as to identify additional moderators or mediators. Indications are that this model would also have applicability to other social networks, notably Twitter and Instagram, which were the two most frequently mentioned by participants in this study. The model should be examined with respect to these and other contexts. Moreover, the mechanisms evolve over time, and new ones arise. For example, these data were gathered at a time when the Trending News section existed, which now no longer exists, and the data do not include influence of hashtags, which have surged recently as a mechanism across all social media platforms. Therefore, further work should be done to understand other mechanisms not examined here. Moreover, the influence on consumer trust should be measured to understand which filters and mechanisms are having the most effect and to what degree.

Regarding the connection between the corporate reputation literature and the stakeholder trust literature, the next step would be to quantify the strength of the connections between the reputation factors and the trust dimensions articulated in figure 5.2. This avenue of future research should also include measuring the impact on consumer trust itself in order to understand which combinations of factors and dimensions have the most impact on consumer trust.

Finally, this research contributes to the debate in the literature on the nature of trust and whether it is a disposition, decision or act. The findings here support the definition of trust as an act in the case of consumer trust. Further research is needed to establish this statistically. Additionally, if confirmed, further research is called for to ascertain whether this is universally true in cases of trust by an individual of an impersonal entity, or whether it just applies to consumer trust.

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APPENDICES

A-1 Ethics Approval

Susan Cottam
RE: Katherine Black Ethical Approval ERN_16-0687
To: Mark Saunders, Cc: Polly W. Black, Katharine Black

VIPs copied July 4 2017 August 3, 2016 at 6:44 AM
Details
SC

Dear Mark

Many thanks for this additional information.

I can confirm that the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee has agreed to accept the ethics approval issued by Wake Forest University in lieu of further ethical review by the University of Birmingham.

Kind regards

Sue

Susan Cottam
Research Ethics Officer
Research Support Group
[redacted]
Web: https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/finance/accounting/research-support-group/Research-Ethics

Please remember to submit a new Self-Assessment Form for each new project.

Click Ethical Review Process for further details regarding the University's Ethical Review process, or email ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk with any queries.

Click Research Governance for further details regarding the University's Research Governance and Clinical Trials Insurance processes, or email researchgovernance@contacts.bham.ac.uk with any queries

Notice of Confidentiality:
The contents of this email may be privileged and are confidential. It may not be disclosed to or used by anyone other than the addressee, nor copied in any way. If received in error please notify the sender and then delete it from your system. Should you communicate with me by email, you consent to the University of Birmingham monitoring and reading any such correspondence.

A-2 Informed Consent Document

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: **The Influence of the Social Internet on Consumer Trust of Companies**

Investigator(s): Polly Black

PURPOSE

This research study is exploratory in nature. The purpose of the research is to understand how the mechanisms of the social Internet (social net) influence consumer trust of corporations. The mechanisms of the social net are the ability to aggregate information, share information, and express opinion, comment on and discuss information. We want to understand how trust is influenced through the social net as a result of these capabilities to pass along and comment on information.

Findings from the discussions will be compared to see what commonalities and differences are emerging and how these mechanisms play role in shaping trusting attitudes among consumers.

You are invited to be a part of this research by participating in a one-on-one interview to share your thoughts about how you are influenced as a consumer by what you read and share on the social net. Your participation will be limited to one interview discussion lasting up to 1:30 hours.

PROCEDURES

If you choose to participate in this research, you can expect the following:

- You will be asked to complete a screening questionnaire to ensure that you meet the qualifying criteria for participation in the research. Qualifying criteria include such dimensions as gender, age range, frequency of use of social networks, etc. to ensure a balanced group of participants who can address the questions the research seeks to know.
- Those selected to participate in the research will be asked to commit to coming to a scheduled interview session, most likely in the evening or on a weekend, to share their perspectives on the discussion. You may be asked to bring with you some examples of social network communications that have influenced you in order to share these with the investigator as examples for further the discussion.
- When you come to the interview, you will have a short questionnaire to fill out to capture attitude and usage information. This questionnaire will be collected for later analysis. Following that, you will engage in discussion, led by the investigator, to uncover how the mechanisms of the social net influence consumer trust regarding companies.
- The interviews will be audio recorded. The recordings will be transcribed for ease of analysis.

RISKS

There are no anticipated significant risks to participating. The only minor risks may be the social risk of sharing attitudes and behaviors with the investigator. However, you are under no obligation to share any information you feel uncomfortable sharing or feel would compromise you in any way.

Participation in this research project in no way relates to any academic or other activities at Wake Forest University. No information from this study will be shared by the investigators with anyone else at Wake Forest University, except after all data have been purged of identifiers.

BENEFITS

There will be no personal benefit for participating in this study. It is hoped that, by shedding light on how communications across the social net influence opinion, this study will help both the general public, other organizations and companies to understand how to interpret and manage such communications.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You should not incur any costs for participating in this research project other than the cost of transport to be physically present for the interview. You will not receive any formal compensation for your participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

During the interview, your first name will be used to facilitate discussion. The interview will be audio recorded. When the tapes are transcribed, the data will be purged of all identifiers, meaning that all names will be removed and replaced with a coded number. To ensure confidentiality, the tapes will be kept in a locked and secure file cabinet for the duration of the research analysis phase, and then destroyed.

While records of participation in this research will be maintained and kept confidential, the federal government regulatory agencies and Wake Forest University Institutional Review Board (IRB) may inspect or ask for copies of the records, and these may contain personal identifiers. However, all efforts will be made to use the coded number identifiers and not identifiers that can be directly associated with any one individual.

In any report or publication arising from this research the identity of participants will not be revealed. Results will be reported and summarized without any reference to the participants themselves, such that no information could lead to the identification of any participant individually.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

All participation is voluntary. There are no penalties for deciding not to participate. Additionally, while we ask you to commit to being an active and engaged participant if you are selected and choose to participate, anyone can decide to stop participating at any time and leave the interview. In the case where a respondent decides not to continue their participation, their data will be discarded and destroyed.

QUESTIONS

Questions are encouraged. Questions about this research project and how it will be conducted, analyzed or what the results will be used for should be directed to Polly Black at 336-758-2657 or blackka@wfu.edu. Questions about the rights of research subjects or research related injury may be addressed to the Associate Director for Research Compliance in the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Pam Moser (at 336-758-5195 or moserpc@wfu.edu)

Subject's name (printed): ____

____

(Signature of Subject) (Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I have discussed the above points with the subject or the legally authorized representative, using a translator when necessary. It is my opinion that the subject understands the risks, benefits, and obligations involved in participation in this project.

____

(Signature of Investigator) (Date)

A-3 Pilot Discussion Guide

Project Title: **The Influence of the Social Internet on Consumer Trust of Companies**

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research project

Purpose of the session:

This questionnaire is part of a research project to understand the influence of the social net on consumer trust of companies. Specifically, we are researching the impact on consumer trust that results from sharing information, aggregating information and commenting on information on social networks.

Your responses are important in enabling me to obtain as full an understanding as possible of this topical issue. However, your decision to take part is entirely voluntary. If you decide at any point that you don't want to continue, just say so.

The interview will last approximately 1 to 1½ hours.

The interview is for my research purposes only. Please be assured that everything we discuss during this interview will be kept in strict confidence and your real name will not appear in any reports or publications. As such, please make every effort to be open and honest when responding to the questions.

I will be keeping a record of this discussion so that I don't have to take notes. I like to follow what is being said and then go back later to review what you said again so I can accurately convey your ideas and opinions. The tapes will be transcribed but the information will be kept anonymous.

Do you have any questions about that?

Discussion Guide

1. **Usage questions to establish level of engagement, intensity and presence:** *(this could also be done with quick questionnaire ahead of the interview to save time, but it can also be a good way to get their head into the discussion.)*

    a. Please tell me what social networks you actively engage with

    b. Which one would you say is the primary one?

    c. How often are you on XYZ *(primary network identified above)*

    d. About how much time on average do you spend a day (or week) on XYZ?

    e. About now many active friends would you say you had on XYZ?

    f. Are these people you know offline also, or online friends only?

    g. How important is it to you to interact with your friends this way compared to other ways of interacting (phone, in person, etc)?

(At some point I need to get to the question of whether the informant tends to be an originator of content or a reactor to content – but better to weave that into conversation at a natural point if it does not become clear from interview discussion than to force it here.)

(The next few questions are to start to guide the focus of the discussion towards the topic of research)

2. **What kinds of things do you talk about?**

   a. Probe for/follow up on things to do with companies, brands, products

      i. Tell me more about….

      ii. What happened with….

   b. Did you know about that before you saw it in the post? (awareness)

      i. How did you find out about it?

      ii. What did you think when you saw the post?

      iii. (if they already knew) Was that different from what you thought before? How? Why?

   c. How did that make you feel about the company?

      i. Why?

      ii. How was that different from how you felt about that company before reading that post?

   d. How did you react? Why? What made you react that way?

