Cynics and Skeptics: Consumer Dispositional Trust

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated cynicism in a consumer context, using qualitative interviews in a grounded theory approach. Analysis revealed an underlying construct of consumer dispositional trust. Consumers generalize trust violations across various categories and see a generalized trust as part of their personality. Explorations of cynicism in the consumer context reflected a belief that companies lack integrity and a negative affect toward companies, with an emphasis on dishonesty or empty promises. Consumer cynicism is associated with disparaging and withdrawal behavior, precautions and retribution-seeking. Perhaps surprisingly, cynical consumers demonstrated very strong brand loyalty to the few companies they could trust.

Social commentators claim cynicism in America is reaching crisis proportions, and public opinion polls reflect decreasing faith in politics, media and education systems. Academic and popular literature about societal or political cynicism often point to Western consumer culture, especially advertising, as a major driver of this shift toward an increasing perception of a cultural hollowness (Goldman 1996; Stivers 1994). This pilot study investigated cynicism directed toward consumption itself, using qualitative interviews in a grounded theory approach. Analysis revealed an underlying construct of consumer dispositional trust, a relatively stable tendency to trust or distrust across multiple consumption situations. At the extreme distrust end of the continuum, consumer beliefs, affect and behaviors can be called consumer cynicism.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer Trust
At a macroconceptual level, conceptualizations of trust are fairly consistent in the vast trust literature, predominantly featuring two dimensions, competence (perceived ability to meet customer needs) and benevolence (perceived willingness to put the customer ahead of the self) (Doney 1997; Ganesan and Hess 1997; Singh and Sirdeshmukh 2000). Indeed these two dimensions of trust parallel communication work in source credibility and have remained relatively consistent since the days of Aristotle (McCroskey and Teven 1999; Wanzelniend and Powell 1993). Most of the marketing literature on trust focuses on channels and business-to-business relationships. In addition, Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) recently provided an in-depth analysis of the consumer trust concept, focusing on the trust concept itself rather than its consequences. They distinguish between trustworthiness (consumers’ perceptions of company and frontline employee behavior) and trust (consumers’ self-reported belief that the company and employees are dependable, competent, of high integrity and responsive to consumers).

In academic literature and common language use, trust is consistently represented as a relationship-specific construct. In contrast, this paper introduces the construct of consumer dispositional trust, an individual difference variable which impacts the way consumers interpret consumption interactions and their expectations for trustworthy behavior across multiple companies and situations. In terms of models of specific relationship trust, dispositional trust might be seen as an individual difference variable influencing trust, along with such factors as norms and perceptions of dependence and power.

Cynicism
Although cynicism has been a philosophical and literary construct for centuries, it has emerged as a social scientific construct only in about the last 50 years. In addition to general cynicism, social scientists have identified specific cynicisms targeted at specific institutions: work (occupational) cynicism, organizational or employee cynicism and organizational change cynicism (Abraham 2000; Dean et al. 1998). This paper proposes consumer cynicism as another specific cynicism worthy of investigation.

General or specific, cynicism is described as a learned attitude formed through the process Kanter and Mirvis describe: unrealistic expectations lead to disappointment, which leads to disillusion, a “sense of being let down or of letting oneself down, and more darkly, the sense of being deceived, betrayed or used by others” (1989, p.3). The first steps of this process correspond to widely accepted expectancy disconfirmation theory. Satisfaction is determined more by performance in relation to expectations than by performance in any objective sense. Scholars have portrayed negative disconfirmation of expectations as the primary mechanism for customer dissatisfaction (e.g. Oliver and Bearden 1985). Yet cynics are not merely dissatisfied—they are bitter, angry and resentful. They adopt the cynical attitude to ensure they will not be “taken for suckers” again (Kanter and Mirvis 1989, p.3). In academic terms, the cynicism attitude is characterized by “negative affect” (Dean et al. 1998).

The notion of empty promises or false appearances is a critical element common to all conceptualizations of cynicism. Although the deliberate creation of unrealistic expectations is not always included in formal definitions of cynicism, references to a fundamental disconnect between a publicly presented image and reality characterize all discussions of cynicism. The fundamental disconnect between the presented image and reality is necessary but not sufficient for cynicism. Cynicism also incorporates a feeling of manipulation or ethical violation, exploiting others for one’s own interest (Chaloupka 1999). The pretense of unselfishness to mask selfish goals lies at the heart of the cynicism concept. It also lies at the heart of criticisms about advertising and other marketing messages.

