The relationship of trust in public relations: toward a model of optimal contextual matching

Abstract

Public relations specialists and large corporations go to great lengths to develop and maintain a relationship of trust with their stakeholders. To build this trust, which is nevertheless intrinsic to the definition of public relations, specialists in the field do not have a model specific to their practice to guide their action. A review of the literature has led us to hypothesize a graduated relationship of trust on a continuum ranging from a positive pole to negative pole of trust. Forty semi-structured interviews were conducted with public relations specialists and their stakeholders in order to compare this hypothesis with their practice in a real context and thereby define the components of a relationship of trust in public relations. Analysis of the data resulted in a reformulation of the original hypothesis and the development of a model of optimal contextual matching.

KeyWords

Public relations, trust, model, public relations practice, stakeholders

Introduction

Public relations is a relatively young academic discipline compared to other disciplines such as law, medicine or psychology. As a professional practice, however, it has developed quite rapidly. Despite the thousands of jobs and the revenue the industry generates, the existence of associations and the growing number of researchers and students in this discipline, public relations specialists have difficulty being seen as trustworthy. In many people's minds, the very idea of public relations is associated with lies, disinformation and influence peddling (Baker, 1993; Chomsky and McChesney, 2000; Ramonet, 2000, 2001; Stauber and Rampton, 2004).

Yet public relations specialists are not alone in being mistrusted by their stakeholders. The crisis of trust is also (and especially?) directed toward big business and its specific methods. Today, stakeholders want to be kept informed and, above all, taken into consideration when a company adopts behaviour that generates negative externalities (pollution, loss of quality of life, property devaluation, for example) that have a direct or indirect impact on them. However, the discourse of a company that seeks to show stakeholders its goodwill, sound management and accountability is often perceived by them as a "layer of ethics on a cracked facade" (De la Broise and Lamarche, 2006, p. 9). This skepticism toward corporate discourse poses a problem for public relations specialists: how to build a relationship of trust with stakeholders? Given the importance of the notion of trust — intrinsically linked to the definition of public relations[1] — what are the factors that condition the establishment and development of a relationship of trust between the public relations specialist and the company's stakeholders? Is it possible to develop a model of relationships of trust in public relations?

1. What is trust?

In a general sense, trust can be defined as a belief based on one party's perception of another party's integrity. In this definition, integrity refers to the belief that the other party will live up

[1] The scientific and professional literature does not offer a common definition of the term "public relations" (Dagenais, 1999; Gitter and Jaspers, 1982; Grunig, 1992; Ledingham *et al. 1997;* Sauvé, 2010; Van Ruler, 2005). In September 2007, the CPRS mandated three of its members to record the definitions of public relations used in university courses. Close to 460 definitions were found. The idea of trust is contained in most of these definitions.

to its promises (Chouk and Perrien, 2005). The scientific literature also offers several definitions of trust involving a negative pole and a positive pole.

1.1 The positive and negative poles of the definition of the relationship of trust

The various definitions of trust specify two poles, positive and negative. The negative pole of the definition of the relationship of trust suggests that the process of building trust is a calculation, i.e., that trust results from a rational calculation of gains and risks associated with each possibility (Offe, 1999). It is based on the hypothesis that one acts first according to one's own interests, out of egoism. Ruse, deception, non-compliance with rules, etc., are legitimate means to achieve one's ends. Cooperative relations are then simply illusory. At the other end is the positive pole of the definition of the relationship of trust, which proposes that one of the key aspects of trust lies in the presumption that the other party is unmotivated by opportunism (Bidault and Jarillo, 1995). In other words, trust corresponds to the belief that the other person's behaviour is honest and dictated by pursuit of a common long-term interest rather than the desire to maximize personal interest in the short-term (Kumar, 1996). Most studies that analyze trust from the standpoint of the positive pole incorporate a moral component in their definitions (Hosmer, 1995).

1.2 Types of trust

There are also several approaches to trust, depending on the discipline. The scientific literature identifies five types of trust among disciplines often seen as related to public relations (sociology, psychology, management, marketing and economics): affective trust, cognitive trust, relational trust, organizational trust, and lastly, rational trust.

Affective trust is trust created by the emotion felt by a person who decides to extend his trust, and by personal qualities seen in the individual in whom trust is placed. This type of trust is primarily the result of an act of faith, or the trust that a person places in family members or people belonging to the same social group, or a trust invested almost automatically and unconsciously in a charismatic individual or someone with individual qualities such as kindness, discretion, openness, empathy, fairness, flexibility, honesty, sympathy, loyalty, etc.

Cognitive trust, meanwhile, is based on individual information and dependence on another person (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). This type of trust corresponds to the fact that one consciously chooses the persons in whom one will trust, as well as how and under what circumstances. This type of trust is based on the other party's recognized (rather than perceived) personal characteristics, such as benevolence, competence, credibility, discretion, availability, openness, empathy, fairness, integrity, reliability, loyalty, reputation, etc.