3. **Can you give me another example where you reacted differently?**

   a. What happened?

   b. What was different about that?

   c. How did that make you feel about the company? Why?

   d. How did you react? Why?

(The next sections start to get to specifics that might help answer the research questions in the thesis. The examples discussed above will be used for some of this, and other examples solicited as well.)

While these are written here as straightforward questions, they are unlikely to be asked with quite this level of structure and with this exact wording. At this point in the interview the flow will be starting to be guided much more by the informant's answers. This means that the way and the order in which the information will be asked will be dictated by that, using their answers as a springboard as much as possible.)

4. Sharing (awareness, tie strength, sender credibility)

a. Where do you get most of your information about what companies are up to?

(Listen/probe for Products/services? Advertising? Customer orientation? Treatment of employees and environment?)

b. Give me an example of something you heard regarding a company on XYZ

c. How did you react to that?

d. How was that reaction different?

e. How does XYZ compare to other sources for reliability/credibility?

i. What makes it less/more reliable/credible?

ii. Is some info or types of info more reliable/credible than others?

iii. What makes the difference? *(follow up on anything that might relate to sender credibility, tie strength. Also follow up on things to do with links, tone, opportunity for discussion.)*

f. Thinking about the example you just gave, did it make any difference who it came from, or did it make no difference?

i. Why?

ii. What if the same post had come from someone else?

g. Can you give me other examples? *(Same type of questions along with comparison of answers back to first example to probe for differences)*

5. Aggregation (source credibility, critical mass, presentation & tone)

a. Thinking about the types of things we have been discussing *(or use specific examples here)* how does such content normally come to you on XYZ?

(Listen/probe for linked content, type of content – video etc.)

b. Give me an example of something you heard regarding a company on XYZ that was linked to content elsewhere, not just a comment post

(Listen/probe for Products/services? Advertising? Customer orientation? Treatment of employees and environment?)

i. Tell me about the link

ii. How did you react? What did you do?

iii. How did this post make you feel about the company?

iv. How is that different from the same info posted without a link?

c. Can you give me other examples? *(Same type of questions along with comparison of answers back to first example to probe for differences)*

d. What links do you tend to click on? Why?

 i. What links do you tend not to click on? Why not?

e. In your description of the posts with links just now you mentioned (video, blog post, newspaper article etc).

 i. How was the information presented? What was the tone?

 ii. How did that make you feel about the company?

 iii. What might make you feel differently?

f. People sometimes say things like "It's was all over the web yesterday". What does that mean?

 (Follow up on the answer to try to get at what difference critical mass might make – seeing it often, seeing it from lots of people, seeing it on different sites, etc.)

6. Commenting (sense-making, in-group/out-group context)

a. When you get posts about companies such as the ones we have been discussing, do you ever comment on them?

 i. Why? Why not?

 ii. What is it about the post the makes you (not) want to comment?

 iii. Do other friends in your network comment?

 iv. What type of posts do they tend to comment on most?

 (Listen/probe for Products/services? Advertising? Customer orientation? Treatment of employees and environment?)

 v. What type of conversation ensues?

 vi. How do those conversations affect your opinion of the company?

b. Compared to posts where you don't comment (or there are no comments), how do comments affect how you think about the post?

 i. Can you give me examples?

 ii. What was happening in the conversations?

c. Do some subjects get more comments than others?

 i. Which ones? (examples)

 ii. Why do you think that is?

d. Can you give me examples of times when you have seen opinions about a company change as a result of the comment stream?

 (Listen/probe for Products/services? Advertising? Customer orientation? Treatment of employees and environment?)

 i. How did opinions change?

 ii. Did your opinion change? Why? Why not?

e. How does knowing the person offline affect commenting?

i. What difference does it make if you like them? Don't like them?

ii. What difference does it make if they are part of your inner circle of friends?

(Listen/probe for whether they are more engaged and more influenced by in-group)

7. What else do you want to tell me with regard to the things we have been discussing?

a. Are there any aspects of this that I am not considering that you think may be important to know about?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME TODAY

A-4 Explanation Categorization for Socio Economic Level

I started by having three socio-economic levels as depicted in the socio-economic classification table represented here.

Before	College Plus	College	Some College	High School
High Prof	High Soc Ec	High Soc Ec	High Soc Ec	Not Applicable
Med Prof	High Soc Ec	High Soc Ec	Mid Soc Ec	Mid Soc Ec
Low Prof	High Soc Ec	Mid Soc Ec	Mid Soc Ec	Low Soc Ec
White Col	Not applicable	Mid Soc Ec	Low Soc Ec	Low Soc Ec
Blue Col	Not applicable	Not applicable	Low Soc Ec	Low Soc Ec

These were defined as follows:

High Soc Ec:

Senior executive of corporation or organization, owner of large business, senior professional, high ranking officer with a bachelor's degree or more.

Mid-level executive or manager, owner of medium-sized business, mid-level professional, mid ranking officer with a bachelor's degree or more.

Income $75K or higher

Med Soc Ec:

Mid-level executive or manager, owner of medium-sized business, mid-level professional, mid ranking officer with up to a bachelor's degree

Low-level manager, administrator, owner of small business, low-level professional, low ranking officer with up to a bachelor's degree

Income $35-75K range

Low Soc Ec:

Clerical worker, technician, owner of very small business, high ranking enlisted with less than a bachelor's degree (and not working towards one)

Skilled, semi-skilled, blue collar employee, low ranking enlisted with less than a bachelor's degree (and not working towards one)

Income less than $35K

The professional categorizations were adapted from the Hollingshead Index of Social Position from Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016, p.137 as follows:

High Level Profession: Senior executive of corporation or organization, owner of large business, senior professional, high ranking officer

Mid-Level Profession: Mid-level executive or manager, owner of medium-sized business, mid-level professional, mid ranking officer

Low Level Profession: Low-level manager, administrator, owner of small business, low-level professional, low ranking officer

White Collar: Clerical worker, technician, owner of very small business, high ranking enlisted

Blue Collar: Skilled, semi-skilled, blue collar employee, low ranking enlisted

However, I found that the data at the mid-level was not showing any clear patterns of behaviour. When I recoded with only two socio-economic levels, the data patterns were more consistent, indicating that the mid-level was not a useful distinction. When doing this reclassification, I found that income level seemed to have little relevance. The most relevant factor in getting consistent patterns of behaviour was the education level, with the professional level closely linked to that. Therefore, for the final classification, the levels were defined as follows:

High Soc Ec:

Senior executive of corporation or organization, owner of large business, senior professional, high ranking officer with some college education or more.

Mid-level executive or manager, owner of medium-sized business, mid-level professional, mid ranking officer with some college education or more.

Low-level manager, administrator, owner of small business, low-level professional, low ranking officer with at least a bachelor's degree.

Clerical worker, technician, owner of very small business, high ranking enlisted with at least a bachelor's degree.

Low Soc Ec:

Mid-level executive or manager, owner of medium-sized business, mid-level professional, mid ranking officer with no college education.

Low-level manager, administrator, owner of small business, low-level professional, low ranking officer with less than a bachelor's degree (and not working towards one)

Clerical worker, technician, owner of very small business, high ranking enlisted with less than a bachelor's degree (and not working towards one)

Skilled, semi-skilled, blue collar employee, low ranking enlisted with less than a bachelor's degree (and not working towards one)

This resulted in a final socio-economic classification table as follows:

After	College Plus	College	Some College	High School
High Prof	Upper Soc Ec	Upper Soc Ec	Upper Soc Ec	Not Applicable
Med Prof	Upper Soc Ec	Upper Soc Ec	Upper Soc Ec	Lower Soc Ec
Low Prof	Upper Soc Ec	Upper Soc Ec	Lower Soc Ec	Lower Soc Ec
White Col	Not applicable	Upper Soc Ec	Lower Soc Ec	Lower Soc Ec
Blue Col	Not applicable	Not applicable	Lower Soc Ec	Lower Soc Ec

<u>Final Composition of Sample:</u>

	Boomer 1946-1961	**Gen X 1965-1980**	**Gen Y 1984-1999**	**Total of Targeted Dimension**
Upper Socio-Economic Level	3 Females 4 Males	4 Females 3 Males	6 Females 3 Males	**23 Upper Socio-Economic Level**
Lower Socio-Economic Level	3 Females 4 Males	3 Females 4 Males	3 Females 4 Males	**21 Lower Socio-Economic Level**
Total of Targeted Dimension	**14 Boomers**	**14 Gen X**	**16 Gen Y**	**22 Females 22 Males**

A-5 Main Study Screening Questionnaire

Main Study Screening Questionnaire

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 The following questions are to ascertain the level of engagement potential research participants have on social networks, along with certain demographic and contact information. These questions will identify participants who regularly engage in the activities being researched and help ensure a diverse selection of participants to participate in the interviews in order to enrich the findings. All information is kept strictly confidential. No identifying information will be included in the research report.