Cynicism in the consumption context: Relevant consumer behavior research
Cynicism has not been studied in the consumption context per se, but research in other areas of consumer behavior suggests consumers may in fact be feeling cynical. The consumer alienation construct incorporates attitudes of distrust toward businesses and a feeling of being manipulated (Allison 1978; Durand and Lambert 1985), but also incorporates elements unrelated to cynicism, such as confidence in purchasing skills. Scholars have also found evidence of considerable consumer skepticism toward advertising claims (i.e. Koslow 2000), which relates to the disbelief component of cynicism but does not encompass the perception of deliberate manipulation or the negative affect of cynicism. A growing body of research on anti-consumption attitudes, exemplified by the 2002 Psychology and Marketing special issue on the topic and the Culture Jamming film presented at ACR 2002, suggests at least some consumers are feeling enough discontent to rebel through behaviors ranging from voluntary simplicity to defacing advertisements.
Thus, existing literature supports the notion that a cynicism-like construct has the potential to explain consumer attitudes and behavior, but the precise nature of this construct is not clear. The approach to this study was exploratory, with research questions in mind such as: Do consumers have attitudes resembling cynicism about the consumption process? What should a cynicism construct look like in the consumption context? How does it develop? What aspects or level of the consumption process is targeted—individual companies? Consumption culture?

METHODOLOGY

The conceptual framework outlined here is based on eight semi-structured interviews conducted February 28-March 7, 2003. These eight interviews are a pilot study for a larger interview project now in progress. Interview methodology is appropriate for the subject because cynicism is a conscious, even deliberate attitude. Cynicism is depicted in art and discussed in the public forum and everyday conversation. Although they may use other terms, people reflect on and attempt to manage their own cynicism. Thus, people are well qualified to report on their own cynicism, and their understanding and naïve theories are an essential part of the construct.

Sample and Procedure

The purpose of the study was initial conceptual groundwork on consumer cynicism construct, not to ascertain what proportion of the population is cynical about consumption, a question left for later research. Consumption-related cynicism could impact any consumer. For this pilot study, a convenience sample of members of the Hickman High School Music Boosters association (parents of high school students) was recruited. As a token of appreciation, the association was paid $15 for each interview. For the full study, interviews will draw from a variety of community organizations selected to represent a broad spectrum of the population.

Volunteers from the boosters association scheduled individual appointments. After each subject had reviewed and signed a written consent form, interviews were conducted based loosely on an interview guide (McCracken 1988). Interviews typically lasted about an hour. The interviews were recorded on audio cassettes and professionally transcribed.

Questionnaire

Leading respondents were of particular concern because of possible social desirability and social contagion effects. Once cynical ideas are presented, participants may jump on the bandwagon in order not to appear naïve. Scholars refer to a culture of cynicism (Chaloupka 1999; Goldfarb 1991; Stivers 1994). To avoid leading respondents, interview questions began with positively valenced prompts such as asking about trust in a brand or company and used a balance of positive and negative prompts throughout. “Cynicism” or “cynical” are highly charged words laden with inconsistent but strong negative connotations of pessimism as well as the more positive connotations of sophistication. Therefore, the words “cynicism” and “skepticism” were not introduced by the interviewer until near the close of the session, unless subjects themselves spontaneously introduced those terms. Instead, the emphasis of the interview prompts was on terms associated with potential cynicism elements such as trust-mistrust, ethics, or overpromising.

Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed following the grounded theory procedures for open and axial coding outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Although the process was fluid, with multiple types of coding going on simultaneously, coding was loosely organized into phases focusing on increasingly high levels of analysis, similar to the process recommended by McCracken (1988). Initially, transcripts were read carefully line by line and labeled or categorized using open codes. Next, the transcript was read again, with a greater emphasis on code description and consistency. Third, the codes and associated quotations from the text were reviewed (moving up a level of abstraction from the whole text to just the coded quotations), and notes and comments were made on emerging conceptual issues. The concept of the dispositional trust continuum began to emerge about half-way through the coding process; after that point a profile memo was written for each interview subject addressing his or her trust/cynicism outlook. Finally, the analysis moved up yet another level of abstraction to focus primarily on clustering the codes, describing their properties and dimensions and defining relationships among them using axial coding. Throughout the process, the cynicism literature was used as a point of constant comparison (Strauss and Corbin 1998), drawing on not only the definitions specified in social scientific journals, but also the varying perspectives on cynicism in social commentary.