Relational trust rests on a broader foundation than affective and cognitive trust. It develops more readily when the pursuit of common goals requires frequent communication and shared routines (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). Sharing a common culture or similar world view is also a factor that favours development of relational trust (Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Mangematin, 1997). It is also facilitated by a cooperative attitude when working in teams, and absence of cheating (Thuderoz, Mangematin and Harrison, 1999). It is based mainly on a cooperative attitude by both parties, the duration of the relationship, past experience, frequency of interactions, investment by all parties (in money, time, etc.) in the relationship, shared values, pursuit of common goals, the existence of trust structures (such as standards, contracts, etc.), the propensity to stay in the relationship, common work routines, honouring of commitments, etc.

Organizational trust is attached to a formal structure that guarantees an individual's or organization's specific attributes. One example is the trust we extend to our banker, not because we know him personally, but because we trust in the institution he represents (Thuderoz, 2003). This can be based on past experience with the company, the company's specific investments, its legitimacy, reputation, formal structure, size, values or satisfaction with past results.

Lastly, because trust offers no certainty, some authors, particularly in the fields of economics and management (Fukuyama, 1995; Zucker, 1986; Williamson, 1991) have conceptualized trust in a rational, normative and calculative terms. This type of trust, termed rational trust, is based on the idea that a protagonist will determine his action in a rational way, depending on the goal he has in mind. According to Thuderoz, Mangematin and Harrison (1999) rational trust corresponds to a relatively conventional sense of trust in economics. They argue that extending one's trust is equivalent to exposing oneself to possible opportunism by the other party. Rational trust is based on satisfaction with previous results, the other party's perceived intentions and objectives, formal contracts, and mechanisms of judgment or promises, etc.

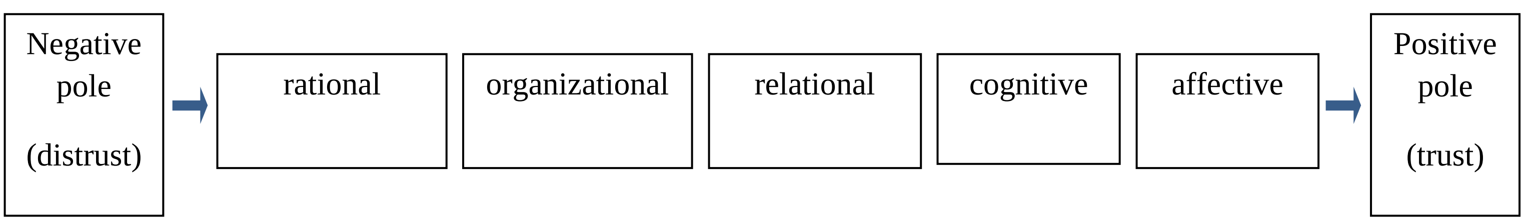
Adopting a critical perspective on these definitions, several authors (e.g., Crozier and Friedberg, 1977; Hatch, 2000) have suggested that humans are neither completely determined by their emotions, nor cold machines, but are rather capable of a limited rationality. Starting from this idea of limited rationality, Brousseau, Geoffron and Weinstein (1997) have developed the notion of procedural rationality, which contests the rationality of actions taken by partners assumed to be from the negative pole without drawing on the notions of hope or expectation from the positive pole of the definition of trust. In their view, assuming that humans are rational "by default" would make behaviour predictable. But the human being is not a robot with complete information on both what people are thinking and the nature of their interests. Within the process of adjusting modes of coordination—as is the case, they state, with the relationship of trust—the rationality of the different parties is more procedural in nature. It relies not on the rules of pure logic, but on a process of learning and knowledge acquisition. For example, when we are required to draft a contract, it is impossible to foresee all eventualities and guard against all contingencies. At best, we can draft clauses of general scope. It is much the same with relationships of trust. In a relationship of trust, it would appear impossible to define *a priori* the obligations and commitments of each party fully and unambiguously. So how can both parties be made to cooperate? There are two kinds of possible (and not exclusive) procedures: determine the methods of continuous interaction between the partners and recognize the need to give both parties a degree of autonomy in how they respond to unforeseen events. The different parties that enter into a relationship must gradually build up a set of rules and routines, largely tacit. These rules serve to facilitate communication and coordination and produce knowledge, and also help reduce uncertainty about the other party's behaviour.

1.3 An *a priori* model of the relationship of trust

The scientific literature on trust allows us to develop an *a priori* model[2] of trust in public relations. In this literature, there is a tendency to systematically contrast the negative and positive poles, creating a continuum on which the different types of trust can be arranged. Figure 1 illustrates the continuum of trust. At one end, the involvement of the parties in the relationship is minimal, and formal guarantees of reciprocity are needed, if not preconditions so the relationship can be established, because there is a high level of mistrust between the parties. At the other pole, the parties' personal commitment to the relationship is maximum and the relationship is based on perceptions or on a system of informal norms. This being said, it would seem that rational trust can be assimilated to the negative pole of the definition of the relationship of trust, since it is based on a purely transactional (in the economic sense) approach. At the other end of the continuum we would then find affective trust, which is primarily an act of faith (Karpik, 1996), and presupposes a certain concession to the other party's decisions and actions on the basis of perceptions and beliefs. Between these two poles we would find organizational, relational and cognitive trust. Seen in the context of public relations, this suggests that, in order to establish a relationship of trust with stakeholders that is positive (based on the idea that the other party is altruistic and well-intentioned) the public relations specialist should favour these types of trust.