Q2 Please enter your first name

____

Q3 Please enter your last name

____

Q4 Please enter your email address

____

Q5 Please enter your phone number to facilitate scheduling of interview

____

Q6 I agree to be contacted for an interview for this research project. I understand that at the time of the contact the research project will be explained in full, after which I will have the opportunity to accept or decline to be interviewed.

- I agree to be contacted
- I declined to be contacted

Skip To: End of Survey If I agree to be contacted for an interview for this research project. I understand that at the time... = I declined to be contacted

Q7 About how much time do you usually spend on Facebook?

	No time at all	Less than 1 hour	1 to 3 hours	More than 3 hours
In a typical week	○	○	○	○

Q8 Please indicate your gender

- Male
- Female

Q9 What year were you born?

- ◯ 1948-1954
- ◯ 1955-1961
- ◯ 1962-1966
- ◯ 1967-1973
- ◯ 1974-1979
- ◯ 1980-1984
- ◯ 1985-1989
- ◯ 1990-1994
- ◯ 1995-1999
- ◯ Other ____

Q10 Please indicate your ethnicity (optional)

- ◯ Caucasian American
- ◯ African American
- ◯ Hispanic American
- ◯ Asian American
- ◯ Other ____

A-6 Main Study Detailed Questionnaire

Social Net Main Study

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 The following questions are to ascertain the level of engagement potential research participants have on social networks, along with certain demographic and contact information. These questions will identify participants who regularly engage in the activities being researched and help ensure a diverse selection of participants to participate in the interviews in order to enrich the findings. All information is kept strictly confidential. No identifying information will be included in the research report.

Q2 Please enter your first name

____

Q3 Please enter your last name

____

Q4 Please enter your email address

____

Q5 Please enter your phone number to facilitate scheduling of interview

____

Q6 I agree to be contacted for an interview for this research project. I understand that at the time of the contact the research project will be explained in full, after which I will have the opportunity to accept or decline to be interviewed.

○ I agree to be contacted

○ I declined to be contacted

Skip To: End of Survey If I agree to be contacted for an interview for this research project. I understand that at the time... = I declined to be contacted

---

Q7 Please rank order your usage of the following social media sites, with the top one being the one you use the most and the bottom one the one you use the least

______ Facebook

______ Twitter

______ Instagram

Q8 About how much time do you usually spend on Facebook?

	No time at all	Less than 10 minutes	10 to 30 minutes	30 mins to 1 hour	1 hour to 2 hours	2 hours to 3 hours	More than 3 hours
Facebook on a typical day	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Facebook last week	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q9 About how many friends/followers do you have on Facebook?

	50 or less	51 to 200	201 to 400	401 to 800	801 to 1000	1001 to 1500	1501 to 2000	More than 2000
Total Facebook friends	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Regular to frequent contact Facebook friends	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q10 Please indicate how frequently you do the following on Facebook by selecting the answer that best describes your level of activity. How often do you...

	Multiple Times a Day	Once a Day	2-3 Times a Week	Once a Week	2-3 Times a Month	Once a Month	Less than Once a Month	Never
Read/check your Facebook feed	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Click on a shared link on Facebook	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Comment on a post on Facebook	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Post something yourself on Facebook	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q11 Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements concerning your Facebook activity

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I use Facebook to search for information or get answers to questions	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I follow organizations and companies I like on Facebook	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Sometimes what I see on Facebook causes me to change my opinion about a company or organization	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I feel out of touch when I haven't checked Facebook for a while	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I find out what's in the news by what my friends are talking about on Facebook	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I tend to post to Facebook more often than my friends do	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I get most of my news from Facebook	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Q12 Please indicate your gender

- ○ Male
- ○ Female

Q13 What year were you born?

- ○ 1948-1954
- ○ 1955-1961
- ○ 1962-1966
- ○ 1967-1973
- ○ 1974-1979
- ○ 1980-1984
- ○ 1985-1989
- ○ 1990-1994
- ○ 1995-1999
- ○ Other ____

Q14 Please indicate your ethnicity (optional)

- ◯ Caucasian American
- ◯ African American
- ◯ Hispanic American
- ◯ Asian American
- ◯ International student (indicate nationality) ____________________
- ◯ Other ____________________

Q15 What is the highest education level you have completed?

- ◯ Professional (MA, ME, MD, PhD, LLD, and other graduate degrees)
- ◯ Four-year university/college degree
- ◯ Some college
- ◯ High school diploma
- ◯ Did not complete high school

▢ Display This Question:

▢ If What is the highest education level you have completed? = Some college

Q16 If you are currently a student please indicate your year/status at the University.

- ◯ Freshman
- ◯ Sophomore
- ◯ Junior
- ◯ Senior
- ◯ Not currently a student

Q17 What type of profession does the person have who has the highest level of employment in your household? Please select the option that most closely describes their profession and position.

○ Senior executive of corporation or organization, owner of large business, senior professional, high ranking officer

○ Mid-level executive or manager, owner of medium-sized business, mid-level professional, mid ranking officer

○ Low-level manager, administrator, owner of small business, low-level professional, low ranking officer

○ Clerical worker, technician, owner of very small business, high ranking enlisted

○ Skilled, semi-skilled, blue collar employee, low ranking enlisted

Q18 What is your household income

○ Less than $20,000

○ $20,000-$34,999

○ $35,000-$49,999

○ $50,000-$74,999

○ $75,000-$89,999

○ $90,000 or higher

End of Block: Default Question Block

A-7 Explanation of Questions on Intensity and Presence

The survey questions on intensity and presence were based on the work of Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007), who used eight questions. The questions are captured here in bold along with my comments on how I used or adapted these questions and why I discarded two of them.

Ellison et al. used a 5-point Likert scale for questions 1 to 6, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Questions 7 and 8 were asked open ended but a notation was made that they can be used with an ordinal scale as well.

Two questions relating to frequency of use were combined in my research. Ellison et al. had the following two questions scored on a Likert scale of agreement:

1. Facebook is part of my everyday activity

3. Facebook has become part of my daily routine

These questions seemed to me somewhat redundant. I wanted more insight into the type of use as well as the frequency, therefore I reformatted the questions to include more specific activities. In order to capture frequency, I used a scale of frequency of use not a Likert scale of agreement.

My question that related to these measures concerning frequency of use was as follows:

Please indicate how frequently you do the following on Facebook by selecting the answer that best describes your level of activity. How often do you...

	Multiple Times a Day	Once a Day	2-3 Times a Week	Once a Week	2-3 Times a Month	Once a Month	Less than Once a Month	Never
Read/check your Facebook feed	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Click on a shared link on Facebook	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Comment on a post on Facebook	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Post something yourself on Facebook	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Ellison et al. also asked a third question regarding frequency of use which they asked as an open-ended question.

8. In the past week, on average, approximately how much time PER DAY have you spent actively using Facebook?

In my research this question was broken into two parts and asked with an ordinal scale not as an open-ended question, as follows:

About how much time do you usually spend on Facebook,

	No time at all	Less than 10 minutes	10 to 30 minutes	30 mins to 1 hour	1 hour to 2 hours	2 hours to 3 hours	More than 3 hours
Facebook on a typical day	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Facebook last week	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

The following questions were used as written and with a 5-point Likert scale of agreement ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

4. I feel out of touch when I haven't logged into Facebook for a while

6. I would be sorry if Facebook shut down (note - this was only asked on the pilot)

Ellison et al. also included an open-ended question on the number of friends a person had:

7. Approximately how many TOTAL Facebook friends do you have?

This question was asked in my research but rephrased to distinguish between total friends and friends with whom they were in frequent contact on Facebook, since those with whom this question was pre-tested made that distinction. It was asked with an ordinal scale not as an open-ended question. The following is the question used in this research:

About how many friends do you have on Facebook?

	50 or less	51 to 200	201 to 400	401 to 800	801 to 1000	1001 to 1500	1501 to 2000	More than 2000
Total Facebook friends	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Regular to frequent contact Facebook friends	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Two of the questions used by Ellison et al. were thrown out during the pre-testing

2. I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook

This question was thrown out because it was considered meaningless by those with whom the question was pre-tested. They did not consider it a matter of pride to be on Facebook, but rather a matter of every-day life.