Although a formal audit was not completed, a researcher not involved in the project did conduct an independent open and axial coding analysis on a subset of three interviews. His conclusions were fairly similar, noting similar elements of the trust and cynicism definitions, a trust-cynicism continuum, and a dichotomy between a relationship-specific trust and a more general trust tendency.

EMERGENT CONSTRUCT: CONSUMER DISPOSITIONAL TRUST

The construct of consumer dispositional trust emerged from the data. As noted in the literature review, trust is typically described as partners’ attitudes and expectations in a specific relationship. Insight from the interviews suggests the existence of an additional type of trust, one that is generalized across multiple contexts. This paper proposes consumer dispositional trust as a relatively stable tendency to expect (un)trustworthy behavior across a variety of contexts.

In traditional models of relationship specific trust, dispositional trust would join the ranks of the many factors contributing to the development of trust in a specific relationship. Its influence would likely be particularly strong at the beginning of a relationship in the face of a lack of more specific information. Yet the influence of dispositional trust is not limited to trust in specific relationships. In the consumption context, dispositional trust appears to also influence consumer search and decision-making behavior and consumers’ interpretation of or response to myriad consumption interactions. Furthermore, distrustful consumers try to spread their distrust by socializing others.

Trust in the Consumer Context

As previously mentioned, the trust literature typically identifies two dimensions: competence and benevolence. Although consumers in this study mentioned product quality and skill of the company when talking about trust in particular companies or brands, the benevolence dimension seems to be much more salient when talking about generalized trust. When asked to define what the idea of trust in a company meant to them, interview participants emphasized fair treatment and living up to promises:

“In the sense of the company I think that they would treat me fairly, they would have a good product, a good service behind
that product…. if I would have a problem that they would take care of it, they would try to resolve it, they would value me as a customer, and try to do their best to keep my business.” (I3)

“Trust that the product is going to do what it says it’s going to do” (I2)

“If they back up their product, I have full confidence that if there is ever a problem with this product that I will get full customer courtesy, I think that’s a part of it.” (I6)

“The break down for me probably occurs probably in some [support] service … I have to sometimes really get right with people and make them do what they say they were going to do.” (I7)

Interview participants seemed fairly tolerant of problems with the actual products, but saw mishandling of their concerns as central to their concept of trusting in a company.

[Because so many of the components are not under the manufacturer’s control] “you’re going to have people and places and things and equipment that do not perform. Now, it’s how you handle its effect on your consumer, that is to me what speaks to ethics of doing business.”(I7)

Self-Characterization

Interview participants clearly perceived themselves to have some kind of generalized trusting/distrustful perspective and see this as a personality trait. Interview questions were phrased in terms of asking consumers to think of specific examples and then asking them to assess whether such an incident was typical of their experience. Other prompts asked their opinions of “most companies.” Instead of responding in terms of perceived frequency of company behavior, participants often responded with statements of self-characterization such as:

“I think I put trust into a company until it’s proven otherwise.” I8

“I won’t use companies or I won’t work with people who I distrust and for me I’ve developed sort of a sense that I can—I know when you are putting me on, or when you are real flaky, and I don’t like to do business with people like that. ‘I’m just a sales call away from being your best friend,’–No, I don’t like people like that.”

“Now I’m certainly not a naïve consumer, but I thought that was pretty interesting yesterday.” II

Generalization

Generalization is critical in the formation of dispositional distrust. Interview participants saw negative incidents as learning experiences which changed their behavior in the future. One company’s failure was generalized to shape expectations for other companies’ behavior. Even trusting consumers generalized from an incident to a product category, and consumers in this study typically described negative incidents using category terms rather than specific brands.

For example, Interview 3 described an incident shopping with her sister for a computer in which the salesperson recommended a voice recognition package. Later they discovered “in the fine print” that the package did not include all the required hardware; the low price was not such a good deal after all.