Figure 1

Relationship of Trust Continuum



[2] An *a priori* model consists of the main dimensions, factors and concepts used to achieve the research objective and answer any questions arising from it. (Mongeau, 2008)

2. Working hypothesis

The continuum model of the relationship of trust leads to the following hypothesis:

1. All types of trust are levels of trust (rational being trust level 1 and affective trust, level 5).

2. Each level is a necessary condition for the transition to the next level. In other words, the transition to level 2 requires having previously established a level 1 trust, and so on.

3. Maintaining and developing a level 5 relationship of trust, based on affective trust, constitutes the final stage for the public relations specialist.

In other words, a public relations specialist could not hope to develop a relationship of trust based on affective trust if he had not previously developed relationships of rational, organizational, relational and cognitive trust with stakeholders.

3. Method

The objective of this research was to identify the building blocks for a relationship of trust between public relations specialists and company stakeholders, and ultimately develop a model of trust in public relations. To achieve this, a qualitative survey was conducted. Specifically, 40 semi-directed interviews were conducted with public relations specialists and stakeholders to find out their views on the relationship of trust in public relations, especially in a context where a public relations specialist has to defend a project with potentially negative impacts for stakeholders.

3.1 Selection of participants (sample)

To build a representative sample, the individuals selected had to be likely to have an opinion on the research topic, and were expected to be able to present a variety of original viewpoints. To identify and recruit these people, the following criteria were used:

- have at least ten years experience working as a public relations specialist.

- be a consultant, employee of an agency or work for a private or public company as a public relations specialist;
- have worked on cases or projects potentially entailing negative repercussions and involving various stakeholders;
- have practiced the profession in Quebec (Canada).

For recruitment purposes, stakeholders had to:

- belong to the category of “primary” stakeholders and thus be voluntarily involved in and directly affected by the activities of the company represented by the public relations specialist;
- have interacted (in person or in writing, at least once) with one or more public relations specialists in conjunction with files or projects that have a direct effect on their personal or professional life.

3.2 Data analysis procedure

Data analysis was done by thematic content analysis. Cross-cutting themes in the interviews were first catalogued. The choice of themes was rigorously tied to the research objective, namely to identify elements that might explain the development of a relationship of trust in the discourse of public relations specialists and stakeholders. Then, for each theme, indicators designed to explain, or at least partially illuminate how a relationship of trust is built, were identified. The Sémato qualitative data processing software package (Plante, Plante and Dumas, 2005) was used extensively at this stage.

In the second stage, the statements contained in each of the themes were analyzed in light of the different types of trust identified in the scientific literature. As a result, the constitutive components of the relationship of trust in the discourse of public relations specialists and stakeholders were identified in each of the themes, together with explanations allowing us to revise the *a priori* model (the relationship of trust continuum) so it could eventually be improved or modified.

4. Key findings

Initially, the interview transcripts enabled us to identify the constitutive components of the relationship of trust between public relations specialists and stakeholders based on the five types of trust. The objective perceived by both parties was identified as one of the components of rational trust by both stakeholders and public relations specialists. With respect to organizational trust, the public relations specialists and stakeholders mentioned the company's reputation. Among the components of relational trust, public relations specialists emphasized communication bi-directionality and symmetry, adaptation of messages and good issue management. Stakeholders, meanwhile, made reference only to two-way and symmetrical communication. For cognitive trust, public relations specialists noted the empathy and credibility of the public relations specialist and respect for stakeholders. Stakeholders emphasized empathy, ability to listen and respect. Lastly, with respect to the components of affective trust, public relations specialists mentioned charisma and open-mindedness, while stakeholders tended to cite empathy and honesty. If we revise the diagram representing the relationship of trust continuum with the components mentioned here, we obtain the new diagram below (Figure 2):

Figure 2
Relationship of trust continuum and components mentioned by type of trust

Negative pole
(distrust)

	Rational	**Organizational**	**Relational**	**Cognitive**	**Affective**
PR Specialists	Objective perceived by the parties	Company reputation	Bi-directional communication Adaptation of message Issues	Empathy Credibility Respect for stakeholders	Charisma Open-mindedness
Stakeholders	Objective perceived by the parties	Company reputation	Bi-directional communication	Empathy Ability to listen Respect	Empathy Honesty

Positive pole
(trust)

The relationship of trust continuum suggests that in order to develop a relationship of trust with stakeholders based, for example, on relational trust, the public relations specialist must first have gained stakeholders' rational and organizational trust.

4.1. The non-viability of the continuum of trust in public relations

In addition to the various components identified for each type of trust, a completely different approach to building trust from that implied by the continuum of trust (the *a priori* model) emerged from the interviews.

The relationship of trust is not seen as built step-by-step according to the "pattern" of the relationship of trust continuum. In other words, public relations specialists and stakeholders do not feel that it is necessary to reach trust level 1 (or rational trust) in order to develop a relationship based on organizational and other levels of trust, and thus reach the optimal level of trust, i.e., affective trust. Two key findings seem to suggest that the relationship of trust between public relations specialists and stakeholders does not work in this way. First of all, affective trust cannot be considered the optimal relationship of trust (level 5). Moreover, for public relations specialists and stakeholders, trust does not appear in "levels." They feel it is possible to build, for example, a relationship of affective trust without first building relationships of rational, organizational, relational or cognitive trust.