5. I feel I am part of the Facebook community

This question was thrown out because it was not considered relevant by those with whom the question was pre-tested. They did not consider Facebook a community, but rather a platform. To the extent that they considered the question of community, it was in relation to their friends on Facebook not to Facebook users in general.

A-8 Main Study Discussion Guide

Discussion Guide for Qualitative Research on The Impact of the Mechanisms of Online Social Networks on Consumer Trust of Companies

Information sheet and informed consent document are reviewed at the start of the interview and signature obtained.

Participant then fills out a quick questionnaire of 17 questions about networks used, numbers of friends, activity level and frequency of access, along with some basic demographic data. The answers to these questions allow for deeper analysis by parsing the data using case attributes.

I. Introduction and Warm-Up

We are now recording.

First of all, thank you for participating in my research. I want to begin by asking you some general questions to establish your level of engagement in social media. I know that I have already asked you some of these questions on the survey you just filled out, but I also want to capture the answers verbally on the recording for analysis purposes.

i. Networks used, preferred network

ii. Which networks used for what

iii. Frequency and activity

iv. Number of friends total and number of currently active/close friends

As I said at the beginning, I'm interested in how the social net is influencing consumer trust of companies. So, I'll be asking you about things you see on your social networks to do with companies, their products and services, their communications, their policies and actions, etc. I want to understand how and why friends sharing and discussing these things online with each other might influence your thinking and your trust of such a company. OK?

II. General discussion of trust

Let's start off by discussing trust of companies in general. If I were to ask you if you trust a company, what would that mean to you?

Does trust matter in this context?

Why/why not?

How would you assess if a company were trustworthy?

i. Probe for QV, AC, CO, EE issues

ii. Probe for connection back to TC, I, VC

III. Vignettes

As we are starting to explore this, I want to give you four short descriptions of a situation and ask you to answer some questions on each of them. Don't overthink this – your first reaction is the best. We will have the opportunity to talk in more detail about the answers and even change them as we go through the interview. These scenarios are developed from similar posts in real life.

i. Administer each vignette survey in turn with discussion following before doing the next one.
ii. Ask *"Have you ever seen a similar kind of post come across your network?"* for each vignette and probe for differences in reaction or influence on opinion.

How? Why?

IV. Awareness

I would like to understand how it comes to your attention in the first place. Do you ever find yourself hearing things on Facebook or Twitter about what companies are up to that you are hearing for the first time?

i. How it came to their attention
ii. Topics
iii. Where else hear this type of thing
iv. What makes OSN different

Examples?
Reaction?
How? Why?
Effect on trust?

V. Connection / Tie-strength

What difference, if any, does it make that it came to you from someone in your network that you know personally?

i. Close vs. distant friend and nature of tie
ii. Relationship inhibitors
iii. History of interaction with friend
iv. Personal affinity / alignment of views
v. Friend's report vs. own experience
vi. Direct or indirect post
vii. Link included – video, article (difference?)
viii. Tone, valence
ix. Response/reaction

Examples?
Effect on trust?
How? Why?
cf. vignettes

VI. Credibility

How do you identify what to believe on your social network?

i. Trust cues / influence factors
ii. Link included – video, article (difference?)
iii. Influence of source vs. friend
iv. Tone, valence
v. Friend report vs. own experience
vi. Response/reaction
   - Clarification or discussion
   - Acceptance / dismissal
   - Verification

Examples?
Effect on trust?
How? Why?
cf. vignettes

VII. Critical Mass

If something is trending on your social network, how does that affect your engagement with it and your opinion?

i. Likelihood of engagement
ii. Perceived importance and/or urgency
iii. Preponderance of opinion and/or evidence
iv. Influence of group norms
v. Response/reaction
   - Clarification or discussion
   - Acceptance / dismissal
   - Verification

Examples?
Effect on trust?
How? Why?
cf. vignettes

VIII. Sense-Making

If you are not sure how you feel about something you see on your social network, such as a new product release, or a controversy about a company, how do you arrive at a conclusion on what you think about it?

i. Under what circumstances
ii. Sense-making activities
   - Use of comments
   - Start a conversation with a post
   - Don’t use OSN’s
iii. What others do vs. what you do

Examples?
Effect on trust?
How? Why?
cf. vignettes

IX. Further thoughts

Is there anything else about the way you use online social networks that you think might be of interested to me in this research?

X. Wrap-up

Thank you for your time and your insights. They have been very valuable to me. If you have any further thoughts or you later decide you wish to withdraw your input, here is my card. If you do decide later to withdraw just send me an email and I will destroy the record of the interview.

A-9 Coding Structure for RQ1

RQ1 Mentions of Rep Factors and ABI dimensions

- Rep Factors
  - Quality and Value of Products and Services
  - Credibility of Advertising
  - Customer Orientation
  - Commitment to Environment and Employees
- ABI Dimensions
  - Ability - Technical Competence
  - Integrity
  - Value Congruence

RQ1 mentions connecting rep factors to ABI dimensions - Initial Responses

- QV issues
  - QV to TC
  - QV to I
  - QV to VC
- AC issues
  - AC to TC
  - AC to I
  - AC to VC
- CO issues
  - CO to TC
  - CO to I
  - CO to VC
- EE issues
  - EE to TC
  - EE to I
  - EE to VC

Other mentions in answer to RQ1 - Initial Responses

- Established company / brand
  - Company has been around for a while
  - Well-known brand name
- Reputable source or third-party endorsement
- Personal experience
- Financial stability

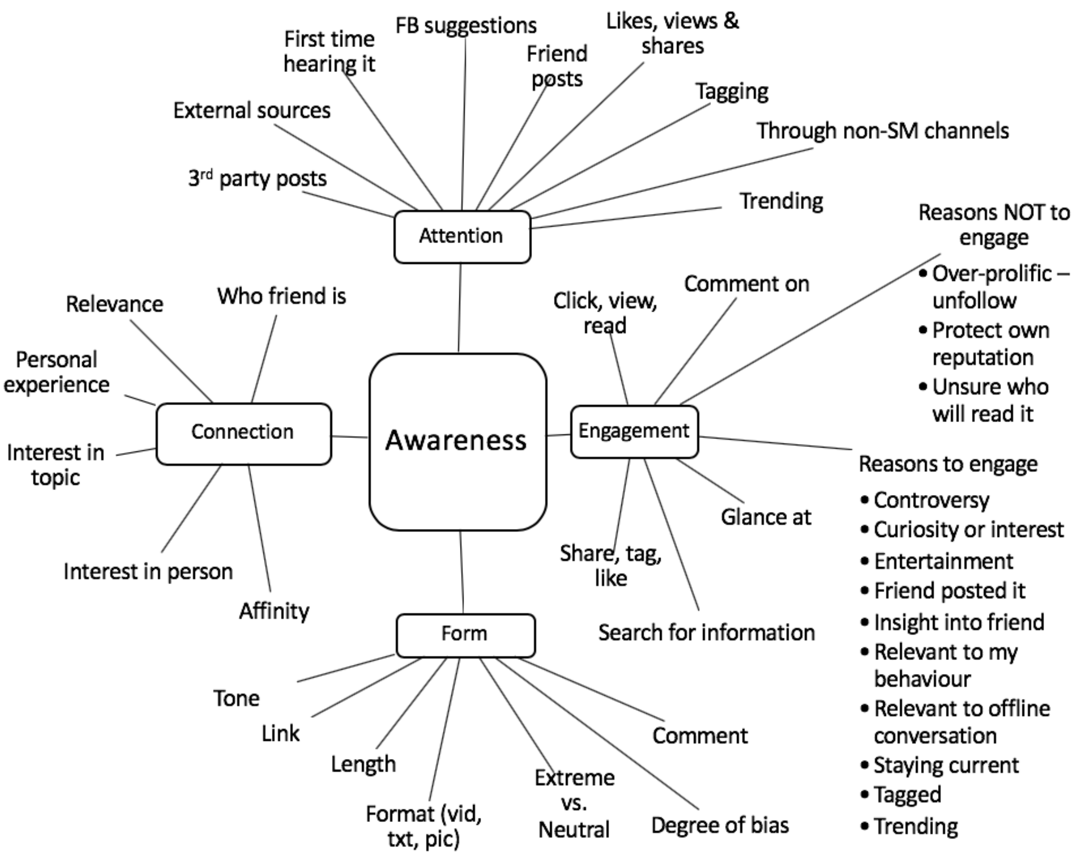
Mentions connecting rep factors to ABI dimensions - throughout interview