I: So next time, later, if you are in the market to get voice recognition software…

R: I’m definitely not going to look for theirs, I mean—I would actually—I don’t remember the name myself because I’m not in the market for it but if I were I’d call up my sister and find out what it was. Because I definitely do remember the experience even though I didn’t associate the name with it.

I: What about other software?

R: I think it makes you more skeptical about any of it, I mean you want to read the boxes closer and be sure you are getting exactly what you think you are buying.

I: What about things other than software? Do you think it would carry over?

R: Probably not so much of one experience but I think the more experiences like that that you have with products as you buy—if I also bought panty hose and there was something funny about them and also about something else and you know, I mean, eventually, if you have enough of those experiences then I think it kind of makes you skeptical about everything, but as long as it more of an isolated thing I think it just kind of makes me more skeptical about software in general.

The literature also shows support for the idea of generalization. Research on the sleeper effect (Allen and Stiff 1989; Gruder and et al. 1978; Pratkanis, Greenwald, Leippe, and Baumgardner 1988), in which people remember information but dissociate it from the source, provides tangential support for the notion that distinctions among sources may erode over time. Is it likely that consumers would forget exactly which brand was responsible for violating their trust? Some studies do suggest that consumers are capable of becoming confused about brand names (Allen and Stiff 1989; Foxman, Berger, and Cote 1992; Kapferer 1995) and about which attributes belong to which brand (Kent and Allen 1994). In the example above, she has already forgotten the specific brand name, even though the incident was recent and her feelings were strong. Research on associative learning also supports the possibility that generalization can occur. Leippe, Greenwald and Baumgardner (1982) found that, when exposed to a series of advertisements including negative and neutral effects about different brands, consumers generalized the negative characteristics to the neutral brands when the brands were similar. This generalization has significant managerial implications—a competitor’s violation of trust can impact the whole product category.

Although interview participants had little difficulty in thinking of product categories that were particularly trustworthy (grocery stores, brand name foods, pharmaceuticals) or untrustworthy (hair regrowth products, used car dealers, pharmaceuticals), they also categorized in other unanticipated ways. One common categorization was of particular marketing practices. Not surprisingly, participants expressed skepticism of mail-order companies, ordering off a television commercial, and telemarketers. Several participants referred to “bait-and-switch” advertising (sometimes even using the term), in which promoted limited time sales did not live up to promises. Rebates and additional fees for maintenance contracts were also mentioned:

“I feel like they are trying to sell me this washer or dryer or they’re trying to sell me this TV set and then they say, oh but then for $200.00 we’ll give you this extended warranty and so
forth and you’re like, wait a second, back up your product, why do I have to pay for you to back up your product?” (I6)

“They are all doing the same thing, they are all issuing rebates. But you have to come home, fill out the paperwork, mail the damn stuff off, and what if it gets there and 4 weeks later somebody opens it and says ‘Oh, you didn’t put the UPC code in it?’ Does it die there? Will they give you a notice? Will you ever see your money? Well, I don’t know, do you have a personal secretary that will keep track of all the rebates you’ve got coming in?…They hope that you will not send in the rebate so they’ll get full price for it. They figure you are too stupid or too forgetful… I can’t really say it is misleading but I think that they are banking on you either being too late or too stupid to do something that you shouldn’t have to do. They should just give you the price.” (I7)

Another common categorization among interview participants was to trust small, local companies or stores over large, national “conglomerates.” Participants almost all raised this issue themselves before reaching the planned prompts on the questionnaire. As one fairly cynical consumer put it, “The larger the company the more I distrust it” (I1). Interview participants suggested several reasons for their trust in smaller companies: being more accountable because of being in the community, being more dependent on a small custom base (need for repeat business), and being less insulated in layers of hierarchy. Several participants felt strongly about this and made a deliberate effort to patronize local businesses even at higher prices.

**COMPLEX CONTINUUM: TRUSTING, SKEPTICAL AND CYNICAL CONSUMERS**

The consumer dispositional trust construct presented in this paper can be seen as a continuum, but it is a complex one. This pilot study suggests consumers with a predominantly distrustful outlook differ from consumers with a predominantly trusting outlook in more ways than simply degree of trust. Degree of generalization, salience, and affect are also relevant dimensions. During analysis, profiles were written for each interview participant summarizing the dispositional trust demonstrated, and these profiles were organized into clusters along the continuum, loosely categorized as trusting, skeptical and cynical. These were not intended to represent hard categories or formal classifications and the boundaries of each category are fluid.