As shown in Figure 2, the relationship of trust continuum suggests that in order to develop a relationship of trust with stakeholders based, for example, on relational trust, the public relations specialist must first gain stakeholders' rational and organizational trust. However, an analysis of the interviews done with public relations specialists and stakeholders reveals a very different way of thinking about how public relations specialists and stakeholders come to trust each other.

What emerges from all the opinions collected is that the relationship of trust is not seen as built step-by-step according to the "pattern" of the relationship of trust continuum. In other words, public relations specialists and stakeholders do not feel it is necessary to reach trust level 1 (or rational trust) in order to develop a relationship based on organizational trust, and so on up to the optimal degree of trust in affective trust. Two main findings lead us to believe that the relationship of trust between public relations specialists and stakeholders does not work in that way. First, affective trust cannot be considered the optimal relationship of trust (level 5). Moreover, trust does not appear in "levels." It is thus possible, for example, to build an affective relationship of trust without necessarily having previously built rational, organizational, relational and cognitive relationships of trust.

4.2 Affective trust: not necessarily optimal

Affective trust is not necessarily and always the form that should ultimately prevail in all situations—in part because relying on a relationship of affective trust, due to its consensual aspect, is not sufficient to open discussion (or at least, to a lesser extent) on the various issues involved in a given project. Public relations specialists and stakeholders thus find themselves in a much less interesting position in terms of communication and relational dialogue. Affective trust entails an element of vulnerability (Baier, 1986; Deutsh 1962, Rousseau et al. 1998; Williamson, 1991; Zand, 1972) that must not be overlooked. As Quéré mentions (2005), when a person decides to give his trust, it cannot be done without a certain abandon, or vulnerability. For example, a stakeholder explains: "He seemed like someone I can trust because he seemed to know his business. [...] I did not check whether what he told us was true." This excerpt indicates that the person trusts the public relations specialist because he appears to be someone who knows the details and issues involved in a given project. However, if we accept the public relations specialists' statements as true, the stakeholder is initially in the position of a passive receiver rather than an active receiver. One might think that this is what every public relations specialist would wish for: complete and total acceptance of his message solely on the presumption of good faith. However, this runs directly counter to what Maisonneuve (2004) considers to be a responsibility of public relations: "to promote public debate, questioning, looking at things from new angles in order to contribute to the democratization of power, diversity of ideas and a better understanding of positions taken by individuals and organizations." (p. 266).

As a result, when a public relations specialist has to inform stakeholders about a controversial project (because of its potential negative impacts for stakeholders), it is realistic to assume that public relations specialists and stakeholders are not on an equal footing in terms of control of information, discussions and public announcements, as evidenced by the following excerpt from what one of the interviewed stakeholders had to say: "Of course we [referring to his interest group] do not have the same resources as the public relations people. No one can claim to have the same resources as this industry." Initially, the public relations specialist would probably have the most information on the project. He should start by conveying this information to the various stakeholders. In the event the stakeholders develop or have previously developed an affective relationship of trust with the public relations specialist, this would mean that they automatically accept the public relations specialist as acting "in good faith" and motivated by a moral desire to act in everyone's best interests. This may be true... or it may not be true. As Libaert (2010) notes, a relationship in which there is automatic consensus does not allow public relations specialists or stakeholders to "overcome the shock of visualization and embark on a dialectic of progress in a more positive vision of what the communicator contributes." (p. 145).

4.3 Trust does not develop in levels

The second finding is that trust does not develop in levels. This finding emerges from statements by public relations specialists and stakeholders. Here are a few excerpts from the public relations specialists:

> In marketing we are often taught that to build a following, you first have to attract attention, stimulate interest, create a desire and encourage action. I don't think it is like that in public relations. [...] What I mean is that I do not think we have to go "step-by-step."

> I don't think we can speak of trust as being built in stages. Of course, it might be tempting to do so. As if winning the trust of stakeholders could be done gradually, overcoming one obstacle after another that prevents trust from building. [...] I think, in general, that we tend to place trust depending on whether we agree on common goals.

These excerpts illustrate the idea that building the relationship of trust (or not) with stakeholders does not proceed through a series of steps. The second excerpt provides a partial solution—namely, that trust may be built on the basis of objectives shared by both parties. However, the excerpts from statements by stakeholders are the ones that best illustrate how the relationship of trust can be built and maintained:

> There are situations in which I would never trust a public relations specialist and others in which I would. […] What does it depend on? That's a good question. Sometimes it's just a *feeling*. I *sense* that the public relations specialist will also pay close attention to my interests. But there are other times, whether it's just a feeling or because of the public relations specialist's attitude, when I would not trust him. Naturally, if I am unable to express myself, it will be difficult to establish trust.

In this excerpt, the speaker puts forward the idea that building trust depends on the situation, and especially on the presence of certain factors (e.g., the perception that the public relations specialist is attentive to the stakeholder's interests) in a given situation. The last sentence of the excerpt indicates the importance of two-way communication (the possibility for the stakeholder to communicate his own viewpoint to the public relations specialist) as practically a prerequisite to creating the bond of trust.