- QV issues
  - QV to TC
  - QV to I
  - QV to VC
- AC issues
  - AC to TC
  - AC to I
  - AC to VC

- CO issues
    - CO to TC
    - CO to I
    - CO to VC
- EE issues
    - EE to TC
    - EE to I
    - EE to VC

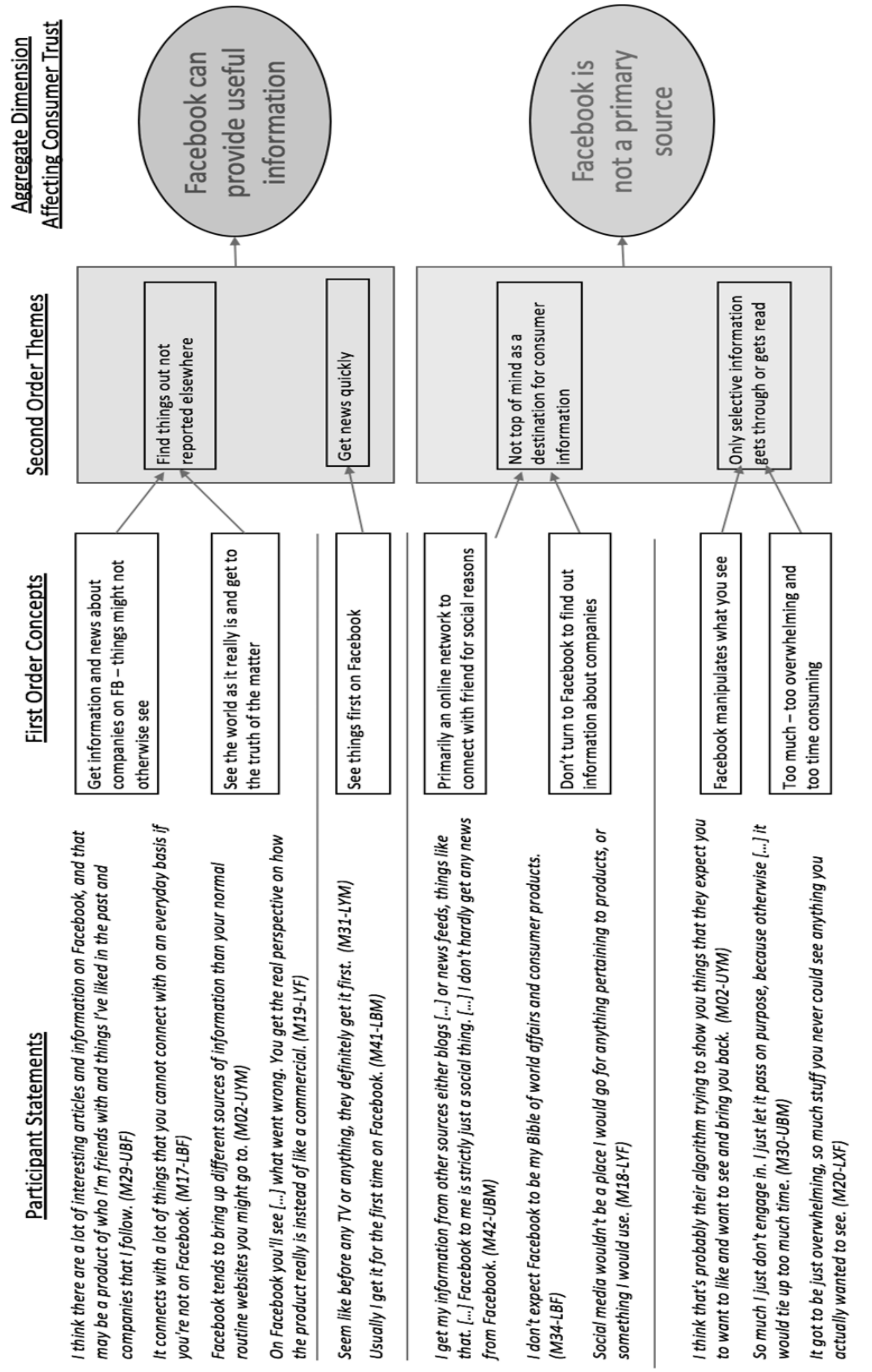
A-10 Coding Diagrams Based on First RQ2 Model

The data were first coded to the diamond model using the main categories identified in that model, namely awareness, sense-making, credibility, tie-strength and critical mass. As an example, the Awareness node structure is included here to, show the level of complexity and lack of cohesion that coding to this model produced. This collection of nodes is illustrated here as a map not a list.

