Integrity and Benevolence: an Examination of Their Distinct Roles in Building Consumer Trust

Fuan Li, Washington State University, USA
Lan Xu, Wuhan University, PRC
Nan Zhou, City University of Hong Kong, HK, PRC
Paul Miniard, Florida International University, USA
Zhilin Yang, City University of Hong Kong, HK, PRC

Despite important differences between integrity and benevolence, little has been done in examining the exact domain of each construct in the context of consumer-brand relationships and the distinct role each plays in consumer trust. Through a large scale survey, the present research examines the unique nature of the two constructs and the way in which they affect consumer trust. The findings confirm that perceived integrity and perceived benevolence are two distinct constructs and they affect consumer trust independently with each following a different behavioral pattern. The effects on trust of perceived benevolence and integrity were found to be moderated by consumers’ propensity to trust, information source, and relationship length. Integrity had a stronger effect on trust with consumers who had a low propensity to trust, who obtained brand information primarily from a third-party publication, and who were at the early stage of their relationship with the brand. On the contrary, perceived benevolence equally affected both low and high trusting people. It exerted more influence on people who obtained information primarily through personal communication and who were at the late stage of the consumer-brand relationship. These findings add additional insights into how integrity and benevolence each affects consumer trust. They should help marketing practitioners with their CRM efforts, especially when it comes to conveying their trustworthiness to consumers.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1008955/volumes/ap09/AP-09

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Integrity and Benevolence: An Examination of their Distinct Roles in Building Consumer Trust
Lan Xu, Wuhan University, China
Fuan Li, William Patterson University, USA*
Nan Zhou, City University of Hong Kong, China
Zhilin Yang, City University of Hong Kong, China
Paul Miniard, Florida International University, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumer trust has been found to play an important role in determining consumers’ value perceptions (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002), choices (Erdem and Swait 2004), and brand commitment and loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Beyond understanding the consequences of consumer trust, researchers have also explored its antecedents. Some (e.g., Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001) have focused solely on perceived competence, representing the ability and reliability of the to-be-trusted party to deliver what the consumer expects to receive from the exchange relationship. Others have broadened the search for trust antecedents to include benevolence (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002; Li, Zhou, Kashyap and Yang 2008; Kantsperger and Kunz 2010) and integrity (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Crosby, Evans, and Cowles, 1990). In accordance with the distinction between motive-based and principle-based virtues, benevolence captures the underlying motivation for one’s situation-specific behavior (e.g., whether one’s behavior is driven by concern for the well-being of a particular person). Integrity is a more enduring characteristic reflecting one’s moral character that transcends situational considerations (e.g., whether one behaves in a morally acceptable fashion regardless of the situation or who else is involved).

Although evidence of benevolence and integrity being important antecedents has accumulated independently of one another, research has yet to consider their potential to impact consumer trust simultaneously. This exploration of one to the exclusion of the other is perhaps a reflection of the challenges in capturing differences operationally despite their conceptual distinctions (Swaen and Chumpitaz 2008). In our investigation, we attempt to remedy this gap in the literature by examining simultaneously the influence of benevolence and integrity along with competence on consumer trust. Beyond documenting their difference at a measurement level, we further seek to illuminate their distinctions at a conceptual level by empirically supporting hypothesized differences in how their relationship with consumer trust is moderated by consumers’ propensity to trust, the information sources they rely upon during decision making, and the particular stage of the consumer-product relationship.

A professional market research firm in China collected data from 631 consumers in cities across different regions of China using a central location testing approach, a variation of the mall-intercept methodology. Participants responded to the required measures for a variety of products and services. The data was then analyzed using multiple regressions.

The findings confirm that perceived integrity and perceived benevolence are indeed two distinct constructs that affect consumer trust independently of each other and perceived competence. By examining how they interact with consumers’ propensity to trust, information sources, and stage of the consumer-product relationship, we found that benevolence and integrity respond differently to these moderators and their influence on consumer trust changes under different conditions. Integrity had a stronger effect on trust with consumers who had a low propensity to trust, who obtained brand information primarily from a third-party publication, or who were at the early stage of their relationship with the brand. In contrast, benevolence exerted more influence on consumers who obtained information primarily through personal communication or who were at the late stage of the consumer-brand relationship. Unlike integrity and contrary to our expectations, propensity to trust did not moderate the influence of perceived benevolence.

Some have suggested that because benevolence and integrity both have ethical connotations they can be integrated into one ethically-based factor (Tinsley 1996). Our findings do not favor such a perspective. To the contrary, our findings show that it is not only possible to provide distinct measurements of these constructs, but given their differences in how they respond to various moderating factors, it is essential to differentiate benevolence from integrity.

Our findings have important implications for marketing practitioners, especially when it comes to marketing communications. Marketers should consider the distinct role of integrity and benevolence in conveying their trustworthiness to consumers. For instance, because integrity and benevolence respond differently to the particular stage of the consumer-product relationship, it would make sense for marketing managers to place more or less emphasis on integrity versus benevolence when constructing trust appeals depending on the phase of the consumer-brand relationship. The integrity characteristics of the brand should be emphasized in the communication program earlier in the relationship, while the emphasis should shift to benevolence later in the relationship. Moreover, they should rely more on third-party publications rather than interpersonal communication when emphasizing perceived integrity in their communication.

REFERENCES
Mediating Analysis,” *Managing Service Quality*, 20 (1) 4-25