4.4 Relational trust: a two-way relationship that fosters trust

The comments also show that relational trust is the type that seems most likely to allow public relations specialists and stakeholders to "trust" one another, in the sense of the general definition of trust adopted here, i.e., a belief based on one party's perception of the other party's integrity. One stakeholder explains: "Having frequent meetings with the public relations specialist, being able to discuss practically on an equal footing with him, and sitting at the same table, allowed for much more fruitful exchanges and encouraged me to trust him more." We see that the opportunity for direct feedback between public relations specialists and stakeholders, including face-to-face meetings, encourages the parties to trust one another much more. Apart from meetings, it would appear that two-way communication, combined with relational trust, enables public relations specialists and stakeholders to trust in one another in a wide range of contexts. In keeping with the notion of procedural rationality, relational trust is the type that maximizes two-way communication by increasing the frequency of meetings between parties and fostering close relations. Relational trust thus establishes a balance of "power" between stakeholders and public relations specialists, as one of the stakeholders we interviewed explains: "When we're sitting at the table and can discuss as equals, the public relations specialists take us much more seriously."

No one could claim that there is a contradiction between the idea that trust is not built in levels and the idea that relational trust is the type that, in various situations, makes it possible to create and maintain a relationship of trust. We must therefore point out that relational trust is not necessarily an ideal to be striven for, but it is the type that is best suited to a variety of situations.

In summary, the continuum of trust, in public relations, does not appear to be relevant to or consistent with the analysis of comments made by public relations specialists and stakeholders we interviewed about building trust. But if trust is not built "step-by-step," from the negative pole to the positive pole, by what process it is built? Does it follow a particular path or does it develop in a random, chaotic fashion?

5. The optimal contextual matching model

Thus far, it has been argued that affective trust is not necessarily an ideal, that different types of trust are not built in "levels," and that relational trust is generally the type that is best suited to a variety of contexts. In this argumentation about the difficulty of thinking of trust as a continuum, it was mentioned that the relationship of trust depended on the context in which the relationship was established. Why is the context so important, and above all, what is its role in building and developing a relationship of trust in public relations? The model of trust developed through analyzing these research findings, i.e., the "optimal contextual matching model," is predicated upon this notion. The model is based on the following propositions:

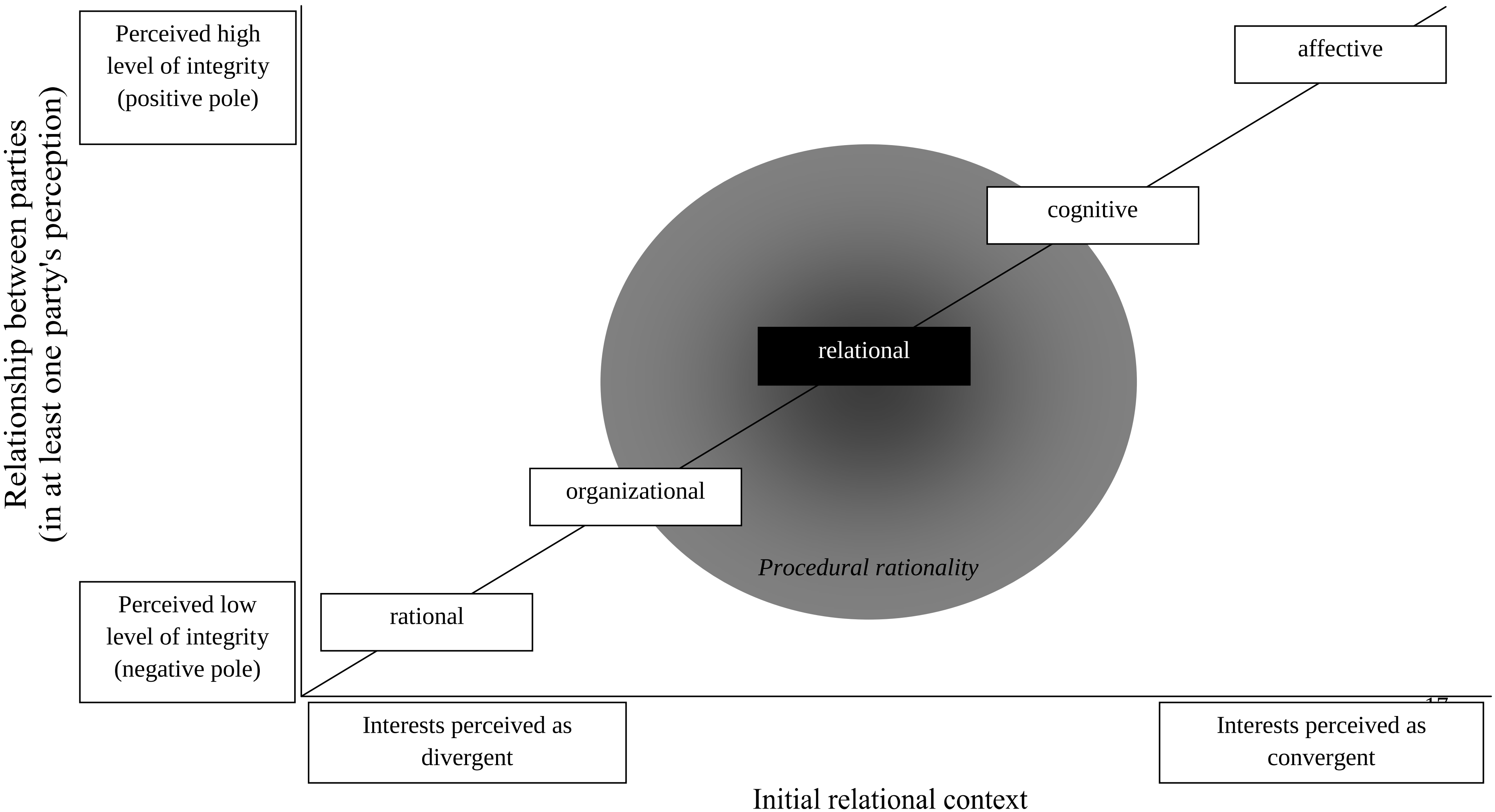
1. The initial relational context is influenced by the perception of each party's interests as convergent or divergent, these perceptions themselves being influenced by the broader social context (the reputation of each party, including the company itself, media coverage of the case, political issues, etc.) in which the relationship between the public relations specialist and stakeholders is built.