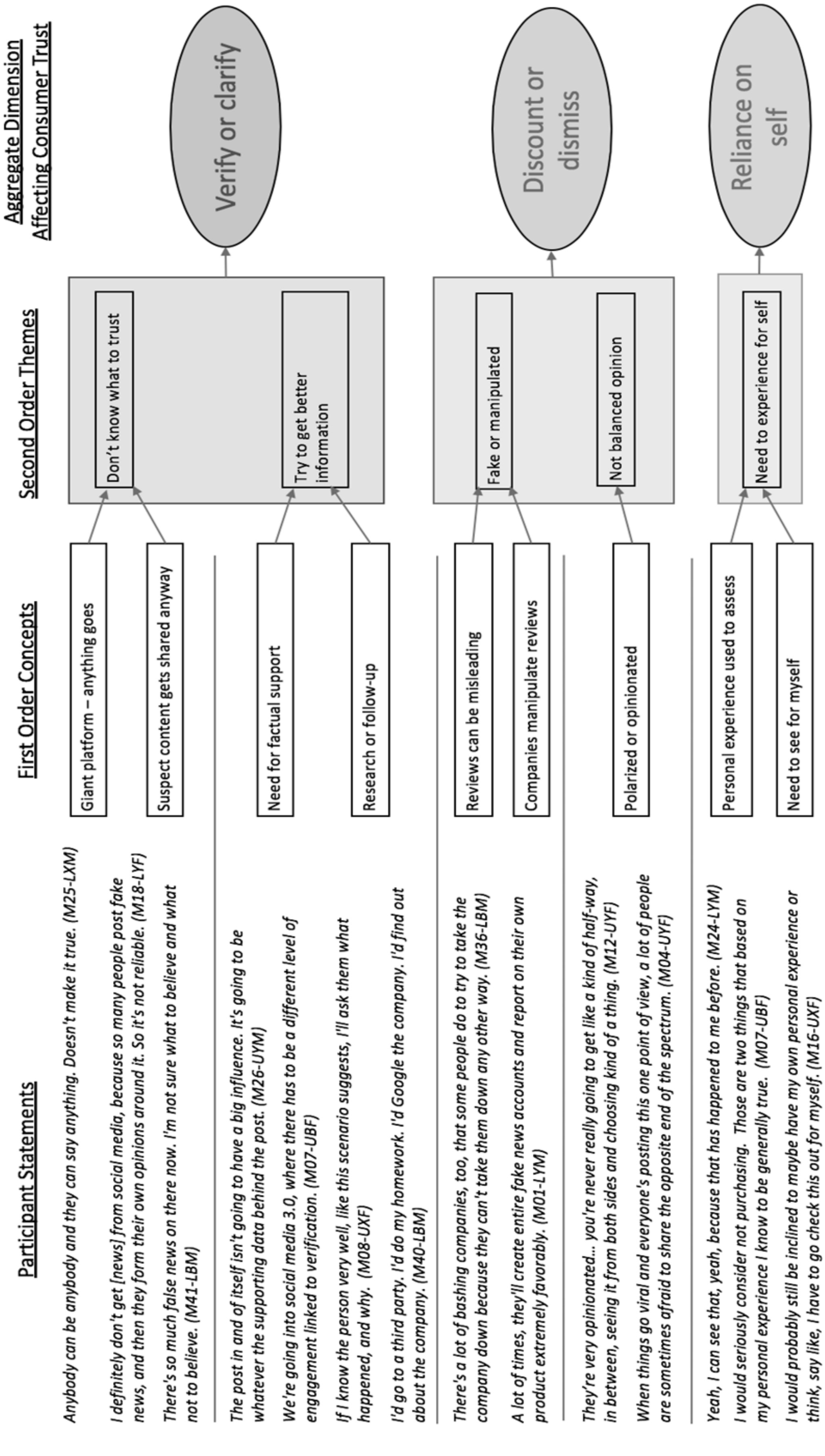


A-11 Coding Diagrams Showing Themes from In Vivo Coding for RQ2

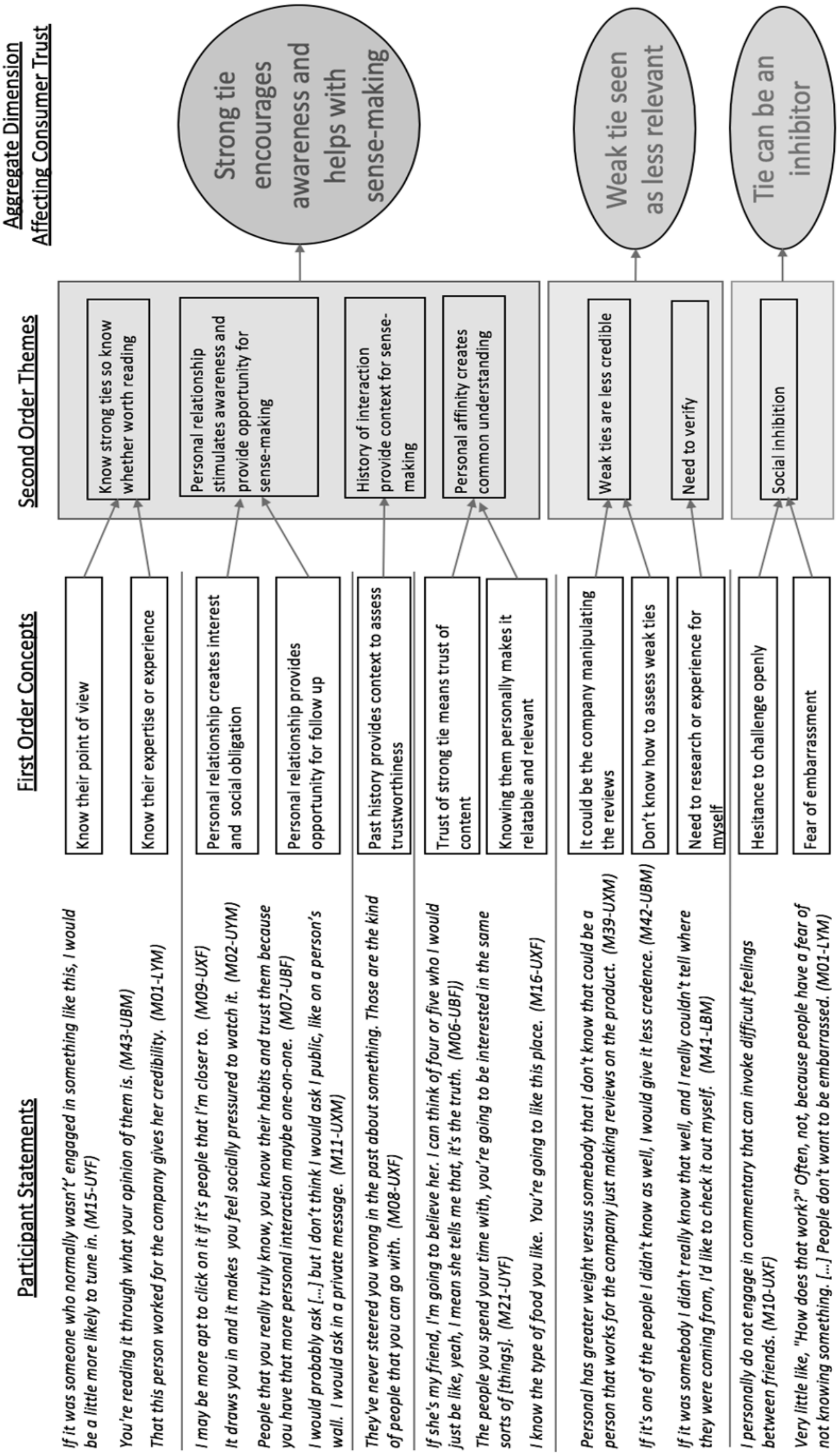
Facebook as a Platform



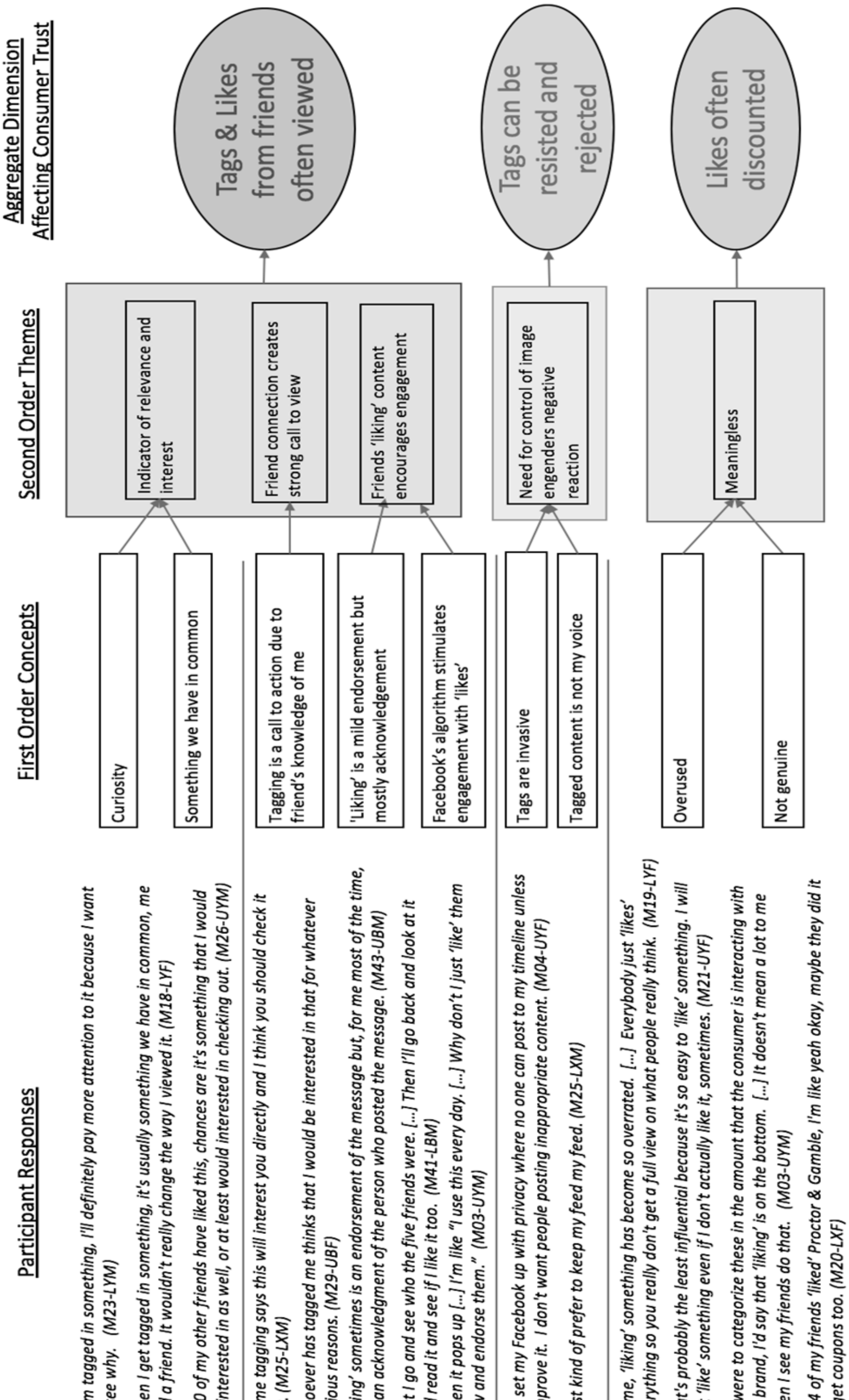
Credibility



Tie Strength

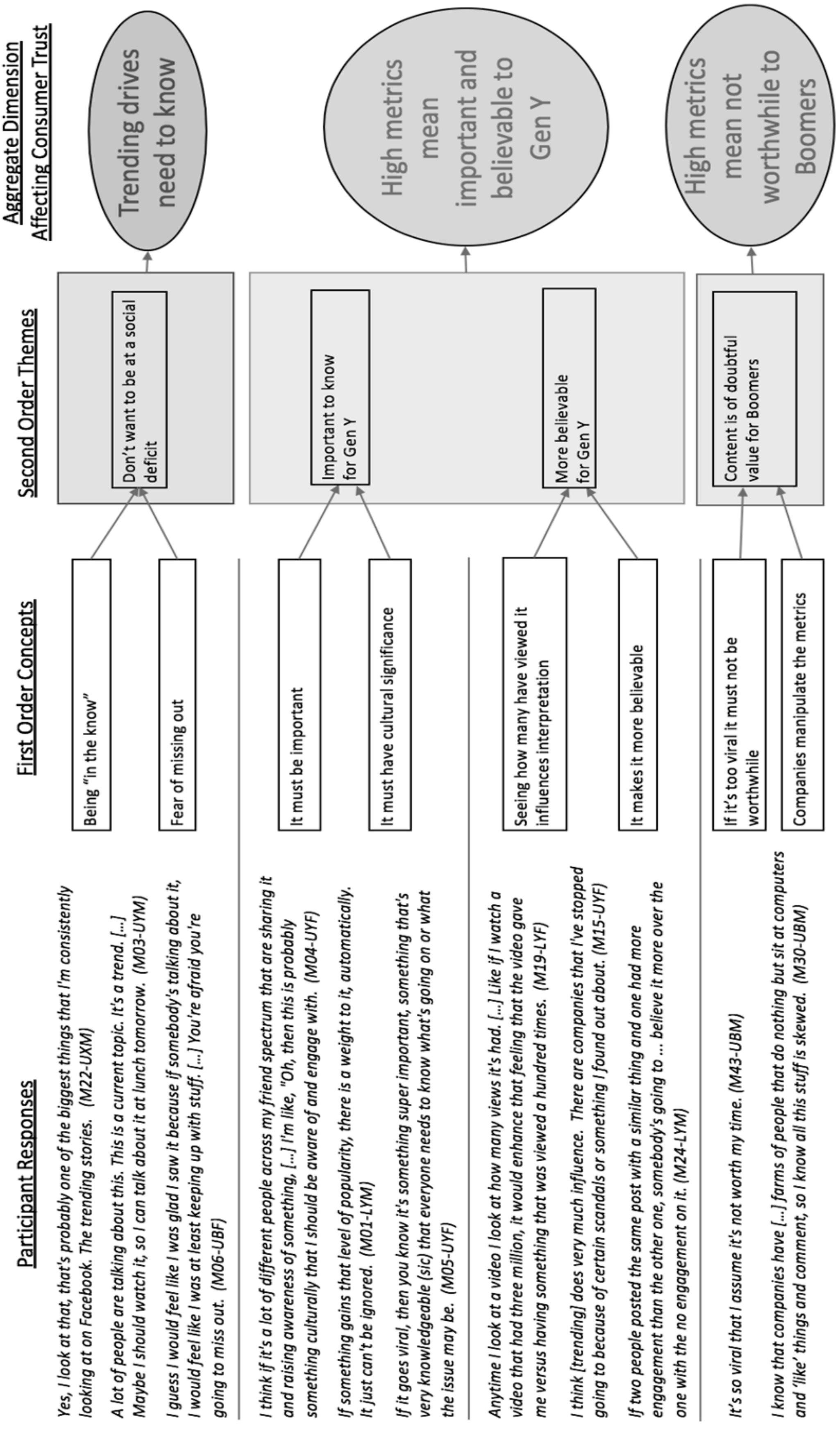


Tags & 'Likes'

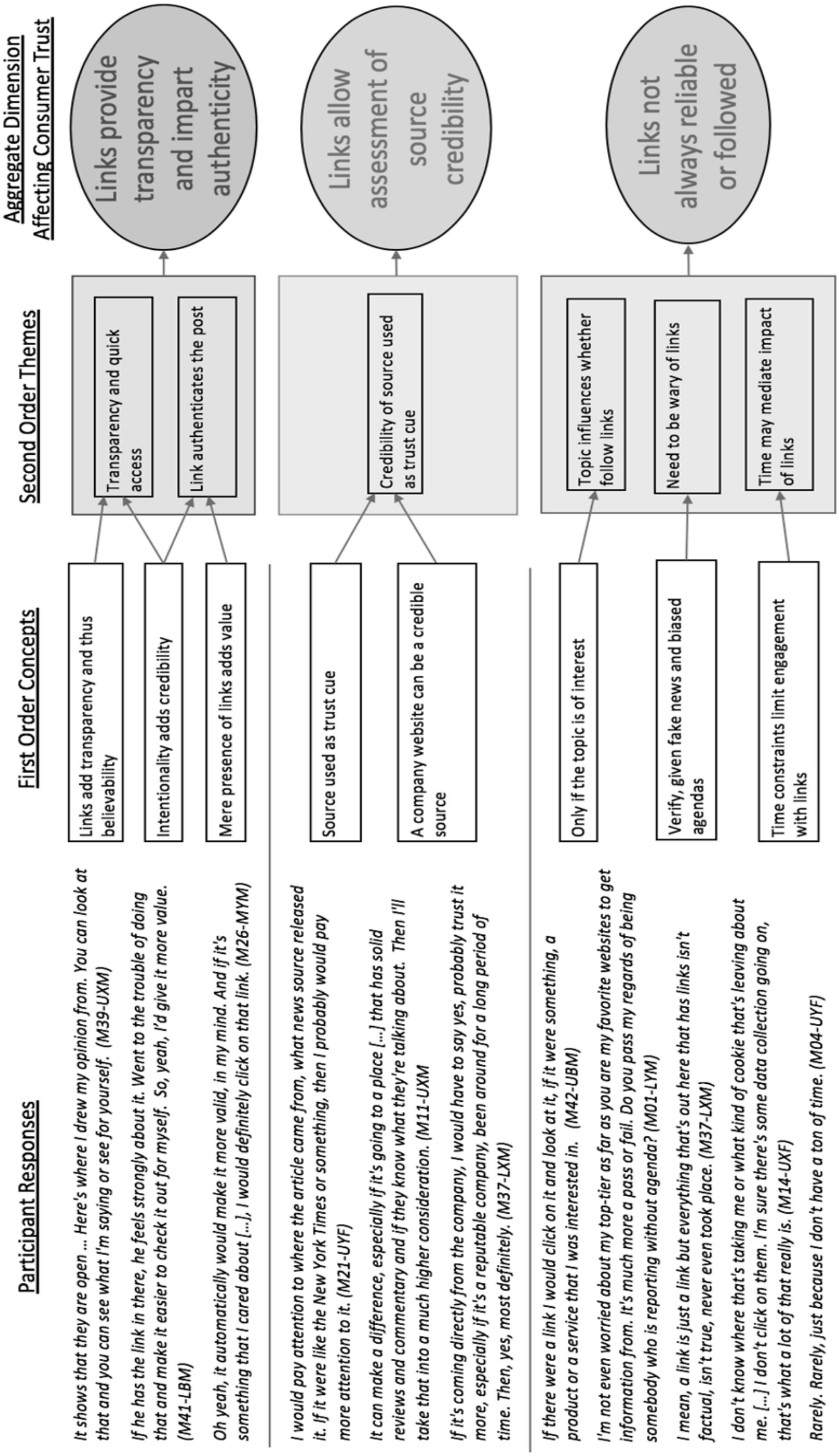


Participant Responses
First Order Concepts
Second Order Themes
Aggregate Dimension Affecting Consumer Trust
If I'm tagged in something, I'll definitely pay more attention to it because I want to see why. (M23-LYM)
When I get tagged in something, it's usually something we have in common, me and a friend. It wouldn't really change the way I viewed it. (M18-LYF)
If 10 of my other friends have liked this, chances are it's something that I would be interested in as well, or at least would interested in checking out. (M26-UYM)
Curiosity
Something we have in common
Indicator of relevance and interest
To me tagging says this will interest you directly and I think you should check it out. (M25-LXM)
Whoever has tagged me thinks that I would be interested in that for whatever various reasons. (M29-UBF)
'Liking' sometimes is an endorsement of the message but, for me most of the time, it's an acknowledgment of the person who posted the message. (M43-UBM)
First I go and see who the five friends were. [...] Then I'll go back and look at it and read it and see if I like it too. (M41-LBM)