**Trusting Consumers**

In this study, for consumers clustered at the most trusting end of the continuum, trust seemed to be less salient in the consumption context. Examples of companies or brands they particularly trusted or distrusted did not come to mind readily, and satisfaction issues, rather than trust issues, were mentioned more frequently when asked to explain brand and store preferences.

“I think for them [preferred stores] I look at it more as I like the selection they have, the prices they have and so, I don’t know if I would say it was a trust sort of thing, I guess there’s a certain amount of trust that kind of you know, you trust that they are going to kind of cater to your needs, but, not in the sense that we normally think of trust.” (I3)

“I don’t know that I line up companies and say these are trustworthy and these aren’t. As a whole, I just know that I’ve had good experiences with Toyota and most recently got a Ford Explorer and that’s been a real good vehicle for me.” (I5)

Interview participants in the “trusting” category made fewer self-characterization statements related to trust issues—they did not describe themselves as “skeptical” or “savvy” or “cautious” consumers as more skeptical consumers did.

**Skeptical Consumers**

Skeptical consumers represent the moderate cluster on the consumer dispositional trust continuum presented in this paper. Skepticism is defined as “an attitude of doubt or a disposition of incredulity either in general or toward a particular object” (Webster’s 1990).

The advertising skepticism construct in the literature is closely related: “Skepticism implies that consumers recognize that advertisers have specific motives, such as persuading consumers, and therefore that advertisers’ communications may be biased and varied in their truthfulness” (Mangleburg and Bristol 1998, p. 11). Although it is described as negatively valenced (Boush, Friesstat, and Rose 1994), advertising skepticism is characterized as a needed consumer skill developed through socialization. In the context of this paper, consumer skepticism is not limited to advertising claims. All of the interview participants indicated some degree of skepticism toward advertising, sometimes to the point of discounting its claims completely. Even trusting consumers were skeptical of some advertising: “It may say that it can clean something and it would be really easy; you’d just squirt, let it rest, then take it off and it won’t do that.” (I2)

Skeptical consumers in this study believe they need to be cautious and on guard against scams, but they don’t indicate much negative affect or resentment. Associated behaviors seem to be limited to precautions—reading the fine print, checking the warranty, shopping around and researching major purchases. Their perception seems to be that there are a few truly untrustworthy or unethical companies, but that many companies can be trustworthy.

“I’m not like overly distrustful of companies I don’t think, but not just you know automatic either…something had to happen to cause me to build a little more trust in one company than the other.” (I6)

Later, this participant characterized herself as “skeptical,” which she defined as: “A little more cautious about thinking and checking things out before you just blindly trust.” (I6) Skeptical consumers saw themselves as becoming more skeptical overtime, but did not point to specific moments of disillusionment. Instead they referred to a gradual development and also mentioned media stories such as the tobacco companies, pharmaceuticals, and Firestone Tires.

Some skeptical consumers in this study see the trust as residing not in the companies themselves, but in external factors that would keep companies in line: competition/the marketplace, the legal system (fear of getting sued), licensing and certification, and government restrictions (FDA). For skeptical consumers, trust issues are salient. Compared to trusting consumers, they seem to be better able to recall specific incidents when trust was built or violated and are more likely to see preferred brands as something they trust.

**Cynical Consumers**

Two interview participants were clustered at the cynical end of the consumer dispositional trust continuum, and some consumers in
the skeptical group also made cynical statements about certain product categories. Cynical study participants are also skeptical, but, consistent with representations of the cynicism construct in social science literature, cynicism in the consumer context seems to be characterized by a belief in a pervasive lack of integrity among consumer companies and negative affect such as bitterness or resentment, as suggested by Interview 7’s comment about the rebate process, “It’s like I’m this little puppet and they are just manipulating me.”