2. The relationship between public relations specialists and stakeholders, depending on the original relational context, is situated on a continuum extending from the perception that the other party has high integrity (positive pole of the definition of trust) to the perception of a low level of integrity (negative pole of the definition of the relationship of trust).

3. The characteristics of different types of trust (rational, organizational, relational, cognitive and affective) will foster an optimal level of trust between the parties depending on how they perceive one another (high or low integrity) and on the perception of the initial relational context.

Figure 3 illustrates the optimal contextual matching model.

Figure 3
Optimal contextual matching model of the relationship of trust in public relations



The horizontal axis represents the convergence of interests perceived by each party, characterized, at one extreme, by the perception that the parties' interests are divergent, and at the other extreme, convergent. On the vertical axis each party's perception of the other's integrity is plotted. At one pole, one or more parties have the perception that the other party has low integrity in what he says and does. At the opposite pole is the perception that the other party has high integrity. When the relationship is based on opportunism, and hence on a low perceived integrity (by both parties, or only one of the two), the relationship of trust is closer to the definitions of the negative pole. Conversely, when the relationship is based on the perception that the other party has high integrity, the trust lies closer to the definitions of the positive pole of trust.

When the original relational context is based on divergent interests and the perception that the other party has low integrity, each party holds to his initial position and is not very open to hearing what the other party has to say because he is convinced in advance that he is right and the other is wrong. Obviously, a minimal form of openness to discussion is required, even if it is imposed (by an external body, for example), since without it the two parties could not enter into a relationship. Thus, the pair "divergent interests" and "low integrity" corresponds to rational trust.

On the other hand, when interests are seen as converging and the relationship is based on the perception that the other party has a high level of integrity, there is incentive to listen. The pair "convergent interests" and "perception of high integrity" is characterized by a high level of open-mindedness and great flexibility on the part of the public relations specialist and/or stakeholders. This corresponds to affective trust.

Along the diagonal from the origin of the axes there are five types of trust: rational, organizational, relational, cognitive and affective. The diagonal extending from the hypothetical coordinate (0,0) to the hypothetical coordinate (10,10) might give the impression of a certain progression in types of trust (from worst to best). This may be true, but it should be remembered that each context corresponds to a type of trust that, in public relations, can help build an optimal relationship of trust.

Relational trust occupies the centre of the diagram (black on white), since this type of trust is generally best optimized in cases where a publicist must defend/promote a project with potentially negative externalities for stakeholders. In fact, with this type of trust, the notion of procedural rationality takes on its full meaning: through frequent communications, close association and the observations they can make, both parties gradually get to know and better gauge one another, not in the negative sense, but rather in a spirit of mutual cooperation. The circle is more opaque in the centre, where the logic specific to creating and maintaining relational trust is operating. The colour gradually becomes paler as it approaches the edge, to illustrate that procedural rationality operates to a lesser degree.