When it pops up [...] I'm like "I use this every day. [...] Why don't I just 'like' them now and endorse them." (M03-UYM)
Tagging is a call to action due to friend's knowledge of me
'Liking' is a mild endorsement but mostly acknowledgement
Facebook's algorithm stimulates engagement with 'likes'
Friend connection creates strong call to view
Friends 'liking' content encourages engagement
Tags & Likes from friends often viewed
I've set my Facebook up with privacy where no one can post to my timeline unless I approve it. I don't want people posting inappropriate content. (M04-UYF)
I just kind of prefer to keep my feed my feed. (M25-LXM)
Tags are invasive
Tagged content is not my voice
Need for control of image engenders negative reaction
Tags can be resisted and rejected
To me, 'liking' something has become so overrated. [...] Everybody just 'likes' everything so you really don't get a full view on what people really think. (M19-LYF)
That's probably the least influential because it's so easy to 'like' something. I will just 'like' something even if I don't actually like it, sometimes. (M21-UYF)
If I were to categorize these in the amount that the consumer is interacting with the brand, I'd say that 'liking' is on the bottom. [...] It doesn't mean a lot to me when I see my friends do that. (M03-UYM)
If 24 of my friends 'liked' Proctor & Gamble, I'm like yeah okay, maybe they did it to get coupons too. (M20-LXF)
Overused
Not genuine
Meaningless
Likes often discounted