Cynics in this study perceive a pervasive dishonesty or sham and see companies as frequently manipulating consumers. “[department store] has this big sale right now. All of a sudden everything in the store is just ‘oh this is perfect for you’, ‘oh I’ll be sure that I can find it for you,’ ‘I’ll hold it for you.’ It is just a motivation to move the merchandise out of the store … Like yesterday, I tried on something that is really too small on me and it was really awful. And the clerk said, ‘Oh this looks really great on you!’ … I felt very strongly that they have their meetings an hour before the store opens, and they have their motivational talks, and they have sales incentives. And that is the way the world works. Now I’m certainly not a naïve consumer, but I thought that was pretty interesting yesterday.” (I1)

All interview participants indicated that the underlying motive for most, if not all, companies was the bottom line profit. But cynics in this study expressed concern or irritation that businesses’ over-eager pursuit of profit would trample other important considerations such as consumer safety, and that emphasis on short-term profits undermines company motivation to really build quality and customer satisfaction.

“I’m saying that profit means that I retain you over time as a customer that means I treat you good, I give you good service, I give you good products, I don’t over-promise anything—and if I do make a mistake, I do apologize for it and I try to correct that. That’s long term, that is profit. To me. And what I’m telling you is what I see today in the market place is that companies have a very short term approach to profit from the standpoint that they will not retain you because they will over-promise you and they will not deliver on service and they will treat you like you are not important….I know I keep going back to the same thing, which is a long term look but you don’t get a customer today and then you blow them off tomorrow.” (I7)

For cynical consumers in this study, their dispositional trust was very salient. Descriptions of themselves as consumers emphasized beliefs that companies are untrustworthy and their own tendency to take extra precautions. In other contexts, two categories of behavior are typically associated with cynicism, disparaging and withdrawal behaviors. These categories can also be seen in the consumer context. Cynical participants described efforts to socialize others by bringing children up to be critical consumers, getting friends on board for boycotts, and spreading negative word-of-mouth. They also described, of course, avoiding buying from distrusted companies, but also mentioned trying to reduce consumption in general, avoiding impulse buys, avoiding negotiation and avoiding shopping. Two other types of behaviors were mentioned: precautions and retribution.

Like skeptical participants, they saw the risk of being “ripped off” as something they could minimize through caution, but to a greater degree. The following story from Interview 7 shows his inclination to take precautions. The quote also shows the salience of the dispositional or generalized aspect of trust—his interrupts his own specific story to generalize to a perceived tendency of lower-level personnel to go back on verbal promises, a recurring theme for him:

“Somebody stole my credit card numbers so I had to cancel … and in the course of handling it—or any kind of daily chores—you’re going to have a conversation with somebody over the phone, some sort of personnel, and they’ll tell you ‘Sir, you’re absolutely right somebody made those charges and we’re going to take those off your card, blah, blah, blah.’ Well who was it? When did they say it? What was … you know what I’m saying? So if you don’t record—and I have recorded conversations. I literally have recorded conversations.”

The cynical participants also described efforts to gain retribution when unfairly treated, whereas, at least in this pilot study, more trusting consumers seemed to be more inclined not to bother. This contrasts with some implications of cynicism literature in other contexts, in which cynics withdraw, see themselves as powerless, and avoid futile efforts to change (Govier 1997). None of the participants were interested in doing business with companies they didn’t trust, but for non-cynics, the motivation seemed to be primarily preventing their own dissatisfaction. For cynics, their avoidance of distrusted companies seemed to be motivated by an additional concern: punishing the company.

“It was totally unsatisfactory. I went to the Attorney General, I complained to somebody in Illinois where their office was, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that I get restitution but I’m fairly savvy but the average guy is going to give up.” (I7)

“I’m thinking about not shopping there any more even though I have a historical loyalty … not that they would miss me but I think that you can only accomplish things if you start with one person at a time.” (I1)

Trust, Brand Loyalty and the Cynical Consumer

Initial expectations for the project were that a possible negative effect of cynicism might be a decreased capacity for brand loyalty. But as the dispositional trust construct emerged, it became clear that it influenced trust in specific relationships but it was not part of trust in specific relationships. Dispositional trust is not a capacity for trust; it is an inclination or predisposition to trust. If the predisposition not to trust (as in the case of cynicism) can be overcome, trust is still possible.