6. A model of distrust?

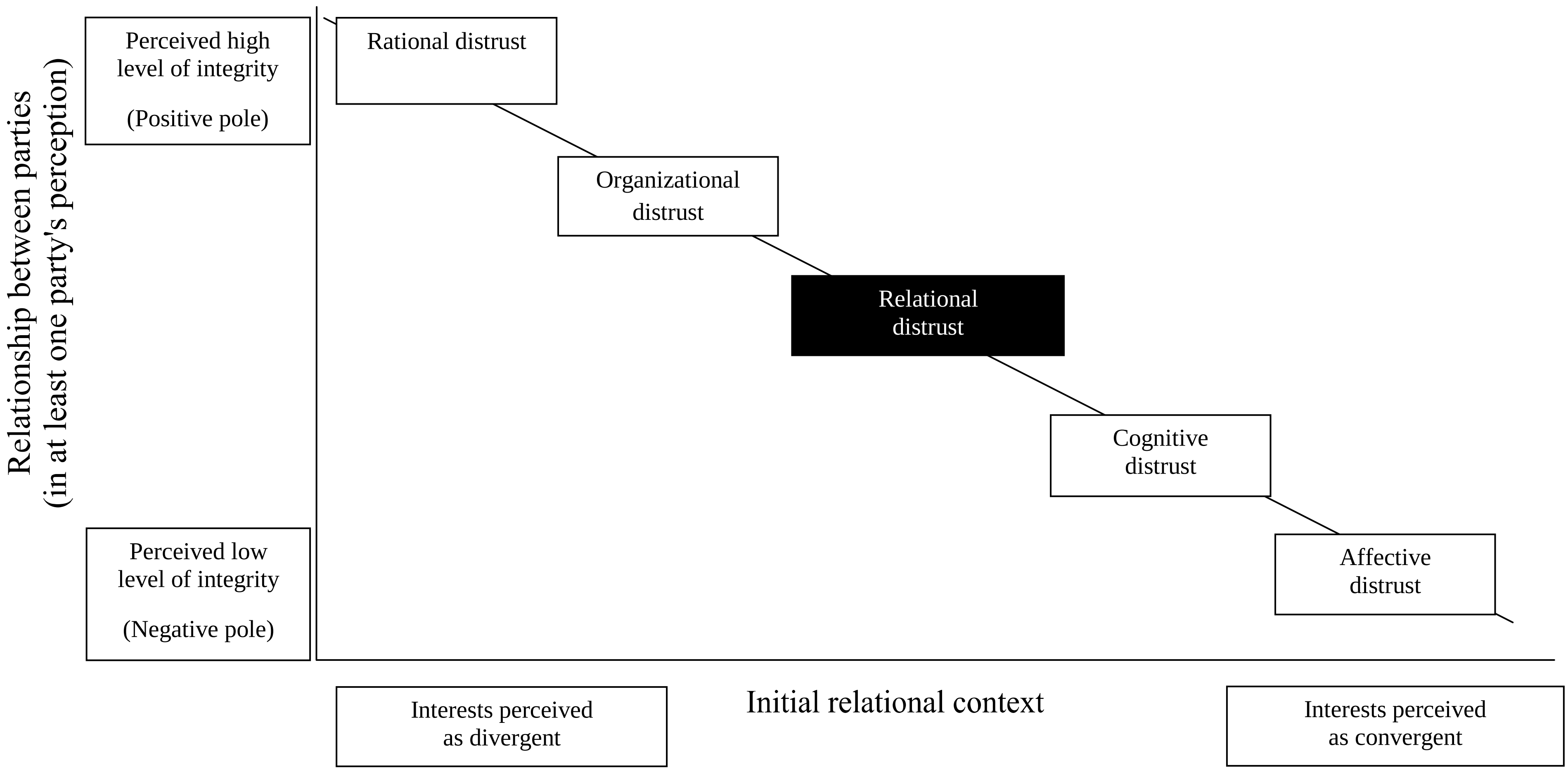
Apart from its correspondence with comments gathered from public relations specialists and stakeholders and its ability to guide action, this theoretical model of the relationship of trust points to the existence of types of relationship of trust that have yet to be studied in the literature. The intersection of the axes of perceived integrity and convergence might identify theoretically possible relational contexts. These are situations where:

1. at one pole, interests are perceived as divergent while one or both parties perceives the other as having high integrity;

2. at the other pole, interests are perceived as convergent while one or both parties perceives the other as having low integrity.

Consequently, the optimal contextual matching model suggests the existence of other forms of relationship. In fact, it is logically possible to imagine a diagonal line extending from hypothetical coordinate (0,10) to hypothetical coordinate (10,0). This new line might be called the relationship of distrust axis. (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Model of the relationship of distrust in public relations