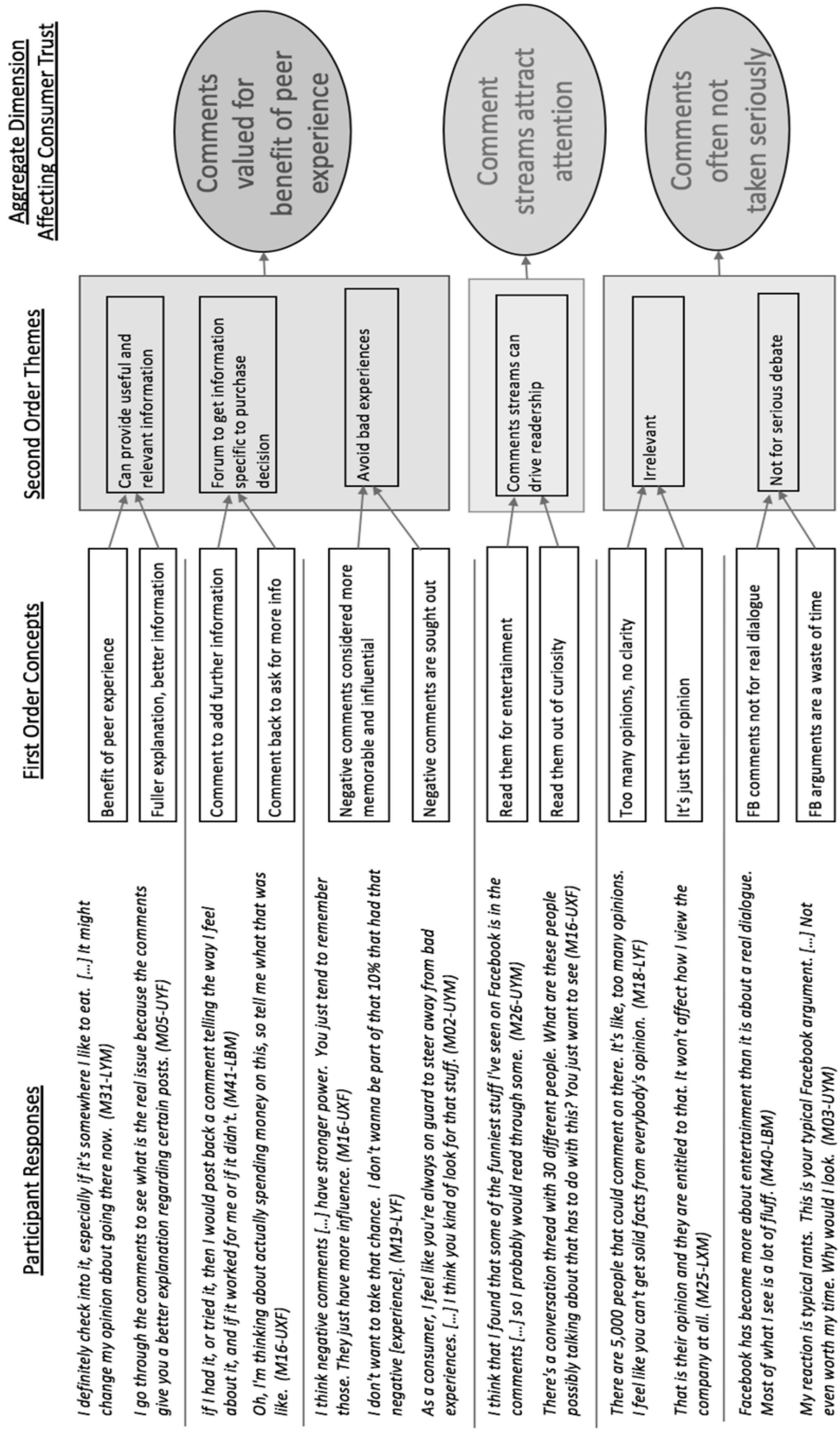
Trending & Critical Mass



Links


Participant Responses
First Order Concepts
Second Order Themes
Aggregate Dimension Affecting Consumer Trust
It shows that they are open ... Here's where I drew my opinion from. You can look at that and you can see what I'm saying or see for yourself. (M39-UXM)
If he has the link in there, he feels strongly about it. Went to the trouble of doing that and make it easier to check it out for myself. So, yeah, I'd give it more value. (M41-LBM)
Oh yeah, it automatically would make it more valid, in my mind. And if it's something that I cared about […], I would definitely click on that link. (M26-MYM)
Links add transparency and thus believability
Intentionality adds credibility
Mere presence of links adds value
Transparency and quick access
Link authenticates the post
Links provide transparency and impart authenticity
I would pay attention to where the article came from, what news source released it. If it were like the New York Times or something, then I probably would pay more attention to it. (M21-UYF)
It can make a difference, especially if it's going to a place […] that has solid reviews and commentary and if they know what they're talking about. Then I'll take that into a much higher consideration. (M11-UXM
If it's coming directly from the company, I would have to say yes, probably trust it more, especially if it's a reputable company, been around for a long period of time. Then, yes, most definitely. (M37-LXM)
Source used as trust cue
A company website can be a credible source
Credibility of source used as trust cue
Links allow assessment of source credibility
If there were a link I would click on it and look at it, if it were something, a product or a service that I was interested in. (M42-UBM)
I'm not even worried about my top-tier as far as you are my favorite websites to get information from. It's much more a pass or fail. Do you pass my regards of being somebody who is reporting without agenda? (M01-LYM)
I mean, a link is just a link but everything that's out here that has links isn't factual, isn't true, never even took place. (M37-LXM)
I don't know where that's taking me or what kind of cookie that's leaving about me. […] I don't click on them. I'm sure there's some data collection going on, that's what a lot of that really is. (M14-UXF)
Rarely. Rarely, just because I don't have a ton of time. (M04-UYF)
Only if the topic is of interest
Verify, given fake news and biased agendas
Time constraints limit engagement with links
Topic influences whether follow links
Need to be wary of links
Time may mediate impact of links
Links not always reliable or followed

Comments



Participant Responses
First Order Concepts
Second Order Themes
Aggregate Dimension Affecting Consumer Trust
I definitely check into it, especially if it's somewhere I like to eat. [...] It might change my opinion about going there now. (M31-LYM)
I go through the comments to see what is the real issue because the comments give you a better explanation regarding certain posts. (M05-UYF)
Benefit of peer experience
Fuller explanation, better information
if I had it, or tried it, then I would post back a comment telling the way I feel about it, and if it worked for me or if it didn't. (M41-LBM)
Oh, I'm thinking about actually spending money on this, so tell me what that was like. (M16-UXF)
Comment to add further information
Comment back to ask for more info
I think negative comments [...] have stronger power. You just tend to remember those. They just have more influence. (M16-UXF)
I don't want to take that chance. I don't wanna be part of that 10% that had that negative [experience]. (M19-LYF)
As a consumer, I feel like you're always on guard to steer away from bad experiences. [...] I think you kind of look for that stuff. (M02-UYM)
Negative comments considered more memorable and influential
Negative comments are sought out
Can provide useful and relevant information
Forum to get information specific to purchase decision
Avoid bad experiences
Comments valued for benefit of peer experience
I think that I found that some of the funniest stuff I've seen on Facebook is in the comments [...] so I probably would read through some. (M26-UYM)
There's a conversation thread with 30 different people. What are these people possibly talking about that has to do with this? You just want to see (M16-UXF)
Read them for entertainment
Read them out of curiosity
Comments streams can drive readership
Comment streams attract attention
There are 5,000 people that could comment on there. It's like, too many opinions. I feel like you can't get solid facts from everybody's opinion. (M18-LYF)
That is their opinion and they are entitled to that. It won't affect how I view the company at all. (M25-LXM)
Too many opinions, no clarity
It's just their opinion
Irrelevant
Facebook has become more about entertainment than it is about a real dialogue. Most of what I see is a lot of fluff. (M40-LBM)
My reaction is typical rants. This is your typical Facebook argument. [...] Not even worth my time. Why would I look. (M03-UYM)
FB comments not for real dialogue
FB arguments are a waste of time
Not for serious debate
Comments often not taken seriously