The cynical interview participants described themselves as brand loyal and talked more enthusiastically about the companies, brands, shops and salespeople they especially trusted more than any of the other interview participants. Against the background of so many distrusted companies, these exceptions stood out in sharp relief. For the cynical participants, trust built on previous experience was a primary reason for brand or store preference. They were more aware of specific brand names and seemed to see themselves as having a relationship or “doing business with” their preferred companies. The cynical consumers frequently mentioned being willing to pay more and go out of their way to buy from businesses they trusted and to rely on a trusted store or brand as a shortcut to purchase decision research. Interview 7 now limits his car shopping to one dealer—the only used car dealer he feels he can trust.

As with the punishing behavior, the motivation for the brand loyal behavior seemed to go beyond a desire to ensure their own satisfaction to a sense of rewarding the few trustworthy companies.
Cynical interview participants perceive a competitive business environment which discourages integrity in companies. They also saw consumers’ own behavior as a major component of that business environment through consumer overemphasis on price (over quality), abuse of exchange and return policies, and failure to research. Perhaps the cynical consumers feel a need to try to counterbalance these other consumers, or perhaps they just feel a need to try to “help” their companies succeed in a competitive world; clearly they feel some responsibility to demonstrate their support of trustworthy companies.

Development of Cynicism
The cynicism literature describes a process of disillusionment leading to the development of the learned attitude of cynicism (e.g. Kanter and Mirvis 1989), but studies do not report individuals’ accounts of their experience of this process. Cynical interview participants did point to specific personal incidents that caused them to increase their feelings of skepticism and could describe a generalization process.

“My dad died of cancer in 76; and I started reading all of the material about pollution of our food supply and I realized that chances were that our food supply was not as pure as it used to be because of the intensive farming, chemicals, pesticides, everything that was increasingly being used to produce more, better yields, and so up to that point I never gave any kind of thought to trusting the food but when that happened awareness finally that probably your foods are not as good as you thought. That was certainly a breakthrough, it was a different era for me.” (II)

“I looked at a used vehicle and before I got home they were calling me and telling me they were taking that vehicle to the auction. ‘We’ve got to sell it, we’ve got to make up the amout,’ high pressure, high pressure, high pressure…[a few weeks later] I was talking to this friend of mine at [another dealer] and I told him the high pressure tactics used and he said, ‘They didn’t take it to the auction, that’s just a technique.’ I said, ‘You think they actually lied to me face to face,’ and he said, ‘Yeah, I bet it is.’ I went back over to the lot and it was still sitting on the lot. I caught them in that lie and that–it is buyer beware. I’m fully aware of that.” (I1)

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

DIRECTIONS
Using a grounded theory approach, this pilot study uncovers the concept of dispositional trust, and the meaning and structure of cynicism in the consumer context is explored. Interview participants’ comments clearly demonstrated that they perceived a trusting or distrustful outlook as a personality characteristic. Consumers in this study generalized violations of trust from one company across varying levels such as product category or promotion technique (i.e. rebates). This has significant implications for managers because the actions of a competitor clearly influence consumers’ disposition to trust in the same product category—even for the most trusting consumers. Interview participants’ observations in this study suggest that trust violations anywhere in the product category have implications for anyone in the product category, suggesting perceptions of industry standards as a possible area of future research.

Explanations of the meaning and structure of cynicism in the consumer context reflect the same elements characteristic of other types of cynicism: a belief that the target lacks integrity and a negative affect, with an emphasis on dishonesty or empty promises. Behaviors typically associated with cynicism in other contexts fall into two major categories: disparaging behaviors and withdrawal behaviors. In the consumer context, the study suggests two other categories of behaviors are relevant: precautions and retribution. The cynical consumers’ discussion of specific moments which shaped their cynical outlook offers a potential contribution to the cynicism literature as well as to consumer research and should be explored in future research. Perhaps the most interesting finding of this study is the committed, enthusiastic brand loyalty shown by cynical consumers.

Based on this pilot study, a full-scale interview study is in progress to further develop the theoretical constructs. Some of the research questions being pursued so far investigate the link between consumer dispositional trust and anti-consumption attitudes and consumer self-confidence and consumer notions of societal and economic forces behind their generalizations about companies. After further qualitative work to shape this construct, future research may include development of a quantitative measure.

WORKS CITED