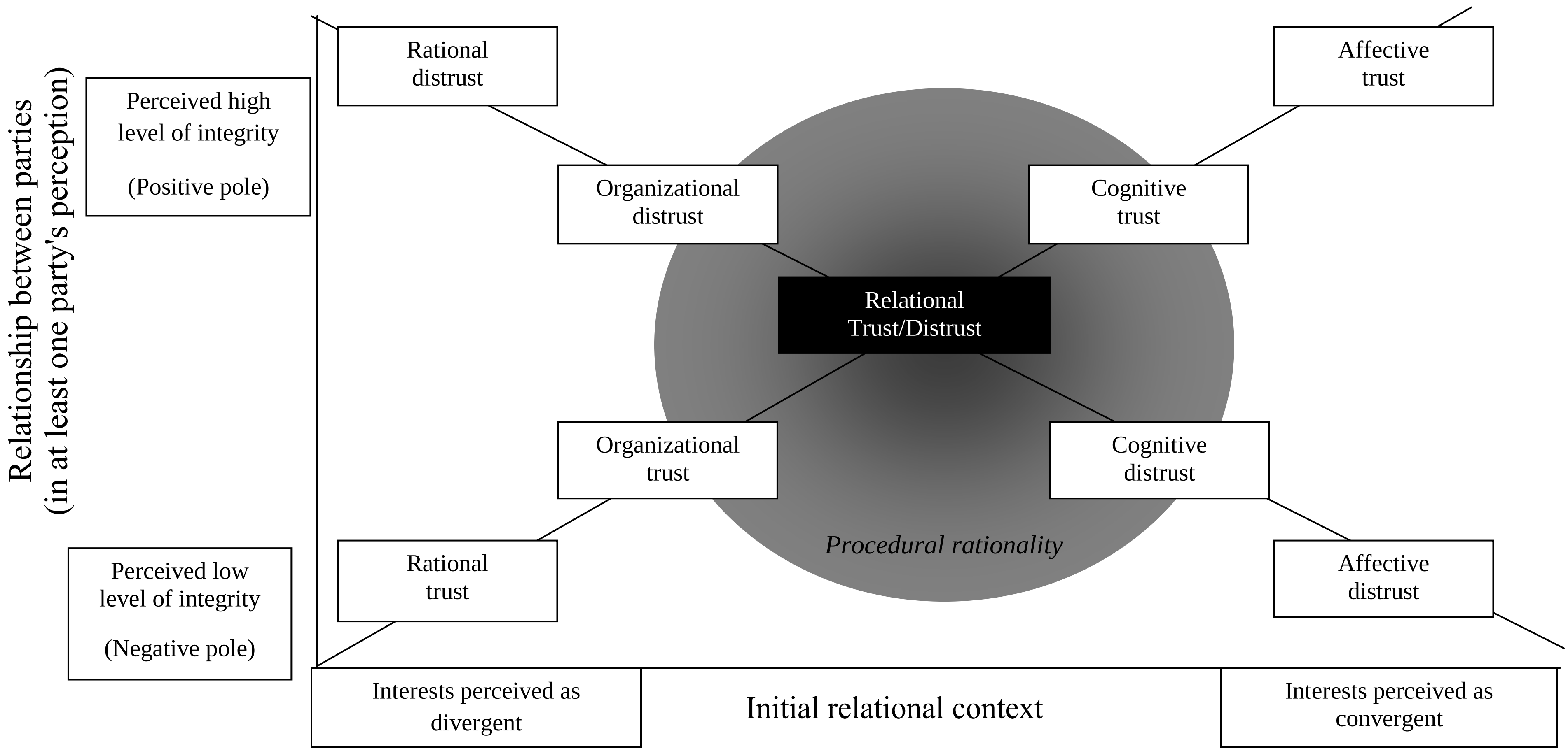


In light of the type of questions asked during interviews we held with public relations specialists and stakeholders, and given the objective behind this research (to develop a model of the relationship of trust), this theoretical proposition cannot be supported by excerpts.

If the model of the relationship of trust in public relations (Figure 3) is superimposed on the relationship of distrust (Figure 4), we obtain a hypothetical model of the relationship of trust and the relationship of distrust in public relations (Figure 5). In this model, the circle referring to procedural rationality has been preserved because it is logical to imagine that procedural rationality may operate in the relationship of trust, as well as relationships of distrust. As a result, one could imagine that procedural rationality takes the following form: as individuals interact and observe one another, they become increasingly distrustful of one another.

The hypothetical model of the relationship of trust and the relationship of distrust is aptly named: it is hypothetical in that it can be assumed that an axis of distrust also intersects the model of the relationship of trust in public relations, thus leaving the door open for future research to document, analyze and test the validity of this model.

Figure 5
Hypothetical model of the relationship of trust and the relationship of distrust in public relations



Conclusion

Despite certain harsh criticisms that have been levelled against public relations, to assert that companies need to communicate with various stakeholders has become almost a commonplace (Libaert, 2004). Members of business associations, unions, interest and pressure groups, etc., would all like the company to take their interests and demands into account, especially when it is developing a project that will affect their daily lives. It is the task of the public relations specialist to establish a relationship of trust between these parties in order to allow dialogue and discussion. However, beyond criticisms addressed to public relations specialists themselves, one of the main criticisms of companies that provide information through their public relations specialists is that this communication is based on processes that are not transparent, and only serves to reveal partial (sometimes inaccurate) information (Billiet, 2009). In this context, how is it possible to build relationships based on mutual trust?

In addition to the various constitutive components identified as characteristic of each type of trust, it emerged from comments made by the people we interviewed that the relationship of trust seems to develop in most cases in the direction of relational trust. It would appear that this type of trust allows both public relations specialists and stakeholders to create relationships that are "win-win" for both parties. However, it would be wrong to say that relational trust is always and necessarily the type on which public relations specialists and stakeholders should base their relationships. The relationship of trust would seem to depend largely on the perception of the initial relational context—i.e., whether the interests of both parties are perceived as convergent or divergent. For example, when the initial context is based on interests perceived as divergent and the relationship between public relations specialists and stakeholders is characterized by a low level of perceived integrity in one party or both parties, it is preferable to focus on the components of rational trust. On the other hand, when the initial social climate is based on the perception of converging interests and the relationship between public relations specialists and stakeholders is based on the perception that both parties have a high level of integrity, it would be preferable to focus on the components of affective trust. By following this logic we developed the optimal contextual matching model, which points to a new model of the relationship of trust in public relations.

Another result was that the optimal contextual matching model suggested other lines of thought about the possible presence of relationships of distrust, based on the same logic. Public relationships specialists and stakeholders have remained silent about situations in which, for example, there was an initial context based on interests perceived as divergent, but a relationship was based on a perception of a high level of integrity in both parties; or a situation where the initial context was based on interests perceived as convergent, but a relationship was based on a perception of a low level of integrity in both parties. It might therefore be interesting to document these types of situation and understand how they take shape and develop.

The present study opens up opportunities for future research in public relations, both in terms of more fundamental (theoretical) research and in terms of practice. For example, the model of the relationship of distrust suggested by our model of the relationship of trust might be a topic for future research, particularly as regards its practical validity.

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